

“THAT OLD TIME RELIGION”

“Turning Problems Into Possibilities”

Scripture Reading – Acts, 6:1-7

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word”.

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

‘Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.’

Philippians, 2:14-15, NIV

This series, based on THE BOOK OF ACTS, is entitled ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’.

The reason I want to call this series ‘THAT OLD TIME RELIGION’ is that we need to look back in order that we might really look to the future. The OLD TIME RELIGION needs to become the NEW TIME RELIGION because it is the ALL TIME RELIGION. If we get back to the basics of life in the Early Christian Church, we might better understand what the Holy Spirit can do through us today.

THE BOOK OF ACTS is the story of success; the story of a church triumphant.

It is the story of a small group of uncultured and generally unlearned people with meagre resources – very little money, no prestige, and no church buildings. This small group of people went out to tell the story of a publicly executed Jew. They went against three great obstacles – the imperial might of the Romans, the intellectual sophistication of the Greeks, and the religious bigotry of the Jews. They turned the world inside out and upside down for Jesus Christ.

The Acts of the Apostles is the story of a church on fire with evangelism and growth...

“TURNING PROBLEMS INTO POSSIBILITIES”

C:\ My Documents\Word\Ministry\David Ellison\
The New Testament\Acts\11 Turning Problems Into Possibilities

Last year, I awoke with such pain that it made me physically sick.

I had never experienced a pain of such severity before. When I arrived in hospital, I was asked to rate it on a scale from one to ten. I gave it a nine, but I almost said eleven! One of the tasks undertaken in hospital was to manage my pain. I was given PARACETEMOL, which is good for mild to moderate pain, and TRAMADOL for moderate to severe pain. Sometimes that medication was not sufficient, so MORPHINE was injected in order to ease the pain.

I guess that at one time or another we have all experienced pains caused by disease or illness. Some of us have rheumatism pains, that are caused by old age, but today I want us to consider another kind of pain that we have all experienced: growing pains...

Do you remember your physical growing pains?

You were a child, and you grew up. When you were learning how to walk, people would rush to your aid when you fell. When you were a youngster, you fell off your bicycle and collided rather painfully with the ground. You fell out of a tree you were climbing and broke your arm, or ankle. When you became a teenager, you felt as though you had two left feet. You had pimples on your face and your teeth needed straightening. You could not get your hair right and your voice was breaking when you talked. The bones and muscles in your arms and legs hurt and you felt just terrible. Nonetheless, you were in the process of physically maturing and growing.

Do you remember your spiritual growing pains?

When some people are saved, they think that they will never have another problem again, but they soon realise that just as they experienced physical growing pains, they will also experience spiritual growing pains. Every Christian learns how to move on from being a baby in Christ and being fed with milk into becoming a toddler on solid foods who stumbles and falls. Every Christian knows what it is like to hurt and have spiritual indigestion. Some new Christians feel immensely put out when they are starting to really grow and newer babes in Christ seem to get more attention. Nonetheless, you are in the process of spiritually maturing and growing.

A growing church will always experience growing pains.

The Early Christian Church was growing at a phenomenal rate. So much so, that it experienced immense and difficult problems. Whilst pessimists go around and see a difficulty in every opportunity, the Bible believing Christian should see an opportunity for growth in every difficulty. Every difficulty experienced by the Early Church became a springboard that led to more prayer. More prayer led to more power. More power led to more souls won for the Kingdom, in and through the name of Jesus.

The four basic facts that I want to give to you today have more than one application.

They will certainly apply to life in the church. They will certainly apply to our family. They will certainly apply to our personal life. But we will concentrate on how they apply to our Corps...

1. WHERE THERE IS LIFE, THERE IS GROWTH

‘In those days when the number of disciples was increasing.’

Acts, 6:1a, NIV

What were those days?

These were days of revival. These were days when multitudes of people were being saved.

We read in the Book of Acts that following Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost **'ABOUT THREE THOUSAND WERE ADDED TO THEIR NUMBER' (Acts, 2:41)**. Later we read that **'THE LORD ADDED TO THEIR NUMBER DAILY THOSE WHO WERE BEING SAVED' (Acts, 2:47)**. After the healing of the crippled beggar at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple and Peter and John's sermon, **'MANY HEARD THE MESSAGE BELIEVED, AND THE NUMBER OF MEN GROW TO ABOUT FIVE THOUSAND' (Acts, 4:4)**. After the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira was disclosed and despite the fact that no one dared joined the apostles, **'MORE AND MORE MEN AND WOMEN BELIEVED IN THE LORD AND WERE ADDED TO THEIR NUMBER' (Acts, 5:14)**.

Now the number of disciples was 'INCREASING'; the word literally means 'MULTIPLYING'.

Now it is no longer addition, it is multiplication! Now they are growing by the thousands. Now there is abundant growth, as they grow in quantum leaps.

People say that they do not believe in numbers, but God is interested in them.

Some people use phrases like that to excuse their lack of spirituality or even their laziness. Where there is a healthy spiritual life there is spiritual growth. Where there is a healthy spiritual growth there is numerical growth. We should be interested in numbers because they represent people. What is more important to our mission than people who are being saved?

Surely, every church that is surrounded by lost people should be a growing church.

I do not believe that there is nothing necessarily great about a big church and there is nothing necessarily wrong with a small church. Some of the greatest churches on earth are small churches. In fact, The Salvation Army recognises that many small corps in the country have an impact upon the community that far outweighs its own size. This is certainly true of the Malton Corps now, and as we seek to impact the community in more tangible and significant ways, it will achieve an even greater impact.

Our mandate, our mission, is to win souls for Jesus Christ.

If we are not reaching people; if we are not helping change lives for good; if we are not seeing people saved and shoots of new growth begin, then we are not doing what Jesus told us to do. New shoots of growth can appear even in the hardest soil, even in the desert, and they must be watered and nurtured if they are to grow.

A church must glow and grow or it will dry and die.

A church must evangelise or it will fossilise. The church can never stand still. Nonetheless, growth is not easy; growth is not automatic. You have to plan for growth and you must pray for growth. Even then, you must work for it, and you have to cultivate something if you want to grow. But note that only God can give the increase! Spiritual growth is the product of a spiritual life. Numerical growth is the product of spiritual growth. God's plan for us is to go and grow.

'A painter was commissioned to paint a picture of a dead Salvation Army corps. The client thought the artist would paint a picture of a building with the roof sagging, dowdy decoration, and boarded up windows. He thought the painting would show a threadbare and dirty carpet,

and furniture that was falling apart. He anticipated a few people, if any, sitting here and there amongst the debris.

'But the painter did not! Instead, he painted a glorious looking building decorated with fresh paint, sparkling windows, new carpet, and beautiful furniture. There was an elegant looking and moderate sized crowd that looked both well fed and well heeled. Everything seemed to be just right.

'The client was shocked and asked the artist if he had understood his instructions. "Look closer at the picture", came the reply. When the client looked more closely, he saw cobwebs on the mercy seat. In the eyes of the painter, that was the true portrait of a dead corps.'

A dead church does not have any difficulties because it is D-E-A-D.

Where there is life, there is growth. Where there is growth, there are problems...

2. WHERE THERE IS GROWTH, THERE ARE PROBLEMS

'In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.'

Acts, 6:1, NIV

When God sets out to multiply, the devil sets out to divide.

When the devil sees a healthy, growing church, he tries to divide that church any way he can.

What followed the MULTIPLICATION? MURMURING

The church was experiencing true growing pains and this was making it difficult for the apostles to minister to everybody. The **'GRECIAN JEWS'** were the Greek-speaking Jews who had come to Palestine from other nations, and therefore may not have spoken Aramaic, while the **'HEBRAIC JEWS'** were Jewish residents of the land who spoke both Aramaic and Greek. The fact that the 'outsiders' were being neglected created a situation that could have divided the church. However, the Apostles handled the problem with great wisdom and did not give Satan any further foothold within the church fellowship.

I do not believe the Grecian Jews were overlooked on purpose.

It is very likely that as the membership of the church multiplied, the apostles got themselves so busy doing so many jobs and tasks, that they unintentionally missed out people who they knew were in desperate need of help. I do not believe that it was intentional, but the situation was nonetheless very real.

The problem was real, but the response was terrible.

The Greek-speaking Jews began to complain, they began to murmur. Murmuring is a horrible sin. If you murmur, you are really murmuring against God because the Bible tells us that in everything we should be giving thanks to God. The truth is that we cannot murmur and praise at the same time. If his praise is to be continually upon our lips, then we cannot be murmuring and complaining.

'Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe.'

Philippians, 2:14-15, NIV

When you murmur or complain, you are really murmuring about God.

When the people were murmuring in the wilderness about eating manna and quail, Moses said:

"You will know that it was the LORD when he gives you meat to eat in the evening and all the bread you want in the morning, because he has heard your grumbling against him. Who are we? You are not grumbling against us, but against the LORD."





Exodus, 16:8, NIV

How seriously does God take it when we murmur and complain?

'Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: "The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in pagan revelry". We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did – and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did – and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did – and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!'

1 Corinthians, 10:7-12, NIV

Here are four big sins in the eyes of God.

| | |
|---|--|
|  IDOLATRY | You say, "Well, you will never catch me worshipping an idol". |
|  SEXUAL IMMORALITY | You say, "Well, I would not be engaged in anything like that". |
|  TESTING THE LORD | You say, "Well, I would not dare to do that, it's dangerous". |
|  GRUMBLING | You say, "Well, ...?" |

Complaining, grumbling, murmuring, is never a good way to solve problems.

Whenever you put people and progress together, you are going to have problems...

3. WHERE THERE ARE PROBLEMS, THERE ARE SOLUTIONS

'The Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word". This proposal pleased the whole group.'

Acts, 6:2-5a, NIV

God always has a solution for every one of our problems.

When a church faces a serious problem, this presents the leaders and the members with a number of opportunities. For one thing, problems give us the opportunity to examine our ministry and discover what changes must be made. In times of success, it is easy for us to maintain the status quo, but this can be a dangerous course of action. Any ministry or organization that thinks its success will go on automatically is certainly heading for failure. We must regularly examine our lives and our ministry lest we start taking things for granted.

The Apostles studied the situation and concluded that they were to blame.

They were too busy serving tables that they were neglecting prayer and the ministry of the Word of God. They had created their own problem because they were trying to do too much. They were getting behind in their Bible Study, they were getting behind in their prayers, they were getting behind in their sermon preparation, they were getting behind in their ministry of the Word of God. The problem was that they were deficient in their spiritual ministry and in their practical ministry.

The solution pleased the whole group.

In other words, they considered it a reasonable solution. It made perfect sense. God called the Church to get properly organised. Although the church was growing, problems were developing because everything was in chaos. The Holy Spirit brought order out of disorder.

The apostles decided it was right for them to minister God's Word.


Some people were murmuring and talking about physical food and the widows being neglected, but the apostles believed it was right for them to be serving square meals from the pulpit. It seems to me that any church will be strong to the degree that it maximises and emphasises the ministry of the Word of God, not only from the platform, but in Sunday School, Bible Study and in the homes of its members.

I want you to notice the qualifications necessary to wait on tables!


'Brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.'

Acts, 6:3, NKJV

The members of the Early Church did not just pick anyone to serve...

 **To serve in the church you must be of good reputation.**

These men had to have an impeccable character. In no way could anyone point the finger of blame at them. The apostles did not look for inferior men to wait on tables, they chose superior men to serve at Luncheon Club.

 **To serve in the church you must be filled with the Holy Spirit.**

You may rightly think that those who lead worship should be filled with the Holy Spirit. You may rightly think that those who preach should be filled with the Holy Spirit. You should be filled with the Holy Spirit when you sort out the Army papers or do the multimedia. You should be filled with the Holy Spirit when you serve in the Sunday School or the Kid's Club. You should be filled with the Holy Spirit when you prepare and serve meals in

Luncheon Club. Dare I also say that you should be filled with the Holy Spirit if your task is to even clean the toilets?



To serve in the church you must be filled with wisdom.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that knowledge and wisdom are the same thing. They are not. Whilst some may have knowledge and some not, according to God's Word, we can all have wisdom.

'If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.'

James, 1:5-6, NIV

Finally, notice this:

One of the seven that was chosen was Stephen, who did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people before he preached one of the greatest sermons recorded in Scripture and became the first Christian martyr.

Another of the seven that was chosen was Philip who (we learned last time) won the Ethiopian eunuch to Christ and opened up North Africa to the Gospel.

4. WHERE THERE IS A SOLUTION, THERE IS GREATER GROWTH

'So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.'

Acts, 6:7, NIV

After all this, the Church was growing faster than before.

Why? Because they met a problem and they solved that problem in the name of Jesus. Do you want to grow? Then you are going to be in distress. God is going to stretch you. Every problem that is met in the name of Jesus and solved in the power of God causes you to grow.

'A man was driving through the American state of North Carolina during the great depression and came to a sign at the city limit that read: "We have heard that there is going to be a depression, but we have decided not to participate".'

I like that! When God gives the solution, do not take part in the depression or the difficulty.

One of the great things about Thomas Edison was his attitude.

'When he was almost eighty years old, there was a tremendous fire in his factory plant in New Jersey. Everything was raised to the ground and being underinsured, Edison lost \$2 million in 1914. All his research and experiments were lost but the event had a profound impact upon Edison. As he poked around in the rubble, he said to his son, "You know there is something wonderful about a fire like this. It wipes everything out and gives us all a fresh

start". Three months later, his re-founded (and smaller) company patented to the world the first phonograph.'

Edison was a man that was not defeated by his problems.

He simply used them as a springboard for something better and something greater. That may be true on a human level, but there is a spiritual truth behind this story. We can use the problems we face in our own lives as a springboard for something better.

What was the result of the problems within the Church?

The church was unified (Acts, 6:5), multiplied (Acts, 6:7), and magnified (Acts, 6:8).