

The Ministry of the Word is an and

The first preachers of the early church were the apostles and they had a problem: Some thing that was good was threatening to displace what was best. This is recorded for us in Acts 6:1-7.

The problem

The Jerusalem church was growing at an extraordinary speed. Conversions were taking place every day, both among the local Jews as well as among the Greek-speaking Jews visiting the city from abroad. Many of the new believers were widows who had no means of material support, and their new brothers and sisters had taken on the responsibility of providing them with a daily meal.

The problem was that many of them, especially among the Greek-speakers, were going hungry. The distribution system was not working. Genuinely needy people were suffering. There was growing discontent in the church, especially among the Greek-speakers. If it continued, the church would soon split. Why was the system not working?

It was because of the apostles. There are only so many hours in a day and they were perfectly clear about how to use them to the best advantage. They had drawn up a list of priorities from which they were not going to budge, even if this meant that increasing numbers of widows went hungry. There were three items on their list, which went like this:

1. Prayer
2. Ministry of the Word
3. Everything else

There had never been so many believers as there were now. How they needed praying for! How they needed feeding from God's Word! In the apostles' judgement, spiritual nourishment was infinitely more important than physical nourishment. Nonetheless, it was not right that widows should go hungry, just as it was not right that preachers should get distracted from their first and second priorities. But how, how, was it going to be possible to have both satisfied widows and praying preachers?

The solution

'The twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.'" (Acts 6:2-4, ESV)

The preachers kept their priorities, the widows got their meals, the new men became actively engaged in vital ministry, the church peace was restored, the Word of God spread wonderfully and the flood of conversions continued to astonish the watching world!

The apostles were as dependent upon prayer as any other preachers. They understood that it is better to default on every other responsibility than it is to neglect prayer. It even takes precedence over the ministry of the Word. Compared with prayer, preaching is only an 'and'. It must never take first place. Prayer recognises God as God, and depends on Him to do what He would not do without prayer.

Prayer, and prayer alone, is the way by which the Lord's armies call Him onto the field.

True prayer stirs itself up to lay hold on God (Isaiah 64:7). This takes time, energy, faith and perseverance. It is easy to allow other things to slip in and get in the way.

It is not only sinful or questionable things that provide such hindrances, but also things that are right and necessary which have been given a wrong priority. The servant of God gets sidetracked. The door to the secret place is not shut (Matthew 6:6).

The preacher gets caught up in his exegesis and preparation, his administration, his commitments, the needs around him, or in the actual act of preaching. He no longer knows what it is to wrestle with God and to prevail (Genesis 32:28).

The secret

How is it that the apostles were able to keep to their priorities and so many of us are not? It is not difficult to give an answer. We only have to think about what they had experienced in the previous three or four years. They had seen the Lord, spent time with Him, listened to His teaching and witnessed His miracles. Some of them had been present at both His transfiguration on the mountain and His bloodied agony in the garden. But none of these things, nor the cross, the blood, the resurrection, the appearances or the ascension had made preachers out of them. For this they had wait to for the day of Pentecost. Every apostle knew that no one could be a true preacher without being 'clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24:49).

In recent days they had learned the lesson afresh. We do not read that any of them had prayed for Pentecost to be repeated. They knew well enough that this could not be. They had lived through a unique event. But they also knew that if they were left to themselves, they would be for ever powerless. It was essential that they should have the direct and immediate blessing of God. For this they could only pray, which is precisely what they did after it became clear that the Jewish authorities would not tolerate any further preaching: 'And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the Word of God with boldness' (Acts 4:31).

Since then, the persecution had been stepped up. No wonder they kept prayer as their first priority! Mere words would not conquer their enemies and win the world. They needed a force by which they could declare God's truth with ever-loving hearts, fiery tongues and superhuman authority.

This power from the Holy Spirit was the one thing to be sought and secured. They could not work this up; but they could call it down, and this is what they set themselves to do. A little prayer would not do. No average wave would ever sweep away the resistant Rock of Gibraltar, the unregenerate heart, even though it might throw up spangles of spray filled with rainbows. A resistless tsunami was required. God alone can do God's work, and we must ask Him to do it.

Suggestions

In seeking to put all this into practice, I have found the following suggestions to be helpful.

The first is to live by the motto, 'Prayer first, study and activity second.' My normal routine is to get up and have breakfast, engage in family and personal devotions, shave and shower, and then to give myself to a session of sustained prayer before doing anything else at all.

The second is to pray outside. This keeps me from giving in to the temptation to start other work before having a time of special communion with God. During thirty-five years of pastoral ministry in the inner city, this meant walking the streets and parks, and praying out loud - but not too loudly. At certain times a large umbrella and waterproof trousers proved useful!

The third is to have a prayer schedule. I have a small and robust notebook divided into five sections. In each section is a list of church members, regular attendees, family members, friends, ministers and missionaries, church activities and Christian ministries.

I seek to pray through one section each day. So why are there only five sections? This is because I do not follow this system on Sundays, and also have a 'free day' to catch up on any day's intercession that has been interrupted or hindered.

The fourth is to use aids which will stimulate prayer. Almost every day I recite a portion of the Westminster Shorter Catechism and use it as a foundation for prayer. I also make frequent use of the writings of E.M. Bounds, especially his 'Power through Prayer', using each sentence as a 'prompt'.

The fifth is to prepare sermons in this spirit of prayer. On my walks I often take a photocopy of the Scripture passage on which I will be preaching. I run it round in my head, talk to the Lord about it until the message is clear, and then make notes. Such prayerful interaction with the text adds a marvellous freshness to the exegetical and other preparatory work which will then follow in the study.

'Prayer is the first thing, the second thing, the third thing necessary to a minister. Pray, then, my dear brother; pray, pray, pray.' (Edward Payson)

By Stuart Olyott