

## **Ministry Structure**

(Acts 6:1-7)

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Who doesn't love structure in their life?! By structure, I mean Process! Plans, Organisation, Order...*

Not for everyone, I get that...some are more free-flowing in life...take things as they come...less structure...that's fine...in some ways, I envy those people that go with the flow like that...

But I love structure in life...I love everything to have structure: appointments, events, activities, reminders: all in my calendar...very ordered & structured...

What about you? Are you someone who enjoys structure in your life, or are you a more easy-going: 'come what may' kind of person?

What about in your Parish?

Do you see clear, intentional purpose in the way your Parish does ministry each week? Especially difficult when there's no clergy or other dedicated ministry lead in your Parish.

Difficult, but not impossible.

And so important.

And, structure in ministry, is Biblical.

That's what today's passage in Acts 6 is all about: *ministry structure*.

In this passage, as we continue this *New Beginnings* series in the first part of the book of Acts, we read about a problem; a proposal; a presentation and a proliferation... a passage that's all about ministry structure, deserves a sermon that's also clearly structured!

Over the last fortnight in that previous chapter 5, we read about the Apostles healing and teaching; then being put in jail; miraculously released; then teaching some more; then brought before the religious leaders to explain themselves; released again but not before being flogged and ordered not to teach about Jesus...all these events culminating in what we read in 5:41:

'The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. <sup>42</sup> 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.'

### **POINT 1 – A Problem (v.1-2)**

It's in this context that Acts 6 begins.....and it begins with a problem. From verse 1:

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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.

'In those days.....': it's in this context from chapter 5 - fervent gospel activity amidst actual persecution for the gospel - that our passage confirms that the number of disciples – followers of Jesus – is increasing....what a great problem to have! Of course, that's no problem at all....

No, it seems the problem first described is a very practical one: amongst this diverse, growing group of believer....this cultural diversity sees those on the margins – particularly widows who were very vulnerable in first century society – these widows are being overlooked....especially when it came to the way food was distributed amongst the believers.

Growth, diversity....wonderful! But with this, some conflict....a problem....

Revealing the very normal, human aspect to even this devoted community of Christ's followers...naïve to think that even in a Christian context, that conflict and problems don't arise.

I'm sure you can think of examples of this in your church...a sad but inevitable reality when there's sinful humans involved....conflict, problems arise...

But this problem isn't allowed to develop, fester, grow, cause more pain...

Like the tooth-ache that we all ignore because we don't like going to the dentist...that's allowed to develop, fester, cause more pain...

No, we read here that the twelve – the Apostles – address this problem straight away.

And they do this, in a show of united leadership: *gathering all the disciples together* as they call out the problem....really getting to the heart of the issue...to the actual problem:

'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.'

Note their concern, as they get to the heart of the actual, main problem:

ensuring that the importance and priority of Word ministry, is maintained....this can't be neglected!

Note too: the initial problem raised of widows being left out as food is distributed isn't dismissed...in fact the way the Apostles explain the problem is that this "*waiting on tables*" still needs to be done, but it 'would not be right' if this means that they – as God's appointed leaders of this community of believers – are neglecting their priority.

And their priority is the ministry of the Word of God: what we call today, teaching and preaching, from the Bible.

## **POINT 2 – A Proposal (vv.3-4)**

Having identified the problem, the leaders of the church put forward a proposal. From verse 3:

<sup>3</sup> 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 <sup>4</sup>and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

This proposal to address the problem is put to the whole community...

It's a proposal that requires them to choose people from within their own ranks, whom will 'take responsibility' for the distribution of food.

But not just any people.

This isn't a lottery...these people aren't chosen randomly...

'Choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.'

The sense here, that they're to be tested – assessed.

How are they 'known?'

It's actually the same idea that the Apostle Paul later conveys in his letter to Timothy, when he lays out qualifications for church leaders.

Assess, test, check...

*Does their life show the Holy Spirit at work in them?*

Our time in Acts so far has shown repeatedly, that it's the power of the Spirit that enables people to faithfully serve God.

Some might see this issue that these 7 would be focussing on, as something menial or unimportant. Yet here, the Apostles confirm that any ministry for God is to be done by people empowered by God, and this will show in the way they conduct their lives.

'We will turn this responsibility over to them,' say the Apostles.

*It won't be neglected, it's still important.*

And, the Apostles as this early church's leaders, here modelling what we now know as the way our church leaders are to minister.

Ministry isn't just the task of the one with Rev. in front of his or her name....or the LLM! What did we hopefully learn last year, as we were taken through Ephesians 4 as part of our online Diocesan conference?.....*Ministry is for Everyone! Ministry is for Everyone!*

Here it is: on display, clearly and helpfully modelled for us.

And with this handing over of this ministry to these chosen people, the Apostles are then freed up to ensure they can *give their attention to...*

Verse 4: 'prayer and the ministry of the word.'

Not caught up in distracting arguments about non-Gospel matters...?

Not wasting time reading and spreading mis-information that's fed them from a culture which insists on conflict and outrage...?

Not prioritising false gospels such as prosperity, activism, individualism, moralism, over THE gospel...?

No!

Their focus and priority is on 'prayer and the ministry of the word.'

The very thing they've been instructed and equipped by God to attend to.

Prioritising the Word...that which is at the heart of THE gospel: the good news of Christ crucified, risen, ascended...and God's gracious offer of abundant life with Him!

It's only this gospel – THE gospel – that makes any of this: our ministry, possible.

### **POINT 3 – A Presentation (vv.5-6)**

We continue from verse 5:

<sup>5</sup>...They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup>They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Seven chosen, as proposed...presented to the Apostles.

We're told more about Stephen: not about his appearance, his job, his family or his hobbies. We're told about what's really important: 'a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.'

Note there again...the prominence of the role of the Spirit: His empowering of this early community of believers, as they achieve great things for God's growing Kingdom.

These seven are chosen, and presented to the Apostles.

Formality, recognition, confirmation that the proposal has been followed...the qualifications met...this structured model of ministry...

And, they're commissioned to the important ministry of food distribution through *prayer, and the laying on of hands*.

*Prayer*...the very first thing we read back in verse 4 that the Apostles will be giving their attention to...they're doing it right here!

*The laying on of hands*...a symbolic gesture which recognises, sets aside, empowers, supports those whom God has recognised, set aside, empowered and will continue empowering by His Spirit.

We saw our new Prime Minister sworn in recently...at a ceremony with the Governor-General...no laying on of hands, that I saw...but other symbolic gestures, as he was presented and then commissioned to this role.

Similarly, these 7 are presented and then commissioned to this ministry.

Interestingly, as we keep reading Acts, we'll see that for at least 2 of them – Stephen and Philip – their roles would change to more Word-based ministry.

A reminder for us, that humble, faithful service in less prominent ministry roles, is often required for – part of – the assessment or testing process for ministry leadership roles!

I'm reminded of Paul's instructions – again to Timothy as we read in 1 Timothy 3 – that a church leader 'must not be a recent convert.'

There's great, Godly wisdom, in people humbly serving in less prominent ministries first, before they're appointed to positions of church leadership!

#### **POINT 4 – A Proliferation (v.7)**

So far in our passage, as this model of structured ministry unfolds, we've seen a problem; addressed by a proposal;....and, the presentation of people suitably equipped to serve so as to address the problem.

The final aspect of ministry in this passage, is a proliferation....that is a huge increase, a rise, a spreading...

Verse 7:

<sup>7</sup>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.

Note here what's prolific...what it is that's spreading...

Not the number of lamingtons sold;

not the number of funerals taken;

nor the number of likes on a social media post.

No!

'The word of God spread. The number of disciples...increased rapidly....'

The Word of God spread...which results in a prolific increase in the number of people who follow Jesus: even once hard-hearted priests who recently opposed the Apostles' teaching!

More people following Jesus; the result of the spreading of the Word of God...the very thing the Apostles didn't want to neglect, when they proposed that solution to the problem they faced.

Brothers and sisters, when God's Word is rightly prioritised, it is a powerful force! A force that can enter people's hearts and change their lives....that's what the gospel is...'the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes,' writes Paul in Romans 1.

A power that the prophet Jeremiah likens to *fire, or a rock-breaking hammer*...

Do you believe in the power of the Word of God?

Do you believe, and so pray in faith, that God's Word would powerfully spread across your town, our diocese, our nation, our world: calling people to repentance, and turning them to faith in our living God?!

Does your Parish prioritise the Word of God: when it gathers for Church; when it has meetings; in people's homes...in people's hearts?

## **CLOSE**

This short passage in Acts describes ministry....as a Spirit-enabled, intentional...structured activity.

This structured ministry, which prioritises the Word of God, is so prolific! Many more people converted...their lives transformed, now following Jesus.

Jesus, who is the focus of God's plan...and the only solution for the world's greatest problem: the problem we created, the problem of our sin: our rejection of God.

As parishes across our diocese wrestle with problems, conflict, and yes – hopefully: faithfully prioritise the Word of God, are we doing this with intent, process, structure?

Structure and strategy aren't dirty words for Churches...they're not concepts we should be afraid of.

Acts 6 describes a Spirit-enabled, purposeful, structured approach to ministry.

Much activity is happening right now across our diocese, to ensure that this approach to ministry happens in all Parishes. Many of you are already involved in this activity: recently invited to complete a survey which sees us reflect on Parish ministry, through the lens of the early church described in Acts 2.

Today, in Acts 6; we're given a model of how ministry is to be structured: again, through the lens of the early church.

I encourage you to prayerfully continue your involvement in this for your Parish and for our diocese: complete the survey if you haven't yet - why not do it today - the QR code is on your screen now.

Then, look out for the survey results when they're released; prayerfully reflect on these; then: come along to the **Diocesan Conference on 30<sup>th</sup> July in Orange**, where the new Strategic Plan for our Diocese will be launched.

If you can't make it, look out for details that the diocese will publish; and then ask your Rector or LLM, your Wardens: what it's all about, what does it mean for your Parish, and how you can get involved.

Brothers and sisters: as we respond to God's grace to us in Jesus by faithfully serving Him in our Parishes, may we do so with purpose, clarity, structure.....the Word of God rightly prioritised: our faith and knowledge and love of Him deepen...and in turn: we share this – we share Jesus – with the many who are lost in our region: that they would hear and respond to the life-giving salvation only found in Jesus.

**Amen.**