

Godly Leadership, Sacrificial Service

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 August 2007

Preacher: Wayne Schuller

[0 : 00] Jesus, Lord of all, we pray that as we approach your word, we might come with a spirit of humility and tremble before it and want to tap into the same energy and love for you as had by the church in the age of the apostles.

We ask this for your glory, Lord Jesus. Amen. Please have a seat, friends. Well, today we come to our last sermon in our current series on the book of Acts.

And unfortunately, we haven't left Jerusalem yet. We're still there. And later in the year, we hope to leave Jerusalem and continue in Acts and go to the ends of the earth.

And some things that I hope you've picked up over the last seven weeks as we've looked at the first few chapters of Acts are that the book of Acts is a high-powered book for a high-powered church. It shows you the gravity of the gospel of the early church. It shows you the power of the signs and wonders of the fear of Jesus of the early church.

[1 : 08] There is danger. There is great joy. So I hope you've seen and sensed the power of this great book, and it's made you hungry for the same today. I hope you've noticed that the book of Acts has been...

This is really important. Probably the biggest thing I want you to get is that the book of Acts has been Jesus-focused. Not just about the Holy Spirit or apostles or a history of a church growing, but it's actually presented Jesus, risen and reigning.

Some of the names given to him so far have been Savior, Lord, Prince, Messiah, King. We haven't been given just a history.

We're being given a theology to proclaim of who Jesus is today. And even when he isn't mentioned in the book, he's there. And I think you'll see that today.

And lastly, I hope you've found with me that the book of Acts is a realistic book. It is a true historical account of the ups and downs of the early church.

[2 : 11] There has been community and corruption. There has been growth and divisions. There's been success and setback. So it's not a rose-coloured picture of life in the Christian church.

It's been very realistic. Now today, friends, we're going to look at one last setback and how it was overcome in the early church.

And it's probably appropriate that it's the last sermon I'm doing in this series before Paul Barker gets back next week because it's a controversial passage and the principles behind it, I think, are very controversial.

And one thing I always love is when people give me feedback on a sermon or send me an email or leave me a note. And you might like to do that after this sermon if you think it's too controversial for you.

Well, let's look at the problem and see what's happening. I'm at Acts 6, verse 1. Now during those days when the disciples were increasing in number, that's good, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews, that's bad, because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.

[3 : 23] It's not unlike in Numbers where the people of God who have been rescued are now beginning to complain and there are divisions among the people of God. Now it's happening in the New Covenant. And what we have are these two cultural groups.

Both are Jewish, both are converts to Jesus as the Lord and Saviour. But the cultural differences are one group are kind of more modern, cosmopolitan, Greek-speaking, Hellenist Jewish Christians, and the other group are the more old-school, traditional, Hebrew, Aramaic-speaking, Jews from the actual capital of Jerusalem.

And we know that these two cultural groups were rivals already within Jewish culture, and it seems that they brought this sort of conflict into the church.

And especially the Greek Christians, the Hellenist Christians, were complaining that their widows were being overlooked in the church's daily distribution of food.

What we saw a few chapters ago of Barnabas and people giving spontaneously for the needs of the church now seems to be evolving into a kind of regular system of social care.

[4 : 39] And there's a complaint, and it's a serious complaint, because really what they're saying is that the apostles, who are the ones who distribute all this, are inept, that they're bad managers.

I mean, that's at best. At worst, there's an accusation that the apostles are preferring one group over another, that they are biased. Now, friends, the point, the controversial lesson, I think, from this chapter is not about the distribution of our social resources for the church.

It's not even about fights in the church and how to deal with them. Those things are important. The big issue, and I think I've learnt this from John Stott, if you've got any John Stott books, he's a great Bible teacher.

I commend them to you, especially his book On Acts. And John Stott makes the point that what we're seeing here is an attack of Satan on the church.

And it's his third attack on the church, and it's his most clever and most shrewd. The first attack was persecution, and the apostles so far have come through that with flying colours.

[5 : 49] Satan's second attack was corruption, and that's when we looked at Ananias and Sapphira, and again, they dealt with that issue comprehensively. But now this third attack comes, and the attack is not one of persecution, it's not one of corruption, it's an attack John Stott calls distraction.

The satanic attack on the church, on the apostles of distraction. What's happening is that the apostles have been called by Jesus to be eyewitnesses of his resurrection in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth.

Now, if Satan can get the apostles distracted by affairs of administration and dealing with disputes and taking care of food distribution and not preaching the gospel, if Satan can achieve that end, that's basically as effective as putting the apostles in jail.

It's a very clever strategy, and it's a true one today. If Satan can wear out a pastor with administration or church leaders can be distracted by secondary matters and the gospel is not focused on, or what we'll see is called ministry of the word and prayer, is not focused on, then Satan has won the day.

I think it's a great tragedy when a church tries to be everything to everyone and loses the heart of why we're here, which is to preach the gospels, to have ministry of the word of God and of prayer.

[7 : 30] Churches cannot do everything, and we would be failing the gospel if we tried to. I'll give an example. I'm told there was once a time in Melbourne toward the start or middle of last century where if you were interested in playing tennis, you'd have to join a church because all the tennis courts were on church properties.

And to join the club, you had to kind of be a member of the church, so there was this overlap of the church's ministry. They proclaimed the gospel and had a ministry of tennis. Now, I'm trying to be prophetic here, and it's controversial, but friends, running tennis clubs is not our main game.

Okay? Running tennis courts is not our main game. It may be true that having a tennis court won't interfere with the ministry of the gospel in a church.

It may be true that as long as you're not getting the pastor to be the ball boy, that the church can do its job and have a tennis court and it not be a sin. I might grant that.

Some might even argue that having a tennis court could be an outreach that, you know, in effect, you're hitting balls, but you're also sharing the gospel. So, I don't know how that happens.

[8 : 49] You say, what's the score? Love all. Oh, Jesus said, love all. And, what must I do to be saved? And then have baptisms on the tennis court. I don't know.

The trick, friends, I think, is that when we start thinking that having something like the tennis court becomes a non-negotiable or becomes our core business at the expense of what Peter would call ministry of the word and of prayer.

Something is wrong when we do pick up important secondary things but they become primary. Then Satan has distracted us from our core business.

And I think this is one of his most effective strategies in Australia today. More churches, I think, have been ruined by distraction than any other means.

So, by being focused on not ministry of the word and prayer and preaching the gospel but being focused on their polished music or their social welfare or their spiritual warfare or being focused on their buildings and their maintenance or keeping up their traditions or their denominational distinctives or by solving life needs and life problems, promoting family life.

[10:09] Now, all these things, none of them are bad but if they become core business at the expense of ministry of the word and prayer then a terrible thing has happened to the church.

The apostle calls it not right. It's not right. This is what happens and the twelve called together the whole community of disciples and said, verse 2, it is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.

So, the apostle says it's ungodly, it's not faithful to Jesus if we are distracted by this good thing by helping these widows and these disputes about widows.

That's a good thing but it's not right if we're focused on that and not on what Jesus has called us to do. The apostles need to choose between good ministry and the best ministry.

They need to choose between feeding people physically and feeding people spiritually with the gospel and word of the Lord Jesus. The good is often the enemy of the best.

[11:18] Now, it's important to work out, friends, what does Peter mean when he says, we will devote ourselves to prayer and serving the word or ministry of the word.

All through apps we've been seeing the apostles do prayer and ministry of the word and what they've been doing is basically two things. Teaching from the Old Testament that Jesus is the Messiah and that he's the one who has to suffer for sins and rise to new life as God's king.

So, teaching from the Old Testament and the other thing they couple with that is their own apostolic eyewitness the things that Jesus has taught them as the twelve and their own witness to his resurrection.

They keep saying, you know, you killed him, God raised him, we saw him, we apostles saw him.

And so I think ministry of the word is whenever we are sharing those two things, either the Old Testament witness or the apostolic witness which in effect is brought to us via the New Testament today.

anything we can do to promote that message is ministry of the word. So it must include evangelism because that's sharing the apostolic gospel but it would also include Bible teaching and anything that will help people understand the Bible and grow spiritually in their walk with God.

[12:42] Ministry of the word is not just preaching a sermon, not just what's happening right now. It could mean being part of a small group Bible study and just being a member of a small group and contributing to understanding the word together.

It could be parents teaching a Bible story to their children over dinner, that's ministry of the word or teaching them a memory verse.

It could be when a married couple commits to reading the Bible and praying together, that's a ministry of the word and prayer. It could be when grandparents drive their children every day to the church holiday program and the holiday program has the Bible in it.

That's a ministry of the word you're doing. You're bringing people to the word. A ministry of the word could happen when we give someone a Bible or a Christian tract that explains the Bible or a Christian book or write a letter to encourage someone to become a Christian or to stay a Christian. It's very clear that Christian church, the apostles say, is to be focused on the ministry of the word and of prayer. You can't really have a valid ministry of the word unless the spirit is blessing it.

[13:57] So you can see how prayer must go with it. Everything we must do must be intoxicated with prayer before, during and after. We must be praying for the spirit to bless the ministry of the word that we do.

By God's grace, and this is all by grace, it's not our works, by God's grace, this is the task entrusted to the whole church of ministry of the word and of prayer.

So the question is, is that our focus at Holy Trinity today? Prayer and ministry of the word. Is prayer part of our DNA of all our activities?

Is the Bible something we love to talk about and love to try and bring into anything and everything we do so that it's part of our DNA? Well, they implement this decision and we hear how they implemented and we hear the people they choose.

What they said pleased the whole community and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, which is good because they said we need to choose people full of the spirit and wisdom to serve this food, to wait on these tables.

[15:06] They chose him together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanan, Timon, Parmenas, Nicholas, a convert of Antioch. Now, some observations, friends, about the people they choose and the kind of people they choose for this ministry of waiting on tables.

Some people call this the choosing of deacons. Now, they're not actually called deacons in this passage, but you kind of get that sense of this special ministry of support so that the apostles can do ministry of the word.

One of the first things I notice is that Stephen and Philip become preachers of the word in the next chapters of Acts. So they actually choose people, I think, that they are training in a kind of apprenticeship for ministry of the word.

So they're trying to think, who can we raise as pastors to do evangelism? Why don't we train these guys and kind of test their character as they wait on tables? So they use it as a kind of ministry apprenticeship.

Secondly, all the names of the people they choose are Greek names, are Hellenist names, which is not quite logical, really. They're choosing these people because of the fights between two groups, and yet the people they choose are all from one group.

[16:29] I'm not really sure. It's hard to guess why, and I can only guess, but I wonder if the Hellenist Christians are, that's where the numbers in the church are coming from, that's where the, most Jews were kind of part of this diaspora, this spreading of Greek culture, of Jews in the Greek culture, and I think what they're doing is sort of letting the new leadership come from the new members of the church, rather than just let an old guard hold the reins indefinitely.

And the biggest thing you've got to notice is friends, that even to wait on tables, even to serve food, they are looking for people who love Jesus.

That even in those ministries in the church that are of support, we need people who are faithful, people who are godly. So your godliness matters if you do a support ministry in this church.

It's important that you love the Lord Jesus and that you are godly. Please don't think I'm not godly enough to then do this ministry and have everyone quit their ministries before Paul gets back on Thursday.

That would be a bad thing. But just take seriously that any task you serve in this church, godliness is required. Of course it will be required if you're teaching, but also if you're serving in some other practical way, you need to love Jesus.

[17:53] Well, did it work? Did this solution work? Luke says in his editorial comment, it did work. Verse 7, The word of God continued to spread.

The number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. Luke often gives us these wonderful little editorial summaries of how is the mission going?

And this is one of them. It's saying, it's going well. The church has passed another satanic attack. They've passed the test of distraction.

They still affirm that the support ministries are important. They're not bad. They're actually good things to feed the widows. But they've been able to prioritise ministry of the word.

And the implication, I think, from Luke's summary is that Jesus has been active. They have prioritised the word and the word of God spread. That is, the risen Lord Jesus spread his word through his church.

[19:01] It's a great lesson to learn, friends, that if we put at front the word of God and prayer, then the word will spread. It's a very simple formula.

If you prioritise prayer and the word, the word will spread. Many don't follow it. Many say, if we do X, Y, Z, then people will come and then we'll give them the word a bit later down the track.

But that's not what Luke says. Luke says, we prioritise the word and the word will bear fruit. We need to keep the main thing, the main thing in the church.

Now this is very hard to do and the practicalities of this are quite hard to do. I think of the vestry at the moment is deciding on a budget for the coming year and it takes a lot of wisdom and prayer to work out where do we put our resources as a church to prioritise the word so that there'll be spiritual fruit.

Spiritual fruit is very hard to measure. It's kind of, in one sense, it's invisible and very hard to see what ministries are bearing the most spiritual fruit to prioritise.

[20 : 12] I mean, it may be that a ministry that doesn't have numerical growth is being a very effective ministry of the word in a few people's hearts and therefore it's important.

We can only ask questions such as is this ministry prayerful? Does it point people to Jesus? Does the Bible get a look in anywhere in this ministry?

It's even harder I think when a church like Holy Trinity that has a long kind of heritage when there have been things that we've done that have borne a spiritual fruit in previous decades but now they're not producing a spiritual fruit today whether we should keep doing them.

We need to keep the main thing the main thing. We need to keep ministry of the word on the agenda. Satan's game of distraction is very effective. To use an illustration from another area of life but just as relevant I think, one of the duties of parents, of Christian parents I think is to nurture their children in the gospel and that's a ministry of the word and I think that that continues even when your children are adults.

Satan would love to distract you from that and what he would love I think is for you to be the best parents you could be to give your children the best education and the best upbringing everything but ministry of the word and prayer.

[21 : 43] When I speak to parents clearly one of the hardest things for parents to do is to teach their kids the Bible and pray with them. Why is it hard? Because Satan doesn't want us to do it.

Now you might say to me it's easy for me because my kids are toddlers and they love a Bible story at dinner and your children may be teenagers who are prickly or they may be grown up and cold to the gospel and that makes it hard for you to talk about Jesus with your children.

But friends see the reason it's hard is because Satan wants to distract you. It will always be hard and will never be easy to implement the ministry of word and prayer to which all parents are entrusted.

Friends Luke is teaching us it's a great tragedy if the apostles were to leave behind the main game of word and prayer. It would be a satanic attack on the life of the early church.

Distraction is a church killer and can leave churches in a spiritual coma. In many ways that's what the Melbourne Anglican Diocese is like and many of my peers and probably me one day we have to go into some of these parishes that haven't focused on ministry of the word and prayer and that are spiritually in a coma and try and bring the word and prayer and bring life.

[23 : 08] It's not a nice or easy thing to do. Friends, although I don't want to fall into this trap, this is not about clergy and lay people.

This is not about clergy and lay because the assumption in Acts is that all of us will be involved in ministry of the word. The day of Pentecost, the spirit came on everyone, not just apostles.

And the promise was, in the last days it will be God declares, I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy.

That is, in Acts 2 we see the prophecy is people declaring the wonders of God, the wonders of God in Jesus. All of God's people will have a ministry of the word in the last days in which we live.

Moses, in our numbers reading, longed for this day. He said, would that all the people of God were prophets. Would that all the people of God could prophesy and that God's spirit would be on all of them.

[24 : 13] He was longing for the day we live in, that all of us play a part in the ministry of the word. You might not preach a sermon, but we can all be part of a small group Bible study.

We can all give away a Christian book or a Bible. We can all write a letter of encouragement to someone to help them become a Christian or to help them stay a Christian.

We can all visit someone who is in need and share Bible words and pray with them. We can all come to a prayer meeting or pray daily for our church or pray with another Christian one-to-one.

We all have opportunities to say help with the Sunday school. That's a very clear ministry of the word or to lead religious education in a school. That's a great ministry of the word that many are involved in here.

We can all lead a family devotion. We can all give someone a Bible or pray. We can all play a part in the ministry of the word. And some of us also will want to take on some special unique ministries of support.

