

NOTES FROM TIM GAMSTON'S SERMON– 5th November 2023 am

TITLE: “Gospel Growth” TEXT: Acts 6 verses 1-7

Series: More on Mission Part 1

Scripture references from the ESV

Acts 6:1-7 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists^[a] arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ²And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³Therefore, brothers,^[b] pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” ⁵And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Which of the following feels like it is more productive?

- Organising a ministry to meet some humanitarian need or
- Spending time in prayer and listening to a sermon being preached

Given that we have limited time and resources, should a church prioritise social action or Bible teaching and prayer?

There are three possible answers to this – some people will say social action, some will say Bible teaching and prayer and others will say both should be priorities. What we prioritise matters because of what the outcome is.

- If we want to see the church growing numerically, growing in obedience and growing in mission and to see more people coming to faith in Christ, living in obedience to the commands of Jesus, and reaching out with the Gospel, then the answer to this question matters.

This is not a new question as we can see from the passage above. History teaches us that

When the church prioritises the Gospel, it grows

but when the church prioritises social action, it declines.

These early believers were faced with the choice between social action and Bible teaching, and they made the latter their priority. They did not neglect social action, but they did not elevate it above the ministry of the word, and the result was growth. History has shown that when church leaders fail to respond in the same way as those early Christians, the result is decline.

Churches that are closing locally are churches where the leadership put social action above gospel preaching, probably in the hope of serving the gospel by showing people God’s love in practical ways. In doing so, they neglected the ministry of the word, and those practical ministries became disconnected from the Gospel. People came for the social things, and took the food that was on offer, but they did not hear about Jesus and so the church declined.

What we, as a church, prioritise will affect whether there will be a gospel witness in Broadstone in the years to come.

Growth happens when the ministry of God’s word is kept as a priority over everything else.

This may seem to be a passage about the church dealing with an internal matter rather than being connected with getting the good news of Jesus out to the world, but we will see that:

A spiritually healthy church is extremely effective in mission

A spiritually healthy Christian is an extremely effective missionary.

First, let us answer the question: **How do we protect word-based ministry at BBC?** Acts 6 shows us three things.

a) We need to identify the threats. Acts 5 and 6 show how gospel ministry can be threatened.

Acts 5 (please read in your Bible) tells us how the church was threatened by internal sin and outside opposition.

- **Internal sin (5:1-11)** – two members lied about some money, and their secret sin threatened the health of the

church. However, God intervened and took them out of the church through death. He was protecting his church from secret sin.

- **Outside opposition (5:17 ff)** – those outside the church had the apostles arrested and put in prison to stop them preaching the gospel. Again, God intervened. He set them free, telling them to continue preaching.

Acts 6 tells us of two more threats – disunity and a threat to the preaching of the gospel.

- **Disunity (6:1 above).** Complaint is a word that means murmuring or grumbling. The particular complaint was about how the programme that fed widows in the church was run. Widows had no means of supporting themselves, so it was a necessary system. However, as the church had grown so had the number of widows, and the apostles were no longer able to keep up with the growing need. As a result, the Greek speaking widows were being neglected, which meant a risk of racial tension in the church. Members were grumbling. Although the church preached a gospel of love (God's love for sinners shown through the death of his Son), that grumbling showed a lack of love for one another, making it hard for outsiders to believe that Jesus could love them since his people did not show love for one another.
- **The threat to the preaching of the Gospel.** The grumbling put the apostles under pressure to stop doing word ministry and focus on feeding the widows. The growth of the church meant more work, which would lead to less time preparing to teach and preach God's word.

How are we doing as a church with regard to these four threats? We cannot do much about opposition from outside but:

- Are we sinning in secret and grieving God's Spirit, thus hindering God's blessing on the church?
- Are we murmuring and grumbling because our needs are not being met by those we think ought to meet them?
- Are those who are called to teach neglecting this God-given work due to other ministry pressures?

Satan wants to stop the spread of the Gospel, and he will make use of these means to stop those called to word based ministry from fulfilling their task. We need to be aware of anything that threatens the preaching and teaching of God's word, and we need to watch out for anything that undermines the Gospel – those things in our lives that show that the Gospel has not really taken root in our hearts.

b) We need to prioritise prayer and the ministry of the word. (vv2-4 above). The apostles made it clear that the solution to the neglect of the widows was not for them to stop preaching and teaching the Bible. That would be an act of disobedience to God's call on their lives. However, God had also commanded his people to take care of widows, orphans and the poor. How could they do social care without neglecting their first calling?

- The solution was to appoint others to do the work of running the humanitarian aid programmes, giving the task to godly men full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, and who had a good reputation both in the

church and outside. Feeding the widows was important but the apostles would then be free to do the work of word-based ministry.

This church prioritised word ministry over social action

It is true that the church did both, in one sense, but there was a clear priority given by the apostles to word ministry (vv2,4). However, the whole church also got on board with this approach (v5).

- The church showed that word-based ministry was their priority by their whole-hearted agreement with this solution.

They showed their desire to keep the apostles at their primary work of Bible teaching by agreeing to let others take on the feeding programme and choosing the seven godly men to do it.

- The early church had a high view of word-based ministry, as does our church.

Our Pastor considers himself blessed to be given the time he needs to rightly preach and teach the Bible. Others in the church have picked up various ministries, enabling him and the other elders to focus on prayer for the church and to give themselves to ministering God's word.

Prioritising the church's word-based ministry is something we all need to be involved in.

- Ask yourself what you can do to free up the elders to pray and teach the Bible.
- Ask yourself how you can avoid burdening them with things that would take them away from this work.

When a Pastor is given time to carry out his God-given role, then it behoves him to be faithful not just in preaching and teaching but also in praying for the church (v4). God changes lives as his servants surround the teaching of scripture with prayer. Robert Murray M'Cheyne said this:

What a man is on his knees before God, that he is and nothing more.

The greatest need in our time is godly pastors and elders who are devoted not just to Bible teaching but also to prayer. This applies to our Pastor too. He is of greatest benefit to the church when he is on his knees before our all-powerful God, asking him to make the message he is bringing to us each week speak to us by his Spirit.

As all this is worked through, we will see what God will do and be in a position to:

- c) **Celebrate the growth (v5,7).** When the early church prioritised the ministry of the word and prayer:
 - the church's unity was restored. Instead of grumbling and disunity, there was agreement(v5).
 - More people came to hear about Jesus, and were brought into God's kingdom (v7)
 - There was growth in obedience (v7)

What happened next? The rest of the book of Acts shows how mission outside of Jerusalem began to happen. As people were converted to Christ and disciplined through the apostles' ministry, so those people were then equipped to tell others about Jesus. The Gospel spread at great speed throughout the Roman Empire. Satan sought to stop the message of the gospel being preached but the church identified the threats, prioritised prayer and the ministry of the word and were able to celebrate kingdom growth.

What does this mean for us? We need to understand just how powerful God's word is. There is a very real danger that we may elevate social action over listening to a sermon. For example, what we remember about the harvest service is far more likely to be the quantity of food that was collected than the sermon that was preached on that day. Collecting food for the food bank is important, of course, and it is also visible, practical and culturally acceptable. When a sermon is preached, it is impossible to see what is going on in the hearts of people, so often it does not feel as if anything practical is happening. We need to be assured of two truths.

- 1. God's word is powerful. Psalm 29** (see below) celebrates the power of God's word. When God speaks, powerful nations obey him, deserts shake and tremble, deer give birth and angels shout out 'Glory.' God himself says: **my word ... that goes out from my mouth ... shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:11)**

Acts 6 shows the power of God's word to:

- Unite churches and people
- Convert sinners and sanctify believers
- Establish missions, and feeding programmes

- 2. God's word produces fruit for eternity.** The food from the harvest service sustained life but only for a short time. Where the Gospel is preached it saves a person, not just for this short life, but for all eternity.

If we fail to see the power of God's word, the power of prayer and the eternal nature of God's word, we will prioritise social action over word ministry. Then, sadly, we will lose the very thing we want to see happen. Once a church has declined, it can no longer feed people. If we do not prioritise the right thing, there will no longer be a church to carry out those ministries. At best, all that remains is a secular aid agency which can do nothing for people's eternal souls.

Where we keep the Gospel as the foundation:

- Social action will happen
- Unity will be maintained
- Sinners will be converted
- Believers will be made holy
- Mission will increase

Above all, Christ will be glorified

Take time this week to meditate on the power of God's word as expressed in Psalm 29.

**Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.**

**²Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendour of holiness.^[b]**

**³The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over many waters.**

**⁴The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.**

**⁵The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.**

⁶He makes Lebanon to skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.

⁷The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.

**⁸The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.**

**⁹The voice of the LORD makes the deer give birth^[c] and strips the forests bare,
and in his temple all cry, "Glory!"**

**¹⁰The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.**

**¹¹May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless^[d] his people with peace!**

