

## MAXIMISE 2021

### THE MINISTRY OF PRAYER & THE WORD – TALK 3

So far in Acts 6 we've considered two of the three important Biblical principles the Apostles applied:

**Principle No.1:** maximising gospel ministry, in ourselves and in others, is a priority for every Christian (v.1-2). I hope you were persuaded of that on Wednesday.

**Principle No.2:** building teams enables churches to maximise their gospel ministry (v.3-4) . I hope you were persuaded of that yesterday; and now thirdly...

**Principle No.3:** different people need to accept different roles to maximise gospel ministry vs.5-6).

*"<sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> They presented these men to the Apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. <sup>7</sup> 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)*

We need to think very carefully about v.7, '*So the word of God spread*'. Before asking why the word of God spread, we need first to explore what is meant by this phrase, '*the word of God*'.

### **The 'Word of God' was the Apostolic message of Jesus in the gospel of the Bible!**

Luke's use of this phrase, '*the word of God*' here, is very intriguing! Depending on our church background, we probably make assumptions about what '*the word of God*' is - and how it relates to '*the ministry of the word of God*' in v.2 and '*prayer and the ministry of the word*' in v.4. Some churches would assume word ministry is expository preaching of the *Bible*; others would assume it means evangelistic proclamation of the gospel; but other churches would assume it means God's call to a relationship with Jesus! Whether we think the Apostles devoted themselves to exposition or evangelism or experiencing Jesus profoundly alters what we are trying to do! May I suggest that the NT uses all these phrases and more deliberately - because we can become spiritually warped if we become fixated upon just one dimension of the message...

If we don't emphasise "Jesus" - our message can become rationalistically impersonal. We need to remember God's saving message is not merely intellectual information about great events - but a personal call into a living relationship of repentant faith and worshipful delight in our living Lord Jesus! You may have heard of the Scottish followers of Robert Sandeman in the C18th who over-reacted to the charismatic emotionalism of their day by proclaiming "bare belief in bare facts" for salvation. Thankfully, a theologian called Andrew Fuller

corrected this diminished view of faith by showing that Biblical faith includes the joy of experiencing a personal relationship with Jesus, for Paul writes, "*I consider everything scum compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*" (Phil.3:8)

However, if we emphasise Jesus but not the "Gospel" - our understanding of Jesus can be powerlessly **superficial**. Unbelievers respect Jesus, Muslims honour Jesus and demons fear Jesus, but they're not saved! We can only be saved by faith in the Jesus of the gospel: which is not everything true (Jn.3:16) but specific facts 'regarding Jesus' (Rom.1) - that Jesus (the crucified Galilean) is the Christ (the promised Saviour-king) our Lord (divine risen ruling and returning judge) who came as our King, died for our sins, rose to rule and will return to judge! (Rom.1:1-5; Mk.1:1; 1 Cor.15:1-8; Rom.2:16). Paul warned the Corinthians, "*By this gospel you are saved...otherwise, you have believed in vain*". We must proclaim the *Jesus of the gospel!*

However, if we emphasise the Jesus of the gospel but neglect "the Bible", our understanding of salvation will not just be shallow but narrow! For the Bible explains how the gospel relates to all of history and all of life! Without exploring the gospel in all the Bible, we'll be unable to explain how the message of Christ crucified and risen relates to our world of Covid19, Capitol Hill, and Cancer! We need to proclaim the joyful experience of a relationship with **Jesus** through evangelism with the gospel that Jesus is Christ our Lord who came as king, died for sins, rose to rule and will return to judge by exposition of the Bible in relation to all of life - as Peter and Paul do in Acts! We proclaim Jesus in the gospel in the Bible!

But here in Acts 6, what did Luke think the Apostles meant by '*the ministry of the word*' and what did he mean when he says, '*the word of God spread*'? In all of Luke's gospel, he only refers to our message as '*the word of God*' on a few occasions. The same is true in Acts until there's a dramatic change...in this passage! In Acts 1:8 Jesus told his Apostles (or '*messengers*'), '*you will be my witnesses*'; in 2:11 they were '*declaring the wonders of God*'; in ch.2 Peter says they're '*prophesying*' as Joel promised and proclaims Jesus as Lord and Christ, which is called '*his message*' in 2:41; the church then devote themselves to '*the apostles*' teaching' (2:42); in ch.3 they proclaim Jesus to be the promised Messiah which the Sanhedrin were alarmed to realise was '*proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead*' which Luke again calls '*the message*' (4:3); when arrested, the Sanhedrin warn them not to, '*speak in this name*' which the Apostles call, '*what we have seen and heard*'; Luke records the Apostles praying for courage, '*to speak your word with boldness*' (the only reference to God's word in the first 5 chapters and it's not from Luke! In 5:20 the angel says, '*tell the people all about this new life*' so they began in 5:21, '*to teach the people*'; the Sanhedrin again forbade them twice in ch.5 not to '*speak in the name of Jesus*' and in 5:42, prior to our passage, we read, '*they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the gospel that Jesus is the Messiah*'. Not once does Luke use this phrase, '*the word of God*'...until now! '*Word of God*' is used three times here in 6:1-7 and then constantly: *I counted 25 times* '*word of God*' is used in the next 14 chapters; indeed, on three occasions, the *word of God* itself is said to be powerfully active in overcoming obstructions: here in 6:7 - '*So the word of God spread*'; 12:24 - '*But the word of God continued to spread and flourish*' and 19:20 '*the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power*'. Certainly, this idea of the word of God (which Hebrews 4 describes as '*living and active*') growing organically has its background in Jesus parable of the soils - where Jesus teaching ministry is likened to a farmer sowing seed that grows and multiplies; but why is there this dramatic increase in

speaking about the word of God from 6:7 onwards? I think it's because twice in this passage, in 6:2 and in 6:4, the Apostles describe their own teaching ministry as '*the word of God*' and '*the ministry of prayer and the word of God*' – and Luke wants us to realise that it is the Apostle's teaching that will grow God's kingdom. Indeed, he will provide multiple examples of their teaching in the sermons of Peter and then Paul, to Jews proclaiming Jesus as the Christ of the OT and to Gentiles as risen to be appointed judge by God our creator to whom we are accountable for our idolatry because he has blessed us so generously – and in his Elders training session in Acts he gives us Paul's description of his gospel teaching ministry for repentance and faith! When Luke starts using this phrase '*the word of the Lord*' he is emphasising it is the message taught by the Apostles, to which they committed themselves in this passage. So, for us, following their example in '*the ministry of the word*' is not about preferring one methodology over another such as exposition over evangelism or calling people to experience of Jesus – for it is all three - but to the teaching of the! The 'Word of God' was the Apostolic message regarding Jesus of the gospel of the Bible through which the Lord was daily saving people. Now let's explore why this Apostolic word of God spread...

## **The word of God spread because new ministry teams were properly appointed, the needy were properly cared for, and the teaching was prayerfully prepared!**

We need to engage with the plain truth that v.7 follows vs.1-6 – where we read three things happened in Jerusalem:

### **a) New ministry teams were properly appointed.**

We saw yesterday that the Apostles preserved loyalty to their mission of making disciples of all nations for Christ by managing change carefully - they listened humbly and responded carefully to the complaints – they gathered everyone to explain their thinking – they explained the spiritual need for organisational change – they presented a collectively agreed proposal – they proposed to carefully delegate their own relief ministry – they invited and trusted the involvement of those who'd been hurt – they required high standards of public holiness and practical wisdom in those who were appointed – they solemnly authorised the new leaders, whose names suggest they were all from the Hellenistic community! In short, there can be no doubt that the restoration of unity and loyalty to gospel mission achieved in this passage resulted in large part from the wisdom with which the Apostles managed the organisational change necessary to delegate ministry to a new ministry team! Let's not be too pious to recognise the team building here.

### **b) The needy were properly cared for.**

The Apostles did not say – we must maximise gospel ministry so I'm afraid those widows will have to go hungry! They say something must be done urgently, and not by us, but by others! The needy were cared for, but not by those teaching Jesus from the gospel from the Bible to equip the church for mission! Let me make two observations here...

c) **The church provided food for the needy of the church family, not the wider community**

Jesus teaches in his parable of the Good Samaritan that we should all personally help those we come across in need – for repeatedly in the OT God expresses his concern for the needy – especially orphans (surely including the unborn being aborted), widows (surely including women being trafficked in the sex trade), foreigners (surely including Asylum seekers and refugees) and the poor (surely including families who can't feed their kids and the homeless on our streets) – always remembering that the most loving thing we can do for anyone is to lead them to Jesus the good shepherd; churches are for teaching and encouraging us all to do this, but not to do it for us! So a church is not for social work but for making disciples – disciples who will be good Samaritans in the community; but the NT is quite clear that churches must love each other: Jesus said plainly, 'this is my command that you love one another' and 'by this all will know you are my disciples if you love one another', Paul says, 'bear one another's burdens' (Gal.6) and James says, 'religion that God our father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world' and 'Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food,. If one of you says, 'go in peace' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith without deeds is dead' (Jam.5); but again, this is the responsibility of all of us as church members, not the church pastors who must teach us the word of God – which is why the Apostles delegate this ministry! Too often pastors are being distracted from gospel ministry to do what the whole church needs to do e.g. in a pandemic – churches need their pastors to teach the word of God – which will empower them to love their neighbours – not run around like headless chickens trying to do it for the church! What cannot be denied is that v.7 follows v.6 – as with the church in Jerusalem, pastors need to organise provision of care for the church family: to teach, encourage, celebrate, exemplify, appoint, and train – leaders of caring ministries – but not the word ministers (e.g. families in need I eventually fail so I teach and encourage non-staff to lead our Care Team; Seniors; Options)

d) **A loving church is usually a growing church.**

Provision for the needy widows was done to please God not to impress unbelievers but sacrificial love attracts unbelievers; it would be an ugly thing for a church to organise care for the church family just to impress unbelievers – as it would be manipulative for Christians just to help non-Christians in order to recruit them to our church; a church needs to love one another, and Christians need to love others in every way especially with the gospel, because it pleases God! When we do this out of genuine love, it is very attractive to unbelievers: Peter writes, '*live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us*' (1 Pet.2:12) and Paul urges Titus to teach wives to submit to their husbands, young men to be self-controlled, and employees to work for their masters 'so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive' because God's primary evangelistic strategy in this world is the godliness of his people! So church which care for the needy will be more effective in their outreach e.g. Maeve at St Peter's Fulham met someone looking to deliver a meal

to a new mum! So love people in every way – especially with the gospel! Churches are lifeboats with crew dedicated to rescuing people from drowning in sin – not hospital ships focussed on social need (and pastors will feel enormous pressure to do what the world wants and focus upon social needs like the NHS which it understands and not the spiritual need for salvation from hell which it doesn't) – but as lifeboats still need to offer first aid to those they pull out of the water, so churches need to properly organise care for each other – so long as they remain collectively focussed upon making disciples of all nations for Jesus;

**e) The teaching was prayerfully prepared.**

Three things happened: new ministry teams were properly appointed, the needy were properly cared for and the teaching was properly prepared - the Apostles committed themselves to prayerful word ministry – this needed time for study and preparation and delivery! They needed to set apart from other distractions to give more time to proclaiming Jesus in the gospel | the word! This doesn't mean they wanted a genteel life of relaxed study in the mornings preparing one perfect talk for Sunday as some seem to adopt! They needed time to pray – they needed time to prepare – and they needed time to teach and preach as much as possible – not just once a week but as much as they could manage! Our teaching ministries need to be a sustainable sacrifice – sustainable in that it's not helpful to the church or loving to the family of pastors who have burn out (usually for lack of a real team-work) – but there does need to be sacrificial commitment to preaching the gospel! The primary difference between my evangelism and teaching when I was a lawyer and now as a pastor is simple the time I have to do more of it! And the church knew and approved of this! They want the Apostles to equip them for their ministries which will save the lost and grow the church – good teaching takes many hours of preparation and preferably training in Bible-handling, theology and skills (e.g. Cornhill; Oakhill; Co-Mission training); but this can't happen if teachers or potential teachers are busy with all kinds of ministry which distract them from their priority; so different members of the church body will all have different roles in the body with one goal of making disciples of all nations for Christ. So now we arrive back where we started – to ask what will we do as the people we are to maximise gospel ministry in ourselves and in others?

Jason was a fine young doctor at a London hospital when he asked me if he should pursue pastoral ministry. He is now the pastor of one of our Co-Mission church plants, Bridge Church Battersea, because as a doctor he could only bring temporary relief from physical suffering, but by teaching the Apostolic word of God he has been rescuing and train others to rescue people from eternal suffering of the lost terrible kind.

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?

Now imagine walking home ...seeing a house with flames in the front room... do something!

**As the people God has made us, with the privileges God has given us, in the circumstances God has placed us, what we can to maximise gospel ministry – in ourselves and in others?**

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.