

The Word of God

Acts 6:1–7

July 22, 2001

“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God. . . . But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ . . . And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly.” Here is the heart of what is going on. Here is the core of the church’s task and being, then and now. Here is direction for the church yet today, as we seek to be faithful in the new millennium. “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God. . . . But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” This is true for ministers, and it is true for the church as a whole. It is true for ministers and those preparing for the ministry as they devote themselves to praying and preaching. And it is true for the church as a whole as the church lives by the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as the church yearns for the preaching of the gospel, and as the church provides for the preaching of the gospel. The single most important thing we do here at Grace Covenant is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Prayer prepares us to preach and to hear. Music moves our hearts and stirs our souls. Christian education helps us to understand the word of God. Worship frames the preaching. Christian life flows out of preaching. Christian mission flows out of preaching. Christian fellowship flows out of preaching. The center, the core, the heart of it all is the preaching of the gospel. The apostles knew this then. It is time for the church at large to learn it again now.

Today’s reading goes two directions at the same time. Both are important, then and now. But they are distinct, so we need to distinguish them in our thoughts and actions. The rapidly growing, early Christian church had assumed significant responsibility in caring for its poor. We have already seen that people of means sold their houses and fields so that there was not a needy person among the early church. “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number,” so that the membership numbered perhaps in the tens of thousands, the sheer administration of the relief of the poor had become overwhelming. There were offerings to be received, money to be handled, requests to be answered, and distributions to be made. I do not know whether they had to keep records or fill out reports for tax purposes, but there were significant financial management aspects to the stewardship of the early church. The apostles simply could not keep up with it anymore. Complaints of neglect were arising, not necessarily based in reality, but threatening to split the fledgling church along linguistic and ethnic, if not racial, lines. In order to alleviate the situation immediately, to eliminate even the appearance of favoritism, as well as any possibility of its reality, in short, to provide adequately for the relief of the poor, a whole other group of men were chosen, prayed over, set aside for this job, and charged with this responsibility. That took care of the problem.

You see, providing for relief of the poor falls into the category of being too important to leave to the ministers! In order to be absolutely sure that it got done, they got somebody else to do it. There was a division of labor, not because relief of the poor was unimportant, but because it was so important that they wanted to be sure that it got done. It is not at all the case that the apostles were looking down on it. But they needed to tend to their primary calling. So the church provided for another way to distribute relief to the poor. Some have said that today’s reading depicts the selection of the first deacons. That is a little bit curious since the word “deacon” does

not even appear here. Nevertheless, we do find that helping the poor, especially within and among the church, is so vitally important to what the church is and to what the church is all about that a whole new office was formed and people were chosen to fill it in order that this work would be done. It is still important today. We continue to have deacons today to lead this entire congregation in ministries of sympathy and compassion both within and beyond the congregation. We seek to assist our own members as needed. We take up offerings for the relief of hunger. We serve meals at the Stuart Circle Meals Ministry. We serve meals at Freedom House. We work through the William Byrd Community Center. And there are other ministries like these. All of this is part of what the church is and what it is about. We dare not neglect this diaconal mission.

And yet, at the same time, a division of labor was made then not only to provide for the relief of the poor but also, and perhaps especially, to provide for the preaching of the word of God. The division works both ways. The relief of the poor was too important to leave to the ministers. The preaching of the gospel was too important to allow it to get pushed aside by administrative responsibilities or other ministries. Indeed, the preaching of the gospel is too important to neglect for any reason. The preaching of the gospel is what the church is all about and is both how and why the church exists. It was true then. It is true now. The church at large desperately needs to learn this again in our own day.

What is this word of God? The word of God is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The word of God is the good news that in Jesus Christ our sins have been forgiven and we have been promised eternal life. That is why the apostles then preached Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected. He was killed for our sin and made alive for our life. And that is why the early church provided for the apostles to preach of the word. And when they did, what happened? “The word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.” To say that “the word of God increased” is to say that their preaching of the gospel increased in quantity, in quality, in amount, and in effectiveness. Being relieved of their responsibilities for caring for the poor, they concentrated upon their preaching. And when they did, “the number of the disciples multiplied greatly.” Here is the aim of it all. Here is the goal. Here is the reason for preaching. Here is the reason for the word of God. The purpose, and the natural result, of the preaching of the gospel is the building up of the church. That is what the church in today’s world seems to have lost. That is what the church at large has forgotten today. Our daughter churches in Korea still know this; our daughter churches in China still know this; our daughter churches in Africa still know this; but we have neglected the very lessons we taught them. It is time for us to relearn these lessons. This is what the church in the United States needs to reclaim, now, with strength and fervor, for the good of the church, for the good of the nation, and for the good of the world. The purpose of the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ is to increase the number of disciples of Jesus Christ and to build up the church of Jesus Christ. But the mainline churches in this nation have been declining for decades. We have been losing members as if it did not matter. We have fed the poor but failed to preach the gospel. And we have no one to thank but ourselves. If the proclamation of the word of God leads to the growth of the church of God, it stands to reason that the lack of growth stems from the dearth of preaching and the silence of the pulpits. When we have neglected preaching, when we have neglected discipleship, the church has suffered. I do not know why we are surprised. But now is the day to end all of that. Now is the day to provide again for the increase in the preaching of the word of God. Now is the day to provide again for the

multiplying of the number of disciples. Now is the day to provide again for a great many to be obedient to the faith. We can start that here at Grace Covenant, and we can join with others who have rediscovered it, and together we can lead the larger church into a new reformation into a revival of preaching the gospel, and into a season of growth. Indeed, we can do no other.

“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God. . . . But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ . . . And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly.” Here is our mandate and our promise. The word of God is the word of life. It was by the word that God created us. It was by the word that God saved us. And it is by the word that God sustains us today. When life is good, it calls us to give thanks. When life is hard, it carries us through the rough times. When we sin because we want to, and when we sin even though we do not want to, the word condemns our sin and forgives us. When we are lost, it shows us the way. When we are strong, it gives us opportunity and responsibility to serve. When we are weak, it gives us strength. When we are divided, it makes us one. When we are broken, it makes us whole, When we are dying, it welcomes us home. That is why we come here to Grace Covenant week after week, to hear the word of God, read and preached, to meet the living God present in the word, to be forgiven, to be made whole, to be made new, to be lifted up, to be made alive, to be joined together with each other and all the communion of the saints. We come to hear, to believe, and to obey. We come to be disciples. We come to be built into the church of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God!

It is our privilege, in the providence of God, to be located only two miles from Union Theological Seminary, one of ten seminaries of our Presbyterian denomination in the nation. At these seminaries, the next generation of ministers is being trained to preach. In so far as we are able, in so far as we have contact with these students, national and international, and with the faculty and staff of Union Seminary, we encourage them in their studies, in their diligence, in the faithfulness, and in their preaching of the word. This is part of this congregation’s providing for the preaching of the word.

It is our privilege, in the providence of God, to be a part of the Presbytery of the James, one of one-hundred-seventy-three presbyteries in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). At each of these presbyteries, the single most important thing done is the receiving of ministers to fill the pulpits of their churches and to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. In this presbytery, we want to fulfill our responsibility for helping to seek the very best preachers we can find for the Presbyterian churches of central Virginia. This is part of this congregation’s providing for the preaching of the word.

It is our privilege, in the providence of God, to be located here on Monument Avenue, in the heart of the Fan, in the historic city of Richmond. Here we intend to exercise our diaconal ministry to the poor, as an outgrowth of our preaching ministry, to a greater extent than we have ever done it before. At the same time, we want to extend our preaching ministry to this city as never before, with multiple services here, with better publicity, with expanded radio broadcasts, and with the computer Internet. We are committed to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the preaching of the word of God, in this time and place.

Today’s passage begins with the disciples being increased in number, and it ends with the number of disciples being multiplied greatly. It begins and ends with church growth. That is what the gospel is about: building up the church. It is not just about going to heaven; it is about building up the church starting here on earth. It is not just about feeding the hungry, though it is about that, it is also about building up the church as the believing fellowship of the people of

God. When the gospel is preached, people are attracted, and healed, and made whole. They want to hear more, and they want to dedicate their lives to their Savior, Jesus Christ. That is the way it is supposed to happen. That is the way it is depicted in the book of Acts. I do not know why we have gotten so skittish about that. Some today want to make us think there is merit in the decline of the church. But we want to live our lives as a church today in continuity with the early Christian church of the book of Acts and in continuity with the great church of Jesus Christ which has grown in every century and reached around the world. We want to preach the gospel, and we want this church to grow. If you have never made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, we invite and urge you to do so. If you do not have a church home in the area, we invite and encourage you to join Grace Covenant. Indicate your interest on the attendance pad, or speak to me after church. If you are worshiping with us by way of radio, we invite you to join us and become a part of Grace Covenant. Call us, write us, or E-mail us through our web site.

In the days and years to come, let it be said of this church, Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, that its ministers, elders, deacons, and members knew this: “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God. . . . But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ . . . And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly.”

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220