

# The Church That Kept the Main Thing the Main Thing!

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[ 0 : 00 ] Acts chapter 6, which is on page 1098, Acts chapter 6, and I'm reading verse 1 to verse 7, Acts 6.

Let's read God's Word. In those days, when the number of disciples was increasingly, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

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.

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 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

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.

[ 1 : 26 ] They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. 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. This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Well, good morning, St. Silas.

My name is Martin Ayers. I'm the senior minister here at St. Silas. Great to have you with us. And it would be a great help to me if you could keep your Bible open at page 1098, Acts chapter 6, as we have a look at this together.

You can find an outline inside the notice sheet, which I'll almost follow. And we're going to have a look at this together. Let's pray. Let's ask for God's help as we turn to His Word.

[ 2 : 23 ] Let's pray together. Let's pray together.

You would comfort us afresh with a vision of Your love for us and enable us to grow in wisdom and stature that we could discern Your will for our lives as individuals and as a church, so that You work in us what is pleasing to You.

For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, last week it was Oscars night, if you're into the movies. And Oscars are still the big prize, aren't they, for the movie makers, for recognition and also for publicity as well for their movies.

And so a lot of Hollywood producers will time the bringing out of films. It feels like in the last couple of months there have been a bunch of epic films have come out that I'm desperate to see and won't get to see for some time.

But it's because they line them up in the hope that they'll get the big prizes at the Oscars. And then last week there was this quite unexpected threat to the mainline Hollywood producers that this film from South Korea, Parasite, started to clean up.

[ 4 : 04 ] So it won Best International Film. No great surprise for that. But then the award came up for Best Director and Sam Mendes was seen to be the frontrunner for 1917.

And Bong Yun-ho, who's the director of Parasite, got the award. And then Best Picture came up and again people thought 1917. And Parasite won again.

And of course, lots of people in Hollywood were very happy about that. They were celebrating. But for some movie makers, you could also say that it was a threat that just seemed to come from nowhere and take the prizes away that they had perhaps hoped to get.

And some of them might have been thinking, where did that come from? You know, a South Korean film has never before won an Oscar. It was unexpected. And this morning we're looking at a threat that came to the mission of the early church completely unexpectedly.

When you look at it, it looks really unexpected. And I think if we apply it rightly, even though on one level you look at this and think, why are we having a sermon about what is effectively a church meeting?

[ 5 : 12 ] It's actually a challenging correction to us as a church. And it's a refreshing encouragement as well. It's a challenging correction because it identifies, Acts chapter 6, a threat that as a church we might have fallen for or we might be in danger of falling for.

And it's a refreshing encouragement because it speaks to us of an approach to being a healthy church, a living church, a growing church that's really simple.

It's inspiringly simple. So let's dive in. Our first point is the pressure that threatens the church's priority. The problem comes at a very happy time.

If you look at verse 1 at the beginning, it says, in those days when the number of disciples was increasing. And if we just back up, we can remember what's been going on. We've been in a series looking at these early chapters of Acts.

Jesus has risen from the dead. And really the whole story of the early church, and you might say of lots of human history since, has been living in the implications of that, that Jesus is alive.

[ 6 : 17 ] He died and rose again. He ascended into heaven and he sent his spirit to empower his people to be his witnesses, to share the gospel, the news about him.

And by the time we got to chapter 4, Luke tells us, who wrote Acts, there were 5,000 men in the church. So if that's, you know, maybe up to 5,000 households, there's maybe 20,000 people in this first church in Jerusalem.

And if you just look up at the end of chapter 5, he reminds us why this growth is happening. 5.42, day after day in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

God's word is going out. And Luke's big message is, God's saving word is unstoppable. Then we get this unexpected threat. Acts 6.1, among the disciples, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

So there are groups within the church that are Jewish background believers. We might call them today Messianic Jews. That's often what we would call someone who is Jewish and they know the Old Testament because that's the Jewish scriptures.

[ 7 : 39 ] But they come to see that Jesus is the one who is promised by their scriptures. So they put their trust in him as the Messiah, the Messianic Jews. And in the Jerusalem church at that time, there are Jewish background believers who are from quite different cultures.

There are Hellenistic ones and there are Hebraic ones. The Hellenistic ones would have spoken Greek and been more integrated into the wider society. The Hebraic ones probably spoke Aramaic. And as we see today in places like Scotland, often with language comes culture and differentiation and boundary markers.

So there are these two distinct groups that have come together into the church. But there's a problem. And the problem is to do with widows. There's no welfare state. There's no universal credit and state pension.

And so the church takes it on itself to look after vulnerable widows within its community and care for them. But there is an issue where some of the Greek Jews, the Hellenistic Jews, feel they're being overlooked in that relief work.

So it looks as though it's an issue of potential division in the church. And certainly that is a threat. But the biggest threat is summed up by the apostles in verse 2.

[ 8 : 56 ] If you just have a look. So the twelve, that's the apostles, the leaders, 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.

Now that phrase, ministry of the Word, is about Bible teaching ministry. Prayerfully proclaiming God's Word to the church and to the world.

The twelve apostles, they had a unique authority and role in doing that ministry of the Word because they were commissioned by Jesus to do that. And as we look back on them now, every

New Testament book has either as its author or its source, the twelve, the eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection.

But what we also see in the New Testament is that as the church prepares for the next generation, when the apostles aren't with us anymore, the apostles hand on the baton.

They hand on that responsibility to people who they feel will be able to continue that Word ministry faithfully in the life of every church for the generations to come.

[10:06] And as pastor teachers are appointed to faithfully teach God's Word, the church can be built up and grow. So what's the biggest problem with this complaint in the early church?

It's actually not the disagreement, it's distraction. And let's notice here that these are growing pains. So in verse 1, it's when the number of disciples was increasing that you get this problem, this potential distraction. And that's good for us to think about, isn't it, at St. Silas? Because we are a growing church here at St. Silas.

And I'm sorry if when you arrived this morning, we had to put chairs out for you. I don't know quite what happened there, but we would normally have them out. But we are a growing church. The number of people coming on a Sunday, the number of people coming midweek is growing.

And it's really exciting to be working for that and praying for that and seeing God at work like that, especially when we're seeing people come to know God through Jesus for the first time.

[11:09] It's thrilling. But the early church shows us here that growth brings pain, partly because growth changes a church and change is painful.

It's also because when the size of a church family grows, the complexity of the church grows exponentially. The number of relationships explodes as the number of people grows.

And so the number of things that can go wrong explodes. I'm reading a book at the moment by Matthew Syed called Bounce. And he just tries to help. It's actually, it's not about church at all. It's about sport. But he tries to help you understand the concept of exponential growth in his book. And he said this. He said, imagine a standard piece of paper and you fold it in half so it's twice as thick.

Now imagine repeating that process a hundred times. How thick do you think the paper is now?

Most people tend to guess in the range of a few inches to a few yards.

[12:11] In fact, the thickness would stretch 800,000 billion times the distance from earth to the sun. That's amazing, isn't it? Now in a church we see that kind of complexity as numbers grow.

And it comes through the different lines of relationship and communication in a church. So a church of 50 people has 2,450 possible personal connections across it.

2,450. A church of 300 people has 90,000 possible connections in it. So it's only six times bigger numerically, but it's 30 times more complicated.

So as a church grows, we have to be on our guard for growing pain. And the complaint here is so unexpected. You could imagine the apostles pressing on with all kinds of pressure.

And then suddenly this complaint arises from nowhere. In this series, in Acts, Luke tells us about three big threats. The first one was external opposition. The apostles have been threatened.

[13:19] They've been imprisoned. They've been flogged. And Jesus has dramatically demonstrated that you can't stop him. There's been a miraculous prison escape.

The disciples have been filled with the Spirit. They've prayed for boldness. They've rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for the name. You can't stop God's word through persecution.

The second threat to the advance of the gospel was internal corruption.

And we saw that two weeks ago. Ananias and Sapphira, who are in the church community, but they deceive the church leadership and community and the Holy Spirit. And God judges that corruption to keep his church holy.

And it's a reminder for us that if we're involved in Jesus' work, we mustn't allow moral compromise among us. Godliness really matters to God. And now we get this third threat.

And compared to those two things, it just seems so relatively minor. It's just getting distracted by a problem in the church. The leaders of the church being diverted away from the ministry of the Word of God.

[14:22] And it's a warning to us that obstacles can come in very surprising ways. And we found that in church life at St. Silas in the last few years. That you can be motoring on and you can see progress and life and it's exciting.

And then all of a sudden there is a setback that no one was expecting. That completely blindsides you. And the threat for us is always there. That the leadership of the church gets distracted. In the language of verse 2 of chapter 6. That we neglect the ministry of the Word of God. That's our first point.

The threat to the church's priority. It's the threat of distraction. Our second point is the team that upholds the church's priority. So the apostles call a church meeting.

It must have been massive. Verse 2. All the disciples are gathered together. So thousands of people. And the solution is proposed in verse 3. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you.

[15:27] Who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them. And we'll give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

So the apostles here. It takes real wisdom, isn't it? They recognize this is a legitimate complaint. So they don't go and rebuke the Hellenistic Jews. And as far as we can tell, they don't plan that the next sermon series is going to be on the dangers of complaining.

They realize that there is a real threat here of division in the church. And it's going to undermine the witness of the church. It's one of the most powerful adverts for the gospel.

That in the church, all around the world today, and in every local church, God is gathering together people from all different backgrounds. All kinds of different people.

And so it's a place of ethnic diversity, class diversity, a place of cross-generational friendship in a way that's very distinctive in our culture. But it's almost inevitable that that will bring tension with it.

[16:31] We're a group of people who would not normally be together. That's the miracle of the gospel. That we are together. How could we not, therefore, expect that it might be challenging?

And the challenge is, therefore, to stay united around the gospel. That although we are very different from one another, we are fundamentally all sinners who are being saved by a great Savior, the Lord Jesus.

So the apostles are clear that this social need, and therefore this social ministry within the church family, is a big issue. It's important. And so what they do is they delegate.

They even delegate to the church the responsibility of choosing the seven. It's like voting for the vestry. They just give the criteria. They say they do need to be full of the spirit and wisdom to do this role.

And the seven are chosen. And among them we meet Stephen and Philip, who we'll see again in the next couple of chapters. We'll get to know them as God uses them to play a very significant role in the sending out of the gospel from Jerusalem.

[17:31] These are significant men. But by delegating the issue, the apostles are not saying it's unimportant. They're also not saying, which I think sometimes we're in danger of doing in churches.

They're not saying, oh, let's find a group of people who are more excited about this than we are, and let's keep them busy doing that. It's not what's happening. They're thinking, we want the whole church united around the key priority of verse 4, that the apostles must give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

Because that is the main thing for the life of the church. And the church has to keep the main thing the main thing. But just because you keep the main thing the main thing doesn't mean you don't do anything else.

And so they delegate this important ministry. The church has spirit-filled leaders. It's setting apart for prayer and the ministry of the word. And to do that, to set them apart, it has spirit-filled leaders who are stepping up to take on table ministry, caring for the widows in the church.

And the result comes in verse 7. That's our third point. The results of maintaining the church's priority. It's extraordinary. Have a look at verse 7, what Luke says next.

[18:48] 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. It's extraordinary.

This is Luke's moment to tell us that amidst massive opposition from the Jewish ruling council in Jerusalem, a large number of priests turned to Christ in faith.

It's explosive, the early church. And this is a key end-of-chapter moment for Luke. Luke, a few times in his book Acts, he puts in a summary statement that says, so the word of God spread.

And you think, why did he put it here? And I find it so surprising that he puts it here at this moment. Not straight after Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came.

That's where I might have put it. Not after the miraculous healing of the paralyzed man in Acts chapter 3. Not after the prayer for boldness in Acts chapter 4. Or the break out of prison by an angel in Acts chapter 5.

[ 19 : 49 ] He puts it after a church meeting. It just seems so mundane, so administrative. Why does Luke do that? Could it be because this is a more dangerous threat to the church than we realize?

Maybe we find it easy to spot the devil at work when the world is persecuting the church. When there's opposition and persecution.

Maybe we find it easy to see the devil at work when there is moral failure in the church. Moral compromise. Or perhaps the moral collapse of a church leader.

And we see the devil at work in that. But all the while, we are at risk if we as a church family allow ourselves to get distracted. And especially if the pastor teachers of the church get distracted.

If we stop keeping the main thing, the main thing. And the main thing is ministry of the word and prayer. The prayerful service of teaching and preaching the Bible.

[ 20 : 54 ] When the apostles take this decision to delegate instead of getting distracted. And the whole church supports that and gets behind it. Luke says the word of God was unstoppable.

So what does that mean for us? Well, just a couple of implications to think about. Well, first, that the living church, the healthy church, the growing church, affirms and gives dignity to every member ministry.

So it's not that the social ministry, the caring for the widows, was in any way beneath the apostles. Rather, it's that God calls different people in his church to different kinds of service.

There's dignity in all those kinds of service, however mundane they might seem. So, I'm not necessarily saying we have to change this, but it's worth thinking, what do we think about calling the ordained church leader the minister?

And about when people are thinking about going into full-time, paid Christian church leadership, we say they're thinking about going into the ministry. They're exploring a calling into the ministry.

[ 22 : 02 ] Now, the good thing about that is that, as long as we remember, the word for minister is actually just the word for servant or service, and it reminds us that church leaders are servants. But it's a problem if we think that, by saying that, that ministry is what the rector does, it's what the curate does, and everyone else is doing something different, or isn't really expected to do very much at all.

The same word for ministry is used by Luke, here in Acts chapter 6, for the word ministry and for the table ministry. There are all kinds of ways of serving going on, even this morning, just to make Sunday morning happen, as we've gathered.

And it's important we see them all as ministries, as ways that God has called different people to serve him. It's also good to keep in mind, as we think about the bigger picture of Acts, that every one of us is called to some kind of word ministry.

In Acts chapter 2, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, and the prophecy, he says that an Old Testament prophecy was fulfilled, from the prophet Joel, that said that everyone of God's people will prophesy in the last days.

That is, that in the New Testament, we are commanded to speak God's words to each other, to build each other up. We do that prayerfully. We speak God's word to each other, and to the world.

[ 23 : 22 ] In the New Testament, it commands us to do that by teaching, by speaking, by singing to each other. And in Acts chapter 4, we read about the believers, all together being filled with the Spirit, and proclaiming God's word.

So I've heard Rico Tice, who is a traveling speaker, use the phrase, that we as the church, we're not all called to be Bible teachers, but we can all be Bible sharers.

It's helpful to remember that. Word ministry is for all of us. And also that ministry comes in all kinds of ways. The great many different ways that people serve in the church, from cooking, and taking a meal round to someone who's unwell, to soldering a wire that fixes a speaker, so that we can hear, to drawing up employment contracts for the staff, or doing the accounts, or going around and trimming the hedge for someone in the church who's elderly, or organizing a cycling trip to help to build community, or praying at home for a Christianity Explored course going on that evening.

These are ministries that God calls us to. And the next implication, that the living church, the growing church, honors and upholds the priority of the ministry of the word.

All kinds of service are ministry. Acts chapter 6. The ministry of the word is a special kind, and it is essential. Acts chapter 6. The church absolutely depends on faithful, clear, prayerful Bible teaching, for its life and growth.

[ 25 : 00 ] And it's reassuringly simple, to hear that. When Jesus was hungry in the desert, and he's tempted by the devil, turn the stones to bread. And he says, man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.

It's great for us to reflect on that as individuals, for all of us. It's a huge comfort to discover that. It's an inspiration, to think that you can find in a church, a person who is looked on in worldly terms, as very ordinary, in their working life, unexceptional, across the city, not well known at all, but who spiritually, is like a giant redwood tree, full of joy, and wisdom, and love, and stability.

And dynamism, flourishing, because they have prioritized, in their own lives, the ministry of the word of God. Or that you can find, maybe even in a church, a person who is a very successful person, a career high flyer, with financial security, popularity, and respect, who is spiritually, comparatively, like a twig.

Because they've not prioritized, the ministry of the word of God, in their own lives. It's so simple. And it's vital, for us as a church, does Acts chapter 6, invite us to ask church, what are you looking for, from your church?

What are you looking for, from the church leaders? If you've got children, what are you praying for, and hoping for, for them? From the youth zone leaders, and kids zone leaders here?

[ 26 : 39 ] And what are you giving them at home? It's really easy for us, to lose our nerve, isn't it? I know that. To panic, that prayerful, word ministry, might not work.

To think, what if it doesn't work? What if it doesn't work for me? And I put all that time into it. What if it doesn't work for my kids? The world they're growing up in, is different to the world, I grew up in. What if prayerful ministry of the word, is not the answer for them?

And these chapters of Acts, not just chapter 6, but what we're seeing throughout, it impresses on us, that the real power, from God, for salvation, and for growth, and for transformation, is in the word of God.

And we're encouraged here, to see the impact, of a church, who are right behind, that priority, of the ministry of the word of God, and prayer. Could I ask you, if you belong to St Silas, could you pray for this?

For us at St Silas, that our convictions, would change, in this area. So that we make the main thing, the main thing. We should ask God, to have mercy on us, for the times we get it wrong.

[ 27 : 48 ] And when I get it wrong, pray for those of us, who are meant to be set apart, for word ministry and prayer. Because, let me tell you, it is just so easy, to get distracted.

To get overwhelmed, by other pressing things, pressing needs, that are important. But to try and sort them out, to sort out the issues, people raise. And other things, seem so tangible.

You know, if James and I, this week, went to Ikea, and we went and bought, a storage unit, and we built it, next week, and we put it up, in the church, people would notice. That's really helped, that you build that storage unit.

Everyone notices, that we've got, better church lights now. We put them in, and it's better. Or that, everyone would notice, if the church entrance, was renovated, and we bashed it open.

I'm desperate, for us to do that. And it, these, you know, it's so much more tangible, to be in a church, and see that they've put on, a music concert, or they've put on, an exhibition, or they've sent, shoe boxes, to children, in Kazakhstan.

[ 28 : 52 ] These are great things. And so, the temptation, for the staff team, is that we just fill our time, with these important things, and they divert us, from the main thing.

So, pray for us, and help us. Having this priority, is a whole church project. I think of a friend, who is the, the rector of a church, I didn't say minister, he, he emailed somebody, in his church family, one morning, weekday morning, and he got a reply, on email, saying, I don't expect, to get an email from you, on a weekday, before lunchtime.

Quite harsh, but in other words, we are paying, to set you apart, from your day job, for word ministry, and prayer. And so, that's what I expect you, to be doing, on a weekday morning.

Keeping the main thing, the main thing, is simple, but it's hard to do. And the reality, is that faithful, prayerful, clear, culturally relevant, prophetically challenging, heart affecting, word ministry, is really difficult.

And you can do, other things, that build a crowd, in a church. You can do, other things, that draw in a crowd. So that all the while, the temptation, while the main thing, is hard, is to look over our shoulders, at other churches, and see a crowd, and think, what we really need, to be doing, is something else, because they did that, and it grew.

[ 30 : 17 ] Or a big temptation, in churches, is when a minister, with a Bible teaching, ministry moves on, the church, looks for something different, in their next minister.

Think, well we went, in a kind of Bible direction, for a while, but now we really want, something else, from our next minister. Pray for the vestry, in this, our leadership body.

It is a tremendous thing, when a church vestry, or a church eldership, the leadership body, of the church, when they are, a united group of people, who bring with them, all kinds of different ways, of serving, and different skills, and gifts, but who share together, an absolute commitment, to the priority, for the church, of the ministry, of the word, and prayer.

And could we pray, too, as a church, that we can raise people up, who can do this work, for the next generation, of churches in Scotland, and the nations. Could it be that, for some of us here today, you could be asking yourself, is this what I should be doing, with the gifts, I have, as the person I am, as God has saved me, should I be thinking, about whether, I should be set apart, for the word ministry, and prayer, for the good of the church.

Could you talk, to other people about that, if that's what you're thinking, and thinking of exploring. Could it be that, for some of us, we can give financially, to support that goal, as we support, ministry trainees, and as we, seek to support people, as they train for ministry, because Scotland, needs more people, set apart, for the ministry of the word.

[ 31 : 54 ] The church needs it, and, the nation needs it. And for many of us, we know, that's not where we're called, we know we're called, to serve Christ, in quite a different way, but Acts chapter 6, encourages us, to do that, with a clearer sense, of how the different ministries, in the church, fit in with the life, and the growth of the church, so that we don't think, well, the way that I like to serve, is this particular way, whatever that might be, I'm going to look for a church, where that's the main thing, in the church, but rather to think, the main thing, for a healthy church, is word ministry, and prayer, and I'm glad, to serve, in the way God's called me, to serve, to uphold that priority.

And as we finish, perhaps it's worth, just thinking, why on earth, would we serve? It's a clear assumption, of Acts chapter 6, that Christians, would want to serve, but we've thought, about word service, and about social service, the world tells us, to spend more time, on self service, and me time.

So let's remember, as we close, what the early church knew, that we serve, because we remember, Jesus words, whoever wants to become, great among you, must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first, must be slave of all, for even the son of man, did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life, as a ransom for many.

So we follow a king, whose service, was incredible self-denial, to death on the cross, so that by his wounds, we are healed.

We have a fresh start, with God, and he asks us, all this I've done for you, what now, will you do for me? So whatever ministry, we could do for him, we do it because, of his ministry, to us.

[ 33 : 51 ] Let's pray together. Just a moment of quiet, to reflect on, God's word to us, in Acts chapter 6. Amen. Heavenly Father, we praise you, that you are the giving Father, that in your salvation plan, you gave us your mercy, you gave us your son, the Lord Jesus, and you sent people, who by their ministry, of the word and prayer, brought the news, about Jesus to us, that we could come to him, and have life.

Heavenly Father, by your spirit, we pray you be at work, in us, strengthening our resolve, to serve one another, to serve you, and growing us as a church, in wisdom and direction, that we would have the joy, of life and growth, as we line up behind, Jesus mission, and his unstoppable word. we ask for the glory, of his name. Amen.