



## THE DIVERSITY OF MINISTRY

SERIES: THE SPREADING FLAME

Catalog No. 1239

Acts 6:1-7

Tenth Message

Gary Vanderet

May 5th, 2002

Many Christians are unaware that every believer is a participant in the ministry. While they may not have taken vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, or taken holy orders, all Christians are called to be ministers of the gospel.

Throughout the centuries, however, the church has turned away from many of the vital principles that made it such a powerful and compelling force in its early years—including this principle of the priesthood of all believers. A gradual transfer of responsibility came about to those who were called the clergy, a term derived the Latin *clericus*, or priest. The Scriptural principle that every believer is a priest before God was lost, and a special group, the clergy, emerged.

Henceforth the clergy was sought out for practically everything involving ministry. But when ministry is left to the professionals, there is nothing for others to do except attend church and listen, and bring people with them. Christianity, as a result, has become a spectator sport. Someone has said that football is a game played by twenty-two men desperately in need of rest, observed by fifty thousand people in the stadium, desperately in need of exercise. That is how we could view Christianity following its takeover by the professionals.

Our Lord himself is proof that all believers are called to be ministers. Jesus was a layman, not a clergyman. Preaching was not his profession; it wasn't a profession in those days. He was a carpenter. He didn't even come from the clerical tribe of Levi, but from the tribe of Judah. But he set the pace for all Christians in terms of ministry. Once he said, "I came not be ministered to, but to minister, and to give my life as a ransom for many."

In our studies in the book of Acts we are observing the life of the early church. These newborn believers depended on the life of God within them, and as a result were having a tremendous impact in the city of Jerusalem. They were loving one another in practical ways and boldly proclaiming the good news. In our last study we read that, "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 Christ" (Acts 5:42).

This success came at some cost. The devil repeatedly tried to destroy the church, but without success. We have seen that so far he has used force, first, through intimidation, and second, through violence and persecu-

tion. Then, having failed to destroy the church from the outside, he tried to destroy it from within, through moral compromise.

The devil's third means of attack, which we will look at this morning, might be the most cunning of all. Having failed in his first two attempts through persecution and moral compromise, now he tries to undermine the church through false teaching, by distracting the apostles from their primary task of preaching and prayer.

**Now at this time, while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.** (Acts 6:1, NASB)

The disciples were increasing in number, and so was the number of individuals who needed to be cared for. Part of the power of the early church's witness lay in the practicality of their love for one another. Earlier we read that so powerful was their love there wasn't a needy person among them. As need arose, believers sold their homes and possessions and gave the proceeds to the apostles to distribute equitably to needy families.

But this unity and love is now threatened by a complaint. This unpleasant word is the same term used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the Jews' murmuring against Moses in the desert. But grumbling is inappropriate for believers.

Their complaint involved the welfare of the widows, those who couldn't earn their own living and had no relatives to support them. The church accepted responsibility for them, and a daily distribution of money or food was made to them. Most versions say food, but the text says that a distribution was made. It may have been food, but more likely it was money, or perhaps both. The word for serving or distribution is *diakonia* (service), from which we get our word deacon. A service was being performed for these widows.

Jerusalem had a large minority of Hellenistic or Greek-speaking Jews who had lived abroad for centuries and had returned home to their holy city. As a consequence they not only spoke Greek, they thought and lived like Greeks. The Hebraic Jews, on the other hand, spoke Aramaic, preserving their Hebrew language and culture. They were the Hebrew of Hebrews, so to speak. Tension arose between these two groups. It had always been so.

Sadly, it continued inside the church. The Greek-speaking Jews complained that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. They started murmuring, "Our Hebrew brothers are favoring their own people." It is not known whether the complaint was imagined or real. Certainly it was not deliberate. Perhaps it was the result of a lack of administration, due to the increase in numbers.

The apostles act quickly and openly.

**So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." (6:2-4)**

Up to this point, the apostles apparently were part of this daily distribution. Now they are alerted to a deeper problem than temporary disunity. Managing this situation of organizing the distribution and settling complaints was taking so much time and energy they had little or no time for preaching and teaching—the work that Christ had commissioned them to do.

But the apostles don't force their own solution on the church. They call a congregational meeting and say, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables." They are not saying, "We're too good to serve tables. Let's pick out some talented people to do this menial task, while we devote ourselves to the really spiritual work of preaching."

This text is not saying that preaching is more important than social work. These men had been in the Upper Room with Jesus. They had seen him strip down to the garb of a servant and wash their dirty feet. They had heard his words, "He who is the greatest among you shall be your servant."

No, these apostles were not minimizing this ministry, or saying that they were too dignified for this work. This was a question of gifts, of calling. They were not free to stop doing what they had been called to do, so they made a proposal for the church. They asked the congregation to choose seven men to whom they could delegate this responsibility. The men they chose must have three qualifications. First, they must have a good reputation. These should be people who could be trusted, who already had the confidence of others. Second, they must be full of the Holy Spirit. They should be spiritually mature men who were dependent on the Spirit of God rather than their own strength. Third, they must be full of wisdom. They should know how apply truth to practical situations.

Though the word deacon is not used in this passage, it is commonly thought that this is the origin of the office of deacon. It certainly laid the foundation for this wonderful office which, while taking many different forms in the history of the church, has done so much to

show Christ's love to people in need. William Barclay makes this observation in his commentary, "It is extremely interesting to note that the first office-bearers to be appointed were chosen not to talk but for practical service."<sup>1</sup> They spoke all right, but not with words!

The church recognizes the wisdom of the proposal.

**The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. (6:5)**

Their process of selection is not described. The word for select (verse 3) means "to look out for." Occasionally it means "visit." These leaders were probably nominated by the congregation but appointed by the apostles.

Notice that all of those selected had Greek-speaking names. Some have assumed that they all were Greek-speaking Jews, selected to satisfy the complainers. But we must remember that even among the twelve disciples there was an Andrew and a Philip—Greek names—but they were Hebrews, so we cannot be certain.

**And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. (6:6-7)**

Because the apostles devoted themselves to the Scriptures, the word of God kept on growing and many were being converted.

These verses illustrate an important principle: God calls every Christian into ministry, but to different forms of ministry. All Christians are called into ministry, *diakonia*, service. All are followers of Jesus, who declared, "I came not be ministered to, but to minister, and to give my life as a ransom for many."

John Stott makes an important observation in noting that the distinction in this passage is between what is called "the ministry of the word" (verse 4), and the "ministry of tables" (verse 2). The distinction is between pastoral and social work; between speaking and serving gifts. Both are valid forms of ministry. *Diakonia* is the word used to describe both. Both require spiritual people, men and women filled with the Holy Spirit. The only difference between them is that they require different gifts.<sup>2</sup>

There is a lot of confusion in the Christian world about this subject. Christians further that confusion by referring to pastors as being "in the ministry." People who are going off to seminary say that they are "going into the ministry." What ministry are they talking about? Again, Stott notes that that word "ministry" in the New Testament is used of all kinds of service. It has no precise meaning until the kind of ministry referred to is identified.<sup>3</sup>

All followers of Christ are called to ministry. Some are called into ministry in the secular community: in technology, business, the media, education. Some are called into the ministry at home: as a wife and mother, a homemaker. These are fulltime Christian ministries.

It is critically important to capture this vision of a wide diversity of ministries. Paul Stevens spoke to us recently about all of us being created in God's image. He talked about God being in the business of creating, upholding, reconciling and restoring, and all the vocations that flow out of those images. We bring missionaries and elders in front of the congregation and lay hands on them and set them apart for ministry, as we should. Paul's visit here with us has put a seed in my mind. I would like to have many of you come and share with us what your ministry looks like in your workplace, and give all of us an opportunity to pray for you.

The danger to the apostles was not that they were to be too busy in ministry, but that they would be too preoccupied with the wrong ministry: that they would sacrifice the ministry of the word, to which they had been called, for the ministry of service (or tables), to which they had not been called.

This is a danger in many churches that don't understand this principle about the role of a pastor in a local church. Though a pastor is not an apostle, according to the New Testament his role is that of a shepherd who cares for the flock by feeding them, either the whole congregation or smaller groups within it. A pastor-teacher's main responsibility is leading people to maturity through the ministry of the word. His role, stated clearly in Ephesians 4, is to "equip the saints for the work of service."

A pastor is called to a ministry of the word and prayer. Many pastors, however, function more like administrators. They fill their time with programs and committee meetings. They think they have to be multi-functional. They spend more time on the telephone, or the modern telephone, e-mail, than they do in the Bible. And churches don't help. I am reluctant to send out young men into a pastoral ministry unless they have a clear understanding of what God has called them to do.

At various times I hear about churches seeking a pastor. The following are the qualifications that one church is asking for:

Experience in a large church setting or similar experience in managing staff in a business setting; administratively gifted with a coach/team management style; passion for reaching unchurched; willingness to work and ability to make things happen.

I wonder whether they are looking for a pastor or a CEO. As a consequence of this kind of thing, pastors try to do everything, so that they are left with no time for study and prayer. How can pastors preach or teach if they don't have adequate time to study and pray? That is why there is such a low level of teaching in many pulpits. Pastors are absorbed in the wrong kind of minis-

try. How can the church be equipped to maturity if the pastor isn't teaching the people? The devil, of course, is delighted with this. He has succeeded in his strategy of distraction.

On a personal note, I struggle with this. I'm a people person. I love people. I love counseling and building community. People energize me. Studying is hard for me. The continual exhortation to me from my brothers on the elder board is, "How is your studying coming along? Are you taking time to study, to let God speak to you through the word?" I am glad to have brothers who push me to "keep the main thing the main thing." We are blessed that from the beginning we have had leaders who understood this principle.

When a congregation or its pastors are not doing what God has called them to do, preaching declines, and as a result, Christian understanding and living declines. Such a church is prey to all kinds of false teaching. It is stuck in a state of perpetual immaturity. As Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote in his book, *Preaching and Preachers*, "The decadent periods and eras in the history of the church have always been those in which preaching has declined. Error and evil flourish when truth languishes. And Christ's flock fall prey to the wolves when there are no true shepherds to feed and protect them."<sup>4</sup>

But there is a second tragic result of this condition that is so prevalent in churches. Not only are pastors tired and worn out and failing to study and pray, the saints are not being equipped. They are not using the gifts God has given them. They are prevented from functioning in their God-given roles. Oftentimes pastors in their arrogance think they hold in their hands all the power and authority for ministry. People can't do anything without checking with them. But the pastor's role is to equip and set people free for ministry. Christians don't need approval to start a ministry.

I will close with a story that practically illustrates what we have been learning.

Once upon a time, the animals decided they should do something meaningful to meet the problems of the new world. So they organized a school.

They adopted an activity curriculum of running, climbing, swimming, and flying. To make it easier to administer the curriculum, all the animals took all the subjects.

The duck was excellent in swimming; in fact, better than his instructor. But he made only passing grades in flying, and was very poor in running. Since he was slow in running, he had to drop swimming and stay after school to practice running. This caused his web feet to be badly worn, so that he was only average in swimming. But average was quite acceptable, so nobody worried about that—except the duck.

The rabbit started at the top of his class in running, but developed a nervous twitch in his leg muscles because of so much make-up work in swimming.

The squirrel was excellent in climbing, but he encountered constant frustration in flying class because his teacher made him start from the ground up instead of from the treetop down. He developed Charlie horses from over exertion, and so he only got a C in climbing and a D in running.

The eagle was a problem child and was severely disciplined for being a non-conformist. In climbing classes he beat all the others to the top of the tree, but insisted on using his own way to get there...

What is true of creatures in the forest is true of Christians in the family. God has not made us all the same. He never intended to. He planned and designed our differences and unique capabilities. He placed us in his family and gave us spiritual gifts.

If God has made you a duck-saint, you're a duck. Swim like mad, but don't get discouraged because you wobble when you run or flap instead of fly.

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1. William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: St. Andrews, 1955), 52.
2. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), 122.
3. Stott, *Acts*, 122.
4. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972).