

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the Word of God in order to wait on tables.' Acts 6.2.

As we have working our way through *Acts*, we have seen the church growing at a phenomenal rate. The attraction was a life-giving message of hope in Jesus *and* a never-before seen lifestyle. In the harsh world of the Roman Empire, these Jesus-followers really seemed to care. The richer members of the church, we saw, made sure no-one went without. Here in ch6 we come now across a particular group of needy people, widows.

You've all experienced children squabbling: 'it's not fair! She's got more than me!' Well, exactly the same broke out in the early church. At the very beginning nearly all the first Christians were Jews who had converted. Many of these Jews lived in Palestine and knew Hebrew. But many others had been dispersed abroad; they had forgotten their Hebrew and spoke only Greek. (That's why there is an important version of the OT in Greek called the Septuagint). These Greek-speaking Jews were known as the Diaspora, the Dispersion. These Greek-speaking Jewish Christians thought that *their* widows weren't being treated as well as the Hebrew-speaking ones, v1...

Situations like that can fester if not faced up to. The disciples took decisive action. Their solution was - 'Delegate'. Spread the load. This is exactly what happened in the OT when Moses' wise old father-in-law, Jethro, told him to appoint wise men to help him sort out the people's problems, and avoid a break-down. One person cannot do everything.

No organisation does well when there is a one-man-band. Sometimes the old-style clergy used to do everything while the

congregation were left passive. Possibly ministers felt they would be accused of being lazy if they didn't do everything; possibly they liked *controlling* everything. The point is that it can't be done. We in the URC pride ourselves that a) we are not a clerical hierarchy where ministers do all the important things, and b) we believe in the priesthood of *all* believers where everyone does their bit for the life of the church. Sharing, team-work, enabling - we cherish all this in the URC.

The word 'deacon' means a server; it isn't actually used here in *Acts 6*, but 'serving' the needy like the widows and poor was to be their role. But that didn't make these 7 men 2<sup>nd</sup>-class. They were very spiritual men, v3a... Philip was to bring the high-ranking Ethiopian eunuch to Christ, and Stephen would become the first Christian martyr. Since it was *Gk*-speakers who were moaning about bias, NB that these 7 'deacons' all have Greek names, v5b... Smart move!

What I want us to focus on this morning is the *reasoning* behind the disciples' decision. There is only so much a person can do. There are only 24 hours in a day. Unless you want a breakdown, you've got to be really ruthless and *prioritise*. You've got to decide what is really important; what must be kept and what can be binned. What the disciples were determined to keep was the ministry of the Word of God, vv2-4... Looking after the poor and the widows was very important, but the ministry of the word of God was even *more* important. It's a set of priorities not shared today, I'm afraid.

My experience is that when ministers today become overburdened, particularly with endless committees and

courses, it is the meetings that are kept and the time for prayer and Bible-reading which is scrapped. A few years ago the Revd Richard Church who was at college with me and who is now Moderator of the NW Synod published a survey he had done into the spiritual habits of our ministers. It was shocking. Would you believe that only 22% of our ministers engage in Bible Study, and only 21% have a structure personal prayer life? And we wonder why our congregations are dying! If our ministers are not being fed on God's Word, what have they to tell our congregations? If they can't be bothered with scripture, what is it that is forming their thoughts and outlook? If they are not prayerful, how can they help their parishioners? Do they really know the Lord Jesus? Our church leaders need to be converted! They need to get off the committees and on to their knees and back into the homes.

Acts 6 certainly tells us the priorities of the disciples. First and foremost was the reading, studying, and preaching of God's Word. Scripture-based, Christ-focussed, Spirit-filled and prayerful churches are the ones that are growing in this country. The priorities must be right.

But that is true not only for ministers, but for everyone in the pews. You might say to me, 'Brian, I'm too busy to pray'. Bill Hybels, the phenomenally successful pastor of Willow Creek Church in Illinois, wrote a book called, *Too Busy Not To Pray*'. If you've got all these demands on your time; all these deadlines and pressures, day after day, you jolly well need to pray for God to get you through. And if you, as a Christian are too busy to spend time in God's Word, then

you're too busy! If you're too busy to find an hour to come to church on a Sunday, then you're too busy. People are flaking out today, because they too busy, very often doing really *good* things like looking after widows but at the expense of the *best* things, like listening to God from his Word.

It's all to do with *priorities*. You can tell a person by his priorities, by what he thinks is important. The secret of life is to get your priorities *right*. Too many people are unhappy because their priorities are *wrong*. Their hearts are set on the wrong things.

And it's true that where there's a will, there's a way. John Wesley's mother, Susannah, was a remarkable woman. She had 19 children, though only ten survived. Her husband, the Revd Samuel Wesley was often in prison for debt. Susannah was a busy woman. And yet she made time for her children and for her Lord. Each child had a whole hour to their mother alone every week. John's was on Thursday. Later in life he looked back on that happy hour alone with his darling mother. Every day of her life, she set an hour aside from the housekeeping, the rearing and schooling of her 10 children for prayer and Bible Study. Even amidst the hubbub of all the children, if she wanted time with the Lord, she would simply throw her apron over her head, to be private with God.

Where there's a will, there's a way. No-one was busier than Susannah Wesley. What I am urging you to do is to make room for God in your busy lives. Speak to him in prayer and listen to him as you read your Bible. Get your priorities right. The disciples did, and see how the church grew, v7... !