

Moving The Head Office

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 0 0] 1994 all right when i'm at home thinking about coming down and talking to you and uh it's the it's the uh discipline of having to prepare to talk to you that i really enjoy talking to you isn't all that much fun uh but i i often think i would i would really like to be if i might say so intimate and open my heart to you and have you open yours to me but then it's almost invariably the experience that when i get up here ready to open my heart to you you terrify me slightly and so i i may do the same to you so i guess we need to pray that god will give us grace to uh to to share some things as time goes by and and uh you know the fact that that that this group of people sort of uh that we sort of condense out of the city for half an hour and then disappear into the city like that it just comes and goes it's a it's a strange phenomena and i suppose many of us don't see anybody else here from one wednesday to the next and so it's uh it's interesting to to see i mean to pray and think how god could use this time and uh uh the passage that i you know what we've finished i finished for the present with john but uh i wanted to look at act simply because i got i got very uh i really i really enjoyed this passage this uh it's a it's the seventh chapter of acts and it's all about stephen and he condenses in a sense the whole of the bible in his his his the sermon that he gives uh and it's a it's a very effective sermon uh it uh it has a certain quality to it which i like uh he preaches his whole heart to them and then it says it says at the end at this they covered their ears and yelling at the top of their voices they all rushed at him dragged him out of the city and began to stone him now you may not think that that's a very desirable end for a sermon but but it there is a certain charm to it that you could that you could pour out the whole of your heart and everything that's on it and then later that afternoon go to heaven uh instead of having to come back next week uh there's undoubtedly some awkward moments but but nevertheless um it's a it's an amazing kind of passage because of uh because of the way that it ends and it's it comes in the acts of the apostles and the acts of the apostles is as somebody said the second volume of luke's writing in the

new testament he writes the gospel and then he writes the act and the acts is a terribly important book historically because it says you know how the transition was made from the crucifixion and resurrection of jesus to the establishment of the community of jesus which is the church of jesus christ how that transition was made and certainly you you know that the way it was made is that the disciples were together in an upper room and uh christ had ascended into heaven and the holy spirit came on them at pentecost and now they were more than just a collection of individuals uh now they were more than just uh some interested people they were uh they were a group that had uh uh uh a group that had come together and been uh been formed into a community by the presence among them of god's holy spirit which which we interpret as jesus with them uh instead of god being present with them in the person of jesus who might sit on that chair god is present with them by his holy spirit who dwells in their hearts and uh that is how god is present in his community and the essential business of the community uh whenever a group of people get together we have ways of shuffling and and relating to one another to prove that i happen to be slightly more important than you but you can reserve the opinion that you're slightly more important than me and we can get together and say we're slightly more important than anybody else here but that kind of thing is happening uh this community is to be marked by the fact that the lord who is the spirit is present among us and we are to know him and to submit our lives to him uh at the end of this passage which comes in in acts chapter 7 today it talks it talks about let me uh hearts and ears being both being uncircumcised you know that the heart that is made of stone and won't and won't and won't to submit and an ear that is deaf and won't listen and so god the holy spirit has to come into a community where hearts are of stone and ears are deaf and uh and in a sense break the heart open and and and allow the ear to hear and that uh it's very important that that should happen well what i you see what what what takes place here is uh it's really in many ways an historical event by which the whole of the community of christ's church uh starts uh starts now you know that that the church is so divided into various groups but uh it seems to me that one of the things that is happening i mean we had an enormous ecumenical effort to try and bring all the churches together about 50 years ago and everybody was trying to work hard on it and it didn't work you know organizationally you just couldn't get the head offices to move into one head office and name one person in charge we still have the lingering model of the papacy and uh and and i think i suppose that it's uh it has great authority because it is a model of

of unity which is quite surprising in the diversity that exists in it and that diversity is increasing all the time as you hear various groups within the roman church in contention with one another but it seems to me that there is somehow in an undefinable way a sense of the unity of the church which really transcends all the barriers and boundaries if you're looking at it from the outside it looks terribly divided if you're looking at it from the inside and you share in what we could call the community of the holy spirit there is a oneness which is a reality which transcends all the ethnic and linguistic and denominational barriers that exist between us and jesus is lord and we are united by his indwelling spirit and uh that is that's i think the great reality of the church but it's hard to get it into place because uh we look at the church in its institutional forms and in its structures now this passage that we're talking about today when i talk about changing the headquarters headquarters we we keep condensing the headquarters of the church into something that we can and that that we can understand and uh you have you have this kind of you have the temple now that's a human structure within which god is meant to live you know and uh we have within that structure uh the the the the commandments the law in all its fullness so you have a community that is uh that demonstrates its faith in god by building this structure and at the heart of the structure you have the commandments that people are to obey and that that that's uh i mean i can remember kids walking by the church up on 27th there and saying one of them one child saying to another god lives there and uh that's a heretical misconception not with respect to that church only but to any church uh and uh because somehow this this this is what happened this is what happened to stephen this is what he talked about and uh when he when he talked to them about it he said that god doesn't live in a temple made with hands you know heaven is his throne and earth is his footstool that god is far bigger and the law is not something which is written on tables of stone the law is something that is established in your heart so that there is a massive shift and what stephen is doing in this seventh chapter is telling them about this shift they had grown up to believe that the dwelling place of god was the temple and the will of god was the law and and what what he was saying to them what uh what stephen was trying to persuade was that it's a far more dynamic process than that and that you can't capture god in a building like that and you can't summarize god by a law like that that there is an individual and personal reality to god which uh which uh which you as an individual need to and we as a community and guided by the holy spirit can appreciate his presence among us part of the reason that i i've been thinking this way about this

passage and thinking a good deal about you uh and uh you know uh is that uh i i i i i i i'm i'm very much of the opinion that you i mean of the conviction i think what scripture is teaching us in a very real way is that you are meant to be the temple of god's presence in the world and that your indwelling you is god's holy spirit by which you know the will of god god's holy spirit by which you know the will of god's presence in the world and that's where god's presence is to be found now that could create a massive egocentric uh individualism which would be catastrophic but it is god it is jesus who is lord and it is his spirit who indwells us so if you need to know what god is doing in our day you don't go to church you look in your own heart and you'll find out what god is doing in our day because you are a totally unique individual person whom god has created in his own image for whom christ has died for whom god the holy spirit has come that he might indwell you and the great reality of your life is not to find something outside of yourself but to find the reality of god's presence in yourself and in the community of believers to whom you belong now having made that claim which i i'd like you to look at this passage with to show you in a sense how it happens because uh uh steven in in uh in uh in this passage i think is showing us something very profound and and i'd i'd like i'd like you to see what it is the first thing i'd like you to look at is uh uh uh what god has done for them you see you start with a people you know i mean the uh this is the nile river down here and that's north africa and this is the so you have this people who are in slavery for 400 years with a vague kind of corporate recollection that they were somehow the children of abraham and that god had made them a promise and the evidence of that promise seemed to be disappearing rapidly and after 400 years and generations and generations of slavery they thought the hope is gone when suddenly god appoints a leader for them and prepares him in the unique way that he does this is moose and moose comes to them and moose lives uh 80 years partly in in uh in uh in uh in egypt as the son of the pharaoh's household and then 40 years on the back side of the desert and then 40 years

of course leading these people in a unique and wonderful way so god has not forgotten his people god has appointed a leader for them and god is carrying out his purpose among them but then moses was really good at talking to god uh but he didn't think he was very good at talking to people and so uh there was a fellow named aaron who was related to moses who came along and he would talk to the people while moses talked to god now that tells you that there are two kinds of ministers some that talk to god and some that talk to people uh now uh what and uh and i might say further that it's the ones that talk to god that you've got to take the greatest care of because if you lose them you've lost everything uh and uh god has given gave these people a great leader who uh who led them out of slavery uh and uh he god had done some amazing things for them you see they they had with them under moses direction they had the tabernacle which marked the presence of god with them they had moses they had aaron they had uh they were given the the ten commandments they were they shared a common heritage as the children of abraham and and there they were and and god was trying to create a nation out of that people and the purpose of creating that nation was that if god made himself known to them then they would make it god known to the rest of the world you know and that's that's still uh you know there's there's something strange about that i you know that that somebody back in history was said prove for me the existence of god in one word you know that you know what the answer that one is the jews you know the strange fact of god at work in history and uh you get you get this uh that that this this people that god seems to have forged and and brought uh brought together and he was patient with them for 40 years in in the in the desert and he fed them and he gave them water and he led them and uh he cleared a land for them he gave them great leaders if you read this passage like joshua and david and solomon and all the time he spoke to them in their history through the prophets so god never let them alone he kept bugging them if you want and uh they they uh they couldn't at any time say that they were unaware of or that god had forgotten them they wanted to build a temple that you know we looked at they wanted to build a temple as a kind of place where they could localize the presence of god and david desired to do it but solomon in fact did it and so they they in a sense had this land they had the temple they had the law they were the people everything was working except for the fact that they didn't want to do it now this to me is the most the most amazing reality about our world and that is the consistent rejection

[20 : 42] of the god who has created us and redeemed us that to me is the most profound mystery of all humanity how how we can do it and and and they were they were very good at doing it and i i want to just show you what the um what the pattern of that is set out here and this is how this is how stephen manages to get himself stoned to death he tells them this is the pattern he said uh look in verse in the in the verse 39 our fathers refused to obey mooses they rejected him it says in their hearts they turned back to egypt they look now they now look back to egypt as great times compared to what we're enduring now you know as people always look back and they look back and they look back and they want to go back and the world the solution to all the world's problems is if we can go back and so they wanted to go back to egypt uh they told aaron you see this is what i mean about aaron and the people because instead of aaron telling them they told aaron what we want is uh is something to worship make us a god you know and that's you know that's basically the function of the local minister he's faced with a congregation that want him to make them a god that they can worship it's awkward business and uh i mean i say that cynically but i i i mean there was an amazing last night uh on on uh in ideas uh the the the the massey lectures this brilliant irishman was talking you know and he was talking about american democracy and he says democracy is going to fail because it becomes a popularity contest and the leaders of the country have to maintain their popularity and aaron to maintain his popularity had to make them a golden calf that they could worship and it's it's that kind of breakdown instead of god speaking to them through mooses they now create their own god through aaron it's a it's an amazing story simply because it's so it so reveals the the heart of our rebellion against god make us gods that will go before us mooses is lost on the mountain and we didn't like him anyway you know uh so we'll carry on uh they made their idol in the form of a calf they brought sacrifices to it they had a celebration in honor of what their hands had made yeah we have celebrations like that every week in vancouver but uh it's a very natural thing to do then it says they worship the heavenly bodies even what the prophets told them they would do they went ahead and did it as though they never heard what god had to say to them they failed to bring sacrifices and offerings to god and yet they lifted up the shrine of malik the star of your god rephan the idols you made to worship they they had the tabernacle marking god's presence with them or symbolizing god's presence with them but they turned to other gods now that that kind of opposition opposition to the god who has created us and the god who has redeemed us in jesus christ is to my mind very much the the heart of of the problem and it says god gave them up to that

and you see stephen carries on and he says yes you have consistently murdered those who have come and made known to you the coming of the righteous one that's your history but then he points at that generation and says and you to whom the righteous one have come you've murdered him and that's where we are and uh and so that there is this there is this terrible tension at the heart of our individual lives and at the heart of our corporate life and that is yes if we confront god what do we do do do we destroy him or do we submit to him and that in the new testament is what life is all about when you encounter god whether you destroy him or whether you submit to him and because of our proud and rebellious hearts because of our stone hearts and our deaf ears we turn in defiance of god at that very moment when we should bow in submission to him and that what the new testament says is that when jesus comes among us when jesus presence is made known to us we are to bow in submission to his presence and not raise our fist in defiance and put him to death you see the unique thing about stephen preaching that sermon was that jesus was present there among them in the person of stephen and they did to him to stephen as they had done to christ they took him out and they stoned him that hate and rebellion found expression and what we and you see what when when it ends up by saying that to them it ends up by saying that uh that uh you want god in a temple with a law so that you can obey the law according to your lights and contain god within a certain area and uh uh and what christ has come to do is to say i want possession of your heart and i want you to live in submission to and obedience to me and that's all that i offer you and when he offered it to steven steven didn't back down from that and spoke his mind and heart to his generation and died for his troubles was killed for his troubles and somehow we have to find the grace and the courage in our own lives to allow christ to be lord in our lives and to allow and and and to uh to uh to be willing to obey him even though there is the reality of this opposition to him which is which is frightening in its proportions let me say a prayer our god as we as your scripture in a sense is like a surgeon's knife that opens up our our hard hearts and

and perhaps opens our deaf ears our god grant that our hearts may be open to you and our ears may be the effective channel of our obedience to you that we will hear and do those things which are honoring to your name help us to accept the wonderful and gracious gift of being who we are our not in ourselves but in the fact of your love for us and christ's presence with us that you may dwell in us that your spirit may guide and direct us us we ask this in jesus name amen here