

Share (Acts 6:1-7)

For the early church their key aim and priority was to spread the Word of God about Jesus. In Acts 6, however, they run into problems and have to reassess their priorities. What can we learn from the attitude and behaviour of the early church that will help us as a church today to open our mouth and share God's Word?

How do you measure a church's achievement?

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In many organisations these days there is a lot of pressure to measure things to ensure that an organisation is being effective.

I was talking to someone this week who says the new owners of their business were putting a lot of pressure on them to ensure growth in profits and turnover.

Schools are under a lot of pressure to ensure good exam results for their students.

Even hospitals are often measured on things like how short their waiting times are for operations.

What we measure about an organisation shows what we think its main goal or aim should be.

So what about the church, what is the key goal for the church?

The book of Acts was written by Luke and it is the story of the early church. As we see in this passage the early church faced challenges in this case from division within. More frequently in Acts it was persecution. Yet, the overall flow of the story of the church in Acts is one of growth or success, a growth or success that was measurable.

Luke shows this by peppering his account with indications of the general growth of the church.

Number of believers:

To start with it is the number of believers that is said to grow:

"Those who accepted **his message** were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day." (Acts 2:41)

"praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who **were being saved**." (Acts 2:47)

"But many who heard **the message believed**, and the number of men grew to about five thousand." (Acts 4:4)

"Nevertheless, more and more men and women **believed in the Lord** and were added to their number." (Acts 5:14)

"Now during those days, when **the disciples** were increasing in number..." (Acts 6:1)

A sign of growth is of course the number of people who are part of the church. We want as many people to know Jesus and be saved. Every new believer is someone saved to be a child of God and have eternal life. Clearly, the more the better.

But notice that Luke links those being saved, those believing with the word or message of the apostles about the Lord Jesus. It is those who believed the message that find salvation. This shows us why the Word of God is so important. It is by hearing the word that we are saved and it is by following the word that we grow and develop as Christians.

So, it is no wonder that for the apostles in the early church the main aim had to be sharing the word of God. Look for example at the end of chapter 5:

"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)

Word of God:

And as Acts goes on the growth is recorded not so much in the growth in Christians, but in the growth or spread of the word of God. These are of course linked. The more the word spread, the more people become disciples. The more disciples there were, the more the word could spread. So in Acts 6:7, we have a phrase that Luke will repeat as the story progresses:

"So **the word of God spread...**" (Acts 6:7)

"But **the word of God** continued to increase and **spread.**" (Acts 12:24)

"**The word of the Lord spread** through the whole region." (Acts 13:49)

"In this way **the word of the Lord spread** widely and grew in power." (Acts 19:20)

And of course the Word of God continues to spread today. In the survey on Share this week, people told us how they are managing to share God's word despite the difficulties of connecting with others during lockdown:

In what ways, if any, have you been able to share your faith with non-Christians during this time?

- During telephone conversations
- Encouraging family to pray. Answering children in my family's questions.
- By sharing some of the online services, has open doors to discuss faith with some non christian friends and relatives.
- Short sentences in a card or letter. During telephone calls.
- At work, whenever the opportunity arises.
- In conversation with people i simply say i will pray for you which has resulted in more conversation the next time we meet.

How can we open the church's mouth?

How do we spread God's word. Well we need as a church to open our mouth to speak it! That of course takes courage, but opening our mouth to speak God's words also requires us to open other things as well.

It takes open ears...

Firstly, we need to open our ears to hear God's word, before we can speak it!

Interestingly, our passage is the first time in Acts that the believers are called disciples. You see that in verse 1,2 and 7!

A disciple is basically a learner, an apprentice. When we become Christians we become those who are learning about what God has done for us and how we can better serve him. A disciple of Christ is an apprentice of Christ as we learn to be and act more like Jesus.

I think Luke emphasises this description of Christians here, because he is also talking for the first time about people other than the Twelve apostles taking on roles in the church and before taking on key roles in the church it is essential that you are a genuine disciple - someone with ears open to learn from God's word.

So, how can we open our ears to God's word? Well there are obvious answers: join in with services and listen to sermons, read the Bible regularly, meet with others to discuss God's word.

Our online survey showed that for some this had proved more difficult during the Pandemic, whilst for others the lockdowns had freed them to engage more effectively with God's words:

What has helped you to engage more with the Bible during lockdown?

More difficult:

- I have struggled
- Not taken enough time for God . Allowing family and health to overtake everything else.
- Lack of teaching and guidance makes it harder to understand Gods message sometimes
- Isolation has made it very hard and living with a non christian husband. Need the company of others to read talk and discuss passages. Felt I was reading but my ears were closed.

Better:

- *Having more time out from daily 'life'*
- *Looking for help or for answers.*
- *Having more alone time I've been able to dig deeper into God's word.*
- *Because this is such an uncertain time there has been more times when I wanted to look and hear what God has to say or to ask for his wisdom.*

We need to acknowledge that it is not always easy to open our ears to God's word, but the more we see how central it is to our discipleship. the more we will want to keep it as a priority in our lives.

It takes open eyes...

So, for the church to be more effective at opening its mouth to speak God's word, we need to have open ears to hear God's word, to be eager disciples.

We also need to pray as we have seen in previous passages in Acts. Indeed, in this passage the apostles see prayer as a joint priority alongside teaching the word.

Prayer means opening our eyes to see God's character, that God is bigger than our problems and to see God's mission.

That last aspect of prayer is also key to the church opening its mouth to speak God's word. In this passage the growth of the church and the Apostle's involvement in caring for the needy is resulting in a dispute. The distribution of food to widows is not being done properly and the

Apostles need to make a decision. Are they going to focus on preaching the word effectively or distributing the food effectively - as the church grows they cannot do both!

The Apostle's, see this issue clearly, because their eyes are open to God's mission as they make clear in verse 2:

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." (Acts 6:2)

Their eyes are open to see God's mission is for them to focus on the sharing of God's word. That is the top priority and so they act to keep it as a priority. What is more, the church they serve agrees with them - they are pleased with the proposal that the Apostles make!

If we are to be a church with an open mouth to speak God's word, we need to open our eyes to see that it is a top priority of God's Mission.

When we see that, then we like the apostles will seek to find ways to keep sharing the Word of God. At the moment that is difficult, but we are discovering new ways through social media, You Tube, emails, phone calls and the like. But we also need to think how we can share the word more effectively as we come out of lockdown.

In the survey we asked that question:

How do you think the way we share God's word with one another and the outside world could be different after the Pandemic is over?

- I would hope that we would have more compassion and focus on those who don't know Jesus. Getting away from our needs to the needs of the lost. Sharing a favourite scripture that has proved invaluable to us can sometimes speak to people too.
- Continuing to have Zoom meetings for Growth Teams would help those who can't get out physically to a group.
- Continuing on line services to encourage people to attend the re-started physical ones.
- We should keep the multi media channels we have developed and make sure our actions reflect God's Word.

It takes open hands - 6:1-7

So, the Twelve Apostles had eyes open to see that God's mission priority was sharing the Word of God and that was in danger if they were too caught up in the caring part of a growing church.

But, that did not mean they thought care was unimportant in the church As we saw last week caring for those in need was a key distinguishing feature of the early church. So how did the Apostle's solve the problem?

They opened their hands and encouraged the church to open their hands.

The Church opened their hands by seeing the need for new workers and putting forward the best people to take on this new role. Possibly the other church members had to commit to financing these new workers in addition to the Apostles. Whatever, this move required a growth in generosity, service and leadership within the church. The church needed to open its hands to help the church be effective at both caring for one another and sharing God's Word.

Also, the Apostles as leaders of the church had to open their hands by letting go of a key role that they had. In appointing people to the role, they 'laid their hands on them.' This was a symbol of handing over the role to new people. If we want to see the word of God grow then sometimes we need to let go of some of our responsibilities which we may enjoy having to be released to focus on what God is calling us to. We also need to do this in order to raise up new leaders in the church.

In fact both Stephen and Philip, two of the new leaders mentioned here, went on to be key people in spreading the word of God in the early church!

What about us?

At present the church of England generally is facing a challenge in a lack of finances and a lack of trained clergy. Sadly, this is a sign of decline, rather than growth.

However, the solutions are the same, whether we are facing problems caused by decline or growth. We need to:

- open our ears, so that we all become better disciples.
- open our eyes, to make sure we are clear on God's mission and can prioritise that as we make difficult decisions.
- open our hands, so that the preachers in the church are released to focus on what matters - teaching the word of God, whilst also ensuring that we are a caring church.
- open our mouths to boldly spread the word of God in whatever way we can.

As we face changes ahead as a church, particularly in the new partnership with St. George's, lets respond to the challenges and opportunities this presents in the same way the early church responded to the challenges they faced!