

Sermon Given by

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Acts 6:1-7 - "Obstacles overcome"

Last week we saw how time and again in the book of Acts, the devil, that great hater of souls, tries his hardest to stop the spread of the gospel. He does all he can to destroy the church in its infancy.

This is a theme throughout the book of Acts. In my quiet times last week I was reading through the end of Acts and you may remember how after the shipwreck, they're on the beach – there's a little fire going and a serpent – that great satanic symbol - comes and fastens itself to Paul's hand and they all think, that's it he's a gonner but Paul just shakes it off and the serpent is thrown into the fire.

Throughout the book it looks again and again as if the church of God is a gonner as the devil throws down his ace of spades but God is working his sovereign purposes out – his purposes that can't be thwarted and he always trumps the devil, so the gospel spreads and the church grows.

In our series we've seen various tactics of the devil. So he's tried no end of persecution – the apostles have been imprisoned, they've been flogged, they've been ordered not to preach the gospel.

The devil has tried attack from within the church – you remember Ananias and Saphira that hypocrisy, greed and deceit from amongst the fellowship.

But having failed to overcome the church by either persecution or corruption, he now tries a new tactic – DISTRACTION.

If he could preoccupy the apostles with social action, then they would neglect their primary God-given tasks to pray and preach. It's a very shrewd and subtle tactic.

We're going to look at the passage under 4 headings: The Problem, The Solution, The Principle and The Result.

First then, **The Problem**

Anyone who's been a member of a church for any length of time will know that it's never that long before one group at church feels aggrieved in some way. "There's too much of a focus on young families. What about the elderly, what about the singles – we should do more to look after them?" or "There's not enough care and support for families!" or some will say "There's not enough involvement in the village." Others will say, "There's too much of a focus on the village." Another group will say, "There's not enough done to support those in the work place" only to hear another group shouting out: "Don't forget the retired, we should be prized too!"

Well let's take a look at the specific problem for the Jerusalem Church.

V1 “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.”

The early church was made up almost entirely of Jews. And there were two communities of Jews – the distinction between them went back three hundred years to the time when the Jews had been forced to decide how they should respond to the challenge of Greek culture which was prevalent at that time.

Some had taken a very conservative line, insisting that they should retain Aramaic as their primary language and refuse to absorb the manners and customs of the Greek Empire.

Others, however, were more pragmatic. They were prepared to speak Greek and to immerse themselves in Greek culture.

These two groups of Jews were often at loggerheads. The Hebraic Jews were prone to a slightly superior attitude, feeling that they were less polluted by paganism than their Grecian cousins. This tension seems to have spilt over into church politics.

“The Hebraic widows are getting more food than ours! You're treating us like 2nd class Christians – it's discrimination – that's what it is!”

It is extremely doubtful that there was any deliberate policy of discrimination being practised by the apostles. What is much more likely is that they were grossly over-extended in managing this rapidly multiplying congregation, which would have numbered well over 10,000 by this time.

The 12 apostles were still the only official leaders of the movement, so this vast mega-church looked to them for everything - from preaching the sermons to running the church finances. It's not surprising that we find evidence of strain as a result. And this particular problem was a very serious one – it must be resolved and soon

What was to be done? Next heading...**The Solution**

Notice that the 12 don't impose a solution on the church but rather v2 they **‘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 tables.”**

When they said this it wasn't an arrogant; “such things are beneath people like us” kind of remark. There is not the slightest hint that the apostles regarded social action as inferior. The point was that as apostles they had a unique role which demanded that they put first things first.

So they make a proposal to the church, v3: **“Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”**

Just as Moses two thousand years earlier had brought in additional personnel to help in the leadership of God's people so do the apostles.

And it's worth reflecting that this required a fair bit of humility on the part of the apostles. Peter and the others could easily have adopted an injured, "oh so you don't think we're doing our job properly" sort of tone.

Some leaders can get themselves enmeshed in a kind of indispensability syndrome which makes them insist on doing everything – it's usually generated by a perfectionism that fears that others are bound to get it wrong. It takes humility to delegate and these apostles had that quality.

Notice too the calibre of the seven men they chose. They had to be **"full of the Spirit and wisdom."** That phrase to be full of the Spirit comes 13 times in the NT and refers very simply to those people who have given themselves fully to following Christ.

It's not some mystical experience but someone who is daily living a Christ-like life. The Seven were able and godly – these were the best people they had. And the church was happy...

V5 "this proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Phillip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism."

It was probably a generous gesture by the Hebraic Jews that all seven of the candidates appear (from their names) to be Grecian Jews. V6 **"They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them."**

The Problem, The Solution and we turn now to **The Principle**

A vital principle is illustrated in this incident, which is just as relevant and important for us today. It is this: that God calls all his people to ministry, that he calls different people to different ministries and that those called to prayer and the ministry of the word must not allow themselves to be distracted from their primary task.

When Luke describes the work of the Seven in v3 as waiting on tables – the Greek word he uses for that "waiting on" is the same word for ministry in the phrase ministry of the word.

One group serves up food for widows, the other serves up Bible teaching. Both are ministry and both are spiritual, both are essential and they both require the help of the Spirit.

There was a sign outside a church once which read: "Vicar – Joe Bloggs, Ministers – the whole congregation!" And that's right. In whatever way we serve one another at church and in whatever way we reach out to the world we are ministers – each and every one of us.

It's actually unhelpful when we speak of ordination in terms of "going into the ministry". All Christians without exception being followers of him who came "not to be served but to serve" are called to ministry.

And as I look at our church fellowship I see all sorts of ministries carried out by all sorts of wise Spirit-filled ministers.

For example I see those who minister in the secular work place – doing their jobs thoroughly and with integrity, being kind and fair towards their colleagues, witnessing through their lips when opportunity arises to the hope that they have in Christ.

There are those who minister in the home, caring for children, discipling them in the Lord.

I'm helping run a course called Discipleship Explored at the moment - it runs for 8 weeks – one evening a week.

There are actually about 100 other people at ASLS who are running Discipleship Explored courses – the difference is that they are running them 24 hours a day, every day of the year as you disciple your children or your grandchildren, teaching and training them in the way of the Lord.

Some people have the gift – the ministry of making money and praise God for them and it may just be that that's the most significant thing that God will do through you, making money and giving it generously to fund gospel ministry.

Everyone Christian is called to service – to ministry and all those ministries are important.

We're all called to ministry and yet there are some within the fellowship – the church pastors – at ASLS – Simon and myself who are called particularly to the ministry of prayer and the word.

That's what our particular gifting is – that's what we've been set aside for – that's what we've been called to dedicate our lives to. It's important for all of us to keep remembering this.

Because as one commentator David Gooding makes clear it's a serious matter. Writing about the situation today, he says this: 'Many churches seem to have lost their confidence in the gospel to convert sinners and turn them into disciples of the Lord Jesus. So they concentrate solely on doing social good works, and offer the world their aid. And the world, not being aware that there is any more to Christianity than that, takes the aid but sees no need to come to Christ for salvation; no true conversions take place and these churches dwindle.' (Which I think we might have, sadly, to add, is what is happening in the majority of churches in our land today.)

Or listen to John Stott – he comments on how ignoring this principle affects the clergy: 'Many pastors, instead of concentrating on the ministry of the word (which will include preaching to the congregation, counselling individuals and training groups), become overwhelmed with administration. Sometimes it's the pastor's fault (he wants to keep all the reins in his own hands), and sometimes it's the people's (they want him to do everything). In either case the consequences are disastrous. The standards of preaching and teaching decline, since the pastor has little time to study or pray. And the lay people do not exercise their God-given roles, since the pastor does everything himself. For both reasons the congregation is inhibited from growing into maturity in Christ. What is needed is the basic, biblical recognition that God calls different men and women to different ministries. Then the people will ensure that their pastor is set free...to give himself to the ministry of the word, and the pastor will ensure that the people discover their gifts and develop ministries appropriate to them.'

I think this principle is understood and lived out at ASLS. As a minister of prayer and of the word, I, like Simon am very grateful that as a congregation we employ a Parish Assistant and a Church Administrator. If it wasn't for all the excellent admin and practical ministry that

Helen White and David Green do, we wouldn't have time to prep sermons properly or read the Bible with people 1-2-1 or lead small groups.

It's not just that the work itself they do is good and important and necessary but that it enables word and prayer ministry to continue. The same goes for all the great work that David Bridge and others before him have done as Treasurer and that so many of you do in so many ways in the life of our fellowship. Flower-arranging, serving tea and coffee, updating the website, playing musical instruments, offering hospitality and so on and so on.

It's great to be part of a church where Simon & I are encouraged and enabled to give ourselves to the ministry of prayer and the word and this passage presses on us the importance of keeping going with this principle.

Lots of you, in the MAP questionnaires that went out last summer mentioned how you'd like to see more social work done in the village – for example practical care and support for the elderly, helping them with DIY and gardening, making meals and so on. That's a great idea – it could be a brilliant ministry for a team of folk but it'd be wrong for Simon or myself to devote that much time or energy to it. Not because it's a lesser ministry but because it isn't the ministry we've been set aside for.

It's the same for all those who lead mid week Bible studies or who teach the Bible at Trekkers, Pathfinder or TNG – it'll always be hard to prep because so many other good things press on our time. Take encouragement from Acts 6 to keep prioritising that evening a week or however long it takes you to prepare thoroughly and prayerfully. Don't let the urgent distract you from the best. Keep prioritising the ministry of prayer and of the word.

That brings us to our last heading... **The Result**

Why should we keep taking this principle seriously at ASLS? As a direct result of the action taken by the Jerusalem church v7 **“the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”**

The solution worked. With these 7 men looking after this important ministry, the apostles are now released to be doing what they were supposed to be doing and so more and more people hear the gospel and are converted – yes even the priests – the arch enemies of the church even some of them were converted. There's the power of the gospel for you. The last people you'd imagine would become Christians are the very ones that Luke mentions. This delegating and prioritising works a treat!

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)