

MAXIMISE 2021

THE MINISTRY OF PRAYER & THE WORD-TALK 1

Jason was a fine young doctor at a London hospital when he asked me if he should pursue pastoral ministry; Gen was a mum with two kids at school wondering if she could use her spare time for God at our church; David was an elected MP when he considered training as a preacher; Rosie was team leader for Girl Guides Europe when she asked how she could support our church plant; Simon was a successful private equity investment director eager to serve Jesus; I was a young commercial lawyer in London evangelising colleagues but wondering if I should retrain for pastoral ministry. What should each of these people have done? I'll tell you what they did and why...eventually. But first, I aim to show you how the Bible tells each of us, as the people God has made us, with the privileges God has granted us, in the circumstances God has placed us, to do what we can to This may mean very different roles in life for each of us. But all of us need to stop being spectators watching gospel ministry and get on the pitch of maximising gospel ministry. I don't mind what position you play (we're all different), but we all need to get involved i.e. I don't presume to know what your role should be (do talk to your church pastors about that) but I do know we must do whatever we can do to maximise gospel ministry. I want to do this by spending our three sessions in one amazing passage: Acts 6:1-7. Here we read of the Apostles of the early church in Jerusalem facing a problem: an urgent social need distracting them from gospel ministry. The narrative reveals three important principles, taught throughout the Bible, applied to this challenging situation. These principles are not taught here but are assumed and applied here – so we'll need to look elsewhere in Scripture for their theological basis. These principles are vital for making decisions about how we should respond to God's mercy in our lives of sacrificial worship. Vs.1 outlines the problem which emerged, threatening to distract the apostles from maximising their gospel ministry. Their response reveals:

Principle No.1: Maximising gospel ministry, in ourselves, and in others, is a priority for every Christian (v.2)

Principle No.2: Building teams enables churches to maximise their gospel ministry (v.3-4)

Principle No.3: Different people need to accept different roles to maximise gospel ministry (vs.5-6) Priorities, teams, diversity: the talks go together (so don't lynch me 'til you've heard them all). Acts 6...

'¹ In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So 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 tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, 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 ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word". ⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a

convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the Apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ 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.' (Acts 6:1-7)

Acts is the second volume of Luke's orderly account of all that was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the saviour for all nations (Lk.1). It recounts what Jesus continued to do after his resurrection through his Apostles (Acts 1), empowered by his Holy Spirit in the unstoppable progress of the gospel, led by the preaching ministries of Peter among the Jews and then Paul among the gentiles. This progress is described in stages announced by Jesus to his apostles in 1:8, '...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' Chs.1-7 recount the growth of the gospel through the church in Jerusalem, empowered by the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost for prophesying the word of God – as Peter does, expounding OT texts to call the crowds to repentant faith in Jesus as Lord and Christ and 3000 were baptised (ch.2). Devoted to the apostles teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer, the Lord added daily to their number. Luke then describes how the church was enabled to overcome three kinds of familiar obstacle to gospel growth: persecution by the Sanhedrin (chs.4 & 6), corruption in the church (ch.5) and distraction of bible-teachers by urgent social need (here in ch.6). As Luke reveals the resolution of this challenge through the appointment of 'the seven' as they're called in 21:8 (to distinguish them from 'the twelve' apostles) to organise the relief ministry – which both addressed the urgent need of the church community and allowed the apostles to concentrate on prayerful bible teaching, we are also introduced to a new circle of leadership in the church, including Stephen and Philip (with whom Luke stayed in ch.21, no doubt checking details). Tension between the church and the religious establishment was growing, and Stephen's martyrdom in ch.7 will result in a terrible persecution which God will use to propel his gospel out to the surrounding region, as Jesus had promised, 'On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria...those who'd been scattered preached the word wherever they went' (8:1,4). But this sustained commitment to evangelism would not have been possible without the church engaging with the issues raised by the problem that emerged in 6:1.

A serious need threatened to obstruct gospel ministry: by distraction! (6:1)

¹ *In those days...* refers to the days described in the previous verse, *'day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah'* (5:42).

What a challenging description – this church was so excited about their new life in Christ they were daily gossiping the gospel in public and studying it together in their homes. *'...when the number of disciples was increasing...'* - this reference to constant growth in numbers that bookends with the conclusion of this passage in 6:7, *'The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith'* is significant; consider how often Luke reports this growth in numbers e.g. 1:15 *'a group numbering about 120'*; 2:41 *'about 3000 were added to their number that day'*; 4:4 *'the number*

of men who believed grew to about 5000'; 5:14 'more and more men and women believed and were added to their number'; 9:31 'increased in numbers'; 16:5 'so the church were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers'! We are sometimes piously told 'numbers don't matter because growth is God's work – our work is just to be faithful'; well, such reserve may be British but it's not Biblical! Faithfulness is certainly essential and David was warned by General Barak not to count his soldiers to feed his pride. But God gives growth through the mission of churches. So, Acts repeatedly celebrates God's grace in the work of his church revealed in growing numbers which represent people being saved! Numbers must not be a cause for pride but they should be a cause for praising God! And if a ministry claims to be faithful but is not fruitful, we must question if it is truly healthy. For the word of God is living and active and grows like seed in the ground in people's hearts to extend the Kingdom of God! The 'well done good and faithful servant' approval in Jesus' parable of the talents is reserved for servants who show loving respect for their master by investing effectively in the growth of their master's business, not just by preserving what was entrusted to them! Numbers matter in Acts. Because ministry outcomes matter. Because Christ came not just to offer salvation but effectively to seek and save the lost (Lk.19) as both an evangelist who proclaimed the gospel and our Saviour who died to be the gospel we proclaim; so, his churches are not just for preserving the truth but for proclaiming the truth to a sick and dying world for the God who wants all to be saved (1 Tim.2). So, God's churches are not primarily for bible-teaching or primarily for worship or primarily for outreach as different parties claim (as if these are alternatives); Christ gives his churches Bible-teachers to equip his people for their ministries that will grow the church (Eph.4) through lives of sacrificial worship (Rom.12) in the holy evangelism of making disciples of all nations for him (Mt.28)! In this sense Acts teaches church life is all about the numbers, not of Christians who attend, but of people being saved! So the issue which now emerged was immensely serious because it threatened to distract the apostles from the prayerful word ministry which was fuelling the evangelistic growth of the church! It was not a problem because it was interrupting the Apostles study for their PHD! It was a problem because it threatened to obstruct the growth in numbers of people being saved from hell for heaven forever...

'...the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food'.

The Hellenistic Jews in the church were probably Jews raised abroad - speaking Greek and attending their own synagogues (e.g. the Synagogue of the Freedmen for foreign Jews who set upon Stephen in 6:9) and whose faith was less focussed upon meeting at the temple. The Hebraic Jews spoke Aramaic and were still focused upon evangelising traditional Jews at the temple. The problem was serious:

- a) **This neglect could become life-threatening** - without their own incomes, widows were extremely vulnerable, possibly to starvation; so, the OT commanded they be cared for (and Luke often mentions them); the '*daily distribution of food*' probably refers to the church accepting the burden from the temple rabbis of providing a daily soup kitchen for the church family; to neglect these poor women could be life-threatening!

- b) **This neglect could become gospel-undermining** – it clearly wasn't motivated by racial prejudice (so there's no proposal to discipline any racist bigots); but if nothing was done to correct this unintended injustice, such neglect would perpetuate an ethnic inequality that could undermine claims that Christ is the Saviour for all nations; some commentators suggest that since the solution was administrative it can't have been an injustice issue; but when a systemic bias, however innocent in origin, is left unattended, it can become an issue of racial injustice; to neglect this injustice could undermine the gospel and divide the church
- c) **This neglect could become personally humiliating** - when the Holy Spirit first came upon the believers we read in 2:44 how they shared their material possessions and in 4:32 of extraordinary generosity, *'they shared everything...from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them and brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need'*; the Apostles were personally responsible for distributing funds: they must have personally longed to put things right to help these dear women; this neglect could be personally humiliating!

There was now, unsurprisingly, a growing complaint or 'murmuring' in the church – the word used echoes the discontented grumblings of Israel against Moses in the wilderness, suggesting that instead of raising the issue constructively with the Apostles, some were stirring up divisive protests; the Apostles recognise that something **MUST** be done – **URGENTLY**...but not by them!

The Apostles' prioritised word ministry: by delegation! (V.2)

'2 So 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 tables.' The Apostles gathered the whole church (by now many thousands) from their different house churches and synagogue congregations, probably in the temple courts, to explain their thinking. With their authority as Christ's foundational Apostles, they declare, 'It would not be right', (literally 'not desirable' to God) for them to attend to this problem themselves. There's no suggestion they thought the necessary relief ministry was either unimportant or beneath them. So why did they want to appoint others to 'wait on tables' (lit. 'serve' - the word for ministry)? There are two options:

- a) **It was because they were apostles** – as if to say, 'it would not be pleasing to God for 'us' [the apostles] to neglect the ministry of the word' i.e., others should neglect their word ministry to address such issues but not us because we're apostles i.e., they are asserting the priority of their office as Apostles; or
- b) **It was because they had a 'word ministry'** – so others who have or could have word ministry should also not be distracted by such issues, however urgent i.e., they were asserting the priority of word ministry? We know it's the second (the priority of their word ministry not the priority of their unique office as Apostles) for two reasons: (1)

they don't mention anything about being apostles, but they do compare ministries; and (2) because this priority is taught throughout scripture:

It's vital to understand this is not saying some people are superior to other people because of their role, for... WE ALL HAVE TWO KINDS OF MINISTRY – creation ministry and new creation ministry. When God created humanity he commanded, “*Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it*” and then took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to ‘*work it and take care of it*’; – this responsibility to harvest and nurture God’s creation is often called the ‘Creation mandate’ – and we all play our part in fulfilling this command when we contribute to the wise stewardship of the earth’s resources, the just government of communities and improving the welfare of humanity, especially among the poor, weak and vulnerable. However, because our ancestors rebelled and brought condemnation on the earth, and God sent his Saviour to die for our sins and rise again to offer salvation into a renewed creation – the creation mandate to subdue the earth is now fulfilled by Jesus great Commission to “Go and make disciples of all nations” - rescuing people from the icy waters of this titanic disaster into the lifeboats of his churches, in readiness for the tsunami of his judgement! We now extend the kingdom of God through world mission, calling all nations through the gospel to surrender to Christ and become citizens of his new creation; so, all of life, enjoying the goodness of God’s creation, remaining single or marrying and having children, our social life and work life, are all now part of the great cause of making disciples of all nations for Christ. It was an important biblical principle rediscovered in the European Reformation that both kinds of ministry are means of worshipping God; we don’t divide life into sacred and secular as the medieval church did, calling monks and nuns out of this world into monasteries; and there’s always a danger of thinking real godliness can’t be working on a building site or in a bank or in politics or at home as a mum; but the Biblical model of wisdom is the home manager of Proverbs 31 fulfilled in Jesus who was not a professional Rabbi but a manual labourer who preached the gospel. However, this doesn’t mean our ministries are all equally important, as if God doesn’t mind if we play golf with our Cristian friends each week making no effort to reach unbelievers.

Here are six Biblical reasons our new creation gospel ministry should always be a higher priority for us when they clash with our creation ministries. Before I list them – please hear what the Bible doesn’t say: Scripture doesn’t say pastors are superior: we’re all equally precious children of God who will be judged for our holiness not our roles; Scripture doesn’t say everyone should become a pastor – the church body is made up of people with many different and complementary roles; Scripture doesn’t say our lives are only for evangelism - in serving our society well we obey God’s creation mandate; and Scripture doesn’t say everyone can do more for the gospel in a pastoral role – some can do more for gospel ministry in their secular roles e.g. I’ve always appreciated wise church elders who bring their working life skills to guiding our gospel ministry, generous patrons who finance our gospel ministry, Christian politicians who protect our gospel ministry, experienced businesspeople who give operational support to our gospel ministry, and willing church members who implement our gospel ministries in networks and communities our pastors could never access. But Scripture does teach that as the people God has made us, with the privileges God has granted us, in the circumstances where God has places us, we should all do whatever we can to maximise gospel ministry - in ourselves and in others - so if a creation ministry is distracting us from

maximising gospel ministry – in ourselves or in others, it will not please God to neglect a new creation gospel ministry, for multiple reasons including the following six:

1. **Gospel ministry was Jesus' priority** e.g., Jesus said he came, *'to seek and to save the lost'* (Lk19) so in Mk.1 when confronted with crowds in desperate need of healing, Jesus drew aside to pray and returned declaring, *"Let's go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so that I can preach there also because that is why I've come"* - he clearly neglected healing people to pursue gospel ministry, for even healing is only temporary relief from physical suffering but gospel ministry offers relief from an eternity in the fires of hell.
2. **Gospel ministry meets people's deepest needs** e.g., whenever Jesus was confronted by crowds of people he was characteristically filled with a 'gut-wrenching' compassion - because they were harassed and helpless (burdened and stressed) like sheep without a shepherd (Matt.9) i.e., they need him above all else! Salvation in Christ through the gospel is what this world most needs – even more than a vaccine which only delays death for a few years! So, we are to love people in every way the Bible commends but especially with the gospel – for evangelism is the most loving of all ministries for it gives people Jesus; Jesus was the supreme Good Samaritan of Lk.10 for he didn't just give two coins to help a foreigner who'd been mugged, but gave his life to save sinners who deserve judgement.
3. **Gospel ministry brings the deepest social change** – if we want to see the misery of injustice and poverty and abuse and alcoholism reduced, the most powerful thing we can do is to preach the gospel – for only the gospel brings the transforming power of the holy Spirit into someone's heart e.g., only Jesus could bring repentant renewal to the heart of that greedy taxman Zacchaeus in Lk.19.
4. **Gospel Ministry grows the kingdom of God** – God's kingdom is not extended in this world by righteousness alone but only in the hearts of those who surrender to the rule of God's king Jesus by believing the gospel which is commended by our righteousness.
5. **Gospel Ministry is God's priority** – he demonstrated his love supremely in giving up his Son to die for our salvation (1 Jn.4), he has delayed the world to enable evangelism, *'not wanting anyone to perish but to come to repentance'* (2 Pet.3) because he is *'God our Saviour who wants all people to be saved'* (1 Tim.2)
6. **Gospel Ministry glorifies God** e.g., Paul says in I Cor.10:31, *'whatever you do, do it all for the glory God'* which he then clarifies means, *'I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, that they may be saved'*! Whatever we can do to maximise Gospel Ministry will glorify God! In conclusion – I'm not saying we must all necessarily be pastors – but as the people God has made us, with the privileges God has given us, in the circumstances God has placed us, we must not allow ourselves to be diverted by urgent social needs from doing whatever we can to maximise gospel ministry in

ourselves or in others. Don't be a spectator watching others – get on the pitch to maximise gospel ministry!

Jason was a fine young doctor at a London hospital when he asked me if he should pursue pastoral ministry; Gen was a mum with two kids at school wondering if she could use her spare time for God at our church; David was an elected MP when he considered training as a preacher; Rosie was team leader for Girl Guides Europe when she asked how she could support our church plant; Simon was a successful private equity investment director eager to serve Jesus; I was a young commercial lawyer in London evangelising colleagues but wondering if I should retrain for pastoral ministry. What should each of these people have done? I'll tell you what they did and why...eventually. But first, I aim to show you how the Bible tells each of us, as the people God has made us, with the privileges God has granted us, in the circumstances God has placed us, to do what we can to maximise gospel ministry – in ourselves and in others.