

Acts 6: 1-7. The Magnificent 7

The best way to crush a movement is to do it early, before it has grown strong and numerous. And that was the devil's plan with the early church. John Stott in his excellent commentary on Acts talks about three distinct demonic attacks on the early church aimed at crippling the gospel before it could spread. The first attack was persecution. In chapters 4 and 5 we read how the disciples were arrested, threatened and flogged. But rather than dampening their enthusiasm for the gospel, the persecution they suffered only served to inspire the disciples to continue preaching the good news of Jesus.

The second attack was corruption. The Bible tells us that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and with the story of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5 verses 1 to 11 there was a real possibility that the love of money and the web of lies these two people weaved would wreck the early church. But again, the dramatic way the Lord dealt with this problem only served to strengthen the early church and leave people in fear and awe of the name of Jesus.

But in these verses from Acts chapter 6 we see the third attack. On the face of it, it may look like the problem was one of organisational failure or perhaps unconscious institutional racism. But whilst they may have been symptoms, that wasn't the focus of the devil's scheme. The devil's tactic here was distraction. He wanted the church to be distracted from its primary mission.

But before we get into the passage, let me tell you a story to illustrate the point.

"On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occurred, there was once a crude little life-saving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one small boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea and, with no thought for themselves, went out day and night, tirelessly searching for the lost.

Some of those who were saved and various others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station and give their time, money and effort for the support of the work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little life-saving station grew.

Some of the members of the life-saving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge for those saved from the sea. They replaced the emergency cots with beds, and put better furniture in the large building.

The life-saving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The life-saving motif still prevailed in the club decoration, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club initiations were held.

One day, a large ship was wrecked off the coast and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, half drowned people. They were dirty and sick and soon the beautiful new club was in chaos. The property committee immediately got together and organised a shower house to be built outside the club, where victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next club meeting, there was a split in the membership. Some of the members wanted to stop the club's life-saving activities, arguing that they were unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon life-saving as their primary purpose – they pointed out that they were still called the life-saving station – but they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to

save the lives of various kinds of people who are shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lives saving station down the coast. So they did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. The new life-saving station evolved into a club, and yet another life-saving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself and, if you visit that coastline today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown."

What is a lifeboat station for? It's for saving lives. But once that prime purpose stops taking centre stage, it's very easy for other things to creep in and take over, and pretty soon no one is being saved.

That was the danger the church faced in Acts chapter 6. That was the point of the devil's attack. If he could distract the early church from its primary mission to proclaim the good news of Jesus and to make disciples of all nations, then pretty soon no one would be being saved and the church would fade and die.

Now remember where we are in the story of the early church. After being filled with the Spirit at Pentecost the disciples began to preach the good news of Jesus and thousands came to accept him as their Lord and Saviour. The believers met together regularly for prayer, sung worship and Bible study. They shared their possessions, showing true practical Christian love for each other. And when persecution came, they were able to withstand it together, even rejoicing in their suffering. Acts chapter 5 ends like this: *"day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, the disciples never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ."* And it was 'in those days', as verse 1 puts it, those days of preaching and teaching and numerical growth, that this attack comes.

What was the problem?

There seems to be 2 difficult issues going on. Firstly the numbers of people were increasing rapidly. Now that's a wonderful problem to have, but it does often lead to organisational stresses and strains, and that was the case here. In that society, where there was no welfare state and no pension provision, widows who were too old, too weak or too ill to work, were cared for by the local church. Caring for the poor and the needy, particularly widows and orphans, had been something enshrined by God into Israel's DNA - and the early church took that responsibility seriously. But people were getting overlooked. Some of the widows of Greek background were missing out on the daily distribution of food – and for the poorest widows this was a matter of life and death.

What impact was it having?

When these widows were neglected two problems arose: anger and the threat of division.

Now remember the early church at this point in its history is based almost entirely in the city of Jerusalem, but that didn't mean that all believers came from the same background. These verses tell us that there were at least two different groupings of Jews that made up the early church. Some of them were Hebraic Jews - that is they spoke Aramaic and were deeply immersed in Hebrew culture. They had probably grown up in or around Jerusalem their whole lives, worshipping in the temple rather than local synagogues, speaking the ancient Jewish language, and perhaps feeling more Jewish than others Jews.

By contrast the Grecian Jews, whilst also speaking Aramaic, would have had Greek as their first language. But more importantly, culturally they thought and behaved more like Greeks than like Jerusalem Jews. Perhaps they dressed slightly differently and approached life and worship slightly differently. And whilst

the death of Jesus abolished any great significance in race or culture, because all people everywhere are only saved through faith in Christ, tragically those feelings of division and rivalry found a place in the early church. And when one group of people feel less favoured than another there is a problem.

But whilst those feelings of disquiet and the threat of division were serious issues that needed resolving, there was a greater threat – that of distraction from the main task of proclaiming the gospel. That's how the 12 apostles explained the situation in verse 2. Now it's clear from the way the apostles spoke that they viewed this ministry as an important work. But to attempt to solve this issue by putting all their time and energy into 'waiting at tables' would have meant them neglecting the preaching and teaching of the gospel. And pretty soon, just like that life boat station, no one would have been being saved.

Do you see the danger? If those whose main calling it is to preach the Word of God, to evangelise and to disciple instead spend their time on other things, the Word of God won't be preached. And if the Word of God isn't preached then no one will be saved. The apostles had to stay focussed – to do what they had been called to do – if the church was going to continue to grow.

Now let me be absolutely clear, the church then and now should be a place where those in need are supported and helped, whether that's through providing food or shelter or clothes. If we are not agents of compassion and mercy to each other and to the community then we are failing to love our neighbours as ourselves. But if we ever take our eyes off the main task, if the focus of this church stops being the preaching of salvation and forgiveness in the name of Jesus alone then we are wasting our time and the enemy will have won.

What was the solution?

The first thing the apostles did was call the church together. It isn't spelt out here but I suspect they acknowledged the problem; that some widows were being missed out, and that it was causing division. But the solution wasn't for the 12 apostles to take on that work as well; the solution was for the church to choose some from among them to take over this responsibility. And that is what happened. The whole group were delighted with the way forward and so they chose Stephen, Philip and 5 others to take on this role- so that the 12 apostles could give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.

And it's interesting isn't it, that although this was a largely practical task, the people who were chosen for it were spiritually mature. Did you notice that? Verse 3 tells us that the seven were to be men known as "*full of the spirit and wisdom.*" The early church needed to appoint more people but they needed to make sure they were the right ones for the task. And as we will see over the coming weeks both Stephen and Philip (and I'm sure the others too) were also involved in word ministry, talking about Jesus and witnessing to their faith in whatever situation they find themselves. That shouldn't surprise us because of course we all share that role: all Christians are required to be able to give a reason for the hope we have. And I hope that whether you are on the maintenance crew or coffee rota or welcoming team you can do that, because as you are carrying out those tasks you will meet people who need to hear of Jesus and you need to be ready to talk to them.

But for some people gospel preaching is their main calling. So the solution for the early church was to appoint more people so that the calling of the apostles could be fulfilled as others fulfilled their own calling.

What was the result?

Verse 7 tells us that *“the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”*

The early church was not distracted from its mission. By appointing the seven to handle the food distribution they made sure that the apostles could fulfil their calling in proclaiming the good news of Jesus. And as a result the church grew rapidly in number and even a large number of priests, who perhaps had been opposed to Jesus during his ministry, became obedient to the faith. Something which might have caused a great deal of harm to the church actually brought about continued growth because of the way it was dealt with.

As I close let me leave you with two challenges.

1: Fulfil your calling so others can fulfil theirs.

I am so glad that the image of the Church of England vicar as a one-man band who does everything has been consigned to the rubbish bin of history. In fact, I'm not sure it was ever real anyway.

But the danger with a paid rector is that, like in the lifeboat story, people start to leave the gospel work to the professionals and just come along for the ride. But that isn't the pattern in the early church and it cannot be the pattern here today. My job as rector is fundamentally one of a pastor teacher. There's admin to do and things to plan but primarily I'm called to proclaim the Word of God, to teach what the Bible says and to apply it in large gatherings like this, in small gatherings like home groups or study courses, and one-to-one as I visit people. That's my job. But to fulfil my calling I need you to fulfil your calling.

You see for a church to run smoothly there are many other tasks that need doing too. We need welcomers, cleaners, caterers, musicians, sound technicians, maintenance teams, Bible readers, intercessors, children's group leaders, PCC members, churchwardens and I thank God for every single one of you involved in those things. But if others in the church family didn't serve in those ways my workload would be overwhelming and the church would not function. Some tasks may be thought of as less glamorous than others, less frontline than others, but every single one of them is vital. Can you imagine what the church would be like if all those necessary jobs were left to the Rector? The church could not function and I'd have no time left to fulfil my main calling. To fulfil my calling I need you to fulfil yours.

And of course that doesn't just apply to clergy. Churchwardens and Sunday school leaders and home group leaders have huge spiritual responsibilities. And if they are to fulfil their calling they also need you to fulfil yours. If we want them to have the time to prepare well and teach faithfully then we shouldn't expect them to take on huge responsibilities elsewhere. You've heard me say this many times but the church is a battleship – not a cruise liner. Once you have decided that this is the place God is calling you to be, then you need to play your part. If everyone does that, if everyone takes up some of the slack, if everyone comes to God and says 'Father, show me where you are calling me to serve because I am ready and willing', then the church will flourish and grow. But if not, if people sit back and do nothing; if people come and take rather than give and serve, then others will have to neglect their calling to do a job someone else could have done, and those struggling with heavy loads of responsibility will collapse under the weight.

So what is God calling you to do? How can you serve God's Kingdom? If you are a Christian and regard this as your church family, you will have a ministry here. What is it? Are you fulfilling it? Right now we need

more Sunday school leaders and helpers and we will need more after the summer. Right now we need more people to join the cleaning rota. Very soon we will need people to take over responsibility for the monthly magazine, the website and our facebook page. Soon we will need more people to lead home groups. Where is God calling you to serve him? Play your part! Fulfil your calling or the church will suffer.

2: Stay focussed on the gospel: don't get distracted.

The second point is even more important. For us as a church to grow and flourish, we need to make sure that the main thing remains the main thing. Our sole purpose is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus to the world and to make disciples to the glory of God. That is why the church exists.

So firstly I and the PCC need your prayers. The spiritual poverty of people in our parish is enormous, but it would be so easy for us to get distracted and focus our energies on the practical, easy to fix things like what goes on within these four walls each Sunday. So pray for me and pray for the PCC that we would stay gospel-focused and that we might become more mission-focused. Pray that we would never lose sight of our calling to proclaim the good news of Jesus.

And secondly pray for those who lead our men's and women's groups, for home group leaders, and children's group leaders that they would keep the main thing the main thing. As the story of the life-saving station illustrated, it's very easy to take your eye off the ball and focus on other things. It's not wrong to want people to have a good time when they come to church or S Club or Little Lambs or whatever, but when churches or kids groups become more interested in maintenance or entertainment rather than saving the lost and making disciples, the end result is disaster. Although we want people to enjoy coming along to church and other groups we are not here to entertain. We are there to proclaim Jesus and to make disciples. So pray for those leading those ministries that they are not distracted from their main task.

And finally pray for yourself too – and for the others sitting in the pews next you this morning. Satan not only wants to distract the church he aims to distract us as individuals from our walk with the Lord. So think for a moment, what is it that stops you from growing in your faith and witnessing to Jesus? What is it that stops you serving as you should? The chances are they will be good things –family, work, hobbies, late night TV. Feeding the widows was a good thing too. But for the apostles at least it wasn't the main thing.

As those who have been saved from a lost eternity by a gift of God's grace and love demonstrated to us by Jesus' death on the cross we owe God our very lives. So enjoy the good things the Lord gives but friends, please don't lose focus. Don't be distracted by getting too involved with good things that aren't the main thing. That's Satan's ploy and we must not fall for it. Keep your eyes on Jesus, keep your mind on the Word of God, keep passing on the gospel message of Jesus, keep serving the local church and fulfil your calling.

Acts 6 tells us that as the early church kept its focus the Word of God spread and the number of disciples increased rapidly, with many becoming obedient to the faith. May that be true of God's church here.