

Acts 6:1-7

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[0 : 00] I've been a church leader in Scotland over a period of 30 years, 30 or more years. I've been in the leadership of teams organising, for example, the Louise Palau meetings at Pedaudry way back in 1979.

I've been part of the team of Scottish leaders who organised the Billy Graham Crusades in Aberdeen and Glasgow and Edinburgh. I've served on the Executive Trustee Board of the Evangelical Alliance in the United Kingdom and I've attended numerous conferences across the nation, the UK and indeed the world, both under the banner of the World Council of Churches and the Lausanne Movement.

Almost exactly a year ago this weekend, I spent a weekend with the Queen, with Prince Philip and the other members of the Royal Family in Balmoral. With the honour of preaching in Krathie Kirk and their presence on the Sunday morning.

And for 30 years, I've seen the church in our nation lose more and more ground to secularism, materialism, and in more recent years to other religions.

With the growth of paganism, Buddhism and the building of more and more Islamic mosques. And you know, I have to confess to you this morning, that there have been times when I've almost despaired at the state of our nation.

[1 : 42] And I've longed for our political leaders to recognise that our moral decay, with all that that means in terms of crime, attacks on the vulnerable people of our society, drug misuse, drug death, I understand, in our region have doubled in the past 12 months.

That our moral decay is directly in proportion to our neglect of a holy God's gracious laws, our defiance in the face of the unique claims of his only Son, Jesus Christ, and our indifference as a nation to the church, the body of Christ.

And can I say to you that I believe that no denomination or Christian movement has caused to be self-congratulatory in our day.

And so, you might ask, do I get depressed as an experienced church leader? Do I prophesy the total disappearance of the Christian church?

Well, first of all, I do have to tell you that I don't agree with those who rely for Scotland on the biblical record that promises that the Lord will not leave himself ever without a witness.

[3 : 13] There are those that I know, and know well, who claim that promise for the nation of Scotland. On the one hand, of course, I do not undermine the promises of Scripture.

On the other hand, I am not in a position to say other than that God the Father loves his Son's church in Scotland and very well could revive it.

However, what I want to say is that I have no guarantees. Let me explain. The three main geographical and cultural areas in which the church of Jesus Christ was birthed, was nurtured and grew, were the church, the land of Israel, of course, then both Asia Minor, today's Turkey, and then North Africa.

Just you'll look sometime at the list of nations represented in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost that's recorded for us in Acts chapter 2 at verse 8 to 11.

And then consider the history of the Christian church in these same areas, and indeed, the state of the Christian church in those places today. The truth is that it was all but wiped out for many, many centuries.

[4 : 46] Yes, praise God, we hear in our day of significant growth in the church in each of these areas. But for centuries, they were barren of Christian witness.

And even more dangerously, they were the most resistant areas to the gospel of Christ for almost one and a half thousand years. So what I'm saying is this.

Let us not presume on God's reviving grace in this land of Scotland. A land that has been for centuries, not least since the 16th century, so richly blessed by the power of the word of God and the ready response of our people to the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. We have no divine right to expect revival. Although, as I said, there is no reason why the sovereign Lord would not visit us again in the power of His saving love. And so I can hear you say, am I really here this morning to bring you a message of prophetic doom?

[5 : 59] Well, no. You see, I do believe the promises of the Lord. And I do believe that Jesus Christ is building His church and that the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

I do believe that the day will come when at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

And so what has saved me from despair? What stops me bringing to you this morning a message of prophetic doom?

It's when the Spirit of God lifts my eyes from the local to the universal. And I see across today's world the church of Jesus Christ more vibrant, more exciting, more influential, and much bigger than ever before in human history.

Yes, we face challenges to the gospel in our world today. We might, on the one hand, get depressed. On the other hand, we can be at times triumphant.

[7 : 19] But the devil neither loses his energy, nor does his guile grow dim. And I want to tell you that today we may be facing the greatest challenge we've ever faced.

Since the birth of the Christian faith in the early days, we have seen such incredible growth across the world that no other religion could either match such growth nor its geographical explosion.

Of course, there has been other world religions, but their significance has been really restricted to specific geographical and cultural areas, whether Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, or Islam.

But in the last 25 years, the faith of Christ has faced a contemporary competitor. Islam is spreading its wings in a bid to outdo the Christian church.

I ask you to witness the attempt by Islam funded from Saudi Arabia to get permission to build that massive mosque in the Olympic area of London in time for the Olympic Games of 2012.

[8 : 46] Their idea is so to impress and attract people who fly into London and who will see first this massive idol to Mohammed.

And so we are not without our challenges either locally or universally. The question is how do we respond? Well, I believe the Lord would have us meet the challenges of our day as have His people over the generations by being what I want to call a courageous church.

A courageous church. And so I want to lead you to the Word of God in these short verses we read from Acts chapter 7 chapter 6 rather and these seven verses.

It's a tremendous book filled with adventure vitality dynamism as well as suffering disappointment and challenges.

And so first of all here I want to point you to the context. The context. The context is a growing church. This is the church in Jerusalem birthed on the day of Pentecost.

[10 : 04] As the Holy Spirit fell on these 120 frightened followers of Christ so first of all they spilled out with their message onto the streets of Jerusalem.

Peter preached that great sermon from the Word of God and the power of the Spirit and some 3,000 men as well as women and children were baptized into the faith and they were embraced within the arms of the Christian church.

And so they began to learn to live together to what we would say today to do church. As Acts chapter 2 and verse 47 tells us the Lord added to the number daily those who were being saved. You know I believe that's God's desire for His Son's body to add to it daily those who are being saved. And so the church grows until we read in Acts chapter 6 and verse 1 in these days when the number of disciples was increasing.

This was a growing church. This is the context for what happens in the church in these verses we read. And it's vital that we understand that as we hear God speak to our hearts this morning.

[11 : 35] This is a growing church. that's the context. But secondly notice that the church by this time had faced various problems.

Peter and John had been tried by the Sanhedrin. There was the deceit of Annas and Sapphira. There was persecution but now now they face what on the face of it is a very simple practical

problem.

Verse 1 The Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Now let me make this important point at the outset. The Bible does not tell us that there was any lack of food here.

It was a question of a proper and a fair distribution. And you know in these days of environmental challenges and so often desperate poverty and starvation and death these days in which we live we do well to remember that there is no lack of food in our world.

[12 : 53] We produce more food than we need on the globe to feed well every single person on our planet. but the issue is one of distribution.

Fair distribution. And so it was in Jerusalem. And of course we begin to see here the seeds of the dispute that was nearly to split the church that we read of later in Acts chapter 15.

And the argument about whether Gentiles could become Christians without becoming Jews first.

Yes, both the groups in Acts 6 are named as Jews but some it seems are less kosher than others.

And so as a result of this very simple relatively simple practical problem the church here is in danger of dividing.

It's not a question of persecution or of pedigree at the end of the day. It's really a question of solving a simple practical problem.

[14 : 08] And so we see thirdly the first possible solution. I've been a leader of a church family for 30 years and so I do know just a little about the way people deal with problems at least in the church of Scotland and I suspect that we are not a thousand miles away from the way others deal with problems.

I want to remind you of two things I have already said and that the scriptures make clear. The church is in a time of growth. A time of exponential expansion.

And it is a church with it seems more than adequate resources. And I can tell you that in a similar situation my experience is that we deal with this kind of problem by way of reorganizing our administration.

Probably the first thing we would have done would be to set up a committee with a very simple remit. Feed the Grecian widows.

Yes, a worthy, needy group for whom we have responsibility. Feed them, keep them quiet. We are successful. Let's not have anybody rocking the boat.

[15 : 31] In other words, many churches would adopt this simple principle. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

And this church certainly ain't broke. In these two senses, they're successful and they've got the resources.

Now, that's a possible solution. But my fourth point is this. And here's where we begin to see and meet the courageous church.

Because they look for a courageous solution. The twelve are all there in the leadership of the Jerusalem church. The twelve who had learned their trade of ministry from the master himself. Who had had that sense of spiritual discernment. Spiritual discernment that comes from living and staying close to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[16 : 33] And so they saw this remarkable yet simple opportunity to push the church forward in its vision, its ministry. And you know, that took courage.

They quite frankly turned their backs on the simple administrative solution and looked for the Lord's solution. They saw beyond the don't upset the apple cart solution to the solution that the Lord wanted them to have and that would really bless them.

of course they took a risk. It could all have gone pear shaped. But they learned that the life of faith is a life of risk.

And that meant it was a life for courageous decisions. And so they looked at their priorities. They are given responsibility as apostles.

close. And they saw very clearly that the priority for them was the ministry of the Word of God. That is, the ministry that feeds the spiritual hunger of the people.

[17 : 48] The ministry that seeks as its priority to reflect the person of Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, so that others may be drawn to put their trust in Him, to follow Him, and to serve Him.

And they say, this is our priority, and we must not be deflected from it. And with this, we will place a renewed focus on prayer.

Now, in our Reformed tradition, I'm not sure that we have always got our priorities right. But this I say, we have got absolutely central to our vision as a church, prayer, and the ministry of the Word. An absolutely primary focus on this crucial matter of relationship with the Lord through prayer and a devotion to the ministry of the Word of God.

Now, I'm well aware in our day of the challenge of communication, not least in an age of fast-exploding and creative media, whether it be mobiles, podcasts, instant messaging, or internet, as well as these wonderfully creative visual media facilities with things like PowerPoint.

[19 : 21] But I have to tell you from my experience and from Scripture that I believe we downgrade the power of preaching the Word of God.

Preaching the Word of God at our peril. It is a priority for the church to be leading in prayer and the ministry of the Word of God.

Of course, the church in Jerusalem could have stuck with the tried and the tested. It was working. But they courageously moved on, first to see their true priority and then to deal with the problem. And to this in the fifth place, they brought a spiritual solution. A spiritual solution. You see, a whole new order of ministry was instituted. What we call in our churches the diaconate.

That ministry that deals at a very practical level with the needs of ordinary people. And notice the apostles turn responsibility, total responsibility over to the deacons.

[20 : 35] This was not in the future to be subject to apostolic oversight. The deacons were responsible for their ministry to Christ himself.

In Acts chapter 6, it's called Waiting on Tables. But it embraces so much more. But my friends, let's we begin to see a hierarchy of ministry within the church.

Never a reformed perspective. Please note that the diaconate were selected and they were appointed, not because they were good waiters, or had good hands, or had especially compassionate hearts, or indeed were intellectually inferior to the apostles.

Not at all. The basic qualifications were first of all spiritual, and indeed the equal of the apostles. These were men full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.

Exactly the same basic qualifications for the apostolate. I may have said this the last time I was here, but for a number of years I was Senior Director in the Church of Scotland for the selection and training of candidates for ministry of word and sacrament, and also for the diaconate.

[21 : 50] And for both orders of ministry we look for such people full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. No wonder the church and the proposal pleased the whole church.

And so the seven were chosen and appointed, and then they were ordained by the apostles in the name of Jesus Christ. Now that's the way a courageous church, deals with challenges.

It sets its priorities, it broadens its ministry, but it never dims or lets its qualifications decline.

It finds a spiritual solution until finally, finally we draw and discover a wonderful consequence. A wonderful consequence. The words in verse 7.

I want to close with these three simple reflections. First of all, because of the vision of a courageous church, the Word of God spreads.

[22 : 59] The Word of God spreads. You know, I believe that that's the primary function of the church. To be that instrument in the hands of Jesus our Lord, so that the Word of God spreads.

You see, when the Word of God spreads, it does its own work. Remember the Lord's words through the prophet Isaiah in chapter 55 and verse 11.

So is my Word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire.

And it was Jesus in his parable who spoke of the sower sowing the Word of God, making it spread. And then Paul reminds us that we can sow and we can water, but it is the Lord who gives the growth.

So let's be the kind of church that looks at ourselves and asks, are we the kind of church that enables the Word of God to spread?

[24 : 17] And if we are not in some measure, where is our courage to change? In Jerusalem, it spreads, and this is the second thing, there is even more rapid growth in this already growing church.

More rapid growth than they'd ever seen before. There was not just daily growth, we read, but rapid increase. And one last shock, thirdly, a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. I call these, as it were, the resistant Jewish leaders, or in modern missionary parlance, the unreached people group.

They saw growth there as well, because of a courageous church. There was a wonderful consequence. consequence. Yes, we face challenges.

Decline in Scotland. But massive growth across the world, but with growing opposition. So face the problem.

[25 : 34] Take the courageous solution. Base your choice on spiritual principles, and reap wonderful consequences.

You know, it takes courage in the life of a congregation and denomination as it does in the life of every single Christian follower.

Amen.