

**They “left us pretty much as we were”:
American Saloon/Factory Evangelists and Canadian
Working Men in the Early-Twentieth Century**

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At Winnipeg’s Queen’s Hotel in October 1907 almost 500 people “jammed into the bar” to hear William and Virginia Asher preach of God’s love. According to the *Manitoba Free Press*, the tavern audience listened carefully and was quick to participate in the singing of gospel hymns. At Toronto’s Taylor Safe Works in January 1911 over 100 workers “blackened from their morning toil [and] seated on workbenches, sectional vaults, and large steel frames” listened to William her relate “the old, old story” of sin and salvation. In the early-twentieth century, the Illinois-based husband and wife evangelist team of William and Virginia Asher, under the leadership of American evangelist J. Wilbur Chapman, preached at taverns, pool halls, factories and workshops in Winnipeg and in the Ontario cities of Orillia, Brantford and Toronto.¹

Studies by Lynne Marks and Doris O’Dell on late-Victorian Protestantism in small Ontario centres show that working-class religiosity was vibrant and that the working-class favoured the emotionalism associated with revivalism.² Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau provide some examples of evangelical leaders reaching out to workers, particularly during the 1914-1925 period.³ In the case of the Ashers, a limited number of press reports between 1907 and 1911 suggest that the Ashers were well-received by Canadian working men at saloons and industrial worksites. Yet the Ashers enticed very few male workers to overlook social barriers and

become church members. Although there are a number of reasons why evangelism among workers bore little fruit, two of the main ones can be traced to the issue of class. First, in the early-twentieth century, institutional Christianity lost ground in its connections and understanding of working-class experience. Second, Canadian evangelical leaders spoke about the importance of enticing workers into the church fold, but their actions said otherwise.

Between 1901 and 1911 the population of Canada increased 34% from 5,370,000 to 7,210,000, and the country witnessed unprecedented economic growth. Workers, however, faced new pressures. With the advent of “scientific management” – including job simplification and standardization, cost accountancy, and the use of autocratic foremen to insure greater employee productivity – many skilled workers were forced to relinquish a significant degree of shop-floor autonomy. Labourers and those in semi-skilled positions, many of whom were newly arrived immigrants, often “lacked traditions of labour resistance and organization.” Defined in terms of maternal and domestic roles, female workers were also prone to exploitation at the worksite and their unfavourable work circumstances (low wages and poor work conditions) were a result of both class and gender relations.⁴ With rising manufacturing and industrial wealth there were few signs of improved work and home conditions for working-class men and women. A number of studies show that increases in the Gross National Product did not guarantee an improvement of the standard of living for most Canadian urban labourers. As prosperity increased among the ruling class many workers experienced alienating work, a cycle of insecurity, poor health and dispiriting living conditions.⁵

Outside the domestic sphere male working-class space included many taverns and factory worksites. Tavern space usually provided a sharp contrast to the respectability and convention which was common in Protestant church life. Many working-class taverns embodied a culture that spurned a preoccupation on moral responsibility, character formation and discipline. In this “environment of the crude and the rude” male workers were often provided with a public forum to discuss working-class grievance. By “refusing concession to the hypocrisies of the consolidating bourgeois ethos” tavern culture rejected notions of respectability and the individualistic, competitive philosophy of modern industrial life. The acts of drinking and gambling themselves were the antithesis of the disciplined virtues of industrial capitalism, virtues that were championed by church-

attending capitalist leaders. It was this masculine and plebian milieu of the tavern which was opposed by Protestant clergy and lay leaders, and that a significant number of working men escaped to after work.⁶

As was the case in taverns church life made few direct forays into industrial worksite space. The only time available for religious services at worksites was early in the morning and during the lunch break. Often overworked, men were not likely to relinquish their limited time of freedom. There are, however, some examples of religious services occurring regularly at work sites. In early twentieth-century Toronto 100 workers of the Canada Ship Building Company, for instance, participated in Bible classes conducted at the work site by the YMCA.⁷ Managers of the Christie Brown Company in Toronto had promoted gospel lunch-hour meetings for female and male employees for over twenty years. At one Toronto foundry, owners W. Greey and J.G. Greey constructed a chapel on the job site and for sixteen years conducted daily meetings between 7:00 and 7:30 in the morning.⁸ There were chairs and hymnbooks for over 100 workers and one employee usually played the piano while another led the singing. While an organized-type of evangelism was rarely seen in industrial space the few exceptions indicate that evangelicalism was welcomed by working men.

The Ashers' provide one of the best examples of evangelism among early twentieth-century Canadian workers. Virginia Healey was born to Irish Catholic parents in 1869 in Chicago. Attending a Protestant church, she accepted Christ as Saviour at the age of eleven. Scottish-born William Asher who lived his early years in Ontario was also converted at the same church. Virginia and William were married in 1887.⁹ While a pastor at a church in Minnesota William was concerned that thousands of men filling the local saloons were denied the saving knowledge of Christ. Viewing this as a great opportunity Asher asked a saloon keeper for permission to hold a meeting. In a tavern crowded with lumbermen, miners, sailors and labourers, some openly responded to Asher's message to forsake sin. According to Asher, "that meeting led me to see that the masses could be reached by the Gospel, if we went after them, instead of waiting for them to come to us." Holding numerous open-air meetings among working men, the Ashers' evangelism among the "unreached" caught the attention of well-known American and Presbyterian evangelist J. Wilbur Chapman. In the early years with the Chapman campaigns, the Ashers conducted over 800 meetings in saloons, jails, and other sites.¹⁰ For Virginia, visiting

saloons was difficult in the beginning: “It was never a place familiar to me, and it took a year’s battle with myself and God before I came to the point where I gave myself up before I could say I was willing to do the work which God had willed that I should do.”¹¹ Inspired by God, she understood the importance of evangelism in male working-class space.¹²

Having linked up with Chapman the Ashers visited Canada when Chapman brought his revival campaign north between 1907 and 1911. While Chapman and his other associates focused on major churches throughout the cities they visited the Ashers held meetings in taverns, pool rooms, a number of stores and factories.¹³

When working as a team William usually preached while Virginia played the organ and sang gospel music that reportedly “melted” the hearts of many working men. Virginia frequently held her own noon-hour meetings at factories.¹⁴ Both of them were driven to work among the unreached people, a task they pursued optimistically because they believed that many were waiting for someone to speak to them about their souls. To a large group of Toronto industrial workers Asher revealed that he and his wife held special meetings at factories “because of the great need of personal salvation.” In Brantford, William declared, “Almost without an exception every man I ever met intends before the end of his life to give his heart to God.”¹⁵

The Ashers’ theological message was uncomplicated and non-denominational: “I’m not advocating any particular creed or denomination or religion . . . except that of a man who came down to seek out and to save all from sin – Jesus Christ.” As Asher saw it, continued indulgence in sin meant “separation through all the dark ages of eternity from those most dear – from God himself. There is a hell as sure as there is a heaven and your destiny is surely shaping you to one or the other.”¹⁶ At a Toronto meeting, he explained that all had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Sinful desires of the heart allowed the devil to take individuals down the wrong path. Asher did not see the need to always specify particular sins: “When I say sin, every fellow among you is next to himself. For we have all sinned against ourselves, our families, our countrymen, and God. What I try to do in these meetings is to tell you how to get mastery over sin.” To be saved, all the workers had to do was “believe in Him.”¹⁷

Rather than promoting social activism and legislative remedies for economic problems the solution to economic and social problems was personal salvation. By adhering to Christ’s teaching, people would be more

loving and thus more caring to others.¹⁸ The Ashers' theological orientation was shaped by their close association to the theologically conservative Moody Bible Institute located in Chicago. Many people influenced by Moody held a premillennial interpretation of end times, the belief that the millennium or one thousand years of righteousness could only begin with the arrival of Jesus, instead of a postmillennial interpretation which said that a Kingdom of God on earth could be established before the second coming of Christ. The Ashers had little faith in grand social reform schemes, and promoted individual over collective action. The concern that Chapman and the Ashers had for the working-class was not rooted in the recent social gospel movement that focused on building a Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Rather, the Ashers' sympathy for the plight of working men was otherworldly and based on conservative evangelical beliefs that Richard Allen views, in his study of the growth of the social gospel, as "irrelevant" in offering a legitimate Christian ethic for industrial Canada.¹⁹ The Ashers' simple gospel message of ruin by sin and redemption by Christ, however, shared a continuity and conceptual framework with older forms of popular religious expression, which could still attract the attention of Canadian working men looking backwards to simpler times.

The Ashers' sermons in taverns usually lasted between 15 and 30 minutes.²⁰ They did not discuss the ethics of the saloon business or moralize about drinking. Rarely, if ever, did they ask for an offering. Still, it was striking that bar owners did not see the Ashers as a threat to their business and allowed them to hold evangelistic meetings in their taverns. William gained the masculine respect of saloon regulars by communicating effectively in the vernacular. One commentator wrote: "It is a wonderful thing to watch the faces of the men [in saloons], as he shows that he is as familiar with their 'lingo' as they are themselves."²¹

At saloon meetings men were also comforted by Virginia's manner. At the Savoy Hotel in Winnipeg, for example, bar-room patrons asked her to pray for them and, reportedly, "men who had not seen the inside of a church for years publicly acknowledged their belief." On the tavern floor, "fully 100 men knelt" and then sang the popular old hymn "Nearer, my God." Although the Ashers only planned the singing of the first two verses the tavern crowd insisted on singing more of the song. With comforting lyrics void of theological complications, gospel hymns could capture hearts in ways that sermons could not.²² Hymns like "Nearer, my God" embodied the themes of darkness but also of mercy, themes which many of the

proletariat struggling against the forces of industrial capitalism could contemplate. Sung by a caring and maternal Virginia hymns played upon childhood memories of church life. The same working men who rejected the femininity of Protestantism could not always withstand the emotional tug on their hearts when Virginia sang in their presence. The hardened guard of rough masculinity could be vulnerable, at least temporarily.²³

Typical was the Winnipeg meeting at the Mariaggi Bar where the Ashers were given a “most reverent and respectful” hearing.²⁴ During a meeting at Queen’s Hotel, there was “dead silence” as approximately 500 patrons listened to the message “And God so loved the world.” Every available seat was occupied at one service at the Coffee House where listeners displaying the “marks of a hard and checkered life” were affected by William’s exposition of the parable of the prodigal son.²⁵ As reported in the *Presbyterian*, “Night after night they [the Ashers] are holding services in different bar-rooms and are having large audiences and as respectful attention as if they were ever in a church.” At one service “not a drink could be bought for love or money.”²⁶ There were always a number of men who responded to the Ashers’ message, some coming forward and shaking hands with the evangelists. Accounts of the 1907 Winnipeg campaign suggest that the gospel message of personal sin and atonement was fairly well-received by working men. Likewise, meetings in Ontario the following year made an impression on working-class men in Orillia and Brantford. The men from the E. Long Co. foundry in Orillia welcomed the Ashers and even raised money to be sent to Virginia. The Ashers received a \$20.00 gold piece from the men of J.R. Eaton & Sons’ factory.²⁷ A report in the *Orillia Times* recounted the Ashers’ impact on a tavern audience in another city. William began by telling the story of the prodigal son in the vernacular of the bar-room while Virginia sang a song. She was then asked to pray for the patrons “as a mother or sister might.” The result was that “the whole crowd of hardened, crime-stained, drink-sodden men sank to their knees.” Then William signalled out the tavern owner and challenged him to give up his old life and accept Jesus Christ as a personal Saviour. Remembering his sordid and violent past, the man “hesitated, flushed and then turned pale, but in a moment he squared his shoulders, looked the little preacher square in the face, and said “I will.”²⁸

It mattered little that this story was written in a melodramatic fashion; males did respond to evangelicalism presented outside the confines of mainstream churches. The press described how vice was

conquered and how “debauched” individuals were reclaimed by the message of Christ. One such individual was an Orillia labourer converted at a “large manufactory.” He presented William Asher with a cigarette box, tobacco, clay pipe and a cocaine bottle, stating “I surrendered all to Jesus and will take Him for my life.”²⁹ An Orillia journalist commented that the Ashers’ work “will long be remembered here, particularly for their kind ministrations to the poor and the neglected.”³⁰ At an Asher service in Brantford at the Kerby House men clasped a “tankard of beer” with one hand and a “gospel hymn leaflet” with the other. They gradually pushed their beers away, discarded their cigarettes, cigars and pipes, and listened intently and silently to the Ashers as they spoke of “the message of Jesus Christ.” At a meeting in the Commercial Hotel bar-room, a large Brantford crowd demonstrated “order and devotional interest” in the Ashers’ biblical message and hymn singing. Even when few were present, as at one meeting in Kelly’s pool hall, the Ashers’ service was “very heartily entered into.”³¹

As in other Canadian cities the Ashers appear to have had some success in reaching out to Toronto working-class men. Reports in the newspapers in 1911 indicate that workers were interested in the services and in the message of sin and salvation the Ashers preached. The Ashers’ efforts, according to one *Toronto Daily Star* account, were “rewarded by a hushing of the crude life.” In respect for the evangelists, Toronto working men were at their best behaviour. The *Toronto Mail* reported that at the Grand Trunk freight sheds “a fair number of the railway-men turned up to listen to some good Gospel and good singing” compliments of William Asher and W.W. Weaver, another member of the Chapman campaign.³² Although attendance at noon-hour services in Toronto varied because some employees went elsewhere for lunch, workers were receptive to a basic evangelical message of personal sin and redemption through Christ.

Besides hearing the Ashers in saloons and factories, working men attended other services conducted by Chapman evangelists. During the Chapman campaigns there were meetings held in churches in most districts of the cities including some in and around working-class neighbourhoods. Moreover, there were meetings at neutral sites, such as the Orillia Palace Roller Rink, Toronto’s Massey Hall, and Winnipeg’s Walker Theatre, where meetings for “men only” were held.³³ These sites attracted male workers who might have found “respectable” mainstream city churches

threatening. Unlike the formal atmosphere of some city churches, halls and roller rinks offered a more egalitarian and less institutional setting. The *Orillia Packet* commented on the large numbers that crowded into the Orillia roller rink night after night for the 1908 Chapman meetings: “Here were gatherings that stirred up this whole community, taking first place before politics and even business.”³⁴ Given that the rink meetings attracted at least 2,000 people every evening of the week in a small city of approximately 5,000, there were a large number of working-class attenders at the emotional revival meetings. During the 1911 Toronto campaign the main meetings at Massey Hall alone attracted “fully 100,000” people. At one Massey service there were “some considerably aged unshaven working men in rough clothes and the immaculately attired. A leading Toronto physician mounted the platform and told the meeting of his change of heart, while the broken English of an Italian was heard with others in earnest prayer.”³⁵

Yet the revival enthusiasm of the Ashers and other Chapman evangelists was tame, at least compared to the earthy, emotional, soul-saving preaching of an earlier era. Historians David Marshall and Phyllis Airhart draw attention to the decline of emotional evangelical services in the nineteenth century and how early twentieth-century evangelical leadership struggled to recapture past glories.³⁶ The *Voice*, a Winnipeg labour paper, described the Winnipeg campaign as “a modern, up-to-date, business-like affair” managed by “polished gentlemen” with the “old revival seance beaten about as far as the new electric cars have it on the old Red river cart.”³⁷ One of the first hints that the revival meetings did not necessarily generate greater church involvement among workers came within a few weeks after the Winnipeg campaign. One commentator concluded that the meetings had failed to attract workers to church life.³⁸ Indeed, an examination of Winnipeg church memberships suggest that the Ashers and other Chapman evangelists failed to have a major impact on church growth. The *Presbyterian* believed that the “whole city” had been “deeply moved” yet did not offer any data of conversion numbers to substantiate this claim.³⁹

In the aftermath of the 1911 Toronto campaign the denominational press questioned the effectiveness of revival meetings. For example, the *Canadian Congregationalist* admitted that despite the efforts of the evangelists the city continued “as though nothing had happened.” Similar assessments were published in the *Canadian Baptist* and the *Christian*

Guardian.⁴⁰ The Rev. W.G. Wallace and the Rev. A. Logan Geggie, two Presbyterian clergymen closely connected to the campaign, agreed that the number of converts fell short of expectations.⁴¹

Such assessments are confirmed by the membership numbers in 1911 for the Toronto Presbytery and Toronto Methodist District. From 1909 to 1913, the best year for the Presbyterians was 1910, the year before the arrival of the American evangelists. Methodist gains did not rise significantly until one and half years after the visit of the Ashers and other Chapman evangelists. Still, some churches did better than others. It may be significant that while Central Methodist Church, situated near wealthy Rosedale, lost members in 1911, Parkdale Presbyterian Church, located near working-class neighbourhoods, had the largest rise in membership. Overall, however, the 1911 Toronto campaign brought few workers into the church fold.⁴² Thus, while newspaper reports indicate that working-class people attended campaign meetings, few of them joined mainstream churches.

Church membership figures are problematic. As religious historians have found, many church people never bothered to sign up for official membership, even when they feel and act like members. Nonetheless, both the denominational commentary on the evangelists' impact and church membership numbers give the unmistakable impression that the unchurched masses were not flocking to the mainstream churches in large numbers. Many young people averse to church participation walked city streets as revival attenders were inside singing "Rescue the Perishing."⁴³ While future studies may show that lesser known evangelical sects and churches attracted significant numbers from the "laboring classes" into membership, mainstream Protestant churches had not.⁴⁴ The Ashers and other evangelists did preach to working-class people, but evangelism was not very successful. This was worrisome especially since mainline Protestant church attendance and membership were in decline relative to the growth of the population.⁴⁵

So why did working men receptive to the Ashers' message neglect to join mainstream churches? One reason was that many of the working-class were recent immigrants with different cultures and languages.⁴⁶ But working men who were native-born Canadians or of Anglo descent, while interested in a traditional message, were also unlikely to join mainstream churches. The reason for this varied. Some of these workers saw themselves as good Christians without any need to become church members.

Geographical mobility of working men searching for employment from city to city often discouraged the development of church and family bonds. With the growth of sport activities, male workers had a greater number of options for their time. And the perceived feminization of Protestantism played a significant role in preventing male workers, particularly single men, from joining church activities. Not only were the majority of church adherents women, but church activities such as ladies' tea meetings, sewing societies, and strawberry socials presented a stereotype of a feminine church.⁴⁷ These are important arguments, but press commentary during these years suggests that class-consciousness was a pivotal reason why many male workers were reluctant to share their religious faith with others in a church setting.

For example, there were workers who were suspicious of the alliance between the Chapman campaigns and clergy and business leaders. As the Winnipeg revival campaign was in progress, the *Voice* reported that the birth of the Chapman evangelistic movement was fathered by wealthy American capitalists, including those who were ardently against union activity.⁴⁸ Two months after the Winnipeg campaign, the Rev. Hiram Hull of the McDougall Methodist Church stated that men stayed away from churches because they thought it was "a class institution."⁴⁹ Into the twentieth century, the task of enticing working men into the churches became more challenging, especially when, in the eyes of many Canadian workers, evangelical church leaders tended to adopt a conservative stance on the issue of labour activity and a laissez-faire attitude to the material well-being of the labouring poor. In a 1907 article entitled "How Shall We Reach the Masses?," Baptist R.D. Warren stated: "[W]hen ever a minister of Christ identifies himself with a class or a party, he wrecks the church, discredits himself and loses his influence." Stating that lifting one's hat respectfully to both labourers and millionaires represented equality, Warren not only demonstrated his lack of understanding of working-class need and grievance, but also his incapacity to admit that church operations (including ministers' salaries) were funded and guided by wealthy parishioners to a significant degree.⁵⁰

The bourgeois nature of ostentatious churches that attracted wealthy members also led some to believe that the social message of Christ was muted. Writing to the *Voice*, one commentator declared that when the pulpit stopped preaching the gospel of "Dollars and Cents" soon crowds will go to the churches and "dispel the idea that Christ's gospel has lost its

influence among people.” Another person argued that “many preachers preach to Labor about Labor on Labor problems and yet they do not understand that problem themselves.” As a result, “work people everywhere get tired of sermons.”⁵¹ Shortly before the Ashers’ 1907 arrival in Winnipeg, one commentator reported that the gulf between workers and the church was due, in part, because the church had “taught labor humility and contentment when it should have taught courage and ambition.” Walter E. Hadden was even more forthright: “[T]he Christian churches are largely responsible for the deplorable social and industrial conditions which prevail, through their support of the present competitive system of industry, a system which is contrary to all the teachings of Christ.” Within working-class circles, numerous others protested that the clergy allowed employers to oppress labour and thus illustrated the church’s lack of understanding of the working and material conditions of many workers.⁵² Perceiving the church as a pillar of capitalism some working-class activists were especially condemning of those who protected their own business interests in the name of Jesus Christ. The *Western Clarion*, a voice of Canadian socialism, declared that if Christ appeared and preached “the doctrines that He propagated nineteen centuries ago, the ruling class of the twentieth century would rise in its indignation and wrath and . . . send Him to a prison or a scaffold.”⁵³

In the case of the Chapman campaigns there was a significant number of wealthy Canadian capitalists supportive of the meetings.⁵⁴ Ironically, these Protestant lay leaders might have been initially concerned over the Ashers’ close contact with workers in working-class space. But Chapman assured that he never had to apologize for any action that William Asher had done over the years.⁵⁵ Given that the Ashers avoided any mention of the problems that workers faced in an exploitive capitalist system, business leaders had little reason to worry that the meetings might provoke action for social change. The Ashers and other Chapman evangelists harmonized with mainstream Protestant churches which, for the most part, adopted a laissez-faire attitude to social and labour problems.

The Ashers might have been forgiven for not raising the issue of labour inequality in their 15 to 30 minute soul-winning sermons, but extravagant city churches catering to bourgeois ideals were not easily exonerated. In an earlier period, the financial success of Protestant leaders in Canada resulted in the extension and growth of churches. For example,

the enhanced social status of Methodist leaders, beginning in the 1850s, “revitalized the evangelical impulse rather than marked its deathknell.” An affluent Methodist membership played an essential role in securing the necessary money and enthusiasm for Methodist church expansion and extension into growing town wards where they drew from a wide spectrum of society.⁵⁶ But with the encroachment of a late nineteenth-century capitalism that was more exploitive and oppressive, the close relationship between church life and the financial success of the Protestant laity tempered rather than enhanced church growth. The “accommodationist stance” characteristic of earlier class relations was in the process of being undermined by a “movement culture” that challenged the perceived inequalities of an entrenched industrial capitalism. In regards to Protestantism, Christian beliefs did not necessarily kindle workers’ anger of capital, yet the disparity between Christ’s message and capitalism would have fuelled such outrage.⁵⁷

Ignorance was no excuse for Protestant leaders failing to appreciate the problems that workers faced. These years saw the increasing use of strike action to combat the loss of shop-floor control and the erosion of real wages. In the 1901-1914 period, Toronto witnessed 198 strikes. Even the much smaller centre of Brantford had 14 strikes in these same years. In April 1908, for example, 120 union stove mounters employed at the Buck Stove Works went on strike and were still off the job when the Ashers held a revival meeting there in October.⁵⁸ The Ashers and Chapman evangelists were aware of the difficulties of many of those they encountered. In Toronto, one Chapman evangelist discovered an aged woman in an impoverished state “living in a dark, unheated hovel on Front street east.” The Rev. H.D. Sheldon, describing the miserable quarters of Mary Cotey, claimed: “Nothing to compare with it in New York’s notorious Hell’s Kitchen.” Mary’s husband employed at a tannery had died and her working son Harry was injured; without an income they were “reduced to the lowest state of destitution.”⁵⁹ But in most cases evangelicals were unwilling to challenge the status quo.

Ironically, social gospel leaders who were sensitive to the plight of workers jettisoned much of the pietistic and traditional evangelical core which working people had identified with over the years and instead favoured a more intellectual and social controlling message. Scholarship suggests that the petty bourgeois rather than the working class were likely the main supporters of the new theology that many social gossellers

promoted.⁶⁰ Other Protestant leaders who took a middle road between conservative evangelicalism and the social gospel did not have any better success in representing the needs of the working class. A recent study argues that early twentieth-century Presbyterian leaders, applying modern business methods to the church, preached more on the suppression of social vice that threatened bourgeois ideals than on the compelling love and grace of God.⁶¹

Evangelical leaders' support for direct working-class outreach was also poor. In 1909, there was a concerted effort to reach the working class in the Kootenay mining and lumbering region in British Columbia, but the evangelists involved were mainly lesser-known Americans. Examples of Canadian mainstream evangelical leaders entering and focusing primarily on working-class culture are not easily found. The efforts of J.S. Woodsworth among Winnipeg workers is noteworthy, but Woodsworth was no gospel evangelical. The examples that Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau provide of early-twentieth century evangelism in working-class space – by Canadian evangelicals – are all the more striking on the basis that they appear to have represented isolated events.⁶² On no consistent basis did evangelical clergymen initiate direct working-class evangelism in Canadian urban centres. Commenting on the issue of reaching central Canadian workers Presbyterian clergyman Rev. E.I. Hart declared: “[w]e must cease to despise the Gospel waggon, the Gospel tent, and the street preacher.”⁶³ Speaking as one who should know, William Asher, at the conclusion of the Toronto campaign, warned that saloon evangelism – “an undeveloped field” – could not be continued to be overlooked.⁶⁴

Given that evangelical leaders often talked about the importance of reaching the common masses, it is surprising that the work of the Ashers in Canada received meagre attention in the press. Professor Joseph Gilmour, a Baptist who wrote numerous reports of the 1911 Toronto campaign for the *Toronto Star*, gave the work of the Ashers one paragraph. The reports in church publications were equally dismal. In its commentary on the various Chapman campaigns, the *Christian Guardian* made no mention of the Ashers. The *Canadian Baptist* devoted one short paragraph on William Asher. The *Presbyterian* wrote a few more sentences, but only for the Winnipeg campaign.⁶⁵ Having lost touch with industrial workers, Canadian evangelical leaders failed to give the work of the Ashers the attention it deserved.

And yet the Ashers preached in an era when Protestantism was

contested. Evangelicalism was not the sole property of employers. For workers at the grass-roots level, evangelical ideas, traditions, and beliefs likely did not change dramatically over the years; workers could not easily be divorced from an evangelical message which was not entangled with status quo ideals of Christian behaviour. Indeed, Canadian working-class publications contained a surprising amount of Christian rhetoric; even some Canadian socialists admitted that Christianity was an important component of their lives. In William Cooper's mind, there should be no hostility between socialism and Christianity since "[t]aking the latter to mean simply the sayings of Jesus Christ, there is nothing there that is opposed to anything we have to say." Thus, as industrial capitalism grew and American evangelists appeared in Canada many working-class men continued to embrace Christianity but more on their own terms.⁶⁶

William and Virginia Asher's work was distinct in that they focused virtually all their attention on the rough culture of masculine working-class life. Their approach was quite radical compared to the efforts of local mainstream evangelical churches. Attracted to a gospel message of personal sin and atonement, many early-twentieth century working men listened. But the Ashers' efforts did not represent a sustained working-class religious movement. They and other Chapman evangelists had a negligible impact on mainstream Protestant church growth in the Canadian cities they visited. Speaking to the Winnipeg branch of the Labor Party, William Cooper concluded that, despite the abundance of preparation and effort, the campaign "left us pretty much as we were."⁶⁷ This statement could also apply to the actions of many mainstream evangelical churches throughout early twentieth-century urban Canada since they overlooked the rougher element of the working class. Overall, it was more the case that churches deserted the workers rather than workers deserting Christianity.

Endnotes

1. *Manitoba Free Press*, 30 October 1907; and "Revival in the Shop," *The Evening Telegram*, 20 January 1911.
2. Lynne Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks: Religion, Leisure, and Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Small-Town Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); and Doris O'Dell, "The Class Character of Church Participation in Late Nineteenth-Century Belleville, Ontario" (Ph.D thesis, Queen's University, 1990).

3. Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity, 1900-1940* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1996); and Nancy Christie and Michael Gauvreau, "'The World of the Common Man Is Filled with Religious Fervour': The Labouring People of Winnipeg and the Persistence of Revivalism, 1914-1925," in *Aspects of Canadian Evangelicalism*, ed. George A. Rawlyk (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).
4. For more on the social formation of this period, see Bryan Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1900-1991* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 155-163; and Bryan Palmer and Craig Heron, "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901-14," *Canadian Historical Review*, 58, No. 4 (December 1977): 423-432. On working-class women, see for example, Shirley Tillotson, "'We may all soon be 'first-class men'': Gender and Skill in Canada's Early Twentieth-century Urban Telegraph Industry," *Labour/LeTravail* 27 (Spring 1991): 106-107.
5. On the issues of wages, working conditions, and housing, especially helpful is Michael Piva, *The Conditions of the Working Class in Toronto – 1900-1921* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1979), 27-142; Terry Copp, *The Anatomy of Poverty: The Condition of the Working Class in Montreal, 1897-1929* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1974); and Bryan Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980* (Toronto: Butterworth & Co. Ltd., 1983), 144-147.
6. Peter DeLottinville, "Joe Beef of Montreal: Working-Class Culture and the Tavern, 1869-1889," in *Readings in Canadian History: Post-Confederation*, eds. R. Douglas Francis and Donald B. Smith (Toronto: Harcourt Brace 1994), 237-263; and Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 102-106.
7. Frank Yeigh, "The Twentieth Century Bible Study Revival," *Presbyterian*, 9 May 1907.
8. *Toronto Daily Star*, 9 January 1911.
9. *Orillia Packet*, 24 September 1908, records that William Asher was born in Keith, Scotland whereas the *Brantford Expositor*, 4 November 1908, claims that he was born in Canada.
10. "Life Stories of the Evangelists," *Orillia Times*, 8 October 1908. The *Orillia Packet*, 24 September 1908, provides a somewhat different version, stating that Jessie Ackerman of the WCTU encouraged them to be involved in saloon meetings.
11. "Told of Work in Slum Districts," *Toronto Daily Star*, 6 January 1911.

12. Virginia Asher was interested in reaching working-class women whenever possible. Yet in Canada, the majority of the Ashers' meetings were held in the predominantly male working-class space of taverns and factory worksites.
13. For example, Toronto factory sites visited included: Ontario Wind Engine and Pump Company, Eclipse Whitewear Company, A. Barthelmes and Company, Canada Motor Cycle Company, Diamond Flint Glass Company, Christie Brown Company, and Grand Trunk sheds. The majority of sites had male workers only; the Christie Brown Company was one exception. Occasionally other Chapman evangelists also preached at worksites.
14. *Orillia Times*, 15 October 1908; "Some Leaders in the Winnipeg Campaign," *Presbyterian*, 7 November 1907; and "Woman's Pity for Woman," *Manitoba Free Press*, 5 November 1907.
15. "A Great Meeting at Taylor Works," *Toronto Daily Star*, 6 January 1911; and "Life Stories of Evangelists," *Brantford Courier*, 29 October 1908.
16. "Bar Room Rally in the Revival," *Brantford Expositor*, 20 October 1908.
17. "A Great Meeting at Taylor Works," *Toronto Daily Star*, 6 January 1911.
18. Virginia Asher, speaking at one Methodist church, implored church people to open their homes to the young people who are new to the city. "Invite them informally to tea or for a little music in the evening," she said, "Show them that you care" (*Manitoba Free Press*, 12 November 1907).
19. Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada 1914-28* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 356.
20. "Told of Work in Slum Districts," *Toronto Daily Star*, 6 January 1911.
21. *Orillia Times*, 15 October 1908.
22. "Mrs. Asher at the Savoy Hotel Last Night," *Manitoba Free Press*, 8 November 1907. For lyrics see Ira D. Sankey, *Sacred Songs and Solos: Twelve Hundred Hymns* (London n.d.), 581. See also David Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 91-93.
23. "Told of Work in Slum Districts," *Toronto Daily Star*, 6 January 1911.
24. "Bar-room Experiences," *Manitoba Free Press*, 29 October 1907; and "Bar-room Talks," *Manitoba Free Press*, 30 October 1907.
25. *Manitoba Free Press*, 30 October 1907; and "At the Coffee House," *Manitoba Free Press*, 9 November 1907.

26. "Some Leaders in the Winnipeg Campaign," *Presbyterian*, 7 November 1907.
27. "Chapman-Alexander Evangelistic Campaign," *Orillia Packet*, 15 October 1908. No information was provided on whether these gifts were initiated by workers or owners. In an earlier campaign, Virginia Asher received from a saloon owner a small portable organ which she used night after night at tavern meetings ("A Chapman Evangelistic Campaign," *Presbyterian*, 4 April 1907).
28. "Wonderful Revival of Religion," *Orillia Times*, 15 October 1908.
29. "The Chapman-Alexander Campaign," *Canadian Baptist*, 22 October 1908.
30. "Chapman-Alexander Evangelistic Campaign," *Orillia Packet*, 15 October 1908.
31. *Brantford Daily Expositor*, 20 October 1908; "Bar Room Meeting," *Brantford Daily Expositor* 24 October 1908; and "Are Active," *Brantford Daily Expositor*, 22 October 1908.
32. Told of Work in Slum Districts," *Toronto Daily Star*, 6 January 1911; and *Mail*, 19 January 1911.
33. "Local Items," *Voice*, 18 October 1907.
34. *Orillia Packet*, 15 October 1908.
35. *Toronto Daily Star*, 28 January 1911; and "Police Obligated to Keep Crowds from Massey Hall," *Globe*, 27 January 1911.
36. See Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 91-93; and Phyllis D. Airhart, *Serving the Present Age: Revivalism, Progressivism and the Methodist Tradition* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 95-100.
37. "The Home of the Evangelist Movement," *Voice*, 1 November 1907.
38. William Cooper, "Socialist View of Religion," *Voice*, 3 January 1908.
39. *Presbyterian Acts*, 1905-1909; and "The Winnipeg Evangelistic Campaign," *Presbyterian*, 21 November 1907.
40. *Canadian Congregationalist*, 9 March 1911; *Canadian Baptist*, 16 March 1911, and "What Was There in the Chapman-Alexander Campaign?" *Christian Guardian*, 8 March 1911.
41. "Chapman-Alexander Simultaneous Mission: Impressions of the Campaign," *Presbyterian*, 2 February 1911.

42. *Methodist Minutes*, 1908-1914; *Presbyterian Acts*, 1908-1914. The interest generated by Chapman, the Ashers and others did not in most cases generate significant church growth between 1907 and 1911. In Orillia the Baptist church increased its membership by fourteen in 1908, but one year after the campaign the Baptists had a better year, drawing 23 into the fold. Membership figures for Baptist churches in Brantford had one church lose four people, another church gained only two, and another added sixteen. Only Calvary Baptist showed a significant improvement with a net gain of 61 [*Baptist Year Book*, 1908-1914].
43. "Plea for Non-church Goers," *Toronto World*, 22 January 1911.
44. In the British context see the "labour sects" of E.J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Manchester: University Press, 1963), 126-149. According to Norman Knowles, "Christ in the Crowsnest: Religion and the Working Class on the Western Canadian Coal Mining Frontier," a paper presented to the BC Studies Conference, Malaspina University College (May 1997), revival meetings at western mining communities in 1909 likewise did not raise church memberships significantly (30).
45. In a "Plea for Non-church Goers," *Toronto World*, 22 January 1911, a commentator wrote: "I wish to put in a plea for the men and women of this city who do not attend the regular church service and that is "a great multitude," more than half of its population, and the number is rapidly increasing."
46. See "New Conditions Call for New Methods," *Voice*, 24 January 1908.
47. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith*, 73; Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks*, 14, 29, 83, 162; Betty DeBerg, *UnGodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 29, 75-98; "Men and the Church," *Voice*, 17 January 1908; Tim Heinrich, "The Last Great Awakening: The Revival of 1905 and Progressivism," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1991, 355; and "The Feminization of the Minister," *Wesleyan*, 16 February 1910.
48. "The Home of the Evangelist Movement," *Voice*, 1 November 1907.
49. "Men and the Church," *Voice*, 17 January 1908; Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks*, 34, is helpful. She argues that for some men, "conflict in the workplace may have heightened class-consciousness and led a reluctance to worship with employers . . ." See also Knowles, "Christ in the Crowsnest," 21.
50. "How Shall We Reach the Masses?" *Canadian Baptist*, 17 October 1907.

51. "Labor Problems," *Voice*, 22 November 1907; and "Losing its Power," *Voice*, 15 November 1907.
52. "In Pulpit and Platform," *Voice*, 27 September 1907. See also Walter E. Hadden, "To the Social and Moral Reform Committees of Local Churches," *Western Clarion*, 12 June 1909; other voices of protest can be found in "The Church Cannot Afford to Remain Neutral," *Industrial Banner*, October 1907; "Labor Problems," *Voice*, 22 November 1907; "Socialist View of Religion," *Voice*, 27 December 1907; "True Struggle of Freedom," *Voice*, 10 January 1908; "Want it Explained," *Voice*, 10 January 1908; "Woman's Column," *Voice*, 7 February 1908; "Prof. Osborne Lectures," *Voice*, 14 February 1908; and "Why the Sacrifice?" *Saskatchewan Labor's Realm*, 3 July 1908.
53. "Peace on Earth Good Will Toward Men," *Western Clarion*, 25 December 1909. For more criticism of churches and Christianity in general see, "Correspondence," *Western Clarion*, 9 March 1907; and "Spurious Salvation," *Western Clarion*, 6 April 1907. The latter article is an attack on the Salvation Army ("Correspondence," *Western Clarion*, 10 March 1907; "Note and Comment," *Western Clarion*, 30 March 1907; "The Church Always Against Socialism," *Western Clarion*, 1 June 1907; C.M. O'Brien, "'Rev.' Ralph Smith," *Western Clarion*, 16 November 1907; Jack Reay and C.M. O'Brien, "Socialists on the Warpath," *Western Clarion*, 23 November 1907; and W.R. Trotter, "Salvation Army and Emigration," *Saskatchewan Labor's Realm*, 29 May 1908).
54. Some examples include successful businessmen such as Winnipeg's J.A.M. Aikens, G.F. Stephens, William Whyte, and Sir Daniel McMillan, Orillia's J.J. Thompson, and Toronto's J.N. Shenstone, to name a few.
55. "Some Leaders in the Winnipeg Campaign," *Presbyterian*, 7 November 1907.
56. Marguerite Van Die, "'A March of Victory and Triumph in Praise of 'The Beauty of Holiness': Laity and the Evangelical Impulse in Canadian Methodism, 1800-1884,'" in *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience*, 81, 83, 87.
57. Greg Kealey and Bryan Palmer, *Dreaming of What Might Be: The Knights of Labor in Canada* (Toronto: New Hogtown Press, 1987), 283-291; and Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks*, 151.
58. Bryan Palmer and Craig Heron, "Through the Prism of the Strike: Industrial Conflict in Southern Ontario, 1901-14," *Canadian Historical Review* 58 (December 1977): 423-458; and *A Glimpse of the Past: A Centennial History of Brantford and Brant County* (Brant Historical Society, 1966), 31-36.

59. "Evangelist Finds Destitute Family," *Globe*, 14 January 1911; and "Sheldon was Shocked," *Evening Telegram*, 14 January 1911.
60. Christie and Gauvreau, "'The World of the Common Man Is Filled with Religious Fervour,'" 341-342. For more on the social gospel movement in Canada, see Allen, *The Social Passion*; and Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*. An aside to this is a *Western Clarion* editorial, 29 May 1909, that declared, "Socialists" who propagated atheism tended to be "characteristic of bourgeois radicals than of proletarian revolutionists . . ."
61. Barry Mack, "From Preaching to Propaganda to Marginalization: The Lost Centre of Twentieth-Century Presbyterianism," in *Aspects of the Canadian Evangelical Experience*, 138, 142.
62. Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*; and "The World of the Common Man Is Filled with Religious Fervour."
63. Quoted in Christie and Gauvreau, *A Full-Orbed Christianity*, 63.
64. "Saloons Needs Attention," *Toronto Daily Star*, 30 January 1911.
65. Indicative of this short treatment was an advertisement for the Chapman campaign in Winnipeg which relegated the Ashers to the status of "personal workers" rather than "associates," the term applied to the other supporting evangelists (*Manitoba Free Press*, 23 October 1907).
66. See Marks, *Revivals and Roller Rinks*, 149-151. One can find, for example, evidence of Christian rhetoric in the *Voice's* "Woman's Column." See, the following issues: 13 September 1907, 15 November 1907; "Ottawa, Ont." *Western Clarion*, 5 November 1910; William Cooper, "Socialist View of Religion," *Voice*, 27 December 1907; and "Another View," *Western Clarion*, 22 May 1909. In "A Lady's View," *Western Clarion*, 28 January 1911, Mrs. W.D. wrote: "There has been so much in the *Clarion* of late about religion one would think that the Socialist party had turned into a camp meeting." The debate, printed in numerous editorials and letters to editors in the *Western Clarion*, is a fascinating one to read, especially since letters were sent from coast to coast. For socialists defending Christianity in the *Western Clarion*, see: W.G.L. "Correspondence," 9 March 1907; W.E. French, "The Party and Religion," 1 May 1909; Spencer Percival, "A House Divided," 15 May 1909; K. Kingston, "In a Christian Spirit," 15 May 1909; Spencer Percival, "Socialism – Christian and Otherwise," 29 May 1909; (Rev.) A.F. Cobb, "A Sky Pilot's View," 29 May 1909; H. Gildemeester, "Dirty Face Protests," 29 May 1909; W.W. Restelle Shier, "Religion and the Socialist Party," 29 May 1909; Fillmore, "Fillmore's Turn," 28 January 1911. Those against Christianity did not always take a hostile stand. One editor wrote: "By Logic, it would

appear Socialists cannot be Christians. By observation we know that some of them are, and are good Socialists” (“Metaphysiced Materialism,” 14 January 1911).

67. William Cooper, “Socialist View of Religion,” *Voice*, 3 January 1908.

