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We have been ploughing through the book of Acts, identifying the building blocks of the Church. The heart-stopping excitement of the presence of our long lost friend Hedley with us last Sunday, has likely wiped clean our memory about the building blocks of the Church, so let's remind ourselves: we identified The Holy Spirit, Prayer and the Body of Christ as three **"types"** of building blocks and noted, God is the Author of the Church, Jesus is the Head of the Church, the Holy Spirit is the Supreme Caretaker of the Church, prayer is the cement which holds the church together, and we the body of Christ are the bricks which make up the Church (*cf: Keble College - marquetry/tapestry*)

On Friday afternoon, as I parked into a tight space in front of Andy the Butcher, a lady came bounding over. I assured her I would not scratch her car, and she replied, *I'm not worried about that! I was wondering if you are able to get out of your car!* I replied, *In certain angles, I do look larger than life, but thank you, I have a rat-like ability to squeeze through the finest cracks.*

After that introduction, we chatted briefly and I discovered that she is a lapsed Baptist! She was a part of a Baptist church, and then moved over to the *dark side (!)* and became an Orthodox Christian. The sentence I remember from our conversation is this, *Now, I have great worship, one-on-one with God, but I **do** miss the fellowship I enjoyed when I attended a Baptist Church!* I felt a sermon welling up from within, but you will be proud of me - I used every cell of mind, mouth and tongue, to resist the urge!

It is interesting, isn't it, how we associate with different denominations: the Orthodox church is known for its icons and high church worship with smells and bells, the Catholic Church is known for its rituals in sacrament and liturgy, the Anglican Church is remembered for its adherence to tradition, and the Baptist Church is known for fellowship and Bible-based teaching.

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We have examined the significance of **fellowship** in “the body of Christ”, and the importance of **belonging** as opposed to membership. We have two more qualities of the Body of Christ to study; today we shall examine **Giving and Receiving**, and on Sunday 5th August, we shall conclude our study of the building blocks of the church found in Acts: **Witnessing** (Salt) & **Proclaiming** (Light).

The best introduction to this topic of giving and receiving I have found, is in the book of Job, a rich man (*in context*, perhaps as wealthy as Bill Gates, or Richard Branson). Catastrophe and calamities not under his control, hit Job without warning, and destroy his family, wealth and health. His wife said to him, “*Are you still trying to maintain your integrity before God? Curse God and die*”, to which Job replied, “**Shall we indeed accept [only] good (fortune) from God and not [also] accept adversity and disaster?**”

Some translations use the word **receive** in place of **accept**. While I have great respect for the work of translators, in this case I feel the word **receive** leaves us with the impression of a god who dishes-out blessings and curses at will which we are obliged to receive whatever falls on our lap (like victims), whereas the word **accept** places the onus on us, to consent or reject the work of God in our lives.

The starting point of **Giving** and **Receiving** is our attitude towards God's blessings in our lives.

We are told, *every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.*<sup>1</sup>

*Every good and perfect gift*, refers to everything we have and own, and all that we are. It is a difficult teaching to accept, that God is the owner of everything we have. There goes our well-known cliché's, *I am a self-made person; I did it my way; what I've done, makes me what I am.*

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<sup>1</sup> James 1:17

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As we look at the first "Church" which came into being after Pentecost, when the first people heard the Disciples' message and understood their mistake of not accepting Jesus as God's Son, they repented of their mistake, and were baptised<sup>2</sup>, which is to say, they renounced their allegiance to the ways of the world, announcing their personal, individual decision to be obedient to God's Law and follow God's way.

We then read, *All who believed were together and had all things in common...* Now, this is fine. We can accept that we are of one mind, what we have **can** be shared, but what follows usually stops us dead in our tracks, *and they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.* We break out in a cold sweat, and the thought crosses our mind, *surely not **all my** possessions?!*

Before we address that question, it is worth noting, the first three thousand who came into faith in Christ as God's Son, were from a cross-section of society: there were the rich and the poor, the skilled and the unskilled, single folk and families, the educated, farm and domestic workers; they were not all poor, disadvantaged people, nor the squeezed middle class.

This cross section of society did not set up a food bank where people dropped in to pick up what they needed, nor did they set up a charity shop where unwanted items were donated for people to pick up at a fraction of the cost.

This group **decided**, they had possessions and belongings that had cash value, so they sold it, *distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.*

This is not a model of "early communism", because the government of the day did not decree, people should sell their assets. The action of the first church was purely voluntary.

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:41-47

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Then note, the word **all** refers to those who had need - **all who had need, received from what was pooled together**. No one was left out!

Finally note, *Day-by-day, attending the Temple together, and breaking bread (eating a meal) in their homes...* people who sold and put the proceeds in a common kitty, still had homes, which we pick up in the narrative of the first Church right through the book of Acts.<sup>3</sup>

Let's get back to what we found particularly disturbing: "...selling their possessions and belongings..."

What we see is, God's economy at work. People decide what they can afford to sell for its cash value, which when pooled **together**, met the needs of **ALL** who had need.

We can never explain God's economy, because it works to bless all people, all the time. It blesses the giver **and** the receiver.

We can understand the receiver being blessed, but the giver? The **GIVER** is blessed because:

1. they are freed from the destructive sin of hoarding and greed.
2. they are living in the image of God the Father and Jesus, who give liberally without expectation of receiving in return.
3. giving creates deep and enduring relationships
4. Givers are blessed because they reap eternal rewards

There is caution here for us: never deny a giver the blessing of giving. For some it may be a sacrifice, for others it might be acting as God told them to, and for many others, it might be a gesture of pure love. Never deny a giver the blessing of giving; receive with joy!

Finally, Giving and Receiving are both acts of worship, acknowledging God's blessing. When we bring to God, His tithes and our offerings, we

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 12:12; 17:5; 18:7; 20:20; 21:8. And Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:9; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2; 2 John 10

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acknowledge God's generous giving to each of us, not only His giving of material and physical things, but His generosity of emotional, intellectual and spiritual gifts and resources to each of us.

What the world needs to see, is not beautiful building called Church, but a strong Body of Christ, we the people, a tapestry of people, being the people God made us to be: to be blessing to the whole world, starting at our own doorstep, giving as people have need, and receiving in return.

Leave the mathematics of God's economy to Him, and sit back watch miracle after miracle!

Shall we commit ourselves to this?      **AMEN.**