

Insight into Some of the Difficulties we Baptists Faced in our Early Days

A Prayer:

We thank and honour you

For all that your gracious love has done:

We thank you for what you did 140 years ago

To revive and unify your Baptist churches;

We glory still in the days

of which our early Tasmanian Baptists spoke

of decision, of being Baptist, of baptism and church membership

When faith raged like an epidemic

From the country farm of Native Point in Perth

When Mary Ann and William Gibson

Erected chapels and tabernacles

Across our fair land making mountainous Tasmania

A green heaven

People sought your face in baptism

And church fellowship

*And sang your praises.**

But did our early Baptist faith rage in those days?



The answer is not always according to a brief account written by Pastor Harry Wood (left) titled, "Pioneer Work for the Lord in Tasmania" which tells of his pastorates in those early years and gives us an indication of the difficulties our young pastors faced.

Our beginnings as a Baptist Association took place in the 1880s with five General Baptist and two old Particular Baptist Churches joining for mutual fellowship and shared interest in mission both at home and abroad.

The General Baptist Churches were Hobart, Launceston, Longford, Deloraine and Perth. The old Particular Churches were Launceston York Street Chapel and Hobart's Harrington Street Chapel. New General Baptist causes soon followed at

Latrobe, Sheffield, Devonport, Burnie, and in the new century at Ulverstone, Penguin and Smithton.

As for the rage, when Wood transferred from Burnie to Longford for 12-months commencing in January, 1901 he faced quite a challenge. In his memoirs he recorded the impressions of his first few weeks there:

The Longford church had been without a minister for a long time. It was in apparently hopeless condition. Broken in health I returned to my old sphere, only to find the once prosperous church in a state of heartbreaking desolation. The property had well nigh gone to ruin. Fences were down, gates off the hinges, shingles off the roof of the Tabernacle, the Manse which had been let to an R. C. Constable was in a fearful state. The entrance to the Tabernacle and paths was grown with weeds. The once fine, large stable was in a state of collapse. Only a Sunday afternoon service was held with about a dozen people attending, (there was) no week night meetings, or Sunday school. The once prosperous church of eighty-six members were (sic) reduced to a mere handful. The property was well-nigh in ruins. Finances were at low ebb. There were 5 members including one deacon.

What Wood found at Longford just 10 years after it had been opened in 1880 shows that that the maintenance of church structures is a continual challenge for religious institutions and it is most revealing that some of these Gibsons' chapels and Tabernacles were left to deteriorate so early in their lives. The Gibsons, William Gibson Senior and his wife, Mary Ann, were wealthy sheep framers who almost solely financed the resurgence of the Baptist Churches in Tasmania from the late 1860s. They contributed £70,000 to Baptist Churches' Association activities during their lifetime. That would be \$24 million or more in today's values.



The Deloraine Tabernacle, circled

The Tabernacles at Deloraine and Latrobe suffered such a fate. Wood records he was in poor health after leaving Sheffield at the end of 1892. He was asked to return immediately to his first pastorate in Tasmania at the Deloraine Church. Upon arrival he found things had greatly changed for the worse. The church was in a low state and the people were dispirited. The same calamitous state faced him at his next posting, to Latrobe in July

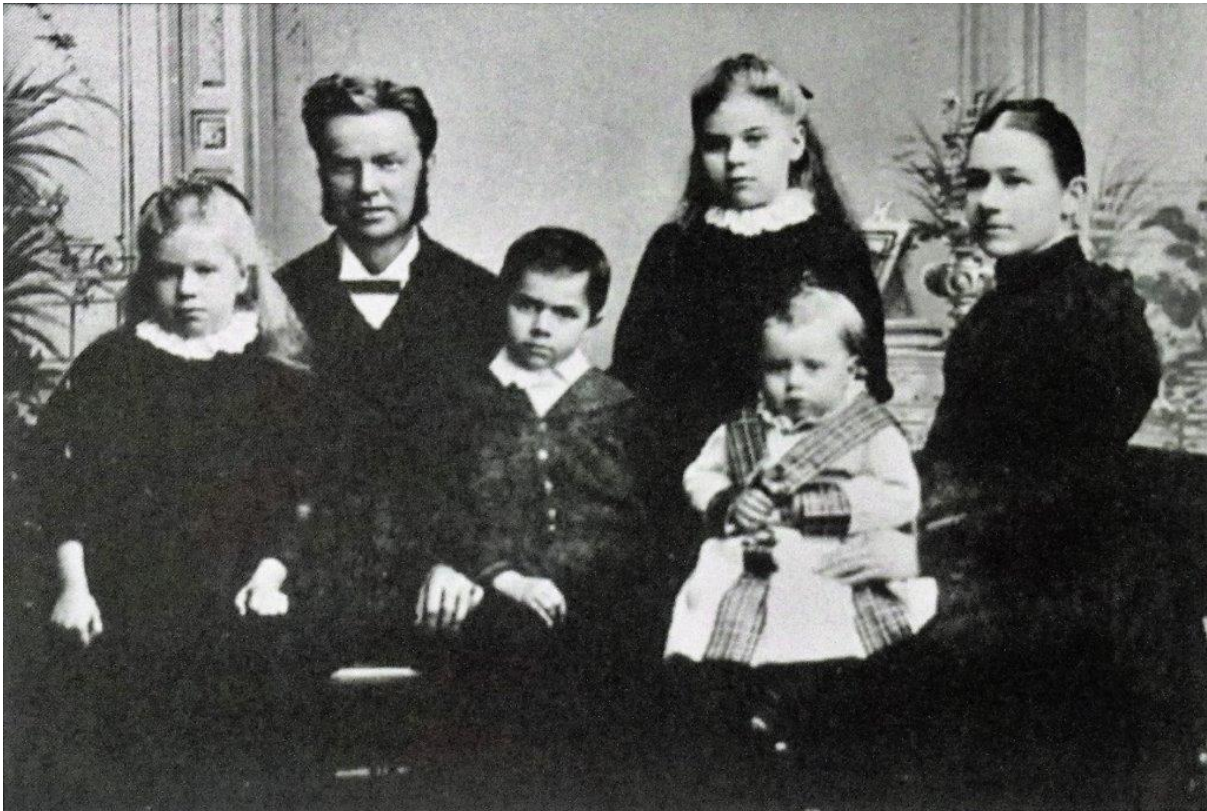
1895. The Baptist Union Council wanted him there because the cause was in danger of becoming defunct.

He found the work was in a much worse state than it was thought to be. The church property, although comparatively new, about eight years old, was in a bad state of disrepair. The services were so poorly attended that they were held in the Tabernacle vestry. There were also outstanding church debts. There was only one deacon and only 13 people attended his welcome.

"I (am) receiving £20 a year less than the Minister who (had) left the church on the rocks," he complained.

He was referring to the State School teacher John Chamberlain. In November 1886 Baptists had commenced in Latrobe with a Sunday school.

Wood's problems at Latrobe were not limited to the Church folk and their building. The only house that could be secured for the Wood family was a large brick building that was so damp and run down that it should have been condemned.



• Pastor Harry Woods and his wife Elizabeth and their four children

Sometime later when he commenced the new work at Burnie in May 1899 the matter of securing suitable lodging returned. The only available house was a rough four-roomed, plain cottage at the far end of South Burnie which was too small for a family of six people. To add to the family's woes, Wood sent their furniture on the day before they left Latrobe. Initially the weather was fine but the wagon was uncovered and heavy rain fell before it reached its destination. On arrival the family found their bedding and belongings saturated, some of the goods being completely spoiled.

When the imminent London Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (at left), sent redhead Wood out from the London Metropolitan Tabernacle in 1881 with the words,



“You are so well known to me that I think I see you (especially your distinguished head of hair), and I look you in the face with a tear of love in separation, and say, ‘God bless you, Wood! Go, and blaze away for your Lord.’”

As Wood first went to New Zealand, then South Australia, followed by Victoria and finally Tasmania, Spurgeon’s charge, “Go blaze away” was difficult at times to keep.

But successes our early Baptists had. One such one took place when the Latrobe Baptists, when conducting a baptism in the Mersey River bend at the end of the town, let the time and place be known, 300 locals turned up to witness the event.

From the above we can say the Gospel for Wood was dangerous to his health as the modern world defines the word, but the Gospel he and we preach leads, as nothing else can, to that total health where we find our true being, and our true communion with our Lord.

- Laurie Rowston.

*The opening prayer was of my making.



The wooden Burnie Tabernacle



The first Perth Tabernacle