

# First and foremost, preach Christ

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Littlebourne - 23rd October 2022 - Acts 6:1-7

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Last week we saw that the Apostles were imprisoned, questioned and beaten, but still did not give up. Last verse of chapter 5 says:

*And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.*

They continued doing what they felt was most important, come what may. Today's passage, they continue in that theme - putting their work of preaching first.

**v1**

*1 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.*

Chapter 6 opens with the note that the disciples were increasing in number. As we've seen in the previous chapters, the Apostles have been preaching and teaching continually, in spite of opposition, and this has been having an impact - the church is growing.

But with growth comes growing pains. This passage marks the first recorded real dispute amongst the church - a genuine grievance that had to be dealt with.

The Hellenists here are those Christian converts that were Jewish by blood, but used the language and customs of Greek-speaking countries, because that's where they grew up. In contrast, the Hebrews are those that speak Hebrew - the Jewish Christian converts that grew up speaking Hebrew with Jewish customs.

You can imagine that there would be some level of division between the two groups - perhaps not intentionally, but two groups that share different experiences and a different first language are bound to be somewhat separate.

We've seen in the previous chapters that the early Christians shared a lot of what they had with each other - they pooled their resources to help each other out. Now the Hellenists were being neglected. There's no indication that this is intentional, but it was happening and in the next verse we see something of how they might have been asking to solve it.

## v2-4

*2 And 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. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."*

So the Apostles answer to this dispute makes it look like the proposed solution was for the twelve Apostles, presumably because they were trustworthy, to distribute the food fairly. But the Apostles summoned all the disciples, that is the whole church, and give a different solution. The solution is not to put all the burden on twelve people. The Apostles decide that there should be some men who can sort this problem out and help the distribution of the food be done fairly and properly.

The Apostles have priorities - they don't want to give up what they are doing in order to do other things - they really think that the preaching of the word is the important role they have and they don't want to interrupt this.

They don't say that the other stuff is unimportant - it's important enough that they believe it requires men to do it. Not just any men, but men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.

But the Apostles make clear that what they see is of prime importance, is the preaching of the word. That's what they devote themselves to - that's what their job as the leaders is.

The office of the deacon probably has its origins here. The Greek verb for serve is *διακονέω* (*diakoneō*). We see the word used two times here - where the Apostles refer to serving tables, and where verse 1 says the 'daily distribution' or more literally 'the daily service'. And it's from this word that we get the English word 'deacon'.

## v5

*5 And 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.*

They choose seven men. What's interesting about the seven men is that they all have Greek names. This doesn't necessarily mean that they were all Hellenists, as many Jews from Hebrew speaking areas also had Jewish names, but it shows that it's probably not just more Hebrew speaking Jews, like the Apostles, that were appointed to positions of authority. We haven't got to the stage of the gentiles being fully incorporated into the church, but the church that has spread beyond those that personally knew Jesus, to Hebrew speaking Jews, to Greek speaking Jews, and now those at the periphery are being invited into leadership positions - the church is growing and with it spreading into more and more groups of people.

Two of the seven mentioned here have extra things said about them. Stephen, who will feature in the rest of chapter 6 and chapter 7, is described as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. It's not that the Apostles were the only ones that were faithful or Holy Spirit filled, but as we've seen, the Holy Spirit was given to the whole set of believers in Acts 2. But in some way, this was particularly apparent in Stephen.

Nicolaus is described as a proselyte of Antioch, that is a convert to Judaism from Antioch, who has evidently now converted to Christianity. Antioch will be a centre of activity for the church, as a launching point for missionaries. The city had a large Jewish population, much of which would become Christian, and Peter and Paul would both spend lots of time there too. Antioch was where the believers were first called Christians.

We don't hear about Nicolaus again, but we do hear about Philip, in chapter 8, as he meets the Ethiopian eunuch. The rest of the seven are not heard about either. Like most of the twelve apostles, the details of what they did and where they went are unknown.

## v6

*6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.*

Before they let these men loose they sort of ordain them - they pray for them and lay on hands. They appoint them to office.

I think this is a good pattern to follow - that in the church we don't just say 'get on with it', but we support each other and pray for each other.

## v7

*7 And 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.*

So after this takes place, word of God continued to increase - that is, the word was preached more and more. The Apostles were freed up for preaching and presumably more and more Christians took the word to those around them.

Not just does the preaching increase, but the number of disciples increases. The spread of the word did not do nothing, but continued to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ.

Also, many of the priests became Christians - not just ordinary people or people that were on the fence, but those of the group that most fervently opposed to Christ are being saved. The word of God has great power.

## Church leadership

So we've seen here the first set of deacons appointed. Not every church today uses this office of deacon, and I don't think there's a hard rule on whether we need to always have deacons or not, but the Bible does give us guidance for anyone in a position of leadership, whether leadership as preaching pastor, or leadership in practical matters. We read in 1 Timothy chapter 3 of requirements for deacons, but Paul writes to Timothy not just requirements for them, but for 'Overseers' too. It's interesting to see both:

1 Timothy 3:1-13:

*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. 2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, 5 for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.*

*8 Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. 9 They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. 11 Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. 12 Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. 13 For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.*

Now different churches interpret the office of overseer in different ways - some believe this is referring to what we typically call bishops, that is people that oversee other leaders. I find it more convincing that this is used as another word for the office of pastor/shepherd/elder that we find in the other New Testament letters - that there's one office of church leadership for shepherding the flock and a lower office than that for the practical matters, the deacon.

But regardless of the best structure, notice that the qualifications for both are not really very different. The overseer here needs to be able to teach, but otherwise, it's basically the same sort of requirements.

The qualification for being in leadership in the church is not having a degree, or extensive training. It's not down to what long words you know or how much esoteric theology you read. It's all about character. Specifically the sort of character that indicates a strong relationship with Christ. Leadership of any sort should be given only to those that hold to the faith strongly and show this in their lives.

In other words, it's about what's in the heart of the man first. We can't see into someone's heart, but these requirements are looking at the outward signs that point to inward transformation. It's the heart that will matter when there are decisions to be made or work to do.

## **Word and deed**

The most important thing about this passage I think is the priorities it sets for us. In primary position is the word of God - preaching and teaching what God has given us, which the Apostles put alongside prayer. Of second importance is the practical, the service. It's not that this is unimportant, but it's not the primary thing.

One obvious way that we could take this is that the word, the preaching, the things that lead us to know Christ, to salvation, are more important than those temporal things of today. Why care about what is on the plate tomorrow, when eternity hangs in the balance? Well that's true - the stakes for eternity are far higher. But it doesn't feel right does it? If you're hungry, tomorrow's plate is pretty important to you. It's not that we can just bury our heads in our Bibles and stop caring about the world or each other. It's not that we should preach and then avoid the real problems in the world. We're obviously not doing things right if we only study and never act it out.

I think what the Apostles had in mind was much more that the fuel for the practical, the fuel for good works and helping each other and caring for needs we see around us is the word. If we devote ourselves purely to charity, with no motivating aspect, we will find ourselves unable to keep going.

We see this is in the world all the time - charities that end up existing for their own perpetuation. What starts as a good thing, helping people, becomes a bloated bureaucracy with a marketing budget, and the funds that should have gone to a good cause instead go to fundraising. Because without a principle beyond ourselves, without a reason beyond ourselves to keep giving from ourselves, we will run out of motivation and ability. Without a source of love beyond ourselves, continually topping us up, we will become unloving.

We looked at the first half of Philippians 2 in the morning last week and Paul gives us this whole long section on obedience, good works. Paul commends the Philippian church to do the right thing, to obey, but he doesn't mention anything *practical*. He goes on a lot about mindset, about humility, but doesn't say what to actually *do*. For Paul, it's all about the mind and the heart that leads to good works - what we do is an outflow from what we worship, what we put first, what we desire. And of course, Paul points our hearts to Christ, gives Him as the key example of obedience and humility. Paul wants the Philippians to obey not because they are listening to his advice, but because they are in Christ.

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One example from the reformation - it's Reformation Sunday next week, so close enough.

Before the reformation really occurred, the corruption, the problems, in the church were very apparent. There was no shortage of complaint about what was going on - the problems of sin in the church, the way church leadership was complicit in this sin, the way there were aspects of the theology that lead to problems, for example the insane moral hazard of indulgences. Just pay your way into God's graces, what could go wrong?

Erasmus was one of a group known as 'humanists'. The name might confuse - these are not the humanists of the last century, in fact Erasmus was an ordained Roman Catholic priest. The group sought reformation in the church, they wanted, like most, the church to change and for the sin to be rooted out and everyone to do good. Erasmus at the time was possibly the most respected living philosopher and theologian - he was a big deal across Europe at the time.

Now Erasmus and co wanted to give the church a good moral bath, to wash off the bad. "Let's all just do better" was roughly the idea. Try harder. This was taking place before the reformation of the church that we know about, which really kicked off with Luther starting in 1519.

Just asking for people to do better didn't make anything happen. What then was it about Luther that his reformation attempts succeeded where Erasmus and his friends didn't? Why did an unknown monk from the middle of nowhere change the world and the most famous philosopher of his time didn't? Maybe the exchange of writings between the two men will make clear what the difference was.

In 1524, as the protestant reformation is getting going, Erasmus writes to Luther his work "The freedom of the will". In it, he examines the arguments for free will, because Erasmus believes that we can choose to do better. We can all do what we want, so let's do better.

Luther writes back in a work entitled "On the bondage of the will" in 1525. Luther said to Erasmus that he had really got to the heart of the matter in a way that his other opponents hadn't. Luther said that, yes, he agrees we can do what we want. In fact, he goes further - we can *only* do what we want. This is the problem - we can *do* what we want, but we can't change *what* we want. And when we want the wrong thing, we do the wrong thing. Our actions flow from our hearts - what we desire, what we worship, is what we end up acting out.

So the reason why Luther changed the world, where a famous learned man like Erasmus couldn't, is because Luther focused people on the gospel - he pointed people to Christ. He did not tell people to do better (in fact, he occasionally told them to do worse, as a way to show how serious he was about salvation by grace alone, tongue in cheek I'm sure). The transforming of minds and hearts is what changed the world, rather than moralising.

(Now God did use Erasmus for great good however, because it's Erasmus' Greek New Testament publication, that allowed so many more people access to the original language, that Luther read and found his great insight in the book of Romans. This insight, the rediscovery that we are counted righteous because Christ's righteousness is given to us, that changed the world.)

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## **Conclusion**

The reason the Apostles put their work of preaching and prayer first, put the ministry of the word in prime position in their duties, is because without it, the other works of the church fall apart and become chores. But it's not just dry teaching, boring lectures that we need - we need something more.

I've been looking into the world of Jehovah's Witnesses this past week, because one came to the door and I want to be properly prepared to talk to them productively next time they come. The way of life of a Jehovah's Witness is a calendar full to the brim with teaching and bible studies - three times a week they meet up to study, the Watchtower organisation produces more content than you could possibly read and the expectation is that you'll read lots of it. And they are studying the Bible for the most part. Yet what are they like? Moralising and miserable. They put a brave face on it, but ultimately we know enough about the organisation to see that it's not a happy group.

The difference is of course that they don't know Christ. They have a false conception of Christ and they don't ultimately believe in salvation by faith *alone*, by grace *alone*. Their gospel is wrong and no amount of study can really motivate you if you don't grasp that Jesus Christ died for your sins, that He rose to give you new life and that this is completely a free gift of grace. The wonderful paradox of the gospel is that it's only when we understand that our works are in no way necessary, that we have the motivation to perform them. Our works flow from the gospel, and a church full of good works will be a church where the gospel is faithfully preached every single week. We need constant reminders of the gospel, constant talk of Christ, constant looking to our saviour and knowing more of Him. That was the Apostles' goal, that should be ours.