

Priorities for the Church

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[0 : 0 0] Good afternoon to everyone. Again, thank you for being here this afternoon. We've been looking at the book of Acts over these past weeks, and so now we're on to Acts chapter 6. But before we look at these verses, let me just read to you a job description that landed in my email inbox. It says, wanted pastor for a small country church, must be 28 years old with at least 30 years preaching experience. Sermons are to be biblical, life transforming, enjoyable to all, and no more than 20 minutes long. Must have a heart for the youth, work well with the elderly, participate in all activities, visit every hospitalized member, run all elder and committee meetings, and never miss a meeting of any church organization. Needs successful negotiating skills, quality singing voice, and spouse who plays piano or guitar. Skills needed for repairing all computer and sound equipment, as well as bathroom plumbing. Office hours, 6am until midnight, salary \$100 per week after all church bills have first been paid. We'll preferably tithe \$50 per week, not including fellowship offerings. We'll wear good fashionable clothes, drive a good car, and have a large loaning library of books for the congregation.

Regular ministries will include three services every Sunday, evangelistic outreaches, 30 house calls per day on church members, and continuous availability in the church office whenever parishioners phone. End of job description. Now, all of that is said in jest, at least I hope it is anyway, but I mention it simply to highlight the unrealistic expectations that there can be on church leaders where there is a pressure to perform a multitude of ministry tasks and therefore a danger to neglect the most important ministry priorities. And so we see the potential for this in Acts chapter 6, verse 1 to 7, which really becomes a threat for the early church because it forces the apostles, the scenario they're faced with, to make clear what their priorities are. There are lots of things they could do, but what are the things that they must do, they should do, that are specific to them?

Because it's as the church in Acts grows that we discover that it's actually at most risk. And we've seen this pattern in the past few chapters. So the church has been at risk through opposition from the outside by the religious authorities. It's been at risk from deceit and hypocrisy from the inside through Ananias and Sapphira. And now we see another threat from the inside where there is the potential for distraction because the needs of some within the church aren't being met. And so again, essentially what this is, is another attack from Satan. Because if the apostles were focused on dealing with certain problems, then they would be distracted from focusing on their priority of preaching the word and prayer. And so the application of our passage is essentially, let's not be distracted from the priorities for the church. And so I'd like us to look at four points this afternoon. First of all, acknowledge the problem. Second, know the priority. Third, make the plan. And fourth, see the result.

So first of all, acknowledge the problem. Verse one, let's see what the problem is. In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Okay, so growth is good. The church is growing, but with the growth there comes problems. So more and more people are coming to faith in Jesus in the early church. But as the church grew, grew, and became more diverse, there was tension between the different groups in the church, and people were complaining. And so there were the Hellenists, that's the Greek-speaking Jews, and there were the Hebrews. And they were all Christians, but there were cultural differences.

[4 : 44] And so the complaint was that some widows weren't really getting the best deal when it came to food distribution, where the Hellenists believed their widows were being neglected. So surely this wasn't a deliberate thing, but it had the potential to be a disastrous thing in the church if it wasn't dealt with.

Now remember, the church was rapidly growing, so the congregation was well over 5,000 people now. We know this from chapter 4, verse 4. And yet, with the growth come the problems. So the social welfare program wasn't quite working. Some people felt not everybody's needs were being met.

And notice that the complaining wasn't about the situation, because we read that the Hellenistic Jews complained against the Hebraic Jews. So it was complaint against people, rather than structures or systems. So the word for complaint here means murmuring or grumbling, and it's always a bad thing, and it's always a wrong thing for God's people to complain. It's always dangerous for the church, and yet nobody ever thinks they're dangerous, sorry, their complaints are harmful or dangerous at the time.

I guess because we like to think that our complaining is always legitimate, and we've got good reasons for it. But it can kill the church. For example, just think how easy it is for someone from the church to meet someone else from the church for coffee, and then start complaining about somebody else who's part of the church. It can become a distraction for the person who is complaining, can then become a distraction for the person who's listening to this person complaining, and then it can actually, as it spreads, become a distraction for everybody in the church from the work that God has called us to. And that's why complaining is always a dangerous distraction, no matter what the complaining is about. So any church is at serious risk if complaining is permitted and not dealt with, especially if there's a growing diversity of people who attend the church, because there are always going to be differences between us. There are always going to be issues arising. There are always going to be people feeling their particular needs aren't being met, and there are always people who will have different priorities from other people, which is fine, as long as it doesn't lead to distraction and to division, because Satan, the devil, loves nothing more than the art of distraction in the church. So here in Acts chapter 6, it's the distribution of food, which has the potential for the distraction. But any issue in the life of the church can cause people to take their eyes off the ball and can become a massive distraction for everybody that just zaps time and energy and focus. And that's why this passage in Acts chapter 6 is really like an alarm bell ringing for us, alerting us to the danger, where this internal crisis in the church can do far more damage than any external opposition can. And that's why the apostles couldn't just leave it. And so that's the first point, acknowledge the problem. The second point is know the priority. What is that? Verse 2,

So the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.

[8 : 43] Okay, so the apostles were clear on what their priority should be. It was the ministry of the Word of God. And that's what was growing the church. And so that's what the apostles needed to protect in the church. But it's not as if it was a bad thing that they were going to be distracted by, because surely equal food distribution is a good thing. But by spending time on the good thing, there was the potential that they would be distracted from spending their time on the best thing. So there's no suggestion here that this kind of work was beneath the apostles at all.

They weren't saying, we're the apostles, don't you know? It is really not our job to be feeding people and walking around as waiters. The issue was the apostles had to get their priorities right.

Because what's interesting in these verses is that Luke uses the same Greek word three times to describe ministry or service. And it's the word *diakonia*, which obviously is where we get our English word *deacon* from. Deacon means servant. And so look down, verse 1, it's the word *distribution*, which is referring to the distribution of food. Then here in verse 2, it's the word *ministry*, which is referring to the ministry of the word, the service of the word. And then later, verse 4, is the same, the ministry of the word. So three times the same word is used to describe the task of serving food as it is for describing the task of ministering the word. So there's the ministry of food, verse 2, that's one area of service. And there's the ministry of the word, verse 4, that's another area of service. So both are important ministries, both are areas of service, both must be carried out. So the apostles are saying, we know what ministry we must prioritize.

And it's not serving food at tables, as important as that is, but it's the ministry of the word of God. And by word, of course, they're talking about the apostolic gospel of Jesus Christ, because their priority was to teach the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus, and its significance for us. So that was their role. That was the specific job that God had called them to do. And that's why they couldn't let other roles, even legitimate ministry roles, sidetrack them from what God had called them to do, because they didn't have the capacity to do both.

And if they tried, both would suffer. The preaching of the word would suffer plus. People would suffer, because there weren't enough people to distribute food well.

[11 : 52] And so that's why they call this congregational meeting, because they want to communicate to everybody. So it was too important to hope that the problem would just somehow go away. No, it was a real problem, and so it needed a real solution. And so they exercised good leadership by implementing good church organization. Because they recognized that for word ministry to flourish, and for the church to continue to grow, then they would need good structures in place to allow that to happen. And so before we see this, it's just worth emphasizing the priority of the ministry of the word. That's what God uses to grow his church. And yet there's great pressure, isn't there, to try all sorts of other things as means by which we might grow the church, with the expectation that, well, church leaders are there to deal with whatever urgent matters come up, rather than give their time to the primary task of ministering the word of God. And as a personal example, I could legitimately fill all of my week with worthy ministry tasks, all important, all things needing done, and yet fail to prioritize what matters most. And yet it's what matters most, the ministry of the word, that is so easily squeezed out. And yet it's when churches don't give priority to prayer and to the ministry of the word that they die. So if leaders spend all their time trying to keep everybody happy and meeting up and meeting every need, then there will soon be no church left. And so we need to continue to keep the ministry of the word a priority in Christ Church Glasgow. Through Sunday services, of course, when we gather together, where God's word is proclaimed from the front, but also by multiplying the ministry of the word through the week in our community groups, in our personal evangelism, in our workplaces, in our social interactions, and to our witness to our neighbors. The word needs to be our priority.

Because if it's squeezed out of the life of our church, and if it's squeezed out of our lives in favor of other worthy, important activities, then the church will die. Our spiritual health will be poor. And so we need to, as the church, have the confidence that God works through his word and by his spirit to grow his church. He always has, and he always will. So that's our second thing.

Acknowledge the problem, first of all. Secondly, know the priority. And then thirdly, make the plan. Verse three to six. The apostles here outline a plan. What is it? Verse three.

Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them. Okay, so they've got a strategy to change things so they don't neglect their responsibility to minister the word, which means organizing church life so as to delegate and create new roles and responsibilities for others to minister. And so they hand over to the congregation the task of choosing seven men who are able to do the job. Men who we read are full of the spirit and wisdom. So these men were to be appointed to this specific role. So the apostles had no desire to micromanage. They wanted these men to get on with the job, which I think is really instructive still for church today because when there's an issue that needs attention, we need to plan to deploy the right people to focus on that issue. Sometimes we fail to deal with problems simply because we don't have a plan.

I think it was Benjamin Franklin that said, if you fail to plan, you're planning to fail. Because if we're not aware that there is a problem, or if we're not clear on what our priorities are, or if we're not flexible enough to change things, or if we're poor at delegating responsibilities to different people, then essentially we set ourselves up for disaster. And so we need to structure our church life to ensure we've got the right people shouldering the different responsibilities. And that's why these verses are so important and applicable to our phase and stage of life right now at Christ Church Glasgow.

[16 : 49] Because for the apostles, by putting this plan in place, it meant the apostles could say in verse 4, and we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. So they're saying our priority is prayer and the ministry of the word. This is what Jesus has called us to do. And so this is what we must devote our time to. And so other ministry tasks, they're implying, as important as these other ministry tasks are, could never and should never be allowed to crowd out this more important responsibility of prayer and ministry of the word. Now, of course, this in no way devalued the ministry to widows. Actually, I think the way the apostles ensure that the ministry is delegated to capable men indicates just how important they considered this ministry to widows to be. So look at who they choose.

Verse 5. This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. Also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. Now, apparently, all of these men have Greek names. So indicating that, well, they're all Greek speakers. And it's a wise move because they could help the Greek-speaking widows who, you remember, were the ones who didn't seem to be getting the right deal when the food was being distributed. So they're the ones who would overlook the food distribution. And it's a wise move because there would never be any more reason for complaining because they got the right people to do that job. So it wasn't as if any Tom, Dick, or Harry would do. No, those chosen had to have the right character and the right qualifications even for sharing food because it was a ministry. And that's why the apostles commissioned them for the task. In verse 6, they presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them.

And so the value of this ministry of these men who essentially are deacons, ministers, the value is highlighted by the apostles praying and laying hands on them. And we can learn from all of this because I think churches can often overlook Christian character in appointing people to certain roles. And it might seem just a good thing to get anybody to fill the gap and do the job.

But actually, it's never wise to appoint people without the required Christian character and convictions. Because any ministry requires people who are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom because it's done for God. And yet alongside this, we must also recognize that ministry is something that every Christian is equipped to do. That doesn't mean that all ministries can be exercised by all Christians, but that we're each called to minister, we're each called to serve in different ways as part of the body of Christ. And so we shouldn't think that it's only ordained ministers who are to do the work.

We shouldn't think it's only those who are full-time paid in ministry who do the jobs. Because they, or we are, speaking for myself, we're not the only ones who have a ministry to exercise. And that's clear from these verses. A few years ago, I went to the induction of a friend who's a minister. And he was going to be inducted into a church that the other minister had left and he was coming in.

[21 : 01] And at the induction service, if you've ever been to one, there's always another minister who comes and preaches a sermon. And usually the sermon he preaches is addressed specifically to the congregation who are receiving the new minister. And so my friend who was going to be minister was listening to my other friend preaching this sermon at the induction. And what he said was, basically, we are all ministers. All of us. All of us are ministers. All of us have a role to play in the church. All of us have vital areas of service to contribute to the church. We've all got a ministry to exercise as we serve God together. And it was a great sermon. Brilliant sermon. But then straight afterwards, what he did was he then invited all the ministers forward. And by ministers, he meant ordained ministers to come and lay hands on the new minister. And of course, that's what happened. But it seemed to contradict in some sense. We're all ministers, but yet only these ministers come and lay hands.

There's no problem with that because that's what the apostles do here. But the point is, we are all called to serve in the church. We all have a sphere of service. We all have a ministry that contributes to the whole of the work that the church has to do. And so God does call people to different ministries, which means we each have different roles and different responsibilities.

And so it's worth us all asking ourselves, well, what is my role in the life of this church? Or in what ways am I currently serving in this church? Or in what ways could I serve in this church?

Some, of course, are called to prayer and the ministry of the word and should keep that their priority. And yet others are called to different kinds of responsibilities, perhaps with music or with finances or with mercy ministry or with outreach or whatever it is. And so together, we must ensure that we stick to our priorities as a church, making sure everybody is involved in the mission of Jesus Christ, the mission to the world. And so the clearer we are on knowing what the priorities of the church are, then the better able we will be to play our part in the mission of the church. So that's making the plan. It's good to make plans. And there will be plans that we'll be making at Christ Church Glasgow as we appoint people to different roles to oversee different ministries. Okay, so first, acknowledge the problem. Second, know the priority. Third, make the plan. And then fourthly and finally, see the result. Verse 7. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Now, do you hear how church growth is described here? The growth of the church is described as the spread of the word of God. And it's interesting because this is the first of four summary statements like this in Acts. So chapter 6, verse 7. So the word of God spread. Acts chapter 12, verse 24. But the word of God continued to spread and flourish. Acts chapter 13, verse 49. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region. Acts chapter 19, verse 20. And this way, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power. So can you see the apostles, the priority for them was the ministry of the word because, well, why? How does the church grow? It grows as the word spreads and increases. And so the apostles, so the result of the apostles appointing these seven men to take over these specific responsibilities is that the word of God spread. It was a direct result of their actions. Now, at the beginning of the passage, we read verse 1 that the number of disciples was increasing. The church is growing. And now, with the reorganization of responsibilities and with good structures in place, with the apostles able to prioritize prayer and the ministry of the word, what happens? The church grows and increases even more. And it makes sense. If the ministry of the word is neglected, there can't possibly be growth. But when it's given priority, it's what God uses to do his work. And so we've got to keep prayer. That's why we have the monthly central prayer meeting first Wednesday of the month. Keep prayer and keep the ministry of the word our priorities as a church. Because Satan will want to stop us praying. He will want to take us, take our focus away from God's words. Because that's what God uses to grow his church.

He'll always try and distract. He'll always try and divide. So this growth can't happen. And so that's why we need to be aware of his tactics. Because it's clear that even what is good in church life, even what is a valid and significant and important ministry, it's clear that what is good that what is good can become the enemy of what is best. And so distract us from the advance of the work of the gospel. And that's why no one of us, whether minister or elder or deacon or member, should ever forget that we're a servant. We are a deacon. Deacon means servant.

[27 : 30] We're here to minister. Maybe minister the word. Maybe minister food. Maybe minister in something else. We're a minister and we're here to serve. And so as we close, well, where is our motivation for service going to come from? Because you might be thinking, oh, here's Jonathan banging on again about what you've got to do to serve in the church. And I'm going to go home and I'm going to feel guilty about what I'm not doing and what I should be doing. What is going to motivate you and me to do the work that God has called us to do? Well, our motivation comes from remembering the ultimate servant.

Who's that? Jesus Christ. Jesus himself was a servant. Jesus said, for even the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many. Jesus came to serve us by giving up his life on the cross to pay the price for our sin. And that's why our top priority, whoever we are, whether we are a Christian or we're exploring Christianity and we're not sure what to think of things, our top priority in life has got to be turning away from our sin and trusting in Jesus Christ. That's going to be our top priority. Because it's only when the reality that Jesus died to serve me sinks into my heart, will I then be ready to serve his church so that more people will come to hear the good news about him. So let's serve. Let's serve together. And let's look to the one who gave his life to serve us so that as we serve him, by keeping the priorities for the church what they should be, by remembering that we are here to minister and we have a role to play in the life of the church church. Because we want more people to come and experience and know Jesus as Savior and Lord.