

ALIVE IN THE SPIRIT
A SERIES ON THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES
(4) THE SEVEN

Acts 6:1-7

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PROLOGUE

When we come across the term, “the twelve,” in the Acts of the Apostles, it refers to the twelve apostles of Christ. But there is another numbered group mentioned in Acts known as, “the seven.” We know next to nothing about them except for Stephen and Philip who are mentioned later in Acts. The one named Nicolaus was a proselyte. This means he had been a Gentile and then later converted Judaism before becoming a Christian. We can read how the seven got their start in Acts 6.

SCRIPTURE

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. ²And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, ⁴while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” ⁵What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:1-7 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

As I indicated earlier in this series, the entire Book of Acts is outlined by the words of Jesus who said, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Subsequently, this book covers the spread of the message of Christ from Jerusalem to the surrounding vicinity to various parts of the Roman Empire.

The first problem that was encountered in the spread of the Gospel was persecution and we looked at the first instance of that last week. Unfortunately, this will prove to be a

recurring problem. Next week, in fact, we will examine the chief persecutor in Acts – Saul of Tarsus.

The second problem encountered by the early church in spreading God’s Word was an internal one. We are told that “widows were being neglected.” What was that about? In order to appreciate this problem we need some background. The earliest Christians were Jews who would have been part of a local synagogue. It was customary for synagogues to take care of members in need, especially the most vulnerable such as widows and orphans. Such practices carried over into the early church.

The language of the synagogues in Jerusalem was Hebrew or the “marketplace” version of Hebrew known as Aramaic. But many Jews at this time had been scattered throughout the Roman Empire and did not live anywhere near Jerusalem. Most had forgotten how to speak Hebrew and instead spoke Greek. Nevertheless, it was the passionate desire of every dispersed Jew to come to Jerusalem at least once before they died. However, when they did so, they had difficulty being accepted by the local synagogues – they were strangers separated by language and culture.

Some of these Greek speaking Jews became Christians but, unfortunately, were still being marginalized by the Hebrew speaking Jews who had become Christians. The problem came to a head and was presented to the church leadership which, at this time, was the twelve apostles.

Spoiler alert: They were successful in solving this problem so that the result was, “The word of God continued to spread; [and] the number of the disciples increased” (6:7). Knowing the outcome helps us to understand the significance of the story – It has to do with spreading the Word of God. The term “word of God” can refer to all of Scripture but here it primarily means the message about Jesus Christ or what we call the Gospel. The Gospel is sometimes summarized this way: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16 NRSV).

The solution to the problem of the neglected widows involved this group of seven I mentioned earlier. The story of “the seven” puts in to focus what the church needs in order to ensure that the Word of God continues to spread and the number of followers of Jesus Christ increases.

1. COMPASSION

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being

neglected in the daily distribution of food . And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples (Acts 6:1-2a).

The first need of the church in regards to the spreading of the Word of God is compassion. When the apostles heard of the problem with the relief work for church members they did not dismiss it as unimportant but took action. Compassion is inseparable from the ministry of the Gospel.

Too often when we speak to people who are going through a tough time we are less than tactful with our words. John Maxwell tells of a man named Merrick who had to go to Chicago on a business trip. He asked his brother to watch his cat while he was gone. Though he did not like cats, the brother agreed to watch Merrick's cat.

A couple days later Merrick called home to find out about his cat. The brother replied, "Your cat's dead," and then hung up the phone. Merrick was devastated not only because his cat was dead but also because of the insensitive way his brother informed him.

Upon returning home he gave his brother a piece of his mind. "How thoughtless of you to say it like that! Have you no compassion?" The brother asked, "What did you want me to say?" Merrick said, "You could have told me gradually. Maybe first mention that the cat was playing on the roof. Then later say the cat fell off the roof and was injured. And finally, you could say, 'I'm sorry Merrick but last night your cat passed away.' That would have been so much more compassionate." Merrick was glad to get that off his chest. He could now move on to other matters. So he asked his brother, "By the way, how is mom?" The brother hesitated and finally said, "Mom was playing on the roof. . ."

We need to be compassionate with our words. But words are not enough. We also need to be compassionate in our actions. One of the twelve, the Apostle John would later write:

If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God's love be in that person?
Dear children, let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions. (I Jn 3:17-18 NLT).

The ministry of compassion needs to be an integral part of the ministry of spreading the Word of God.

2. DIVISION OF LABOR

"It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good

standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” (Acts 6:2b-4).

The second need of the church in regards to the spreading of the Word of God is a division of labor. The image of waiting on tables is the image behind what we call “deacons.” This passage represents the functional beginning of deacons. Our English word “deacon” is related to the Greek word *diaconeo* translated here as “to wait on” or “to serve.” It is especially associated with relief work or providing the basic necessities of life. The office of deacon became a new office within the church. Deacons were given responsibility for the mercy ministry of the church.

Today churches use the word “deacon” in a number of different ways. Some, like Baptist churches, use it to refer to those who govern the church in much the same we Presbyterians use the word “elder.” Others, like Methodist churches, use it as a stepping stone on route to becoming a pastor. Still others use it as a synonym for pastor.

Based on Acts 6, Presbyterian Christians have regarded the purpose of the office of deacon to be that of sympathy and service. The reference to “tables” has also suggested the additional responsibilities of preparing the Lord’s Supper and receiving the communion offering. Historically, the work of the deacons has not been budgeted in Presbyterian churches. Instead, a communion offering is received and used by the deacons to carry out their ministry of mercy.

Acts 6 records the first division of labor in the church. This division of labor allowed the apostles to remain devoted to prayer and to service to the Word of God and it allowed the deacons to bring relief to those in need. This not only solved the problem of how to help those in need, but also greatly enhanced the work of the church and the spreading of the Gospel.

Most churches today still value the ministry of compassion but not as many consider the ministry of the Word to be a priority. Linda Glick tells how she was trying to pass on the family heritage to her young daughter. She told her that her grandfather had been a preacher, her great-grandfather had been a preacher, and her great-great-grandfather had been a preacher. “Wow,” said her daughter, “I had no idea we came from such a long line of grandfathers!”

Martin Luther, who led the renewal movement known as the Reformation, once stunned and terrified his congregation by threatening to not preach one Sunday. Did you catch that? He threatened to *not* preach and that terrified them.

Contrast that with the present day. If a pastor stands up in the pulpit and says, “I’m not going to preach this week,” most congregations would applaud. Think about that. If the president of the hospital announced, “This week we will not dispense any medicine,” would the patients applaud? Now medicine is important. But, at best, offers only a temporary benefit. The Word of God affects what will last forever.

If we want to recover the importance of the ministry of the Word we need to embrace a division of labor. Each and every Christian is gifted by God and called to service. We are not all the same. Some are gifted for teaching, some for leadership, some for showing hospitality, some for discernment, some for acts of mercy, and so on. If we work together and support each other according to our gifts and call then the church is edified, disciples are multiplied, and God is glorified.

3. CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION

What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them (Acts 6:5-6).

The third need of the church in regards to the spreading of the Word of God is contemporary application. The early church was willing to alter its structure, change its procedures, even create a new office in order to respond to emerging needs as it affected the spreading of the Word of God.

Today there are churches, even whole denominations, who claim they want to go back to the New Testament church. They are often called “Restoration” churches. They want to restore the church to the New Testament model. But there is an irony here. The irony being that the New Testament church was not a “restoration” church. It was contemporary. They were not stuck in the past. They were willing to do whatever it took to communicate the Word of God to their contemporaries. They did not change the content of the message but adapted the method of communication to their particular situation.

The language of the first church was Hebrew (or Aramaic). But they had an influx of people who spoke only Greek. What were they to do? They appointed seven people who spoke Greek to minister to the Greek speaking believers.

This is the issue of tradition versus traditionalism. There is a huge difference between the two. Tradition can be a good thing. A first century tradition would say something like,

“The Gospel is for everyone so we will make sure you can understand it in your own language.” Traditionalism can be harmful. First century traditionalism would say, “If you want to be part of this church you need to talk like us.”

A Christian tradition is valuable because it reflects the truth and beauty of God. Notice verse 6. They prayed and laid hands on the new officers. We still do this today. It is a beautiful thing.

Traditionalism, though, means we do things because, well, that’s the way we’ve always done it. It is tradition for its own sake. In contrast, the New Testament model is contemporary application – Do not change the message but figure out the best way to communicate it to your contemporaries.

Someone once said that tradition is the living faith of the dead. But traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. If we want to continue to spread the Word of God we must not be stuck to the past.

4. POSITIVE ATTITUDES

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

The fourth need of the church in regards to the spreading of the Word of God is to have a positive attitude. This means building people up with encouragement rather than tearing them down with blame. Unfortunately, blaming others comes easily to us.

A young woman admitted, “I tend to blame other people for my problems rather than taking responsibility. I think it was the way I was raised.”

A middle aged man said, “My wife blames me for two things. That I often do not listen to her, and then there was something else she said.”

Of course, there is the old saying, “Adam blamed Eve , Eve blamed the serpent, and the serpent, didn’t have a leg to stand on.”

On a more serious note, Robert Anthony points out, “When you blame others, you give up your power to change.” I think that is true. Healthy change requires accountability and a positive outlook.

I am impressed as I read this passage from Acts that the leaders of the church did not

engage in fault-finding. When this problem of helping those in need arose they did not go around pointing fingers at each other. Instead, they focused on practical and constructive solutions and they continued in the ministry of Word and prayer. Think how much healthier the modern church would be if we did the same.

CONCLUSION

Acts 6 contains the story of “the seven.” It is a story that gives us more than just the origin of deacons. It gives us principles for spreading the Word of God today. We need compassion, a division of labor, contemporary application, and positive attitudes.

- Let us express the love of Christ to one and all both in our words and our actions.
- Let us work together and support one another according to the gifts and calling we have received from God.
- Let us take the timeless Gospel and learn to flesh it out for the people of our time.
- Let us focus on encouraging people and solving problems rather than the other way around.
- Above all, let us trust in the Spirit to lead us forward in the greatest cause the world has ever known.