

## Lessons for Today from Our Church 90 Years Ago

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1921 can be remembered for a number of reasons . . .

WA woman, [Edith Cowan](#), became the first woman to be elected to the Federal parliament. The first Rotary club was founded in Melbourne. And the decimated Australian aboriginal population stood at only 75,604. In that year 5,332 people registered as Baptists in the Tasmanian census. But most importantly for 1921, Sydney cartoonist James Bancks created a new comic strip for the Sydney Sun featuring a small red-headed boy called Ginger Meggs! (I'm only kidding.)

At Hobart Baptist church [Spurgeon College](#) man, the Rev. Edward Herbert Hobday (pictured below), was in his final year. The church had changed considerably from its early days. The "Bible only" Baptists had been replaced by a more socially respectable congregation.



The previous pastorate under the [Rev. F.W. Boreham](#) had brought this about. Boreham did not share a reactive or overly cautious faith. His theology was not radical, but instead he valued a rational and intelligent approach to matters of belief and religion.

What is more, Boreham was not a strict literalist when it came to biblical interpretation as were earlier ministers at Hobart, Robert McCullough and James Blaikie. He preferred to find different meanings in a passage rather than pursue narrow understandings. And the Hobart crowds thronged to his services with the membership rising from 180 to 320.

But Hobday was as different from Boreham, as Boreham was from McCullough and Blaikie, even though Hobday had something very importantly in common with Boreham: he was an orator of some note.

Hobday was also a social activist imbued with the Social Gospel thinking of the time which sought to inspire Christians to strive to bring all society as well as the individual into conformity with the teachings of Jesus.

He believed, the example and teaching of Christ authorises fundamental changes, not only in man's spiritual belief, but in human society. For the former is incomplete without the latter. Our soul is saved so that we may go out and save the world, physically, materially, mentally, morally, spiritually.

Hobday blamed weakening of the moral consciousness of the time partly on church preachers themselves:

*We have preached the love of God at the expense of the law of God and God's mercy at the expense of God's holiness.*

*I am afraid that we have allowed ourselves to be grievously misunderstood, crediting the calamitously false impression that sin is not nearly so serious a thing as our fathers supposed it to be and that the forgiveness of sin is quite a simple affair.*

*It is just possible that the shallowness of modern thought in regard to moral questions is partly due to the shallowness of much of our modern preaching.*

For Hobday, "sin [according to] the Scriptures is a fearful and tremendous fact, a most awful and appalling reality, a stupendous and staggering problem – a problem utterly beyond any human power to solve!"

Here Hobday was probably responding to a scathing attack on the Social Gospel by [Reinhold Niebuhr](#) who said that it lacked realism and was weak on its understanding of sin. The Social Gospel defined sin as essentially selfishness and did not deal adequately with the Classic understanding of sin as pride and rebellion against God. The Social Gospel advocates said that man rarely sins against God alone.

Hobday as a Christian Socialist openly spoke of Jesus as a revolutionary. The outworking of this philosophy was dramatically seen in 1919 at the height of the epidemic which arrived with the winter.

With the all schools, churches, libraries, picture shows, skating rinks, billiard rooms, in fact all public meeting places closed throughout the State, Hobart was divided into thirteen districts each supervised by a minister of religion. Hobday was in charge of the North Hobart area.

He undertook "to visit every house and report on the needs of the sufferers in the influenza epidemic" and in doing so soon discovered more than he bargained for. Hobday as the Committee's chairman drew attention to the disgraceful housing conditions of the poor. With moral outrage he delivered a scathing indictment on the landlords. The epidemic had exposed gross social evils, but neither Government nor the public knew how to, nor were they yet committed to altering them, and Hobday let them know just that through the Mercury. The Ware Street Mission in North Hobart (below) was set up by the church's response.



A survey of the 1921 Mercury reveals just the extent of Hobday's social concern. As President and Secretary of the Council of Churches he canvassed through the newspaper and before the City Council a "dry" Regatta and for the closure of the theatres for "Sunday Pictures". With other clergy he solicited support for the first batch of the Dr. Barnardo Boys about to arrive in Tasmania from England. The man who was "down and out" found in him a friend - not of the easy chair type - but one who was ready to appear for them at the Police Court, and use his influence in tempering "mercy with justice."

And many had the chance and used it, of making a fresh start, as the result of his work. In fact, one of the boys of the Tabernacle said when he heard of Hobday's resignation: "They will have to build another gaol now."

Hobday stood against the sale of intoxicating liquors from "liquor booths" at festival occasions. He was on the executive of the Hobart Benevolent Society. At a forum to discuss the objects of the Secondary Teachers' Association, Hobday took his stand against excessive individualism, holding that competition must give way to co-operation. He even had an input on where Hobart's War Memorial should be sited.

On the church front, Hobday encouraged his congregation to attend the combined Council of Churches church services. The Hobart Baptist annual report for 1921 showed an increase of twenty-five members for the year, there having been forty-one new members and 16 erasures through death and removal, leaving a total of 310.

During his five years in Hobart the membership has been maintained, notwithstanding many removals and stringent revision. His Literary and Debating Society now had an attendance exceeding 100; his church monthly paper, the "Baptist Church Chronicle", had been adopted as the official organ for the Baptist Union of Tasmania and the weekly church plate offerings amounted to £556 (a record).

This great bowling enthusiast, outstanding orator and elocutionist and concerned Hobart personality was given a Town Hall farewell on 24 November. The function was attended by the Lord Mayor, the Premier, church leaders, members of Parliament, Chamber of Commerce businessmen and some Freemasons. His church farewell took place two days earlier. Such was his acceptance in Hobart that his portrait was printed in 1 December issue of the Mercury.

For family reasons he and his wife were off to England; In 1949, while holidaying in Hobart, he undertook an interim ministry at the Tabernacle for three months.

### Lessons for Today:

Hobday teaches us that individuals skills responding to the call of God with vision and leadership can make a difference.

Hobday believed that church members must have a certain responsibility as far as the national, social and civic life of the city was concerned thus bringing in the promised Kingdom of God. If they saw any problem, they were obligated to do something about it even if they weren't going to get instant success.

Hobday also understood that the nation itself is accountable to God for how it treated its weaker, less-privileged members. He appreciated the truth that if people live below a certain level of human dignity or material comfort, they may be hindered in response to the Gospel message.

So as a church have we lost our social vision? Definitely not when you consider Hobart's welcoming hand to refugees, our acceptance of the Karen people, and our Church With No Walls, each being our ways of reaching out in love.

*Laurie Rowston*