

Gospel Priorities Amid Grumbling Distraction

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[0 : 0 0] We turn now to our Bible reading for this evening, so turn in your Bible to Acts chapter 6. And if you're using one of our visitor Bibles, that's page 914.

So this is our final visit to the book of Acts for the time being. And really this little section at the start of chapter 6 marks the end of the first chunk of Luke's Acts accounts.

So running from chapter 1 through to chapter 6, verse 7, that really marks the first major chunk of the book. So we're reading from verse 1 through to verse 7 of chapter 6.

Amen. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.

[2 : 0 1] And a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. Amen. This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us this evening.

Good. Well, please do turn back to the passage we read earlier, Acts chapter 6. And we'll be looking at the first seven verses there together.

So Acts chapter 6. Now, what do you think might be the devil's most effective tactic for stalling gospel growth here at the Tron Church over the coming weeks, months, and years?

What do you think is the devil's most effective tactic? We've seen in recent weeks, through these early chapters in the book of Acts, all sorts of tactics used by Satan to disrupt the growth of the gospel and to distract the church from its task.

We've seen external opposition, the attempts to silence and imprison. We've seen internal issues, internal hypocrisy. And tonight we see another tactic, and it's another working from within sort of tactic.

[3 : 2 5] And it's a very dangerous tactic because it's such an everyday thing. It comes so naturally, and it's so very distracting and deadly to the work of the gospel.

What is that tactic? Well, it's Satan's desire to sow discord within the church by appealing to men's self-centeredness, which inevitably leads to grumbling and then division and distraction from the key work of the gospel.

It's an effective tactic, and one that can stall gospel progress in any church. It can stall it in this church. When deployed effectively, the sort of grumbling and discord that we read about here can totally derail a church, show us to turn it inwards, and therefore completely neglect its main purpose, which is to proclaim and adorn the gospel to the world around.

So this is, as we'll see, it's a timely warning for us, as it has been for churches through every age. And we'll look at this in three parts.

We'll look at the problem, we'll look at the response, and then the results. So firstly, the problem, verse 1. We see growth and grumbling. The problem that bubbles to the surface here in verse 1 is very much a problem and product of growth.

[4 : 50] That's what we're told in the very first words of the chapter. Look at verse 1. Now, in these days when the disciples were increasing in number. Now, as we've seen already in the opening chapter, Satan will expend his efforts where the church has been most effective and growing.

And here again, opposition comes when gospel progress is being made. It's a sign of a healthy, vital church that Satan's gotted in its crosshairs.

And it is growth that has led to a mixed congregation. Notice that the issue arises between two groups of people in the church. You have the Hellenists there and the Hebrews.

Now, who are they? Well, the Hellenists, they were Greek-speaking Jews from the dispersion. They were spread out across parts of the Mediterranean. And the Hebrews, they were Jews from Palestine.

So both groups are Jews, but geographically they're in different places. Now, clearly, both groups were followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. They shared that fundamental reality.

[6 : 00] That was the most important thing about them. And it's the most important thing about everyone here this evening who's a follower of Christ. We share that. We are brothers and sisters in Christ.

That's the fundamental reality about all of us. But there would also have been fundamental cultural differences between those two groups. And it wasn't just language, but all sorts of things.

Their customs, their norms, their way of doing things. And that's true tonight. Just look around the room. We have folk from all over the world here, Sunday by Sunday. We have a room full of Farsi speakers downstairs.

We all share the fundamental reality we are in Christ. But we're all quite different. Different upbringings, different ways of doing things, different ways of relating.

And despite sharing the fundamental reality of faith in Christ, these other distinctive things present an opportunity for division. They present an opportunity for the evil one, which he will seek to exploit.

[7 : 06] And we need to be aware, don't we, that cultural and racial divisions can and do pose a threat to the unity of our church and every church. We mustn't be naive about that.

And we must be aware and alert to issues arising in our own church because of those differences. And that's exactly what we have here in Acts chapter 6.

Those two groups. Look at what happens. A complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

Now, it probably is a legitimate complaint in that some of the Hellenist widows were missing out on the daily distribution. The seriousness with which the apostles take the matter, the quality of the men they appoint to deal with it, all that seems to suggest that this was a legitimate issue that was being raised.

The problem was, however, the manner in which it was raised. Luke describes it as a complaint. It's a word that suggests a spirit of discontent, grumbling.

[8 : 18] And such an attitude is deadly in the life of a church. It's an attitude that should ring all sorts of alarm bells if you're a reader of the Old Testament.

Again and again in the life of God's people at crucial moments, this attitude of grumbling bubbles to the surface. No sooner had the people been freed from generations of slavery in Egypt than they were grumbling.

And again, food was the issue. Exodus chapter 16. This is what it says. In the desert, the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The Israelites said to them, If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt.

There we sat round pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted. The sort of attitude there, the sort of attitude here in Acts chapter 6, is an attitude that forgets the provision of God.

It forgets the bigger, long-term picture. And instead it zooms in on the self. It zooms in on the immediate. Forgetting what God is doing. His big plans and purposes.

[9 : 29] And it's an attitude that New Testament writers warn against in the strongest possible terms. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes reference to that incident in Exodus. And he says this, Now these things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did.

We must not put Christ to the test as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble as some of them did and were destroyed by the destroyer.

Now these things happened to them as an example. But they're written down for our instruction on whom the end of the ages has come. Our people are the same, whether it's over 3,000 years ago, 2,000 years ago, or today.

The temptation to grumble will always be there. Don't do it as the warning from the whole of the Bible. Don't harbor that attitude, that disposition, that is ready to assume the worst.

That seems to be the issue here in Acts chapter 6. The accusation that they made is one of neglect. They assume the very worst of the apostles.

[10 : 42] Now again, there was a genuine problem. But their accusation of neglect, well that suggests the apostles were somehow willful in their neglect, rather than what is more likely, a mistaken oversight, just because of the sheer numbers in the growing church at the time.

So that actually seems to be one of assumed neglect. They're assuming the worst of the apostles, rather than giving them the benefit of the doubt. And so as we, in the early days of significant change and growth over various sites and various congregations, we too must watch for that attitude of grumbling.

That attitude that is all too willing and ready to assume the worst and to see our own needs being overlooked and neglected. It doesn't take much, does it?

Both here in Acts and there in Exodus, it was a missed meal or two. And for you and I, it can be something similarly innocuous and insignificant. Your particular ministry wasn't prayed for at the prayer meeting.

Your name was left off a roster. There's more reason for rejoicing than grumbling, but there you go. Whatever it is, you know the sorts of things in church life that irritate that part of you that is prepared to assume the worst, that is prepared to put the self first, that is all too eager to grumble, to complain, to cause those seeds of division and doubt.

[12 : 22] Are there attitudes that you perhaps need to repent of? Are there words said in a grumbling spirit that you need to repent of?

All this grumbling and discontent presented a serious problem for the work of the gospel because it's so distracting and introverted. It turns a church in and of itself.

It takes the focus of the main thing, what they should be doing. And it must be dealt with. So we look now at the apostles' response. Verses 2 to 6, we see their response.

And we see clear priorities and wise delegation. Regardless of the true motivation behind the complaint, there is a real issue here.

There is an issue that needs to be dealt with and the apostles take it head on. Some widows clearly have been overlooked in the distribution. And so they gather the whole church together and they address it.

[13 : 28] They recognize there's a real problem, but it's a problem that must not distract them, the apostles, from their main task. And so they wisely delegate the matter to others.

So two key issues then to highlight in the apostles' response. And these are key issues for any gospel church as it deals with real problems that threaten to distract and cause division.

So the first thing we see is clear priorities. The apostles are absolutely unashamed, aren't they, about their priorities. Look again at what they say. It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

Look on to verse 4. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. The apostles are absolutely clear-sighted on what their core task is.

And they issue something of a rebuke to those who are complaining who wanted the apostles to focus on their felt needs rather than the real and more pressing needs of the gospel. It's not right, they say, that we should give up preaching to attend to these practical needs.

[14 : 39] Rather, we must devote ourselves to the word. Let me take you back to the task Jesus appointed to them in Acts 1, verse 8.

Just flick back there for a moment because it's such a crucial key verse for the whole book. Acts 1, verse 8. This is what Jesus said to his apostles.

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.

That was their task. They were to be witnesses. That is, they were to testify, to speak about the Lord Jesus, what he did, his death, his resurrection.

That was their task. And that was the task that they were not to be distracted from for one moment. They were not to leave that task.

[15 : 42] Now, their focus on that task, their dedication to pursuing that, is not to say that the problem they were confronted with about the Hellenist widows was unimportant. Not at all.

Their swift action, their calling together, the whole church, the quality of the men they appoint, all that suggests, they took the matter very seriously indeed. But they weren't to confuse what was important with what was most important and an absolute non-negotiable for them.

And it seems that the issue of the daily distribution was such a big task that in order for them to do it well would have meant them giving up the preaching of the word of God altogether.

And that could not be allowed to happen. Needs, real and practical needs, as they might be, could not be allowed to take precedence over gospel proclamation.

That could not take their to-do list and put it at the top. At the top of their list had to be that task Jesus called them to. And even this serious, important issue could not take precedence.

[16 : 56] And there's a real realism, isn't there, in the approach the apostles take. They know that they have limits. There is only so much time and energy that they have at their disposal.

And they know that there is one task they can't stop doing, so they wisely delegate. They set others aside to deal with that issue. Now, what about the church today?

This is all very well for the apostles. Apostles. What about today? We don't have apostles today, but we do have pastors, those who lead the church. We do have those who are set aside and dedicated to that same task of prayer and ministry of the word.

Now, of course, that's a job all of us are called to do. That is what every one of us is to do in our daily lives. We are to minister the word to one another, to others. But there are some who are set aside particularly for that task.

And pastors today, church leaders today, must share the same clear priorities as the apostles. And that means the bulk of your minister's time is going to be spent on prayer and the ministry of the word.

[18 : 12] All sorts of expectations are placed on ministers about what they should do, about how they should spend their time. But the focus must be that, mustn't it?

It must be verse four. It must be prayer and ministry of the word. And it's so very easy for that to be sidelined, to be squashed around all sorts of other things.

Pastors must share the same clear priorities as the apostles. And that means saying no to lots of good things.

It means saying no to important things. It means being willing to be misunderstood by some, perhaps many, in the church. Perhaps you have a relative who is unwell and it's your expectation that Willie will come and visit.

it. Well, he might. But the church has several pastoral care teams. Dozens of folk go out week by week visiting all sorts of people.

[19 : 21] Now, if Willie visited every sick person in the church of 500 members, then he would never be at his desk. The ministry of the word would suffer and the church would drift from its gospel priorities.

what are our expectations of our ministers? Pastors must share the same clear priorities as the apostles.

And that means changes to how we do things. It means changes to structures and the way things are organized. That might be necessary like it was here in Acts chapter 6.

If the priority of the apostles are to be the priority of the church, the apostles were willing to make the necessary changes so that the work of the gospel, the ministry of the word, could go on unhindered.

And that's something we've experienced, isn't it, over recent years? Moving locations, expanding our sites, reorganizing things, and no doubt there'll be more of that to come.

[20 : 25] But are we clear on the priority of gospel work and that it is gospel work that must take priority over everything. It must drive everything we do and how we organize ourselves.

That must be the fundamental reason for what we do and it must drive everything in church life. Pastors must share the same clear priorities as the apostles, which does not mean pastors and leaders are ambivalent or uninterested in practical matters, quite the opposite.

they are to take a lead in making sure that these things are attended to and attended to well. And that might well mean delegating those things to others.

It will very likely mean significant time involved in meetings, talking things through. But others will be needed to bring in in order to do those tasks, to share the load, to take responsibility.

It can't all be done by your senior minister or ministers. leaders. The work must be shared and must be delegated. The work of the gospel requires leaders who are clear on the priorities and they must insist upon them so that they drive everything in the life of the church.

[21 : 47] That was the apostles absolutely laser-focused priority. They knew what it was and it determined what they did. They were clear on their priorities but secondly, they made wise delegation.

The apostles are wise in attending to the very real and practical needs that they were made aware of. They don't just fob the problem off. No, they wisely delegate others to that ministry.

And notice the criteria they set for the sort of men they are to appoint. Look at verse 3. Look at the criteria and it's a high standard isn't it? Men of good repeat, full of the spirit and of wisdom.

Why such criteria for looking after the distribution of the daily distribution? Well, it's not just a practical task they're filling but it's fundamentally a spiritual one.

The criteria they set are primarily spiritual criteria not practical. Did you notice that? They aren't looking for someone with a degree in catering from Jerusalem College.

[23 : 03] It's not always the case that the best person for a job in church is the one with the best qualification. You can have the most qualified accountant in the world but they might make for the worst church treasurer.

It may even prove fatal to the progress of the gospel if you have the wrong person however gifted in charge of the sums. The primary criteria for this task the primary criteria for any seemingly practical task in the life of the church are spiritual ones.

And so as a church looks for tasks to be done the primary question is not can this person do that task better than anyone else but rather are they spiritually mature?

What is their reputation? Not just in terms of ability without task but in all of life. What is their reputation? Are they people known for their wisdom?

Are they wise? I think back about 18 months and we were just getting things organized for the congregation down at Kelvin Grove and there were all sorts of jobs that needed doing when things got off the ground there.

[24 : 22] One particular job that I asked a couple of folk to do wasn't really their cup of tea. They weren't a natural fit so they thought but they were spiritually mature.

Luckily we managed to persuade them into it and it's been a real blessing because of their spiritual maturity. Not necessarily their natural aptitude for the particular task although in the event they're more than capable.

And that is key in church life. The seemingly mundane practical tasks need spiritually mature folk overseeing and serving.

Because Acts chapter 6 so clearly illustrates it's often in these areas of church life that division and controversy erupt. Wise delegation is absolutely key.

for a church as it looks at all the jobs that need doing. Clear priorities and wise delegation. What was the result of all this?

[25 : 28] Look at verse 7. What was the outcome? We've seen a problem that emerged within the church grumbling from some quarters that their needs weren't being met.

Accusations against the leaders that their priorities were in the wrong place. The response is robust. Their focus must be on the mission that Jesus tasked them with.

That priority must not be overtaken by other considerations. But they do address the real and practical needs of church life. They make the changes necessary. They wisely delegate to spiritually mature men.

And the outcome of all that? Well it's great gospel growth. Verse 7. And the word of God continued to increase.

And the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. And a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. That is the big picture.

[26 : 30] That is why the apostles held firm. That is why our church leaders must hold firm and be unmoved in the focus on the ministry of the word and delegating to spiritually mature men the seemingly practical tasks.

For the word to multiply, the apostles' priority must be our priority. It is only through the ministry of the word that people who presently are walking in darkness will be brought in the kingdom of light.

It is only through hearing the word believing the word, repenting, obeying, submitting their lives to Jesus Christ that people will be saved. That is the only way.

And so that word must be preached. It must be central to all that we do as our fellowship. It must determine what we do, how we organize ourselves, even in the seemingly practical mundane stuff.

All areas of church life must serve that core purpose. everything we do must serve that purpose of proclaiming Christ. And doesn't that elevate the seemingly mundane things we do in church life?

[27 : 53] If everything we're doing is serving that one purpose, doesn't it elevate the cleaning? Doesn't it elevate what the guys at the back do, the PA? Doesn't it elevate the particular ministries you're involved with?

people. We're all working together for that big central purpose of seeing people coming to saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is a perspective that all of us must have.

If we fail to have that perspective, if our priority is not the apostles' priority, then the grumbling that was a feature of verse 1 will be the feature of our church life.

And nothing is quite as adept at stunting gospel progress than self-centered grumbling. Rather, let us develop a mindset that has gospel progress as a priority in all that we do.

That is the reason we organize ourselves as we do. That is why we do what we do, because this is our priority. So all our needs, all the things we feel we need, all those real needs we might have, must in the end serve that one goal.

[29 : 09] We must be willing to put self second for that one goal. So will you pray for your leaders that they would pursue doggedly the apostles' priority?

Would you pray that those priorities would shape all that we do, and do in the future for the sake of the gospel? And we'll be willing to put self second and to see the big picture, to see what we're all about, that we might see many, as they do here, become obedient to the faith.

That is why we're doing this. let us pray. Let us pray. Our heavenly father, we thank you for the clarity of your word.

We thank you for the clarity of the apostles here. and would you help us to be similarly clear and unashamed in our priorities in proclaiming the word.

Help us not to move from that one iota. Would we be dogged in putting that at the center of all that we do as a church this week, next month, next year?

[30 : 54] Would it always be our driving motivation to see Christ proclaimed? So help us in that task for we are weak.

We so easily turn inwards to our own desires. Help us to look out and to remember what your plans and what your purposes are.

So strengthen us by your spirit for that task. For we ask it in his name. Amen.