

Sermon preached by Mr J K Popham  
at Galeed Chapel, Brighton  
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On the occasion of the baptism of R.H.P.

Acts 6 v 7

"And the Word of God increased, and the number  
of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem  
greatly, and a great company of the priests were  
obedient to the faith"

The first clause of the text is what I would particularly speak of as enabled. "And the Word of God increased". By "the Word of God" we ordinarily understand the canon of Holy Scripture, the Bible, as we now possess it. At the date of these words there was but the Old Testament. Christ was newly gone to heaven and had just shed abundantly on the disciples His Spirit, the promise of the Father. The blessed day of Pentecost was just commenced; its effects were spreading rapidly, widely. It has ceased really as to some effects. Just then it was new and the power wonderful. The Word of God, as we have it in the Scriptures, is that by which God wonderfully works. He quickens the dead. The saints are begotten as by an incorruptible seed, "the Word of God which liveth and abideth for ever". It is a sword by which the Lord wounds His enemies; He rides prosperously in the earth with His sword girded upon His thigh (Psalm 45 v 3 and 4) He makes use of His sword in very remarkable cases and we have visible effects of it. I have often thought that one of the most wonderful and indestructible arguments and evidences of the truth as we have it in the Scriptures, and the correctness of our translation, is this - the abundant testimony He has given of His Word in the hearts of sinners, thereby making them saints, bringing them down to His footstool, subduing their rebellion, causing them to worship Him in Spirit and in truth. And where, in His providence, He has a number of them, He brings them together under the power of the Word, and the guidance of the Spirit, into church fellowship. Every visible church of Christ is a proof of the power of the

Scriptures in the hands of the blessed Spirit. This, I say, has been to me one of the greatest proofs of the soundness of our translation, that God has cared most signally for the Bible, in dark days. He caused it to be preserved; He gave singular care to the holy Roll of the Jews, though much of it testified against them. May we, therefore, value the Scriptures. As I have often spoken in your hearing, it is to one a grievous sign of God's departure from the land that wicked men have risen to cut the Bible to pieces with the pen-knife of their infidel criticism. When a sinner feels the power of the Scriptures, his mind is subdued, his thoughts captivated, enchained, and his judgment informed.

Then we understand first of all by the "Word of God", the Bible, the Holy Scriptures. But I think that the term was not so used in the text, but that something somewhat different is intended here, that it was the Word of the ministry, that the Lord was so with His servants the Apostles. When the number of the disciples had multiplied and there were many external things to attend to - the tables to serve, the poor to look after, etc. - the Apostles would no longer suffer themselves to be distracted by these things, but they appointed men, full of faith and the Holy Ghost, who should relieve the Apostles, the servants of the Lord, of those duties, that they might attend to the ministry of the Word, and give themselves to prayer without those distractions. (The office of deacon was created by emergency; it was an office doubtless that was suggested by the Lord in their minds.) This, by the way, should let us see the vast importance above all the secular matters and offices in the church - necessary and important as they are - of the ministry of the Word, and that a true minister should be relieved of all those external things and have his mind wholly given to that to which the Lord has called him. The Apostle said, when directing the church to choose deacons: "We will give ourselves continually to prayer and the ministry of the Word." I cannot read this, I do not read it, without trouble to myself, for my lack is so great that I have but little appearance to myself of being imbued with so zealous, so great, so spiritual a frame of mind as these

Apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ then had. O if I had! May the Lord make me a good minister of Jesus Christ, cause me to pray to "pray without ceasing", and search into His blessed Word continually, that I may fulfil my ministry, and finish it with joy when that day comes.

So the view that I would bring before you of the Word of God is this - that the ministry is intended, and that the increase of the Word of God here is this - that it had efficacy, that it ran from heart to heart, from man to man, seizing, on the right hand and on the left, idolators and formal Jews, for it is very remarkable how that the great beginning of the Church's life - I mean as a Christian Church - was at Jerusalem. "Beginning at Jerusalem" was Christ's word, where His servants were to abide till "endued with power from on high". This made them very successful in this work. It was not a stationary thing; it was not word only, not a sound in the people's ears simply, not a strange doctrine, but a living authority. "And the Word of God increased."

Let us look at it thus in the following particulars. First the Word of God increased in its power; it spread. The Apostles preached and the word spread among the people, and was like a living fire running about. The blessed Word entered the heart so effectually that the stubbornness, and the death and the confusion of the hearers were broken down, and they were conscious of a power. At the moment when it seized them they might not have understood, but it was the Word of God. "He sent out a word unto Jacob that lighted upon Israel". You have it set forth in that illustrious case of the Apostle Paul when, as Saul, approaching Damascus with an ill-intention, and also authority, against the saints, suddenly there shone round about him a light, and a voice spoke in his heart. He tells us when relating this marvellous conversion, this divine quickening of his soul, that the men who were with him "saw indeed the light but they heard not the voice of Him that spake." Ah, if you have been called, called in an ungodly family, called among men while at your business, and mixed with them necessarily, though they would not,

did not, hear the Word of God that was spoken to you, they saw the light, that is, the effect of it, very soon. There is a power that enchains men when it seizes them, that brings the heart down with labour, that makes them pray - "Behold he prayeth"; that turns them from idols to serve the living and true God, that throws out of their minds their former vile intention to have their own way, to have their fling and fill of sin; that sets them thinking about eternity, and keeps them thinking about it; that sets God before them and keeps the view before them of His majesty; that sets heaven and hell, judgment and eternity, on their minds and keeps them there. Divine quickening, followed by conversion, is not for a day, but for ever and ever! "And the Word of God increased".

What a blessed day that was that the Church had in Jerusalem under the powerful ministry of the Apostles, and in other places as the Word spread, when men were mightily convinced out of the Scriptures, and there was such an authority that those who possessed them brought their books of curious arts, the value of which was 50 thousand pieces of silver (Acts 19.19) into the market-place and burned them all! The Word of God, the authority of the Lord Jesus, increased upon them, in their hearts, until first this idol and that idol, then this book and that, and self last of all, went down into the fire. Every soul that is born again knows what the authority, the power of the Word of God is. And does not this make the things which are asserted in the conscience and in the heart by the Word real? That is how it is that God is real to a person, though unseen by mortal eyes. That is how heaven is real though unknown; hell real and feared; the law true and full of authority; the Word living and full of light, being as "the candle of the Lord searching the innermost parts of the belly" (Proverbs 20.29), that expression setting forth the inward affections and motions of the mind of man. And as God's candle is lighted up first here, then there, then in another place, now in this hidden corner, then in that dark chamber of the heart, God's Word opens and discovers and displays the awful nature and nakedness and wickedness in them, to the eyes, the pained eyes, of the sinner. There is an authority, the

law is made real.

Then the gospel becomes real. Yes, Oh how real, how sweet it is made! The Word coming into the heart is no longer a word, but a revelation, a truth, a vital truth, felt, understood in a measure, entered into, received, embraced, loved; a word, like bread, eaten; a word, like light, showing things; a word so full of authority that a sinner just falls under it. Reason rebels, and the will rebels, corruption rises thick and fast and moves against what is being done, but the Word of God holds the sinner. Though he backslides, the Word does not let him go but fetches him back. Yes, it is a great Word. Dear friends, what is your profession worth if there is no authority in the Word to you, if it never increases, never grows, never does anything for you in a particular way, what is it? Here I am often troubled. I do not want to say - God forbid I ever should say - that He makes no use of me at all, but I am troubled not to be more useful, that the Word of God, apparently, increases so little among you, that there is so little evidence of it so far as I can judge. There is some evidence for which I would be thankful, but I would like to see more. Perhaps there is more than I know and than I ever shall know. If there is more than I know I would bless and thank God that He uses so unworthy a creature, but I would like to see more.

It increases in the next place in its sweetness. There is a sweetness in the Word of God. It is a secret sweetness. You can taste it, if the mercy be given, but you cannot convey it to another. It is a secret sweetness inasmuch as it brings Him into your heart who is all sweetness, namely Jesus Christ. It brings such testimonies of divine love, of divine condescension, of the atonement of Christ, of His righteousness, of His goodwill to you; it brings such promises exceeding great and precious, that you may say, and must sometimes say "Thy Word was found and I did eat it and Thy Word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of my heart". Oh dear friends, though we know so very little of this, may we thank God for the little we do know. And sometimes you can say, a word that seemed small in its influence when first it

came, multiplies (for that word is used in Acts 12.24) "The Word of God grew and multiplied". And another word is used - and I think all these three words are used in the same sense - The word so mightily increased that it prevailed (Acts 19.20). And Oh how the sweetness prevails over the bitterness of sin and the bitterness of trouble and sorrow! Oh how sweet it is in prevailing in its precious power over the wicked rebellion of our hearts, and bringing us down in willing bonds to sit at His feet who speaks it, weaned from self, from the world, from carnal pleasures, weaned from those things which are detrimental to the soul's prosperity and the glory of God in it!

"The Word increased". Ah, what made these new converts - proselytes, Jews, Arabians, Cretes, and from all parts, what made these men leave their idols and choose a crucified Christ and receive Him into their hearts, so that now Dagon was cast down and lost his hands and his feet? Was it not the sweetness in the Scripture and in Christ? A sweetness in Him, in the gospel, of which He is the fulness, over the law? Though He uses the Word and the law, He does woo His people to Himself by the sweetness of the everlasting gospel. That is to them indeed a wonderful word, and He sends it out to heal their wounds. It lights on them to fit their cases; it is so extensive that it reaches the worst, as exceedingly suitable and they say nothing can be sweeter. It is like "apples of gold in pictures of silver". This is God's blessed Word. And this should encourage us to hold and to keep fast any Scripture which may be small in its beginning in our minds. You may find some promise just, O so quietly, stealing into your thoughts, and at first may be disposed to put it aside because it has not come to you as some others have, with a striking suddenness and great power. But O it is not wise to act so! If it falls quietly like dew upon your spirit, that is a Scriptural thing, the Lord Jesus speaks so in Deuteronomy 32.2. People do not see the dew fall nor feel it, but there it is in its influence. Such an influence may be an increasing thing if we are enabled to meditate upon the Word and take it to the Lord in prayer, asking Him to make it effectual in us, and we shall find an added sweetness and power. It will fit

here and work there and O it may wonderfully affect us! May the Lord keep us from putting aside Scriptures that come to us quietly. Now I confess to you as I have often to His Holy Majesty, that this is a thing I have been guilty of. I have had a word spoken suddenly and powerfully on occasions, and have been very apt, because of my foolishness, to expect that every word that should do one good must come in the same manner. That is not wise. I have been a loser. I do not expect to lose my soul for my folly, but I have lost much comfort for it. I do not expect to lose God's favour - that is in Christ! - but I have lost some sweetness by my foolishness. Therefore I would say to myself, and I would say to you dear friends who know what the Word of God is coming again and again, notice words, notice the influence of the truth they contain, that you may come under from time to time, and when any truth is like dew, when it comes like a small, soft rain, do not put it away and say "Now once I got a Scripture so and so, and I wont take anything less, I wont take anything that does not come so." Don't act like that. Rather entreat that wisdom may be given you to discern the falling softly of the word, and when it begins to be sweet to your taste, may the Lord cause you to look out for an increase of it.

In the next place it grows and sweetly grows, in its quickening influence. Ah, there is a quickening in the Word of God! It quickens as it is light, for it is called "the light of life" It quickens when it shows you you are far from God, and when it influences you to turn your face to Him again. It quickens when it shows you your folly in hewing out to yourself broken cisterns that can hold no water, directing you to the Lord who is the Fountain of Life. It quickens when it convinces you of your foolishness in setting your heart on riches, pleasures, or any kind of possession, and turns you to Him who possesses all wealth, to seek from Him your comforts and pleasures and possessions and all things - even God. O blessed be God for the quickening power of His Word! The new conversions some of us have had, have been remarkable, have they not? God has converted us many times. Ah, I have been converted, I believe, many, many times. I have had many turns from the world to the Throne of

Grace, many turns from a rebellious spirit to a spirit of submission and many turns from an almost giving up to a fresh cleaving to Christ crucified. How the Word has influenced by the Holy Spirit! Cannot you understand and follow, some of you, in these things? You have been again and again converted by the quickening power of the truth in this and in that regard, and so it has mightily prevailed against the death of nature, against the death that comes from sin when it is done - done in our minds (Proverbs 24.9)

The Word of God increases also in the sweet promises that it speaks, for it does speak sweet promises on the mind. O how good God's word is! And promises, you know, are the Lord's Word respecting the future things generally. They bring present power enabling us to leave self and the things which exercise us, with Him, and then they carry the mind forward and they tell us of good things and good days to come. The chief of all the good that ever I had out of God's Word I can wrap up in those two things that it has brought my mind to cast all, all care for time and eternity, everything upon the Lord; and then, making me understand and believe that the day was coming when I should be where the Lord is! Now sometimes unbelief grows very powerfully, and I need not tell you that, when that grows, everything goes wrong; that is to say, one's view of things is just completely opposite to right, upside-down. There is not a sin that will confuse you more than unbelief. Nothing will more drive you to the ends of the earth or more harden you against the fear of God. Nothing will more make God appear wrong and yourself right. Unbelief is a terrible sin. I wonder not at Hart's judgment of it. He says, concerning himself, "of all my sins the chief". And surely that is so, it is the chief sin.

If unbelief's that sin accursed,  
Abhorred by God above,  
Because, of all opposers worst,  
It fights against His love,

How shall a heart that doubts like mine,  
Dismayed at every breath,  
Pretend to live the life divine,  
Or fight the fight of faith?

But when God's Word comes, spoken home, then faith grows; faith grows exceedingly then and will begin to chide our unbelieving hearts, and we begin to see the foolishness and wickedness of unbelief and go forth in fresh acts of faith. And when I have been led to observe in myself a few acts of faith, I have found them to be these, at least these have been among them. First, confession of sin. I do not know anything that will make other things more pleasant to you than a spirit of confession. Rejoicing in the Lord will often be so much attended with confession of your unworthiness and vileness that you will be thankful to possess that spirit, and beg it may live in you and grow. Another act of faith will be fervent petition; you will be diligent in prayer, in seeking the Lord. O if this lasted longer with us! Another is love; love and faith are good friends, and they walk in sweet harmony sometimes. Another thing connected with an act of faith sometimes is a very comfortable feeling that things are right between the Lord and your soul, and it is a wonderfully pleasant union that God makes between faith and feeling at such times. Sometimes faith lives contrary to sense; sometimes she lives with sense and encourages sense, and begets strong sense of things. Then it is good and the Word of God is in it all. Begotten by an incorruptible seed, strengthened by an incorruptible seed, established, completed by the incorruptible seed, enlarged by it, spoken to by it, promised good things by it, God being in it. The Word of God increased.

Now sometimes the Word of God will increase in your hand, that is to say, it will be to you the Sword of the Spirit by which you will cut your way through hosts of devils, while they fall before the Word. And is not that wonderful, that one minute you should be like the pilgrims in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, thrown on the ground, or locked up in prison with "Giant Despair" beating the life out of you, and the next you should have the

Sword of the Spirit in your hand, and be saying "Rejoice not against me O mine enemy! When I fall I shall arise; when I sit in darkness the Lord shall be a light unto me". "Therefore" you will say "I will bear the indignation of the Lord because I have sinned against Him". No fear, guilty fear, no bondageing fear, no fear, the fruit of unbelief, can stand before the Word of God when it is in the hand of faith. Here you will fight "not with flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness in high places"; and here you will find God on your side, giving courage and strength, and enabling you to go forth in the fight of faith. "Fight the good fight of faith; lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called."

"The Word of God increased". And when you find it increasing in your hand as a weapon against your heart sins, and against your providential troubles, and against the devil's vile temptations, it will be like a sword piercing your enemies, overcoming in your heart, overcoming the world, and overcoming the devil. Nothing more strengthens a sinner than this - when He believes that Jesus is the Son of God. "A rudiment" you may say. Yes, a finishing too, the top-stone, the very life and soul of vital religion. Who is he that is born of God? He that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God. Who is he that overcometh the world? He that believeth that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. (1 John 5.5.) Who is he that will have a crown? He who believes on the Lord Jesus, for faith believes to the saving of the soul. Faith gives victory over unbelief, and "he that overcometh will I grant to sit with Me in My throne." O this sword is a great thing! It is the Word of God in your hearts wielded by the hand of faith and it increases in its encouraging influence. We need it. Sometimes troubles come that look exactly like anger. Ah, but when the Word drops in (O I do know this) when the word drops in and says to you "Be careful for nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God"; when it comes and says "Come boldly to the Throne of Grace"; then there is such a mighty change that you are like another person. One minute saying, "I shall never get through", and the next saying "I have a Friend in heaven who can

bring one through, I will call upon His Name." Beloved friends none can enter into this until led by the Spirit. But the Word of God in its sacred influence is the great encouragement that God sometimes gives. He sends out an invitation "O beggars, turn to Jerusalem's house; O ye simple turn to My house. I have built it, I have hewed my pillars, I have slain my sacrifices, I have mingled my wine, come in hither. (Proverbs 9). This encourages faith unspeakably to pray, and pray and pray and to go to the Lord with everything.

And the Word will increase in its instructions sometimes. I am more for knowledge than I can speak about possessing. I would have knowledge, the knowledge of God. O it is a great thing to know! True religion, in any judgment, is not a vague thing. We may be vague about what we have and uncertain, but true religion is not a vague uncertainty. "I will give them a heart to know Me" says the Lord. "This is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent." And the Word will bring this to you - the Word Incarnate, and the Word given by inspiration of God. "The letter" the Apostle says, "is profitable for doctrine, for instruction in righteousness" etc. Do not always judge by what you feel within, but look for knowledge, the knowledge of God; the knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus; knowledge of the Throne of Grace to which you are invited; knowledge of His blessed covenant which is "ordered in all things and sure", in which the soul is bound up secure; knowledge that your sins are forgiven; knowledge that you have union with Christ and that the Word of God, as opened and made over in any degree, will bring the knowledge of these realities, these blessed truths, into your souls.

"The Word of God increased". Now my brethren it will increase in respect of walk in all the Lord's people, all of them, without exception. "They are not of the world", therefore they will come out of it, out of a false church, out of a false religion, "lest ye be partakers of her plagues". "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world". If the Word of

God in no way shapes your life, then you are ignorant of its power altogether. Now let us look very briefly at this line of things. First, it will affect your minds in respect of indwelling sin, and the practice of it. Now I should quite believe that some of you, if you were to speak at this time about a certain line of experience, would have to say there have been times when some Scriptures have come straight on a sin, and right across a path that your sinful nature wanted to walk in, and you have stopped, could not go another step, did not want to go another step. Grace was in the word, and the word increased in its authority, and you were there before God with indwelling sin, saved from doing it, from living inwardly in some sin in your heart and thoughts which was craving indulgence. The Word of God increased; it came right on the disposition to yield and you could not do it. (Genesis 20 v 6) Bless God that He has saved us from living in inward sin. O the world is as full of sin as it can hold! But we do not see all of it. No man sees all the sin in the world. There is much locked up in our breasts that never comes out. Now we have lived in some sins and the Word of God has come right on those sins, has it not? Do thank Him if you can say, "Yes". The Word increased, the light increased and showed you how evil it was to sin against God. The Word increased and showed the danger we were in, if not of losing our souls, at least of losing the comfort and sweet goodness of God in manifestations. O I have known more than once what it has been to have God's Word come right on my spirit when I have been wanting to do something, not amongst men but in my mind! As when these idolatrous and formal Jews, and the people living under Moses, were brought away and brought to the feet of Jesus. Their hearts were affected, their unbelief broken, their enmity subdued, their affections captivated, and now as willing slaves they come to the feet of the dear Redeemer, and then their books of sorceries, and all those things worth so much to the world had to go into the fire. And has it not been so with us when the Lord by His Word has come and brought us from ourselves and from our pride to the feet of Jesus Christ? Might it be more so with us. What prejudices it has brought us from sometimes! Prejudices against His ways, humbling and mortifying to a proud

heart. What an influence may have come from the ordinances with, it may be, no particular Scripture, when perhaps you may have seen the Lord Jesus baptized, that is, read of His baptism! You could never describe what you felt and what you saw. And it dragged down prejudices and made you feel: O beautiful path to walk in, since He has commanded it, since He Himself has walked in it! Prejudices are mighty influences on our nature. But the Word increasing will not let the old prejudices stand, leaves no feet to stand on, and no hands to work with, but, like Dagon, both hands and feet are lost, and you feel a willing slave at the dear Redeemer's feet.

The Word directs us what to do. The Word leaves us no doubt as to what is right. May the Lord help us and cause the influence of it to be so powerful that we may find ourselves brought to that one door to the Lord's Table, which He Himself has set up and opened. "Go" He said to His disciples, "Go into all the world and teach them" - make disciples of them - "and baptize them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." And the Word prevailed at that time so that three thousand in one day had all their Jewish and all their idolatrous prejudices broken down and were brought to follow the Lord. So in Cornelius's house, Peter's preaching so grew, that is the power of it so increased, that they who heard it followed their Lord (Acts 10). And the Apostle Paul found the Word grow. It took him to Ananias and brought him to obedience. (Acts 9.18) It was so with the jailor (Acts 16.33). It is so with individual saints. In Jerusalem there was a great multiplication of disciples. We do not see that nowadays. We would be thankful for one or two, but we do not see a multitude. May the Lord return us, at least somewhat, to old days. O that it would please Him to influence His saints to obedience! I believe the best time is when love is young and warm in the spirit, when Christ is near in early days, when you feel you have got nothing between you and Him, when you feel that His majesty reigns, His love prevails, His sweetness is sweet indeed to you; when you feel a simplicity that in some ways is lost in later days, when fresh and more difficult exercises come and new paths have to be

walked; when you say in simplicity of faith and love - "Lord I am Thine, Thou hast blest me". Or, if you cannot say as much as that, when you can say "Lord I feel a hope, a sweet hope, and I would not walk in any but a right way. Help me to do so by Thy power and grace." When you feel - O what would I not do to please Him? What would I withhold from Him that He asks?

The Word thus helps people and says to them - Now you walk as they did of whom we read in the New Testament days, when in their new warm love and simplicity they followed the Lord, when they left the heathen and the temple and went into the church of the living God, when they left Diana of the Ephesians and fell at the feet of Jesus and were baptized in His blessed Name.

Thus may we walk. Faith will point out the road. The Scriptures show it and faith will say "Follow the Lord, walk in simplicity, own His kingly authority, own His right in His own house, follow His beautiful footsteps, for He walked in this way. Follow Him, own Him soldiers as your Captain, domestics as your Master, children as your Father, servants as your Lord. Own Him as the great example, for "He has left us an example that we should follow His steps." I hope the Lord will own us now in the public obedience of one who gave and witnessed a good profession before the Church of Christ here. May the Lord help her, help us, and accept us in this humble acknowledgement of His sovereign right to say to the Church "Do this" however a proud reason and carnal mind may rebel against it. I am thankful I am not allowed to let out all the dreadful things that an Ishmael in my heart has said against this ordinance, but I would like to say, if I could, the things I have felt in the sweetness of it, the authority, the beauty of it, the binding nature of it, the blessedness of it. And O, if there were no other reason, if the Lord would never give a sweet feeling in it, if He would never let a smile fall on a soul in it, if there were no other reason for it than this - that He commanded it, that ought to be enough for us! May the Lord make it so. But He has not left it simply there (that is our reason for doing it) but O what some of us have had, what beauty we have felt, what beauty we have

perceived, what pleasure has moved us in this ordinance! May the Lord grant that there may be an increase of His word among us and in all godliness for our profit and His glory.

AMEN.