



World Christian Fellowship

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Growth brings Problem!

Acts 6:1-7

Acts 6:1-7, *Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. ²Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. ³Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; ⁴but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, ⁶whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. ⁷Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.*

1. The Complaint

This chapter begins with a reference to the increasing number of disciples. This also sets up the problem.

The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews who most likely migrated back to Palestine from the diaspora (an estimated 10-20% of the population). The Hebrews were Hebrew/Aramaic-speaking natives of Palestine. The complaint originated from the Hellenists who saw a problem with the lack of relief distribution for their widows.

What is the “distribution”?

We have seen this word a few times already.

The community held things in common, some sold their possessions and had the apostles distribute the proceeds.

Acts 2:44-47, *Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common,⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. ⁴⁶So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.*

Acts 4:32-37, *Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. ³³And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. ³⁴Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, ³⁵and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. ³⁶And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, ³⁷having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

The distribution appears to include things needed for survival (i.e., food, clothing, and money).

The murmurings of the Hellenists are similar to the murmurings of the Israelites who were wandering in the wilderness. The word is the same in the Greek Old Testament (LXX or Septuagint).

Therefore, it most likely has negative connotations regarding the attitude of the complainers.

Maybe they were making unfounded accusations against the apostles as to why the distribution seemed unfair.

Or maybe they were filled with duplicitous motives.

We do not know exactly how they complained or what they said, but it isn't hard to imagine a sinful influence at work underneath it all.

Two primary tensions within the community that are acknowledged in this complaint.

There was ethnic and administrative tension.

Hellenists would have returned to Jerusalem retaining much of the cultural influence they had while living in another context. The ethnic tension was somewhat akin to the way native cultures often treat immigrants.

The cultural differences are so vast that favouritism is shown to those we relate to. And there was likely a subtle racism behind the mistreatment of those who were different. This was something the apostles had to work through as well.

Paul rebuked Peter for refusing to eat with Gentiles.

Galatians 2:11-14, *Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; ¹²for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated*

himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. ¹³And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. ¹⁴But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews?"

But there was also an administrative tension. The apostles were not distributing in a consistent manner.

Similar tensions are most likely present in our church.

How are we addressing them?

These tensions are common enough, but are they dealt with in a godly manner?

2. The Solution.

V 2-4, *Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. ³Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; ⁴but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."*

The “full number of the disciples” constitutes a congregational meeting.

What is their responsibility?

They are tasked with choosing seven qualified candidates for the work.

How does the apostles’ solution complement what Jesus said, “I came not to be served, but to serve...”?

Are the apostles elevating their role?

Are they suggesting that serving tables is beneath their calling?

Of course not.

They demanded the candidates meet high qualifications.

- ✓ Good repute,
- ✓ Full of the Spirit and
- ✓ Full of wisdom.

It was a matter of calling, not preference.

Notice that the apostles do not challenge the complaint. They don’t even establish a council to look into the matter. Apparently, the complaint was valid, and the evidence was plain for all to see.

Nor do they minimize the role of the “distribution”, in fact they saw it as something that required more attention than it was currently receiving.

This was a significant shift in the mindset of the apostles.

Throughout the Gospels we see the apostles looking upon the afflicted with little sympathy. They simply saw their needs as a distraction from real ministry.

Here, however, they recognize the need of the widows, and call a congregational meeting to ensure that the church shows proper compassion.

But they did recognize the apostolic calling to be one primarily focused on praying and preaching.

James 1:27, *Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.*

Although, modern pastors are not apostles, there is a parallel between the primary calling of the apostles to pray and preach, and the primary calling of teaching elders.

In Paul’s first letter to Timothy, he emphasizes prayer.

1 Timothy 2.

In his second letter he emphasizes preaching. **2 Timothy 2 and 4.**

If prayer and preaching are to remain the primary tasks of the pastor, then the necessary tasks of administration and mercy must be handled by others.

Our vision is to transform the people by finding, equipping, and multiplying followers of Jesus Christ for the glory of God.

Have you considered how you might involve taking care of the needs present?

The solution involves the selection of qualified servants.

3. The Selection

V 5-6, And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, ⁶whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

The whole church was in agreement that the best use of the apostle's time was praying and preaching.

The process of praying and laying hands on these men is typical of commissioning one who already has the Spirit.

Joshua.

Numbers 27:18, &23, *And the Lord said to Moses: "Take Joshua the son of Nun with you, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him;*

²³And he laid his hands on him and inaugurated him, just as the Lord commanded by the hand of Moses.

They did not receive the Spirit because of the laying on of hands. The laying on of hands was symbolic of the authority the person was receiving for his new role.

These men are now filling an official role in the church. Although the language of "deacon" is not found in this passage, the components of the office fit the circumstances described. There is also a close connection between "diakonein" (to serve) and "diakonos" (servant). Both words have the same Greek root.

Each of the men have Greek names, which probably indicates an intentional selection of leaders from the portion of the church that raised the complaint.

Stephen and Philip appear to have an enlarged role later on. Stephen will show his ability to preach the word in the next chapter and Philip is referred to as an evangelist (**Acts 21:8**).

Either Philip laid aside one office to take up another, or this original group of seven were not identical to the deacons Paul defines in 1 Timothy 3.

Notice the importance of spiritual qualifications (**1 Timothy 3:8-12**). They were not merely to be good businessmen, but godly stewards. Notice also, the selection was not singular, but plural.

The process of caring for needy widows was also a bit complicated (**1 Timothy 5:3-16**).

- Family role
- Church member
- Assessment
- Warning
- Daily care provided.

May give justification for not simply giving someone a month's rent. They appear to be given enough to survive the day. Or, a certain number of those in need came each day.

Either way, the assessment of the need was regularly done.

We cannot say the responsibility of the office defines all a person does. Certainly, the apostles still served, and the

deacons still witnessed. But it is helpful to have distinct responsibilities assigned in order to keep order.

I want to point out two realities that suffer when a pastor is expected to do everything.

First, the preaching will suffer because he lacks the time needed for prayerful study.

Second, people within the church are prevented from using their own gifts to serve the church.

With the seven servants in place, the church continued to grow.

4. The Result.

V 7, Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

“And the word of God continued to increase.”

Because the apostles did not neglect the preaching of the word of God—it increased.

“And the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.”

Adding leadership and structure to the church for equipping and edification does not inhibit evangelism as some people have suggested, but its servers to encourage and support it.

“And a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” This isn’t suggesting that the Sanhedrin was beginning to convert, but the more common class of priests (estimated to be as many as 18,000: 8,000 priests and 10,000 Levites) were seeing in this community a love for others they know was lacking from their own community.

Exodus 1:7, *But the children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly, multiplied and grew exceedingly mighty; and the land was filled with them.*

Some parallel between the growth of the people of God at the time of the exodus and the growth of the number of disciples at the time of the new exodus.

The new factor in the latter case is the powerful effects of the preaching.

If our desire is to see the word of God and the number of disciples increasing—and it should be—then we must find ways to guard the pastor’s time to focus on praying and preaching.

Conclusion:

They didn't segment themselves based upon the spoken language or cultural differences. It would have been easy to have First Apostolic Church of Jerusalem filled with the Hebrews and Second Apostolic Church of Jerusalem filled with Hellenists.

But the apostles were committed to maintaining the unity of the body of Christ.

They didn't sweep the problem under a rug and hope it went away. Dismissing those who were complaining was not an option. They took the situation seriously and dealt with it in a way that is instructive for us all.

They upheld the primacy of their own calling as ministers of the word and invited others to take up a new calling that involved serving widows.

Both the apostolic role and the role of deacons was affirmed. Their problems were addressed and solved in house.

Jesus Christ is not only the subject of our proclamation and the source of the apostolic authority, but he is also the prime example of a servant (**Phil. 2:5-11**).

At the Lord's Supper, it is Christ who takes the role of the "distributor" as he dispenses the emblems of his suffering to the members of his covenant of grace.

Submission to Christ entails not only our justification, but also our sanctification in the body of Christ.

There is a reciprocating relationship of giving and receiving blessings from the church because of our union with Christ.

As the church develops and grows and moves on, great things can be accomplished when we work together.

Had the deacons not stepped up at this point, the apostles would've become bogged down. But because everyone did their part and conducted their ministry, the word increased, the number of disciples increased, and even many priests came to the faith.

To God be the glory.