

Profile

SALEM GOLDWORTH BLAND: 19th Century Roots of Progressive Christianity. Part I by Richard Allen



In June of 1881, the Kingston Methodist District Meeting was convened to discuss, among other things, the fitness of a young man to become a probationer for the ministry of the church. What should have been an open-and-shut case, however, turned into a heresy trial. That young man was Salem Goldworth Bland, known to the community from his father's earlier ministry there. This ordeal was his initiation into the profession.

The meeting was held in the Gothic-spired Sydenham Street Church, with its minister, the Rev. Dr. James Elliott, presiding. The young man, now largely forgotten in this secular ahistorical age, would, in fact, become one of the great preachers of the Methodist and United Churches, a public figure of consequence, and a pioneer of what we now call progressive Christianity. He is worth remembering.

Salem Bland's own concern about his acceptability for ministry was whether, being badly crippled in one leg, he would meet the criteria of a church that still prided itself in its circuit-riding past. He had spent a year assisting on the Cataraqui Circuit, and proved to himself that the bad leg was not a serious impediment. But the heresy charge was something else. A leading member of the circuit had taken offence at a sermon on "The New Birth", in which Salem had argued that all children were born in innocence, and not inheritors of Adam's original sin, as much traditional teaching

claimed. That he based this, not on 18th century enlightenment categories, but on the Wesleyan doctrine of prevenient grace, did not seem to impress the assembled brethren.

For the gathered ministers, the issue was complicated by changes taking place in Canadian life. They had rendered many people supersensitive about the abandonment of old ways and teachings: revivalistic camp meetings were morphing into elaborate training schools and fashionable resorts; urban centres were expanding at the expense of small towns; railways were speeding up the pace of life and bringing concentrations of capital to the larger centres; new technologies were threatening the skills and employment of Methodist tradesmen; education was expanding, and with it a reading public increasingly aware of the “new thought” of the age that challenged the view and values of traditional Bible-based religion. Local ministers, like the seventeen gathered at Sydenham Street Methodist Church, had reason to be nervous, and wanted to hardline what they considered to be the doctrines and practices of the church.

By For The Best Of All Candidates

Salem was an unusually widely read young man, and his father had warned him about being “too dialectical” in the pulpit. Ironically, that same June, the elder Bland — widely known for his advanced views in the very subject on which Salem was being tried — would be elected President of the Montreal Conference. In the end, Salem survived the ordeal, and would soon be noted by his examiners as by far the best of all the candidates for the ministry of the church.

Salem’s father, a well educated Yorkshire textiles manufacturer who had given it all up to come to Canada, unheralded, to preach for the Wesleyan Methodists, encouraged his son in his studious habits, and Salem’s later reading lists would average some 40-50 books a year in religious, philosophical, historical, social, scientific, and fictional subjects.

When Salem completed his bachelor’s studies at Morin College in Quebec with straight firsts, his father wanted him to

enroll in theology at the new Wesleyan Theological College in Montreal. Salem, however, chose to study sciences — chemistry, botany, and geology — with some German thrown in to add to his facility in Latin, Greek, and French. He came under the influence of the renowned geologist Sir William Dawson, the Principal of McGill University. There, and at the “Tea and Fossils” sessions at the Dawson household, he became deeply engaged in the issues the sciences posed for the biblical understanding of creation and the nature and destiny of humankind.

Salem Bland was born in 1859, so this Profile is being prepared in the year that marks the 150th anniversary of his birth. He came into an age of profound controversy, for he was born the same year Darwin published his *Origin of Species*, with its theory of “natural selection”, and a year before the publication of *Essays and Reviews*, which exposed the English-speaking world to the historical criticism of the Bible being pioneered in German universities.

In this context, the decision to enter the Christian ministry was not an easy one, but Salem was vastly encouraged by a sermon delivered by the great Canadian Presbyterian George Monro Grant, who was Principal of Queen’s University. The sermon was preached at Little Metis, where the Blands summered in 1880. Grant’s remarks on the “Objectives of Christianity” not only spoke to a young man’s inquiring mind, but could be said to be a marker for Salem’s entire ministerial, professorial, and journalistic career: “Sceptics,” Grant said, “want a sign, but all revealed truth is only probable. Every form of truth admits of doubt. In the search for truth, God deals with us as intelligent creatures and gives us options.” That was the beginning of a significant influence Grant would have on Salem, especially at the Queen’s Theological Alumni Conferences of the 1890s, where Salem also drank deeply of John Watson’s philosophical idealism.

Among The Church's Best Preachers

During his probationer years, Salem found the experience of the smaller congregations to which he was assigned quite

depressing, but on coming to the Queen Street congregation in Kingston, with Queen's University nearby, the very spaciousness of his new world seemed suspect. Even his handwriting, which had been tiny, tight, and cramped, was now open and flowing. Students flocked to his evening services. No less a critic than James Elliott, editor of the *Kingston British Whig*, was impressed. It would not be long before the *Toronto Globe* would comment that, despite his youth, he was already among the church's best preachers. And some years later, C.B. Sissons, Professor of Classics at Victoria College in Toronto and a discriminating man, would return from Great Britain where he heard all the great preachers of the day, and upon hearing Salem Bland, declare that he outclassed them all. Not surprisingly, in a time when platform performance was a principal means of public education and entertainment, he was soon in demand to fill pulpit and midweek engagements from Toronto to Quebec City. And he was often invited to be the challenging keynote speaker at conventions of the new popular church youth organizations, Christian Endeavour and the Epworth League.

Salem had a marvelous facility with words, and was especially adept at figures of speech. On religious controversy he said, "No truths fare so ill in controversy as theological and religious truths, for, in the heat of battle their beauty and fragrance are lost as is the perfume of roses to armies grappling above them in bloody strife." Again: "Creeds recited by a lazy preacher are like apples that have hung on the tree all winter." Or, coming closer to his central message: "The point of life is to sail the ocean, not to draw it off into a little pond."

This last image brings us to the Murney Tower,¹ for it was in an early sermon in Kingston, "The Mysteriousness of God and Destiny", that this image of sailing the ocean occurs. Queen Street Church was not far from this tower, one of four military installations erected in 1846 to protect the Canadas from the Americans, who were in an expansionist mood. Salem often repaired to the tower for inspiration as he struggled to compose his sermons, or for solace

¹ The title of my recent book on Salem Bland is *The View from Murney Tower*.

as he wrestled with more personal issues. The endless vista of lake and sky, as seen from the tower, spoke to him of the great mystery of life and the need for adventurous thinking and living. In the sermon in question, he asked his hearers to recite after him, "We thank thee Huxley for teaching us that word (agnosticism)." Age after age had sought to capture God in various arguments and images, he said, but the attempt to objectify God had always failed. Agnosticism was the revenge of a neglected truth that, in the end, God was quite beyond our comprehension.

Thomas Huxley was widely known as "Darwin's Bulldog" for his persistent defence of Darwin's ideas. Salem had, however, already signaled his refusal to follow the hue and cry against Darwin and "natural selection", and the notion that human beings were part of the continuity of life on earth and not a special creation of God. One of his first sermons at Queen Street was on "The New and the Old Theology", in which he endorsed the fullest freedom for investigation and speculation. "Materially and spiritually," he said, "we are living on the surface of things.... Our religion does not crouch in darkness [and the church] should say Godspeed to every candid seeker after truth like Darwin...even if his inferences clash with theology."

Change and Development Ruled

Darwin's provocative biological ideas were not the only source of controversy at the time on both sides of the Atlantic. There was debate over the vastly extended time lines of the new geology, over the status and authority of the Bible, over Malthus' pessimistic prognosis as to the fate of all species, over the rapacious economic individualism of the industrial system, over Spencer's new sociology with its twin (and sometimes contrary) doctrines of "survival of the fittest" and the organic nature of society, over the role of government in providing for the poor. There were anti-vivisectionists, anarchists, theosophists, and a coterie of cultic groups peddling their panaceas. Charles Bradlaugh's new atheism seemed to be gaining ground in England and Colonel Ingersoll's

biblical iconoclasm was gathering crowds in the United States. There were followers of all these groups in Canada. But if Darwin was not the sole source of controversy in the late Victorian world, there was hardly an area of debate that did not reflect his theories. What Salem distilled from Darwin was that all was in process. Change and development ruled in nature and society. Process was the master concept of the age. Religion itself could not escape. Evidently, Christians were followers of a God who created in great and continuing profusion and was always shaking things up! There was an urgent need to rethink Christian categories to meet the intellectual and social challenges of a new age.

That observation was a sign of Salem Bland's own evolution from an older evangelicalism under which he had been converted in Quebec city in 1875. It equally foreshadowed the break-up of the evangelical consensus that had come to dominate the 19th century, with conservative evangelicals marching on to a defensive fundamentalism, and liberal and social evangelicals adopting or accommodating aspects of the new world view of contemporary science and philosophy. The upshot for Salem was his "New Christianity", formulated in the latter 1890s, which in many ways anticipated the Progressive Christianity of our own time.

Progressive Christianity, of course, does not simply mean Greta Vosper, however much she may dominate Canadian discussion of the subject. Progressive Christianity is a broad encompassing movement open to many perspectives, though named and founded in the first instance in the 1990s in the United States to differentiate itself from the Christian right in that country. But Progressive Christianity is not entirely new and does not entail a wholesale jettisoning of the Christian past. In Gary Dorrien's recent three volume work on American liberal theology, the first volume on the 19th century is entitled "Imagining Progressive Religion". And Delwin Brown's blog book introducing the subject makes important connections with longstanding doctrines like Incarnation.

Many of the dominant notions of Progressive Christianity can be seen in Salem Bland's late 19th century formulations. Take the

“process theology” favoured by most progressives, which speaks of a dialectical relationship between mankind and a God whose love for creation also grants freedom to the creature. Take “science and creation”. Salem anticipates progressive Christian acceptance of science as a wholly legitimate enterprise exploring how God’s world really works. Take “salvation”. Salem rejected the notion of being saved for heaven from the clutches of a corrupt world. Salvation for him was the whole health and well-being of every creature after its kind and he counselled his congregation to be willing to go into exile from heaven with Christ in order to realize a heaven here. It took a dozen years of struggle, but he came to accept the historical criticism of the Bible as a great and liberating advance and to accept what was called “progressive revelation”. Take the “doctrine of atonement”, at least a dozen versions of which had emerged in Christian history. Like progressives, Salem rejected ransom and substitutionary theories for a more natural process of growing up in relation to the person of Jesus in his life and his death. And Salem moved on from an early acceptance of the economic individualism of Ricardo and Adam Smith to a commitment to social justice which is central to the progressive movement. His first reaction to unions and strikes was that “we have our work saving souls cut out for us”, but his observations of the effects of the industrial system upon workers soon led to comments like, “One worker is helpless against a railroad.”

The Place Of The Intellect

At the 1895 Conference of Montreal Methodists, Salem excited much comment for an “Educational Address” defending the place of the intellect in the religious life. There was a time, he said, when Methodists had declared that God had no need of our intelligence, but it was time to say that God has no need of our ignorance. The reform of the church’s conceptions and practices, he advised, should be a constant undertaking, for “the thoughts by which we live, and by which we make others live, must be gathered like manna daily”. There were those who believed that love and the Golden Rule would

solve the pressing problems of the age, but “good people who have loved and honoured the Golden Rule have sold slaves, speculated in land, and paid the lowest market rate for labour. Love alone will not correct these things. Thought is needed and in some cases a new system.”

Salem’s remarks sound remarkably contemporary. “The age is vehement with all the vehemence and energy of an age unsurpassed for physical energy and boldness of thought,” he declared, “rapid and direct in its translation of thought into action . . . an age ready to make great experiments that may end in millenniums or general smash”. He advocated “such approximations to the Christian ideal of socialism as were practicable and desirable”. Others might differ as to means, he allowed, but “there was no way, by revivals, missions, reiteration of dogmas, or even by love and prayer that we can purchase God’s tolerance for intellectual sloth”.

Salem’s address was an historic moment, for in response the Montreal Conference moved to require probationer ministers to study psychology, ethics, political science and sociology. In a second major initiative, at his suggestion, it also decided to replace the mornings devoted to testimonials with up-to-date Bible study beginning with the prophets. It would be several years before the other Conferences of the church (or other Canadian churches) did likewise, but where Salem and the Montreal Conference had led, other would follow. Not all were convinced, however, and lines of cleavage began to form around him. He was even accused of being an agent of Colonel Ingersoll! But a new spirit and strategy of Christian engagement in the secular world, a new social conscience, a social gospel, was now afoot in the land.

Through all his efforts at framing a new social conscience, Salem Bland never lost sight of the centrality of Jesus and the primacy of Christ. Jesus was what human nature was all about, and the Christ the storehouse of all the archetypes, the original pattern of all existing things, the light that enlightens every person. He was wary of letting social reforms and panaceas take central

place, but he was equally insistent that they lay “in the folds of Christ’s garments”.

His last post in eastern Ontario would be Ottawa. He departed for Winnipeg in 1903 to take up a professorial post at Wesley College (now the University of Winnipeg). That period in his life will be dealt with in Part II of this Profile, which will appear in the May issue of *Touchstone*. As we will see then he would become a household name across the prairies, and after that have an extended and influential career of national proportions based in Toronto.

Note: Those who wish documentation for the material in this piece, and a full account of Bland’s life and career in this period, 1859 – 1903, should consult Richard Allen, *The View from Murney Tower: Salem Bland, the Late Victorian Controversies, and the Search for a New Christianity*. Vol. I, *Salem Bland: A Canadian Odyssey* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).