

11. Housekeeping for the Church: The distraction of welfare and God's sound provision

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[0 : 00] And if you would, to Acts chapter 6 and these verses that we read, which are all about housekeeping for the church, and about the distraction of welfare and God's sound provision through the apostles to deal with that.

Today is going to be our last study in this series in the early chapters of Acts. Next Sunday is Christmas Sunday, but verse 7 of chapter 6 here is a natural marker in Luke's book for the end of stage 1 of his account.

It's a little summary of telling us how the church was established in Jerusalem. It's the end of the first circle, do you remember, of the stages that were outlined in chapter 1, verse 8, of the gospel going out to Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth.

And here is the marker of the gospel being established fully in Jerusalem. I think these early chapters of Acts have been very encouraging ones for us, especially as we ourselves stand on the brink of great change and progress in our mission together.

Very encouraging, I think, just because they're so realistic. Because we've seen, haven't we, so clearly that blessing and fruitfulness in the life of the church and great opposition always go together.

[1 : 25] Wherever there's a wide and effective door, as Paul says, for gospel ministry, then always there will be adversaries. Many adversaries. Adversaries, as we've seen, both without the church and, alas, within.

And that's because our enemy, the devil, attacks real churches, living churches, not dead ones. He doesn't bother with those. He doesn't have to. There's no life. And we've seen, haven't we, how he attacks them from every possible angle.

And sometimes the arrows come almost from entirely opposite directions. I had an example of that just this very week. I had to deal with two letters this week. One coming from somebody in the public outside, outraged by our offensive fundamentalism and extremism in this church.

And another from somebody else who reckons that we've become far too liberal and we've apostatized. So the devil can come from any direction you like. And in the same week, well, I take comfort from Acts chapters 4 to 6, if that's the case.

Don't you? And especially chapter 5, verse 41. And so should we all. But Luke shows us these varying tactics of the devil.

[2 : 38] But also, more importantly, he shows us God's wonderful faithfulness to his church. And simply not allowing the devil to overcome them. He turns the attacks of the devil into victory for the name of Jesus.

And into advancement for the sake of his church and the gospel. That doesn't mean, of course, that believers don't face hardship and persecution. The very end of last week's chapter, we saw that the apostles received a violent beating at the hands of the Jews.

But nevertheless, the church will not be defeated. And that's the great comfort. And so, having failed to corrupt the church's life from within by the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira, and having failed to silence the message of the church by harassment from outside, from these enemies, what we see today in chapter 6, verses 1 to 7, is perhaps the most subtle attack of them all.

Because what we see is the devil seeking to sow discord and division in the church through distracting them from the real priorities of the gospel.

Distracting them into other matters. Matters of temporal welfare, housekeeping, the distribution of welfare, and so on. And what we see here is how God, through the apostles, provides soundly for

the housekeeping of the church so that true gospel priorities will prevail.

[4 : 08] It's a short section, but it is an important one. And we need to look at it carefully so that we're clear of what Luke wants us to learn. Because, likewise, we need to be wise to the tactics of the devil, just as these people were then.

Because the same tactics are used by him today to great effect in many churches. And so we need to be very clear about all of this. I'm sure you can see that Luke's structure is very clear.

Verse 1, he lays out the problem, resentful murmuring. Then verses 2 to 6, he describes the apostles' resolute management of the situation. And then in verse 7, we see the resultant multiplying of the church's ministry.

So let's take these issues in turn then. First of all, the resentful murmuring about the church's ministry. Verse 1, there arose a murmuring, says the old King James Version.

A murmuring of the Greek-speaking Jews against the Hebrews, the Palestinian Jews. Now the point here is simply this, that the chief problem with this church in Acts, as with any church, is going to be the natural drift of the human heart away from God-centeredness and towards self-centeredness.

[5 : 25] And even in a spirit-filled, dynamic church, an apostolic church like this one, in the midst of a great movement of revival, even there that's going to be a problem.

And it gives the devil a continual foothold from within, from which to attack the church of Jesus Christ. So even when things are at their very best, and at their most encouraging in the church, then we've got to beware.

That's what Luke's telling us. He says the devil will be at work, and the first clinical sign that the devil is at work will very, very often be this, resentful murmuring about the church's ministry.

Now note that Luke tells us explicitly that this is a problem of church growth, not church decline, verse 1. In these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, that's when the murmuring arose, a grumbling, a gogozmos.

That's the Greek word. It even sounds like grumbling, doesn't it? Gogozmos in the congregation. It's a problem, he says, of a living church, though, not a dying church.

[6 : 31] And it's a problem of a real church, not a sanitized sort of monocultural gathering that some church growth gurus want us to focus on if we want to grow the church.

They say, oh, well, what you need is a homogeneous group where everybody's the same, everybody will gel naturally and nicely because they're all the same, same kind of people, same background and so on. No, that wasn't this church in Acts chapter 6.

This was a church full of the mess and the baggage that's inevitable when people of different backgrounds and different cultures are called by Jesus to join together, to be his church, to be his gloriously peculiar people.

And this church was a mixed group, we're told. It was full of Hellenists, that is, Jews from the diaspora, all over the ancient world. And they were very culturally different from those that had grown up and spent all their life in Jerusalem.

It wasn't just language differences. Some of them would have been natural Aramaic speakers, the Hebraic Jews. Others would have been natural Greek speakers. But very probably both of them spoke both or at least to some degree.

[7 : 37] But the differences were probably deeper than that. There were cultural differences, ethnic differences. They came from different religious traditions, not to mention differences in status. Do you remember we saw in the last chapter that some were obviously very wealthy, had great property and prosperity.

Others, like these widows, were very poor. Now, when you have all that kind of mix in a church, inevitably there's great scope for tension, isn't there? Every real church sees that.

We can see that in our own church here. We're a very diverse group. We've got people here from Christian homes. We've got people who are first generation Christians. We've got people who have been Christians for decades, members of this church for decades.

We've got people who have been Christians just a matter of weeks, and are very new to our fellowship here. We've got people who are naturally at home with one particular kind of music or prayers or liturgy or Bible versions or traditions.

And others that perhaps are much more at home with quite the opposite. And that's the thing, isn't it? Because in the real church, the very nature of the church will inevitably cause a clash of realities,

won't it?

[8 : 47] Because on the one hand, for all eternity, we're all one in Christ Jesus, says the Gospel. That's the eternal spiritual reality that's true of us, isn't it?

But on the other hand, in merely earthly terms, well, there are all sorts of differences among us. There are all kinds, therefore, of potential divisions along the natural lines of ethnicity or culture or background or personality and all sorts of things.

So in the church, there will always be, while we're still this side of eternity, there will always be tension, won't there, between the eternal reality of what we are in Jesus Christ, the new people that we are, and the passing earthly reality, the old reality of life under the curse that was marked by so many dividing walls of hostility.

And there's tension, isn't there, because you and I, we're still living in these bodies of sin. And that means that we struggle, don't we? We struggle to live the reality that is now true for eternity.

We struggle not to drift back into the natural ways, the ways of our old reality. That's what Paul's letter to the Ephesians is all about, isn't it? God has made the two into one new humanity in Christ, Jew and Gentile, and every other division that there is in human, this world terms.

[10 : 10] And that's reflected, says Paul, in the unity of the church. So we have to live that reality. But it's hard. We have to keep putting off the old self and putting on the new self. Putting on, Paul says, the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

And you see, murmuring, grumbling about the church's ministry, that's a cardinal sign, isn't it, that we're not really focusing on the true reality of eternity. But we're focusing instead, far too much, on the passing earthly reality of this world.

Paul speaks about it again, doesn't he, in his letter to the Philippian church in chapter 3. That attitude, he says, is actually living as enemies of the cross of Christ.

He says, it's to have your true God as your belly. Pretty stark, isn't it? He means you're being driven by the appetites, by the ambitions of this world's thinking. He says, it's to have your mind on earthly things.

But no, says Paul, our citizenship is in heaven. And that's where our thinking should be fixed. In the church, always.

[11 : 22] And in our church, on the eternal truths. Because if it isn't, you see, then, if the focus of our minds is on earthly things, then we'll just naturally fall into our own sinful tendencies, won't we?

And that is that we're grumblers. We're complainers. We're murmurers by nature. And that's exactly what we have here in verse 1. You see, a murmuring, a grumbling arose over the daily ministry.

The word there for distribution is just the word ministry. It's used three times here. In verse 2, it's the ministry of tables. And then in verse 4, it's the ministry of the word.

Now, you see, whether this neglect was real or whether it was just a perception on the part of those who felt neglected, we can't be sure. I think probably there had been some oversight and some folk were missing out a bit.

Particularly these Greek widows, we're told. Currently, many widows, Jewish widows of the diaspora, in their later years would come back to Jerusalem and come and live there.

[12 : 26] They'll live out their days. And presumably, many of them had responded to the gospel and the church therefore had them to deal with. Well, you can imagine the situation very easily, can't you? There'd been great growth in the church and things got very hard to manage, very hard to arrange.

Growth isn't a very tidy thing, is it? And it's very easy, you can imagine, for people to begin to feel left out, begin to grumble. And it may very well be that there was a legitimate reason, there was a real neglect.

But you see, and this is very important for us to notice, what Luke is telling us is that they were wrong to be murmuring like that, at least in the way that they were doing it.

And that's clearly implied by the language that Luke uses here, of murmuring or grumbling or complaining. It's always, always a negative thing in the Bible.

In fact, you see, he's giving us a very clear reference back to the Old Testament here. There's been lots of that in the early chapters of Acts, hasn't there? You remember the people of God, what was it that characterized them in the wilderness?

[13 : 32] They grumbled, they murmured against Moses and against the Lord. If you want to read later on in Exodus chapter 16 and 17, you'll see plenty of it there.

It's extraordinary. No sooner had they finished singing their song of victory as God had brought them out of Egypt and over the Red Sea, no sooner had they done that in chapter 15 than in Exodus chapter 16, verse 2, we read this, the whole congregation, the whole church, the same word, grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, you brought us out here to kill us with hunger, grumbling about food.

And then God, of course, gave them manna and quail, but they grumbled again, this time about drink, do you remember? And the water from the rocks, not good enough. And they went on and on grumbling and eventually they said, let's choose a new leader and we'll go all the way back to Egypt because at least the food and drink was good there.

Extraordinary, isn't it? And the Lord eventually said in Numbers chapter 14, how long will this people despise me? How long will this wicked congregation grumble against me?

I've heard their grumbings, same word as here, and they grumble against me. And of course, the Lord judged the people and a whole generation was cast off.

[14:54] You see, see what Luke is telling us here, he's telling us this is a serious issue.

Grumbling, resentful murmuring in the church is actually grumbling against God himself.

And that's a dangerous thing to do. Just read the Old Testament. Because, you see, it shows that your focus is on this world's thinking and this world's priorities, food and drink and these sort of things.

not on the eternal kingdom of Christ. And so, however legitimate the issue at hand might be, then a spirit of resentful murmuring is a sign that your eyes are on Egypt and not on the promised land.

That your God is your belly, as Paul says. Not the God who has given you citizenship in heaven.

That's why the apostles all through the New Testament warn us not to be grumblers like they were in the Old Testament.

We must not grumble, says Paul to the Corinthians, as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer. Pretty tough talk, isn't it? These things, he says, happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction.

[16:04] 1 Corinthians 10, verse 10. Or Philippians 2, verse 14. Do all things without grumbling, says Paul, without resentful murmuring. So you see, there were real issues to be addressed here in Acts chapter 6, but the way to address practical issues in the church is never by resentful murmuring.

Murmuring often arises from misunderstanding, doesn't it? I guess that was probably the case here. Many problems in the church arise from misunderstanding, but misunderstanding itself often occurs, doesn't it, because we're very ready to misunderstand.

We misunderstand things very easily. And we do that because deep down in your heart and in my heart, we have a spirit of self-focus, don't we? An easy spirit of discontent.

Isn't that true? And what it means is that if you're anything like me, you tend to put a negative construction on things first, not a positive one. You tend to assume the worst, not the best, because naturally we tend towards uncharity, not charity.

Isn't that right? Charity, says Paul, love, in 1 Corinthians 13, is patient and kind though. It's not irritable, it's not resentful.

[17:28] It doesn't murmur resentfully, does it? You see, that's so natural to us. Well, it's natural to me at least. I find myself very probably often reacting like these Grecian widows when something's happened.

I assume the worst, you see. Maybe there's a simple oversight or something, but I assume, well, it's studied neglect, just as they did. So you see, here in Acts 6, there is an oversight, probably because of the wonderful spiritual growth of the church, because the apostles could barely manage to cope with the growing situation.

But do you see what the natural assumption was of some of these people? We're being neglected because they don't care about us. We're not the in people, and we're being neglected.

That's a very common reaction, isn't it? The common reaction in churches, it's easy for you or I to think, well, nobody thinks about me, nobody thinks I'm important, or I get more attention.

So we can harbor, can't we, all kinds of resentful thoughts in our hearts about why that is, and we can become quite bitter. And that is exactly what gives the devil a foothold, isn't it? He's right in there to stir up murmuring and resentment.

[18:45] So people get together, and instead of sharing encouragements about the gospel, instead of sharing the joy of people being converted in the midst, finding eternal salvation in the

Lord Jesus, what they really talk about over the coffee is their problems, or the perceived slights, or the things that really ought to be done better in the church.

You see, if you have that spirit, then pretty soon even the things that are quite good in your eyes begin to be full of faults as well, don't they? Pretty soon everything is just disastrous.

And what happens is exactly what Hebrews 12, verse 15, warns us against. See that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled.

You see, that was precisely the devil's strategy here in Acts chapter 6, verse 1. To stir up resentment and murmuring by fanning into flame the natural drift in people's hearts to self-centeredness, to selfishness.

The natural drift to the concerns primarily of this world, the God of the stomach, not the God of our heavenly citizenship. worship. And it's a tactic the devil still uses very, very effectively all over the world in all sorts of churches today.

[20 : 06] And he'll do it in every living and growing church, in every church where God is at work and doing things. And that means he'll do it in our church here, won't he? He'll try to, especially at a time of growth and advance.

So what was the apostolic response then to this challenge to the church's life here? Well, the response is there in verses 2 to 6. And it was resolute management of the church's ministry.

They recognize, you see, immediately that behind this practical issue is a supremely spiritual issue. They understand this drift to self-centeredness. And so they meet their resentful murmuring with more than just a practical response.

It's important we see that. It's a supremely spiritual response. First of all, they put the gospel firmly at the center of the church's life.

They insist on that. And then, having ensured that, they work out the practicalities that must flow from that. This is vitally important. We must focus our attention here on what Luke is actually telling us, not what we might think he's telling us.

[21 : 18] Too easy just to wipe this off and say it's just a practical response by the apostles. Notice, there is no knee-jerk reaction immediately to the practical issue.

They don't rush to pander to the complainers, do they? It's always what's very tempting to do in a situation like that. You go to the people in the hall, you massage their egos a little bit, you make them feel very special, and then they'll calm down and they'll be happy and everything will be great again.

Except that, of course, you've just reinforced that the way to get attention is by murmuring and complaining. It would have been very easy for the apostles to do that, wouldn't it? It would be very easy for them to step aside and devote a whole lot of time themselves to the temporal needs of these widows, to cut down on their teaching and their prayer, and to go into a great big PR initiative. And their popularity, no doubt, would have soared, certainly in certain segments of the congregation, wouldn't they? And any minister, by the way, can make themselves very popular by having endless cups of tea with widows or with anybody else.

And especially by flinging himself into welfare issues generally in the community. If you want to be a minister who's popular in your parish and in your community, that's what you do. What happens is you have somebody who's got a great name in the community, but as likely as not what you'll have on a Sunday is a church with nothing but empty chairs.

[22 : 43] And there's plenty of that around. Or if you do have people still in the chairs, there's plenty of emptiness in the pulpit. But you see, that's not what the apostles did here. In fact, their first response is actually to rebuke the attitude and the desire of the complainers.

Verse 2, it is not right, it is not pleasing, literally, that is pleasing to God, that we should give up preaching the word and serve tables to have a ministry of welfare.

That's a rebuke. Because the clear implication of the grumbling was that they thought that's precisely what the apostles should be doing. And they grumble against them and their priorities.

They're far too interested in their preaching and their training and they're not interested enough in practical care of people like us.

That was the complaint. And that's what they were saying and the apostles said, no, you're the one who's wrong about the church's priorities.

The ministry of tables is not a priority over the ministry of the word. Now, we need to ask ourselves, all of us, if we really believe that.

[23 : 52] Because if you really believe that, that the ministry of tables is not a priority over the ministry of the word, then you'll never be a grumbler. You'll never be a resentful grumbler about the church's ministry, will you?

You'll never be a kind of elder brother who's more taken up with the fact that no one's given you a slice of fatted calf than the fact that people are coming to faith and lost sinners have come back to the father's house. The apostles didn't pander to their murmuring.

They would not be diverted from the true priority of the ministry of the word of the gospel. But notice also, nor did they just say, well, word ministry is more important and we're just going to stick to that. Our job is to preach, not to change and reorder the church. We're not getting involved. Now, they didn't say that either. That would have been just as fatal. You see, they saw that their ministry of the word was more than just their pulpit ministry, if I can put it that way.

It's absolutely no use having a church that's just filled with sound preaching, but where the gospel principles don't actually get worked into the pores of the life of the church, don't get woven into the warp and the woof of the fabric of the corporate life of the church.

[25 : 06] See, the principles of the gospel have to get not just from the pulpit to the person in the pew, but they have to get into the life and the structures of everybody in the church to change those structures and committees and management and everything else.

And it's so important for us to grasp because it's that process actually that causes pain and upset in the church. difficult, but it's the only way to real gospel growth, to the increase of the word, as Luke calls it in verse 7.

See, the whole church as a body, as a corporate entity, has to be shaped by the priorities of the gospel. And as the gospel is at work and growth and development is happening in a ministry, then inevitably, practical arrangements must also change to fit that development.

Or else there will be blockage to gospel growth and that will increasingly provide a focus for complaint and division. You see, that's what the apostles are doing here in these verses.

They're forcing the principles of the gospel firmly into the very center of the church's life. They're forcing the church to see that the eternal issues must be at the center, not the temporal ones.

[26 : 27] It's not right for it to be the other way around, they're saying. We won't give up gospel proclamation to focus on another kind of ministry, on temporal things. So they rebuke a dangerously misplaced emphasis, but at the same time they reinforce the priority of spiritual warfare in the church over bodily welfare.

Now don't misunderstand. The practicalities are not ignored. We'll see that. But the principle of the gospel must drive the priorities of ministry, which in turn will dictate the practicalities and the management of the church that's got to change.

That's the order. Gospel principles give you gospel priorities, which result then in gospel-shaped practicalities. So you see, verse 2 is the principle.

It's desperately wrong for word ministry of the gospel to be neglected. That is worse, say the apostles, than any other kind of neglect, even starvation of widows.

Do you believe that? That's what they're saying. Therefore, the absolute priority, verse 4, is that it must be preserved. We will devote ourselves to prayer and ministry of the word.

[27 : 45] Non-negotiable. But therefore, also, practical provision must be made to enable that and to facilitate that. And that's what verse 3 describes.

In this case, it's a particular duty of welfare, but it applies equally to administration or anything else. And notice in verse 3, the answer is clear. What they're saying is, don't expect us to do all this.

We're not the only ones with ministries in the church, the apostles are saying. You've all got ministries, too. So you must get on and exercise them. Don't say, oh, what more can the church do for me?

You are the church. So think about what you could be doing for yourselves and for others. Now notice also this. There is a clear priority of word ministry over table ministry, over practical things. But that priority does not mean superiority. There is priority, but no superiority. Both, says the apostles, are real ministries.

[28 : 49] The same word is used. Ministry of tables, verse 2, and a ministry of the word, verse 4. They're both ministries, and therefore they both require the same spiritual qualifications.

Do you see that in verse 3? What was required for this practical ministry of tables? Not just practical people. Verse 3, men of good repute, full of the Spirit, and of wisdom.

And if you see in verse 5 who the first two named are, they're Stephen and Philip. And as if you read on in Acts, you'll find that both of these were gifted evangelists and teachers. They were spiritual men.

Their chief focus about everything else was the gospel. That's the kind of people that were needed for practical ministry in the church. It's absolutely not a division of spiritual ministry, those who teach the word, and social ministry.

Not at all. Practical ministry in the church of whatever nature is supremely spiritual. It's a ministry. And therefore, the most important qualification for any kind of ministry in the church, whether it's teaching or whether it's supremely practical, is a spiritual quality.

[30 : 06] What a catastrophe it is, for example, if in the church, the musicians, for example, are primarily chosen because of their musical ability. That is catastrophic.

If at the same time, no attention is paid to their spiritual qualities. It's a recipe for disaster in churches. It's been a disaster in so many churches.

It's split fellowships. It's ruined ministries. Or where your treasurer, for example, is chosen primarily because they've got skills with money and accounts.

Well, of course they need that. I can tell you at least one church where I knew where the treasurer was a brilliant accountant, brilliant with the figures, but had absolutely no interest in the gospel, indeed was opposed to the gospel.

And it was a running sore in that congregation. It's a monumental mistake in a church to say, well, let's get so-and-so involved in this practical area because they haven't got much of a clue spiritually, but they could really serve well there.

[31 : 08] Disaster. No, says Luke. What you need for practical ministry is people full of the Spirit and of wisdom, full of faith. And it doesn't matter if it's cleaning the toilets or typing up the service sheet or doing the PA system or running the kitchen or whatever it is that you're doing.

It's people full of the Spirit and of wisdom that we need. It's a ministry. It's a diakonoid. Same word. It's a ministry of the Spirit. So if somebody asks you, by the way, to do something very menial and practical in the church, don't be offended by that.

It's not demeaning. It's honoring. It says that people think that you're somebody full of the Spirit and of wisdom. And by the way, I want to say also that one of the chief reasons why our building project so far has been such a blessing to us is not just because the competence of our team is so extraordinary, and it is.

It's because of the character, isn't it? Very especially because of the faith and the wisdom and the spiritual grace of our team leader, George McElvain.

You see, that's an example of exactly this. Gospel principles directing ministry priorities and therefore housekeeping practicalities. It's very important that we see that for our wider life as a church, especially at this time, so that we don't fall prey to the devil, so that we don't fail where the church here was wise.

[32 : 38] We need resolute management of our ministry according to gospel principles. And for one thing too, we are also, aren't we, a very mixed group of people. I thank God for that, but of course it means that there are all kinds of potential resentments and difficulties that could happen if we weren't wise to the devil's tactics.

We have lots of young people in the church here. It would be easy for some of you guys to feel resentful sometimes that so many things seem to be for families or for older folk or so many things that seem to be bound to tradition.

You'd like things much more free and easy. It's easy to grumble, isn't it? It would be easy to grumble if you're saying, oh well, why don't we have more of the kind of music that we like or something else?

Just the same. It's just as easy for old folk, isn't it? To feel, well, what about all this stuff for students? What about all this stuff for young folk? What about us? Not like the good old days. Nostalgia is a very dangerous thing, isn't it, in the life of the church?

Because we look back naturally, don't we, to when we were younger, when we were perhaps much more at the heart of the action. Maybe now we feel, well, age and infirmity has made us just a bit more peripheral.

[33 : 49] It's easy to grumble, isn't it? But you see, the answer always is to have the word of the gospel as the number one priority for us, whether we're young or old, rich or poor, whatever we are.

To remember that it's all about the eternal things, about the joy of the kingdom of Jesus, of being part of that, of being able to serve the advance of his church. That's the antidote to grumbling, isn't it?

Somebody said to me, if you're always humbly grateful, you'll never be grumbly and hateful. That's pretty good, isn't it? Think of another thing. We've had many, many encouragements, haven't we, in recent months.

Lots of growth and development in the church's life and ministries. And that necessitates change. It always does. And we find change hard, don't we?

At least I find change hard. Generally speaking, we don't like change. We get comfortable. But you see, if gospel principles are driving gospel priorities in a church, then the practical management of the church will always be having to change so that we can develop and cope with a new situation.

[35 : 02] That's what was happening here in Acts. And it's not easy, but it has to be done. And it's part of the ministry of the word to apply these things into the structures of the church.

I'm sure it was not an easy problem for the apostles to sort out here. Just because it's a short account and it's just a few verses doesn't mean it was a short process. I expect it took a lot of time. A lot of discussion and meetings and prayer. Perhaps a lot of frustration and tearing their hair out. Maybe some heated argument. I don't know. It's just realistic, isn't it? That's what life is like. And the apostles had to give time and attention to it for a time.

In order that they would secure the right pattern for the future of the church permanently. That's why we've had to give a lot of time and thought over recent months and years in our own church here in the Kirk Session, for example, to bring resolute management to a growing situation, a changing situation.

We've got more staff. We've got more groups happening and all kinds of things. Different ministries developing. We've had to do that so that gospel principles will drive the gospel priorities in our midst and therefore shape the practical management, the housekeeping in our congregation.

[36 : 19] That's why, for example, we've rearranged the elders into pastoral care teams. That's why we've formed a new, smaller, practical church management team to help that aim, to keep the main thing of the gospel, the main thing in our midst.

And all of these things are supremely spiritual ministries, whether they're teaching ones or whether they're practical ones and serving ones. It's all part of working the principles and the priorities of the gospel into the fabric of the church's whole life.

It's important, isn't it? It's pretty basic. Ministry that doesn't change the church is never likely to impact and change the world, is it? But it's a hard thing to do.

It'd be much easier for me, for example, to say, well, I'll just preach. That's my calling. That isn't true. My task, just as the other word ministers in the church, is also to force the word of the gospel into the life of the whole organism that is St. George's Tron, to work it in so that, helped by others, we gradually see all of our ministries, practical as well as teaching, to be shaped by the same priorities of eternity.

So whether our personal calling as an individual is serving the word or serving tables, we're all serving. We're all ministering the gospel of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus together.

[37 : 45] And we have to do that. We have to do that. Or we'll never be a truly gospel church. Somebody said to me the other day, we've been very good in Scotland at creating evangelical pulpits, but we've been very, very poor at creating strong and solid evangelical congregations.

I'm afraid that's true. And that happens when those who are called to word ministry fail to grasp difficult nettles like the apostles did here, and meet grumbling and resentful murmuring resolutely by driving the principles of the gospels and their priorities into the practical management of the church. But that must be done if we're to avoid the devil neutralizing us with 101 distractions and other things. All of which, whether it's welfare in particular as here or something else, all of which really arise at root because the real focus of our minds and hearts drifts towards the temporal things, the passing affairs of this world, the appetite and the concerns of this life and not the eternal concerns of the gospel of the kingdom.

But where that is done and where gospel priorities are really truly put at the center of everything and where they're uppermost in the hearts of everyone's minds in the church, in their varied ministries, spiritual ministries, of table service or of word service, then there will be the progress in the church that verse 7 describes.

The resultant multiplying of the church's ministry. The word of God continued to increase. It's one of Luke's key phrases for church growth in Acts. Notice it's word growth.

[39 : 37] It's the knowledge and the understanding of the gospel that grows in the church and outside the church. The influence of the rule of the Lord Jesus Christ grows and expands and becomes deeper in the life of the church and therefore the church more and more impacts the world.

And the result is multiplication. It's wonderful. Back in Acts chapter 2 verse 47 we're told, aren't we, that the Lord added to their number daily those who are being saved but now addition has turned to multiplication.

The numbers of the disciples multiplied greatly. And that in extraordinary ways too. Do you see many of the priests, a great many, became obedient to the word, to the faith.

The priests, the enemies who had been locking them up in prison, who had been beating them and flogging them, became obedient to the faith. They bowed the knee to the Lord Jesus Christ. And that happened because the church became more and more obedient to the faith themselves.

More and more submissive to Christ and the gospel. To his priorities, not their own. To their heavenly citizenship, their eternal calling. And seeking first the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ and trusting that he would add everything else to their needs.

[40 : 53] In Philippians chapter 1, you know, Paul urges the church to be side by side, striving for the faith of the gospel. And that's what they were here.

And you see, where that's the priority in the church, we won't be face to face. We'll be grumbling and resenting one another. Whether Hellenists or Hebraists or highbrow or lowbrow or old timers or newcomers or whatever it is.

How do we resist the devil seeking to destroy us through dissension and distraction? Well, we put the gospel, the eternal gospel, resolutely at the center of our life.

We insist that that principle drives the priorities in our church's ministries. So that all of us, whatever spiritual ministry we're called to, whether it's serving the word or serving tables practically, we are side by side, resolutely for the faith of the gospel.

Because where the gospel is at the center of our life, then Christ will be at the center of our fellowship. And His fragrance and His aura will overshadow all.

[42 : 04] And His grace and power will be at work in everything that we do. And He will add, and He will even multiply the number of disciples in our midst. And the devil himself and even the gates of hell shall never be able to prevail against the church that has the gospel as its absolute priority.

There are many things for us to think about. May God help us to be such a church.