

Leadership Priorities

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Date: 17 July 1994

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[0 : 00] One of the nice things about growing ancient is that I know something none of you know, and that is that a long time ago there was a group of teenage girls in this parish that had a Bible study in a youth group.

And it was a very important group. All those people I think grew up to be significant members and leaders in the Christian community.

One of them was Teresa's mother who just spoke to you, and Teresa's grandparents that belonged to this church for a long time.

So part of the enjoyment of listening to Teresa was that I knew that you didn't know, is that she's a sort of third generation member of St. John. That's encouraging.

I need you to look at your prayer book tonight, as well as your Bible.

[1 : 21] So having found Acts chapter 6, will you now get your prayer book? And will somebody lend me one? When you look at Acts chapter 6, it begins, in those days, it's sort of like that, those were the days, my friend, we thought they'd never end.

Those days in Acts chapter 6, significant days.

See, David Short assigned me this passage to preach on, and I've had a terrible time with it.

And then I suddenly recognized why I had such a terrible time with it. And that is because this passage tells the Baptists why they're Baptists, and the Catholics why they're Catholics and not Baptists, and the Orthodox why they're Orthodox and not Catholics, and the Anglicans why they're not Presbyterians.

And they all get it from this passage. And that's why I want to start by reading to you from, not reading to you, but showing you, what the Church is all about.

[3 : 02] I mean, when I come to think about talking to you, I see you as a congregation. And I wonder what kind of congregation you are, and who you are, and in the whole span of Church history, what you are.

I suspect that if we wanted someone to represent most of the major Christian denominations in the world, we could find representatives who in themselves, or in their parents or grandparents, could be members of almost every Christian denomination within the realms of Orthodoxy, perhaps, that have ever existed.

So, I want you to start by looking at what the Anglicans thought the Church was about when they wrote their foundation statements, which are the 39 articles.

So, if you look at what a Church is, it's primarily a congregation, and you are a congregation. Look at it on page 706. The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men and half the congregation have to forgive that statement.

It's a congregation of the faithful in which the pure Word of God is preached. That's what a Church is.

[4 : 45] It's a congregation where the Word of God is preached. It's a very strangely simple definition, isn't it? And to illustrate that, the sacraments are duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

So, the heart of a Church is a congregation. At the center of the congregation, the pure Word of God is preached, and everything else is ordered around that.

But that's not easy to do. And you'll see how difficult it has been if you read the next paragraph, which says, the Church in Jerusalem didn't get it right.

The Church in Alexandria didn't get it right. The Church in Antioch didn't get it right. So, also the Church of Rome hath urged, not only in their living and manner of ceremonies in response to that pure Word of God, but also in matters of faith.

Well, this was written at a time when it was very important to prove that the Roman Catholics were all wrong.

[6 : 20] In the world in which we now live, we tend to think they're probably mostly on our side. So, it's an embarrassment to read things like this.

But you can go on to read that, you know, because this is written several hundred years ago, you can go on probably to read without apology that the Anglican Church has also erred and that it's even within the realm of possibility that St. John Shaughnessy has also erred that the Church is, in fact, a fallible community which constantly needs to be brought back to what it's meant to be.

And what it's meant to be is a congregation of the faithful in which the pure Word of God is preached. Now, that's by way of introduction to what I want to say about Acts chapter 6.

Just bow your heads and let me pray for a minute. Our God, as we think of this passage of Scripture which has been plowed and harrowed and dug and churned up thousands upon thousands of times as people have looked for the right ordering of the life of a congregation, the life of a church.

Many people have died for not conforming to what has been taught here and many people have died because they conformed perhaps too closely to what is contained here.

[8 : 24] So by your Holy Spirit as we read these verses, help us to understand what you want us to hear and how the Word of God preached and proclaimed and taught is to order and affect our lives together and our individual lives.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, if you look at it then, you will see that those were the days.

Those were the days when the Grecian, there was a vast increase. The church was growing.

If you want to know why the church was growing, look at the last verse of chapter 5 which says they left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name and every day in the temple and at home they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

So you have a wonderful combination there of suffering on the one hand and preaching and teaching on the other hand. And for some reason that produced enormous increase in the life of the church it wasn't the kind of paranoid suffering which is so easy for us to enter into.

[10 : 18] But imagine what a dignity and what an honor it was for those early disciples to be arrested as Jesus had been arrested to be publicly flogged flogged perhaps with the same whip and by the same person that had flogged the Lord Jesus and that they were counted worthy to share in a certain way the suffering that belonged to Jesus Christ and through that suffering to understand in a most profound way the reality of the gospel and I suppose none of us understand the gospel until we have shared something of the sufferings of Christ I read somewhere this week that in days gone by

Christians suffered physical torture now it's all done very scientifically by mental and emotional torture but to share the suffering and not lose touch with the preaching and teaching of Jesus as the Christ both those things together brings apparently increase in the church but then while even that was going on and the increase was taking place the Grecian Jews that is the Greek speaking Jews complained against the Hebrew speaking Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food one of the problems I had with that verse is that this is a brand new infant church and they already had a system of daily provision of food for the needy among the

Christians probably because they had shared their wealth together and were living some kind of communal life and it was breaking down and so the cause of the Greek speaking Jews was that they weren't getting their share but it was an amazing thing that Greek and Hebrew speaking Jews were together representing at least the polarity within a particular group and that they were together now in Christ they were all sharing in a communal life in Christ but then the internal dissension came now John Stott in his very ordered way of looking at things which I envy enormously he said three barriers to the church have been dealt with one is the authorities tried to force them not to preach

Christ and that failed then hypocrisy in the person of Emmaus in the person of help me who am I after come on some of you should be more confident about the answer sorry Anna no no that's the one yeah that that by that by them hypocrisy would have come into the church and destroyed it and then this third internal dissension if you'd like an example of internal dissension I'll tell you see that wall behind me when the congregation tried to accept some architect's proposal as to what it would look like finally it took I think two to three months meetings of meetings of the congregation to decide and of course we got it right in the end until some newspaper reporter came along and said it looks like the set from an old coward play

I but it's enormously energy consuming when there is dissension within a congregation over what must be secondary problems and the problem that it creates of course is that those secondary things become primary in the life of the congregation so you get this internal dissension threatening the church and the church having to deal with it in a particular way I was I was I requested that you listen to the whole of 1 Timothy chapter 5 which is full of how to treat the elders and how to treat the widows and how to treat the leaders and you may have read that and thought to yourself what on earth is this about what on earth it's about is that you've probably never read it before and it's time you did and because there are important principles involved in that but you see how dissension within the church over the treatment of the widows could split the church into two factions on the one hand but more importantly mean that the leadership of the church would have to abandon the ministry to which they'd been called in order to deal with the dissension in the congregation well what they decided to do was they decided to well you can read the account of what they did the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on table and you see what the church is about and this seems little understood in our society what the church is about what its essential ministry is is the ministry of the word of God the church draws its life from its life giving encounter with the word of God the word of God written the word of God preached the word of God taught the word of God encountered in fellowship one with another that is where our life comes from

[17 : 55] Dr. Eugene Peterson gave a talk on it at Regent this week on Monday night and it was an absolutely brilliant talk and if any of you have any idea that this ministry of the word of God sounds a little pious and irrelevant you should make it your business to hear that the very heart of human existence is the encounter with the word of God the God who speaks to us that that's what we are to live by and that's what our life is and when we cease to have that encounter we cease to live and you will know that from your own experience that is essential to us but you see the temptation and the pressure is always on the church to make the feeding and distribution of food to the widows a cause within the congregation which certain people can champion and can get behind and can thrust onto the agenda of the congregation so that the congregation moves from the heart of its life which is dependence upon the ministry of the word of

God to dealing with this cause now if I was tempted to do this but to get you to put up here on a piece of paper the causes which people with great conviction and great earnestness want the church to consider want to become absolutely prior to the life of the church to replace the ministry of the word one of the memorable encounters for me in this congregation was when we had somebody who was devoutly committed to nuclear disarmament and he was anxious that I should become devoutly committed to nuclear disarmament which I might say was not I mean he had reason but his argument was that unless we deal with this problem there ain't going to be a church so let's get first things first and you see that kind of pressure and that kind of argument comes out over and over again but what it does is to deny that that we don't live by bread alone but we live by the word from God that's what our life is all about if you want to know what your life is all about that's what it's all about and until you face that reality and recognize it then as far as this life is concerned you're just messing around with a whole lot of highly significant but ultimately meaningless secondary issues now I don't

I mean I'm not saying and this passage doesn't say it either that the issue between the Greek widows and the Hebrew widows was insignificant steps were taken to deal with it but the important consideration was that it wasn't to be at the cost of the ministry of the word of God and so when we are surrounded by vital issues of all kinds and we are desperately concerned to see some resolution of those issues it must not be by making secondary the ministry of the word of God the issue of our sexuality was dealt with by David Short this morning and in a brilliant way he put down what the issues were then and in a sense compared them to what the issues are now and then he said but these are the fundamental reality the word from God concerning us which is God's call to us and the word from God concerning our world which proves the transitory nature right so you see that's the great debate in the church then and in the church now and these comparatively what seem at first innocuous verses from chapter six of Acts tell us that one at the foundational level of the development of the church this issue was faced and this issue was resolved that secondary issues are not under any circumstances to take the place of the ministry of the word of

God and of course in our society they almost always and everywhere do take the place of that if I was to go through this congregation and get to know you I'm sure that there is an issue which is close to your heart which is in danger of robbing you of the more essential thing that you require and that is to be under the ministry of the word of God well that's what it says how are they going to deal with it because they had to deal with it and so they were told choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the spirit and of wisdom those were the job qualifications you know when they when they put down job qualifications now and what you have to be computer literate and you have to be this and you have to be that and you have to be the other thing well those are probably very necessary qualifications in our highly technological and sophisticated society but primary to those qualifications what a

Christian needs to bring to any job he does is the fullness of the holy spirit and wisdom and the fullness of the holy spirit and wisdom are the result of the impact of the ministry of the word of God in your life that's where the wisdom comes from that is where you encounter God the Holy Spirit I'm not sure whether the wise man knows how wise he is or whether the person who is full of the spirit knows himself or herself to be full of the spirit those are almost unconscious qualifications and in the letter to the Acts in this in this in this book of the Acts we're told to look out people who are full of the spirit and of wisdom might settle for wisdom and some might settle for being full of the spirit but the both of them seem to necessarily go together and they provide the necessary qualification for your life and for mine we have to have those qualifications as a

[26 : 20] Christian and bring those qualifications to whatever job we do because again you get another picture of the church you wonder if you have the gifts well you may have all sorts of gifts but the qualifications you need are to be full of the spirit and wisdom wisdom is like walking the information highway with the Lord that relationship exists all you're going to happen to you on the information highway if you step onto it you're going to get knocked down unless you have a primary relationship to the Lord because wisdom is information with and based on the fear of and trust in the Lord and so you need those things as qualifications but then you see the interesting thing again about the church as a neophyte community that you see it here is that it demands those highest qualifications for what must have been a fairly simple job and I find that fascinating you need those qualifications for any job within the church to be full of the spirit and of wisdom you may lots of people come to the church because they have worldly qualifications which make them think that the world will go round because of their superior ability and I am reminded that there's a great church in

Toronto called Timothy Eaton Memorial Church and it was Mr. Timothy Eaton is the founder of Eaton's and as a memorial to him his family built a magnificent Gothic church in the center of Toronto and in those devout and holy days they appointed managers from the various departments of Eaton's to run the church so that you ran the shoe department Monday till Friday and then you got in on the church on Saturday and Sunday and to my great delight I am able to report you that they found they couldn't do it these men who had the gifts to run the tea eating company did not have the qualifications to run a local congregation because the basic qualifications were not any business or administrative skill it was to be full of the spirit and of wisdom so they that that was what happened there so they chose these people to function in this way and then you see when they had chosen them they took them to the leaders the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them now there's something wrong with the minister standing up here and saying

I want you to give me seven people who will teach Sunday school next Sunday and so the seven best apple polishers in the congregation will come forward I guess apple polishers doesn't mean anything to you it used to mean something but you see what should really happen is that you in prayer with one another and in fellowship with one another should be saying to one another this is the job you should be doing because the elders in the church in Jerusalem went to the assembly and this is where the brethren get the name for their church from Acts chapter 6 they are the assembly and they went to the assembly and the assembly said these are the people that we think should be available for that job and so what in fact the minister should do is say you decide who's going to teach

Sunday school next week I'm leaving but make sure they're here and you wait till you've done the job you decide who's going to go on the mission field and let me know so that they can go because you know each other better you understand each other better and you know the people who are though they may not know it you know that they are full of the spirit and of wisdom so you choose them and then they are brought to the leadership of the church and you have the first ordination service in the New Testament I suppose in the New when they are prayed for and hands are laid on their head now that's often done by the church for many reasons that people are prayed for and hands are laid on them when people are sick when people are going on a mission of some kind when people are taking on a special ministry the

Roman Catholic Church finds in this the evidence for the order of bishops priests and deacons right in these verses but what certainly is said is that when people take on this responsibility they take it on by the choice of the assembly and with the prayers and laying on of hands of the leaders of the congregation that that's how it's done and that's what needs to be done in order that we in our world should do the work to which God has called us in Christ so they did that and you get the names of the people that were brought forward and they were Stephen and Philip and Prochorus and Nicanor and Timon and Parmenas and Nicholas from Antioch a convert to Judaism well I I tell you that because three of those we know who

[32 : 59] Stephen is because his story we're going to deal with next week and it follows on in chapter 6 and 7 we know who Philip is because there's a lot about him in chapter 8 and other places in the Acts of the Apostle some New Testament scholars think they know who Nicholas was because before the New Testament was closed there are some people who think he got heavily into the glue and if you want to investigate that that can be your mystery search for the week to find out what kind of glue he is thought to have got into but the other four are quite unknown nobody knows who they are and of course I think that I think that's really quite important for the life of the church that most of the work is done by people that aren't known by anybody the work they've done is not known and they themselves are often not known

I mean I look over this congregation and I know a number of people in this congregation and I know what an outstanding contribution they've made to the life of the Christian community but most of you don't have any idea who they are you don't know who they are or what they've done and so I think that's probably necessary and part of the divine economy that you don't know who does the work and you need to be made aware of that simply because it helps you to pray and simply because it may help you in the work you're doing that nobody knows or acknowledges to keep on doing it in the knowledge that the servants of Christ the disciples of Christ are rarely known or acknowledged for what they do well the next thing that this passage tells us after it's told us about these people it tells us about one of them that having appointed these people presented them to the apostles they were prayed for and hands laid on them and then it says so the word of

God spread how did it spread it spread by dealing with the problem of the widow's affection on the one hand and maintaining the absolute priority of the ministry of the word of God on the other hand and our church and our time tends to think it tends to go like that if we're dealing with the problems that's all we're supposed to be doing and others think if we're ministering the word that's all we're supposed to be doing but the balance is here they dealt effectively with the problem but they maintained the priority of the ministry of the word and that's what had to happen well when it when it goes on from there it has this to say that there was a great increase there was a spreading of the word of God and the number of disciples in

Jerusalem increased rapidly and I think the word goes a lot further than the disciples if you know what I mean I mean part of the proclamation and teaching of the word of God is that a lot of people may encounter the word who are not yet disciples it may in fact be that one of the functions of this service is that the word of God may spread through the community but the actual coming forth of those who are prepared to be disciples of Christ may be a different reality and you may be someone who has been influenced by the spread of the word of God but have never become a disciple of Jesus Christ what am I going to say next I won't you say it to yourself that that's what needs to happen in your life so the the final thing that

I want to say and this is in kind of in preparation for next week it says the word of God spread disciples increased oh it says also priests became obedient to the faith one of the things I've noticed that last point I announced a minute ago I'm not there yet I'm still working towards it because I want to just say something about this line where it says a large number of priests became obedient to the faith couldn't you use that nicely in our society but they're talking about the priestly families of ancient Israel and the priests are the ones who ministered in the temple the priests are the ones who I think carried on much of the medical practice of those days in dealing with medical problems and the priests came in touch with people and they recognized in a pragmatic way the wonder and value of the gospel and the ministry of the word and many of them became obedient to the faith to the faith of

[39 : 24] Christ and one of the things that I think tends to happen in our world is that people who work closely with people and the problems that people have and very often this applies to doctors tend to be in a sense susceptible to the gospel because they see the deep needs of people day by day and the people to whom they attempt to minister and they see I think the inadequacy of their own ministry sometimes and recognize that something more is needed and I'm sure that these priests who for the whole of their life and perhaps for generations had been carrying out priestly duties in relationship to a people longing for their Messiah but they suddenly saw it and understood it and they became obedient to the faith just as people who are seriously involved in the human dilemma today tend to be open and susceptible to the ministry of the word and to recognize that it meets needs in our lives in Jesus

Christ that can't be met in other ways and they may too then and now become obedient to their faith now this last point verse 8 Stephen a man full of God's grace and power did great wonders and miraculous signs about the people one of the really attractive things about the Bible is that it tells you about a whole lot of people by describing the story of one person so you get the stories of Jacob and the story of Abraham and the story of Joseph and the story of David you get the stories of the individual men Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel you get the gospels of John and Mark and Luke and Matthew you get from the epistles the story of

Philemon and Titus and Timothy all all the way through you get all the way through scripture you get individual people in whose lives you see the reality of the kingdom the Bible describes one person but through their lives you see an enormous picture and so next week we have to look at Stephen and in that one man to see the reality of the of the whole in a sense of the Christian community in the early days as it was depicted and represented by that person and you see that's because the gospel concerns individual people it doesn't tell you it doesn't attempt to tell you the stories of the seven men who were appointed here it tells you about one of them and by telling you about one of them it in a sense fills in the background on all seven of them now what happens because of that to encourage you is that if you take your own particular and individual story from all the lives of the great characters of scripture you can see something of the reality of the meaning of your own life in their lives and then as you bear witness from your life your individual life and circumstances others can see in you as an individual the reality of the grace of God it were in your life and so by God's grace might be encouraged to believe it could happen in their lives as well and that's why you witness from your life to others and that's the story or the outline of what happens next week when we look at the life of Stephen and try and see how his life and the story of how his life came to a dramatic and sudden end nevertheless was the beginning of a profound understanding of the gospel which for one other man in the life of one other man carried it to the whole of the

Mediterranean world an amazing sequence of events a sequence of events which through one individual and another may even come to have touched your life and have brought you to faith in Jesus Christ amen ■ ben ■■ ■■■■ ■■ ■■