

Stays focussed on the main thing

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[0 : 00] In verse 2, he quotes the apostles as saying that leaving the word of God would be a grave mistake. And in verse 7, Luke reports and in fact celebrates the effect of not leaving the word of God.

The word of God spread. His point is that the word of God kept spreading and bearing fruit because the apostles did not make the strategic mistake of leaving their calling to fix a pressing problem. What Luke, I think, is saying here, it was so right that the apostles' focus stayed on the ministry of the word and prayer. The major threat to the church's mission, Luke teaches us, is whatever threatens the word of God advancing and spreading.

That's the threat. And in this case, it would have been something very good that was threatening it. Not something bad at all. See, I suspect that our default way of thinking is that it would have been good for the apostles to express a little bit of humility by serving some tables.

[1 : 17] That is, the assumption is that if these apostles were truly loving and they truly had a pastoral heart, then they would get involved in the nitty gritty of caring for these widows' physical needs.

But Luke puts it together here in such a way that it helps us see that it would have been a big mistake for the church's God-given mission.

And I say this with an element of gentleness. It's because the widow's needs are not the mission of the church.

The spread of the word of God and the increase of disciples giving glory to Christ is the mission of the church.

Now, historically, the churches tended to play these two sort of major roles off against one another.

[2 : 29] Ministry of the word and prayer and pastoral care kind of stuff, if you like. Play them against one another. Playing off the importance of one ministry over the other.

But here God led the apostles to overcome both parts of the threat by not playing the threat off against one another. The apostles didn't say, guys, we can't wait on the tables here because, frankly, we're too busy with the word of God and prayer.

They didn't say that. And it wasn't because, well, actually, I've done my stint of waiting on tables and it's time for someone else to do that now. And it's not because, well, actually, I'm an apostle. I walk with Jesus for three years and waiting on tables is a little bit below me. You know, my pay rate is up here. And they certainly didn't say that caring for the needs of this group wasn't as important as the ministry of prayer and the word of God.

The issue wasn't one of importance. It was of calling and responsibility. Notice the instruction in verse three. Brothers, that is, the apostles are now speaking to the church.

[3 : 53] Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom. And we will turn this responsibility over to them. And so the apostles instructed the church to pick seven leaders who were full of the spirit and wisdom.

As it turns out, they appointed all Hellenists. Greek-speaking Jews. We know that because the seven names are all Greek. The church put up the names as to who they think could do this job. But it was the apostles who authorized them to do the ministry in verse six. They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them.

That's how important the apostles thought this ministry was. They didn't just go, hang on a bit. I've got, you know, my job description's here.

They said, pick seven people full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

[5 : 04] People of stature. People of stature.

Of godliness amongst you. And we will delegate this responsibility over to them. They were very careful about who they appointed to this role. Why?

Because it was so essential to get it right. It was so essential that that ministry was done. It was important as far as the apostles were concerned.

Because without this ministry being done well, and without them doing their ministry well, the ministry of the word of God does not spread.

And so we make a grave mistake when we pit these two things against one another. It was a very wise move on the part of the apostles and the church they delegated.

[6:10] The apostles kept on devoting themselves to ministry of the word and prayer according to verse four. There is no hint here at all that the apostles thought that the ministry of food distribution was below them.

There is no hint at all that they didn't love and care for the widows because they themselves didn't actually distribute the food. In fact, it seems that the widows and the whole church were satisfied that care was being offered under the leadership of the apostles, even if it wasn't by the apostles. And so the issue here is entirely a question of calling. And this is a vital principle for us as a church. God calls all of his people into ministry.

He calls different people to different ministries. And each calling in ministry is to work together to see the word of God spread and increase in our mission field.

But the word of God will not spread if those charged with the ministry of the word of God allow themselves to be distracted from their primary calling. And so Luke here celebrates the solution of the apostles.

[7:30] The two threats are overcome. The widows were cared for and the ministry of the word of God was not neglected. Both were utterly crucial. And either one of these threats could have undermined the church and ended its amazing growth.

The solution was the diversity of gifts and calling working together to see the influence of the word of God spread in their mission field. And I believe that's what we should be praying and laboring towards here at St. Paul's.

As we try to establish our own kind of teamwork that meets the whole gamut of practical needs and free some for the ministry of the word and prayer. The great threat in any local church is anything that jeopardizes the spread of the word of God as being our main thing.

And the way Luke celebrates the triumph of the church over this threat is by showing its effect in verse 7. And so the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

What Luke is celebrating is the triumph over this problem resulted in a breakthrough. A new breakthrough in evangelistic power. Notice he says even the priests.

[8:53] The guys who had been hostile and arrested the apostles in chapter 4. Are responding to the word of God and obeying the faith. The church has been tested. She has passed the test by caring for the widows and guarding the word.

And God honors his triumph with a new power and a new fruitfulness. The word of God, Luke says, grew like a living thing. Because the word of God is alive and active according to Hebrews 4.

In early September I spent a couple of days with the senior staff here working out what is the big thing that we need to work on in 2014 in order for us to take the next steps to see the word of God spread in our mission field here at Chatswood.

The thing that we identified was that we needed to unleash the ministry capacity of the people at St. Paul's. It is interesting that we saw this back in 2010 in a parish council and staff planning day.

That one of the three big obstacles to growth and the spread of the word in our mission field was the lack of leadership and involvement across the church. Thankfully we have seen progress.

[10:15] We had 100 people gather yesterday to celebrate those who made a contribution across the life of the church yesterday afternoon. It's fantastic. People who are involved in all sorts of ministry areas across the church.

So we're seeing some progress. But it's identified as something that we need to work harder on. To be consistently developing leadership and commitment across the church.

And it's going to be a particular focus for us next year. Having thought about that, I scratch my head looking at this passage and go, why would you want to?

That's another question. Why would you want to be involved in the ministry of supports? Because I think that's a question for not just this church, for many churches. Because the reality is, apparently across the church, it's the 80-20 rule.

80% of the work is done by 20% of the people. So obviously a lot of people don't see it valuable. What is the motivation? The best answer I could come up with as I was looking at this passage is that it was a privilege.

[11 : 30] It's a privilege. What I mean by that is, is that I never feel that I am St. Paul's Chatswood's privilege.

What I mean by that is, that you're really privileged to have me. I believe that St. Paul's is my privilege. To be at St. Paul's and serving in a church community is a gift.

In my view, it is all gift and privilege. I still remember the day when my chains fell off and my heart was free and I rose and went forth and followed Christ.

I still remember that day, the day it happened. It was a gift. It was a gift. And it remains a gift. It was a privilege for me to be forgiven, to have all of my guilt erased, and for the first time in my life to have hope, to have life, to have a future, to have purpose.

Because of what Christ had done for me on the cross. The immediate response was for me to go to my local church and to go to the minister and say, what do you want me to do?

[12 : 53] I wasn't paid to do it. I went to him, what do you want me to do? I remember one day, knocked on his door after work, rocked up. Okay, so what's happening? What do you want me to do? And he said, I've been trying to cut the grass for the last couple of days, haven't got to it.

Not a problem. Where's the mower? Next day, rocked up. There's a pew that needs fixing the back of church. Fantastic.

Where's the tools? It was three to four days a week I went. And eventually he said, I need to do some hospital rounds.

Give that a crack. Okay. Go and talk to some dying people. I had a little less subtlety back in those days.

That's a scary thought. But what I'm saying is, coming to Christ turned my life inside out and upside down.

[13 : 58] And I wanted to be involved in what he was doing to bring such a transformation in the lives of other people. This is his eternal purpose. The mindset that I am so valuable that I deserve my stipend.

That I deserve my housing. That I deserve my long service leave. That I deserve recognition. That I deserve praise.

This is foreign to the spirit of Christ. Likewise, the mindset that I'm so valuable that I will only give to the church in a way that I see fit.

And when I see fit, it's just alien to the spirit of Christ. Christ came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

For me. The whole orientation of his life was give, give, give.

[15 : 19] We saw it last week. He came. He ministered. He died. He rose again. He ascended on high and he sits as Lord over all space and time.

And he continues to reign and work in this world for his eternal purposes. And for little old me to be involved in that is just astounding. And to think that you pay me to be involved in that is...

That's a gift. It was a privilege then when I wasn't being paid for and it's even a privilege now.

I'm convinced that when we adopt this attitude of serving because it is a privilege to be involved in what he is doing in his world, we will discover the deep blessing of the word of God growing and increasing in us.

It's ironic that as we labor together, each doing their part to see the word of God increase and grow in the numbers of disciples coming to Christ, it tends to increase and grow in us.

[16 : 33] It's a connection between my giving and my growing. And so my prayer is that no obstacle inside the church or outside the church will hinder the word of God spreading from the ministry of St. Paul's Chatswood.

And may the same power that brought thousands into the church in Acts do the same here at Chatswood as we work together to ensure that the word of God spreading in our mission field remains our main thing.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.