

Date : 28 May 2023
Theme : God's expectations from members in covenant relationship
Topic : The vision of Bethesda Community (SF Membership Class)
Key passage : *Isaiah 60:22*
Key verse : *A little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation. I, the Lord, will hasten it in its time... Isaiah 60:22*

Introduction

Many of us attended the Spiritual Formation Membership class yesterday where you were given a snapshot of what to expect in your journey of faith in BC. You were given a *time-sum* spread of what God can do for you as well as what is expected of you in the membership covenant with one another. You met BC leaders and other members too.

Today, I wish to take you on a journey, starting with acquainting you with our startup founder, to understand the foundational pillars of our existence. With this background knowledge of how Bethesda started, I wish to answer the following questions.

- I. Our Origin – Where have we come from?
- II. Our Purpose – Why are we here?
- III. Our Identity – Who are we as a church body?
- IV. Our Process – How should we live?
- V. Our Destiny – Where are we heading?

I. Our Origin: Where have we come from?

- Bethesda Community's unique market place legacy.

Do you know that when the shutters came down permanently on the iconic 162-year old Robinsons department store on 30 October 2020, the spirit of its founder, Philip Robinson, lives on in 20 odd Brethren assemblies in Singapore? Bethesda Community included!

The Bethesda churches today owe their start to Philip Robinson. Philip Robinson was the little one who became thousands today.

a) Who was Philip Robinson (1830 – 1886) and what were the challenges he faced in life and living in a local culture? He was able to make an impact on Kingdom business whilst running his own business. Launching and building the first Bethesda church was carried out while travelling back and forth, from London to Singapore, and raising a young family of 7 children, 3 of whom died in infancy.

- Philip Robinson's early years was exposed to vision (world vision)
 - Age 14 Taught Sunday school (converted at age 7 years)
17 Baptised.
 - Went to school at Oxford
His family was prominent in Western England.
His elder brother was Mayor of Bristol in 1866.
 - 1855 Married Eliza Knight

- Philip Robinson and the first Bethesda church in Singapore

At a time when expatriates in colonial Singapore (1800s to 1950) generally congregated among themselves and whose expatriate culture was filled with horse racing, rugby, cricket, tea dances and banquets served by locals known as *peons*, what about Philip Robinson?

He arrived in 1857 with a pregnant wife and a one year old daughter.

Historical records show that Robinson in:

1858 Founded Spicer and Robinson, later renamed Robinson's & Co.

1860 – 1868 Six more children born to them. Altogether 7 children, 3 died in infancy.

In the midst of a busy schedule, he started a small group which met in his home.

3.7.1864, his Christian Fellowship shifted to Missions Room (at 108 Bencoolen Street).

- 29.7.1866 Philip proposed a worship place be built with the small building fund accumulated plus \$34.15 collected a week later.
- 30.9.1866 Bethesda Chapel (at 77 Bras Basah Road) opened at 6:30am dawn service. (The familiar plaque *Jesus Only* was added to the Hall, a replacement now in Bethesda Hall Ang Mo Kio).

Robinson had to juggle between running his business and assembly responsibilities. Living in colonial Singapore, he did not behave like other Europeans. His twin role, as market place trader and church builder, made him a unique person in our church legacy.

b) How did Philip Robinson live out his twin role, as English merchant and active church member to be church founder and church builder?

- Robinson's assembly responsibilities
 - Appointment of deacons
 - Speaker, Sunday services
 - Speaker, Tea sessions organised at Bethesda Hall for 150 sailors as outreach to masses.
 - President, Christian Book Society and Library
 - Trustee, Bethesda Gospel Hall property
 - Outreach to local people
 - In 1867 he started a new work called Chinese Gospel Hall. He raised funds for a building for Chinese Gospel Hall. He held English and Chinese assemblies joint service on 18.3.1873.
- Robinson's business travels did not distract him from Kingdom business.
 - In those days, travel was by slow sailing ships.
 - To negotiate the price for a piece of land for Bethesda.
 - Robinson applied his business skills for Kingdom work.
 - In 1879 he travelled to Penang and opened a branch of Robinson's & Co – always seeking to enlarge his sphere of Kingdom influence.
- In 14.2.1886 Robinson died in London.

In a short 20 years, he set in motion, the Bethesda way of building God's Kingdom. We use the word **P.O.U.C.H.** to simplify the main features of a startup ministry.

Participate

Obedience to outreach

Unpaid dedication

Cells

Homes

P.O.U.C.H. stands for Participation in the Great Commission, Obedience to Outreach, Unpaid dedication, Cell-based small groups and the use of the Home rather than needing large meeting venues.

II. Our Purpose: What are we here for?

- God has never created anything without a purpose.
- We are not just a cog in the wheel.

Even Pharaoh, who opposed Moses, was raised by God for a purpose *Exodus 9:16*

a) God's Purpose is we may be fruitful (be successful) ...*your fruit may last* (through eternity)

Robinson participated in His Father's business, obedient to outreaching locals and expats alike with the gospel, unpaid but dedicated to the Great Commission, starting with the use of his home. Little did he foresee that his small beginnings would expand to touch tens of thousands. But from his example, we see that this truth works.

b) God's Call is that we be a chosen generation *1 Peter 2:9*

All along God has always chosen people for His great purpose, to bless the world with the gospel and to declare His praises. God calls us His treasured people *Exodus 19:5*. It is expected that those whom He treasures should show that they treasure Him too, with their life, resources and time.

III. Our Identity: Who are we as a Church?

The Brethren emphasis on the **priesthood of believers**, royal priests, sets us apart as God's representatives; such that we have no "laity". We take seriously our identity to be... *a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light... 1 Peter 3:9*

- Therefore, all BC leaders who do the work of preaching and teaching are not paid to serve. This has been our legacy of **Unpaid** ministry since the days of George Muller. Royal priesthood speaks of the royal dignity of showing forth our Lord Jesus' excellencies. Contained in the *royal* priestly duties is our service to the world in the proclamation of the gospel.
- The **priesthood of believers** means we do not have a separate priestly office. Believers gather for worship which may be led by any believer. Thus, Philip Robinson broke bread with other like-minded believers, preached the gospel, and use other appropriate means for outreach to the local population.
- Believers gather to EDIFY His Body. Our Lord Jesus stressed this responsibility. *...A new commandment I give you that you love one another as I have loved you...by this...all men will know you are My disciples... John 13:34, 35.* As household members, John described about our identity *...he who loves God must also love his brother... 1 John 4:21.*
- How does the priesthood of believers look like in BC?
For this reason, regular teachings of God's Word to equip members to be salt and light in the marketplace. As priests we pray for others and we represent God to others.
BC members are called to be active in market place ministry, as employees or employers / business owners. Tent makers are Christian leaders who exercise their twin roles, running their own businesses as well as serving the Church ministry.

IV. The Process: How should we live?

- We are to press toward our goal as a covenant keeper. The challenge for marketplace Christians is how to live this life and work so as to glorify God in our secular and multi-religious Singapore.
 - How would a Christian who obeys the Word of God be like at work?
 - Is the Christian at work distinguishable from non-Christians in his values and conduct?
- To succeed as a covenant keeper, we need to meet regularly with other fellow travellers to pray and to witness in one-on-one evangelistic attempts or small group evangelism.
The small group, of which we are a part, must bring in new people.

V. Our Destiny: Where are we heading?

As covenant partners, we fulfil Jesus' Great Commission by being His witnesses to the world.

- Jesus prayed that the world would know Him through us. This takes place when, as ambassadors for Christ, we declare His promise of salvation.
- We make time to sharpen our skills in preaching the gospel, as Philip Robinson did.
Jesus said in *Matthew 28: 18,19 ...Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...baptising them...teaching them to observe everything I have commanded...*
- Are you able to see the long-term results of your preaching and discipling from Philip Robinson's humble beginnings? What God has declared *...A little one shall become a thousand ...* is God's goal for everyone who will begin a startup to bring someone to Jesus.

Application

1. Can you agree with God that His declaration *Isaiah 60:22* is not only for Philip Robinson but also for you?
2. Will you covenant with God to use **P.O.U.C.H.** to begin a fruit that will last for eternity?