

PM Acts 6:1-7

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[0 : 00] I'd like us to read together from the Holy Bible from the book of Acts chapter 6.!

Acts chapter 6. So this is in the early days of the church after the ascension of the Lord Jesus into heaven. And this is still centered on Jerusalem and the church's activity there. In the book of Acts, especially the early chapters, it sort of alternates between a focus on the church and then a focus on the apostles preaching to those outside the community. So this is really focused on the church community itself. We're going to just read from verses 1 to 7. I should have announced the page.

Page 1101. Now in these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

[1 : 28] And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And what they said pleased the whole gathering. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolos, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

May God bless to us that reading of his word. Let's join together to turn back to the passage we read to Acts chapter 6, verses 1-7 on page 1101 of the Church Bible.

The Gospel is holistic. That means it reaches the whole person. And God is concerned for us as whole persons.

[3 : 13] Physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, socially, God cares for us in the entirety of our being. That's reflected in the law of Moses, which has structures for the care of the poor, the foreigner, widows and orphans, and those who are disadvantaged in other ways.

And we see it revealed in the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, who healed the sick, who welcomed the excluded, and restored the broken.

And who also proclaimed the word of God with transforming effect, and of course came to give his life as a ransom for many.

And we as the Church of Jesus Christ are called to reflect God's concern, and to follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ in caring for the whole person, for people in the entirety of their needs. And that should shape our agenda as a Church. And that's something we see reflected in this passage that we read in Acts chapter 6, verses 1 to 7.

[4 : 41] And I want to just look through the passage under four headings. First of all, growth. Second, conflict. Third, solution.

And fourth, more growth. So first of all, growth. The passage begins by saying that in these days when the disciples were increasing in number.

And Luke, who's the writer of Acts, is interested in the growth of the Church. In Acts chapter 1, he tells us that there were 120 disciples meeting in Jerusalem.

At the end of chapter 2, after the day of Pentecost, and Peter's preaching on that day, we read of 3,000 being added to the Church. And right at the end of that chapter, chapter 2, we read that the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

In chapter 4, verse 4, the number grows to around 5,000 people. Now, Luke is not just someone who is worshipping success.

[5 : 55] He's not just interested in success just so that the Church will look good. I think Luke is interested in numbers and in growth because he sees it as being a fulfilment of God's promise.

It's way back in the Old Testament to Abraham. In Genesis 13, God took Abraham, or Abraham as he was then, outside and showed him the stars in the sky.

And of course, in the Middle East, the weather is clear. There was no light pollution in those days. So, you know, Abraham could see just myriad numbers of stars.

And God told him, so shall your offspring be. And also that his offspring would be as many as the number of grains of sand. Now, that is, Luke sees that as being fulfilled in the Church.

And of course, that at the moment, at this time, it's among those who are, trace their physical descent from Abraham. They are Abraham's seed. They are Jews.

[7 : 02] They are Israelites. But of course, it goes beyond that shortly in the later chapters of Acts, as the Gospel goes to the non-Jewish peoples, to Gentiles. But it's by faith that they and we become children of Abraham.

So Luke is interested in the growth of the Church. We see, secondly, conflict. That a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

Now, the Hebrews there are Hebraic Jews. those who were from Palestine, who were from that region, whose mother tongue would be Aramaic.

And they were the local people. The Hellenistic Jews were Jews who had adopted Greek language and culture.

They would often be people who had moved to Jerusalem or relocated to Jerusalem from the Jewish diaspora, so around the world.

[8 : 23] Greek was the lingua franca, the sort of international language, and had been since the time of Alexander the Great. And so they would meet, so they would probably worship in Greek, using Greek.

They would have been more cosmopolitan with links to the wider world. They're no less devoutly Jewish. In fact, many would have moved back to Jerusalem for religious reasons.

But they were probably, they would have been in the minority, the majority would have been the Hebraic Jews. So there are these two distinct groups. And there was a sense of group identity and solidarity.

We see that in this conflict. there's an us and them mentality, mindset there. Likely, they held separate meetings. In Acts chapter 2, we read of the meeting in houses, people, the believers meeting in houses, from house to house.

And no doubt, some of those house groups met and worshipped in Greek, and others worshipped in Aramaic. And in fact, there's evidence of both Greek and Hebrew speaking congregations of synagogues in Jerusalem at that time.

[9 : 48] And yet, they're not so sort of completely separate from each other as to, I mean, if they were completely separate, there would have been no problem. But they're involved with each other, and that is why this conflict arises.

Now, later on in, and of course, the apostles call a meeting to resolve that conflict where everybody is to come and seek a resolution.

Now, later on in Acts, the gospel goes much further. This is still in Jerusalem. It goes to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And of course, a much greater diversity of people will come into the church.

But even at this stage, we see diversity and some of the challenges of that. And there's so much we can learn from that in our own church and churches which are often diverse in different ways.

Maybe ethnically, maybe socially, maybe in terms of our political affiliations, or whatever it is.

Sometimes there are challenges meeting with people and having fellowship with people who are very different from ourselves.

[11 : 04] Now, the issue here is the overlooking of one group in the daily distribution of food. In that time, there was no welfare state, and families would be expected to provide for those in need, maybe the elderly people who were in need.

But if people didn't have families, they were just kind of left to their own devices. And the church had this caring ministry, a distribution of food to widows and those in need.

And the Hellenistic Jews, that's the Greek Jews, were claiming that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

food. Now, I expect it wasn't something that was done consciously, it was maybe just done unconsciously. But it was a real problem, and a problem that needed a resolution.

And so that leads us to the next point, which is the solution to this problem, or the resolution. And we see three things that are done to resolve this problem.

[12:17] The first is that the twelve apostles call a meeting in verse two. They summon the full number of the disciples.

So this is not allowed to fester, to brew, so that resentment grows, and indeed so that hardship grows. It is dealt with.

The second thing is that the twelve refuse, that's the twelve apostles, refuse to be diverted from the word of God and from prayer. However pressing the needs are, they steadfastly refuse to be distracted from that.

Now this is a really important issue. It concerns the most basic physical needs of a very needy, vulnerable group in their community.

And the twelve and the other believers take those needs very seriously. But they refuse to be distracted from the word of God and from prayer.

[13:26] Now for us today as a church, there are many pressing issues. Pressing issues in our society around us. Things like homelessness and poverty, family breakdown, addiction, issues to do with the environment, with international poverty and debt, with sanctity of life issues and much, much more.

And these are all pressing issues. They're important issues. We're not just to say they don't matter together. But we also need to be aware that we can very easily be just taken up by the latest issue, the latest need that confronts us.

And we're in reactive mode. We just react to that. But the twelve apostles refuse to be waylaid.

They have an agenda, a proactive agenda, a priority from which they will not be moved.

And that is the word of God. In verse two, they say it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

And then in verse four, we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. So, the ministry of the word, the word of God is the scriptures.

[14:58] Now, of course, for them, the scriptures were what we call the Old Testament. But also very much what has recently happened in the life and the death and the resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, although that's not yet been written down in scripture.

But that is what their focus is. We see it at the end of chapter five in verse 42. Every day in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. And of course, throughout Acts, we have many examples of their preaching, of their proclamation of the gospel in many different settings. So, they devote themselves to the word of God and also to prayer.

Prayer. Preaching is speaking to people about God. Prayer is, well, includes speaking to God about people.

And it expresses our utter dependence on God for growth, for his word to prosper. Actually, the word in verse four, when it says we will devote ourselves to prayer, it's actually we will devote ourselves to the prayer.

[16:23] And that suggests something that's maybe a bit more formal than just, you know, just praying to God. It's maybe what we would think of as a worship service, as public worship.

worship. But of course, praying to God is a very vital part of that. Why is this so important?

Why is this something that the apostles refused to be diverted from? Well, the Christian faith is centered on a message, a message from God, our maker.

A message that deals with our most basic and foundational need from which all other needs grow out of. And that need is our alienation from God, our maker.

And the gospel, the word of God, is a message of reconciliation, of how we can have peace with God. And it is a peace that begins in this life, but is eternal, goes beyond this life, as we were seeing this morning.

[17:41] And so that is why the word of God is so vital, so crucial. All our other needs spring from our alienation from God, our sin.

And so the gospel, the word of God, goes to the root of our problems. So that's why the proclamation of this message of the gospel, of the word of God, is absolutely essential for the church.

Occasionally, I've heard this kind of saying, preach the gospel to every creature, if necessary, use words.

And there's something wrong with that, because basically it's always necessary to use words to preach the gospel. Of course, our lives are vital, and if our lives are inconsistent with the gospel, that will undermine what we say.

But words, the word of God, is absolutely essential to what we have to offer to our society and the people around us.

[18:52] people around us. And that is why the apostles refused to be diverted from it. And the challenge is for us. Do we seek every opportunity to proclaim the word of God in our own society?

Do we set that value, that priority, on the word of God, on the scriptures? So that's the second thing. they refuse to be diverted from the prayer and the proclamation of the word of God.

The third is that they deal with the issue as urgent, and they find a solution. Because these physical needs, these material needs, are important.

As we said at the beginning, the gospel is holistic. It concerns the whole person. And that is why mercy ministry, or caring ministry, there's different terms for it, is vitally important for the church.

And we've seen that in Acts before. Deuteronomy 15.4 tells the Israelites that there should be no poor people among you. And yet it recognizes that there will always be poor people among you.

[20:14] And yet when we read of the community, this early community, this early church, in Acts chapter 4, we read that God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all, that there were no poor persons among them.

And of course in the teaching and the example of Jesus, we see Jesus care for those who are sick, those who are poor, those who are broken. Galatians 6 verse 10 says, let us do good to all, especially to those who belong to the household of faith.

people. And so the apostles, the early church, they avoid two extremes. One is that the gospel, the church, is only concerned with spiritual things, only concerned with evangelism and with preaching, to the exclusion of caring for people's physical needs and justice and mercy.

unity. And the other extreme is that the church is only focused or mainly focused on people's physical needs. And so the evangelism and proclamation, proclaiming the word of God, is squeezed out.

Here we see a church that is focused on both. And we see how they do that. First of all, they delegate so that the apostles are not stretched to the limit.

[21:40] they're trying to sort out the distribution while also preaching the word and leading the prayers. They delegate it to others. And these others are elected by the church.

They're not simply appointed by the apostles, but they're elected by the whole community. That was really important in this particular circumstance that these people who would work at distribution had the full confidence of all the people.

But it's not just anyone. They are people with qualifications in verse 3. Therefore brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom.

So this was not just something that any old person could do. The fact that the apostles refused to do it did not mean that it was unimportant or beneath them.

It was very important work. It was a spiritual task and only spiritual men could fulfill that role.

[22:48] Also, we noticed that it is seven Hellenistic Jews or Greek Jews who were chosen. We know that from the names of the people listed there in verse 5.

They're all Greek names and that suggests that this is a redressing of the imbalance so that those who were previously overlooked would no longer be overlooked.

The list of people here is significant. It's introducing people who appear later in the story of Acts. The next chapter deals with the martyrdom of Stephen. In chapter 8, the activity of Philip, who's another of these helpers who are chosen.

Well, finally, we come to the result of all this, of this resolution, which is more growth. In verse 7, we read that the word of God continued to increase and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and the great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

So, this passage, it starts with growth and it ends with growth. We could call it a growth sandwich. And also added here is the reaching of a new set of people not mentioned before, which is priests. [24 : 17] A great many priests became obedient to the faith. So, in conclusion, this growth is a result of three things.

First of all, of resolving division and conflict so that harmony is restored among the believers, so that there is unity within the diversity of the church and it presents a harmonious united witness to the world.

world. The second thing that results in growth is the preserving of the word of God and prayer as essential for the church.

Verse 7 begins that the word of God continued to increase. And that's because the apostles devoted themselves to preaching it.

They refused to be diverted from that task. So, the increase in the number of disciples, including many priests, was the result of the word of God being preached widely and those people believing.

[25 : 31] And also because of prayer. Prayer that God would bless the preaching of his word and would add to the church. And use it, use the word of God to open hearts and draw people to the Messiah Jesus.

And then thirdly, growth is a result of the creation of a well-run, effective, caring ministry in the church. Here was a community that really cared for the poor, the needy, and the vulnerable people. And as a community, they're fulfilling the instruction of the Lord Jesus. Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and so glorify your Father in heaven.

And his words in John 13, will everyone know that you are my disciples if you love one another. But what about us as a church?

What are our priorities as a church, as a congregation? What kind of church are we? May God grant that we have unity and harmony in working together to spread his word and in caring for those in need.

[26 : 54] May God bless his word to us.