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Largely Unknown but Worthy of Notice

By Paul Cooper

Does it matter if you don't get acknowledgement for something you've done in your service of the Lord? Do you care if your contribution to the development of a valuable Christian ministry remains largely unacknowledged? Does it matter to you if history doesn't record your part?

If you've ever asked yourself any of these questions about a suggested lack of recognition for something you've done, then you wouldn't be the first. There are many people in the past whose work and ministry, though highly valuable, was largely unacknowledged at the time and, down to this day, is almost unknown. Let me tell you about one such person and their efforts.

It is a pleasant evening in April 1846. A man in his mid-fifties and a carpenter by trade, is strolling down a Sydney street when he's approached by a young lady who could only be in her early teens. Gaudily dressed she accosts him and, feigning a happy smile, is intent on selling the only thing she has left, herself. He refuses her offer, but he has great sympathy for this unhappy woman. As a Christian man he's disturbed in his spirit because he knows that such an event is not unusual at this time in Sydney. There are hundreds of such young women crowding the streets and lanes of the city, engaged in surviving day to day by prostitution.

It was not that this young woman, or indeed most of those in similar circumstances, wanted such a life, but it was the only way she could earn enough to place bread on her table. Like many others, she'd come to the colony of NSW in the hope of a better life and what happened was a common enough occurrence. A man, in whose house she worked as a servant, had taken advantage of her; she became pregnant and was expelled from the household. With no family support, no friends and nowhere to go, she now had a blemished reputation; selling herself on the streets was survival.

Our accosted tradesman was not the first to experience such an encounter but, unlike all the others, he didn't put it out of his

mind. He himself had arrived in the colony many years before as a convict, was separated from his family, and had no hope of return. He knew, however, about forgiveness. He understood the gospel of grace, and he knew that change was possible for he'd been forgiven and given a fresh start. He thought long and hard about what he could do to address this social evil for he thought it a disgrace that the Christian community, which was concerned to address so many other issues, had done nothing about this one.

This was not something he could do alone for he had neither the knowledge nor the social position needed to generate support. And while an organization of some sort would be required, with people who had connections and well-known names, this would be difficult to achieve as prostitution was not a polite or popular topic in society. There was a commonly held view that women chose such a life because they loved a good time and frivolity rather than the choice coming from economic necessity. While many of these girls were more sinned against than sinners, they were looked down upon by society while their betrayers attracted little criticism.

So, for the next two years and with unabated zeal, this former convict focused his mind, heart, and efforts on the goal of securing a refuge for these women that would be a place of safety, rest, acceptance and of help to begin new lives. From 1846 to 1848, he devoted his time to the arduous task of convincing others that such a project, the provision of a refuge for those who had fallen into prostitution, was worthy of public support. At times, he was rebuffed by those with whom he raised the issue, but he refused to stop. He unrelentingly pursued his goal and forced the 'indelicate' issue into the arena of public attention.

Finally, a public meeting was called, a committee of people who were well known within Sydney philanthropic and business circles was elected, and funds were collected so that the refuge could, as soon as possible, commence operation: the Sydney Female Refuge Society was born. At the meeting, the name

of the one who had spent his time and effort agitating for the refuge was not even mentioned although his efforts were applauded. We only know his name because one newspaper at the time thought this was a significant oversight and supplied it, and while this name was confirmed a year later in the Sydney Female Refuge Society's first annual report, it was almost never mentioned again.

The Sydney Female Refuge began operation in 1849 and operated continuously for 77 years, giving shelter, assistance, and support, with varying degrees of success, to over 3,800 young women. Not all were helped to reorientate the direction of their lives, but many did testify that the Refuge, and the Christian faith it

promoted, was a turning point which redirected them from near hopelessness to happiness.

Quite a substantial legacy for a man whose name was barely mentioned! Perhaps he took inspiration, as we should when our contribution isn't acknowledged, from the comment of Jesus when he said that "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" Luke 17:10

And his name? Philip Chapman.

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