

## EXPANDING MINISTRY

### Acts 6:1-7

On the surface, today's reading from the book of Acts is just the story of a few men being selected to help the Apostles with their excessive workload, but like all scripture when we examine it in more detail we shall find that it has a lot to teach us. As we look at this passage together you might want to open your bibles at page \*\* so that you can follow it along with me.

The background to these events is that the early church has been growing rapidly. Satan has tried to overcome it through persecution and corruption, but he has failed. Now he tries a third tactic - distraction. If the Apostles can be overwhelmed with administrative duties they might neglect the praying and preaching which were both essential to the continued growth and health of the early church.

The immediate situation is that growth is continuing, but church growth always causes tension, and here division threatens over a simple practical issue. Look at verse 1:

“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.” (Acts 6:1 NIV)

In those times most widows were completely unable to support themselves, so we see that the church has taken on the task of helping them by making a daily distribution of food. This is really an expanded version of what was done by Jewish synagogues which normally made a weekly distribution of food and money to widows. Judaism had always had great concern for the poor, aliens and widows in accordance with the covenant God had made with Moses. Jesus expressed similar concerns and so it's natural that they would find expression in the early church. We need to keep this concern and commitment in mind in our community today.

But, we see that the disciples comprise two different groups. Firstly, Jews born in Palestine who would have spoken Aramaic and who would have been deeply steeped in Hebrew culture and secondly Jews from the diaspora who would mainly have spoken Greek and who would probably have thought and behaved like Greeks – so there are cultural and racial overtones in this situation. The Greek speakers are complaining, probably to the Apostles, that Greek widows are being ignored in the daily food distribution. The Greek word used here for complaining is the same word as is used in the Greek version of the OT – the Septuagint – for the Israelites complaining about Moses in the desert. So the dissent was probably pretty widespread.

Now I don't believe that this verse implies that the inequitable distribution was deliberate, more likely the cause was poor administration or supervision. But, our God is a God of order and he wants us to manage all things correctly and effectively. Also, this shows how important it is for the church to maintain an inner unity and how quickly and easily potential causes of division can insinuate themselves. Disunity, not only reduces our practical effectiveness, but completely destroys the effectiveness of the Christian message.

So what did the Apostles do? They took immediate action to put the trouble right, look at verses 2-4:

“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. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:2-4 NIV)

When there is a problem we need to address it quickly and effectively. It's no good just ignoring it and hoping it will go away. Also it's important to note that the Apostles didn't just impose a solution, but called the whole body of the church together. Given that the body of the church was several thousand people by this time, presumably the gathering together must have taken place at the Temple, perhaps in Solomon's colonnade. Although the Apostle's plan is to delegate this work, there is no hint that they considered the ministry of distributing

aid inferior to preaching. It was simply a question that their own calling was to prayer and preaching.

There are several important lessons for us there. Firstly the leaders didn't impose a solution but sought to build a consensus. That's still a good principal in managing our churches today. Secondly, the Apostles were fully aware of their particular calling and were determined not to be diverted from it. God calls particular people to particular ministries, and the Apostles knew that they couldn't do everything. That's still a valuable lesson for us today. We badly need the assistance of the lay members of congregations to supplement the ministry of the ordained. Thirdly, it's quite clear that both ministries were regarded as being of equal importance. Both works are referred to by the Greek word *diakonia*, which means either 'ministry' or 'service'. One is a ministry of the word, the other a ministry of service in social work. Both are Christian ministries of equal importance. Again that's a valuable lesson for us today.

The solution the Apostles proposed was to appoint seven men from among the disciples to take responsibility for the distribution of aid to widows. We don't know why they chose seven men, rather than some other number. Presumably that was the number deemed appropriate for the work, although in the OT seven is always a symbolic number of perfection, because God's perfect creation was accomplished in seven days. Additionally, small Jewish towns in this era were usually administered by seven man committees, so the Apostles may have based their proposal on that. The chosen seven were to be honourable men, full of the Holy Spirit, so that their honesty and impartiality would command complete confidence amongst all believers and they were also to be wise men. These are certainly ideal requirements for church appointments today.

The Apostolic proposal met with approval, see verse 5:

“This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.”  
(Acts 6:5 NIV)

We're told that they chose people full of faith and the Holy Spirit – real Spirit filled believers of character. Now If I'd been in charge of that project when I was younger I'd have chosen people who were experienced in administration and dealing with buying and distributing food. But I'd have been completely wrong. Here character was more important than talent and being Spirit filled was more important than experience. By the time we get to verse 7, we'll see why these were the right people.

So the whole assembly of believers chose seven men to assist in the ministry to the widows. All of these seven have Greek names, but many Jews had both a Greek and a Hebrew name, and I think it is more likely than not that both groups would have been represented. Of the seven named individuals chosen, two, Stephen and Philip, went on to achieve wider notoriety, whilst the others disappeared into relative obscurity. A little later in Acts 6 we learn that Stephen performed many miracles and upset the Jewish authorities so much that they stirred up a mob to stone him to death. Philip also plays an important part in the subsequent account of the book of Acts, mainly chapter 8, performing an extensive and important evangelistic ministry.

Our text then tells us that the Apostles commissioned the seven individuals chosen by the assembly by the laying on of hands and by prayer – see verse 6:

“They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.” (Acts 6:6 NIV)

In the OT, the laying on of hands was a common way of commissioning a successor. Levites were commissioned in this way as the book of Numbers tells us. Also, Jewish records tell us that the members of the Sanhedrin were admitted in this way.

The prayer is of crucial importance. As a church today we need to be fully aware that we can do nothing in our own strength and our ministry here will not prosper unless we continually enlist God's aid through prayer. As it says in John 15:5 “apart from Me you can do nothing”. As a church we must pray for our minister, our leadership,

all who participate in the work of our church and indeed the whole body of this church.

As a direct result of the Apostles delegating the social work and concentrating on prayer and the ministry of the word the word of God spread and many came to faith – look at verse 7:

“So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” (Acts 6:7 NIV)

The faith cannot spread when either the ministry of the word or prayer are neglected. Conversely, when a church does devote itself to these things, the word of God spreads and people are brought to faith. In our verse 7 the Greek words for ‘spread’ and ‘increased’ are both in the imperfect tense indicating that these processes of spreading and growing were continuous.

Verse 7 also tells us of another remarkable development, a large number of Jewish priests were converted to Christianity. This is the first mention of such a thing happening in the early church. It may have been partly encouraged by Gamaliel’s stand recounted in Acts 5:34-39, but with their knowledge of the OT the Jewish priesthood would have been well placed to see how the OT prophecies fitted with Jesus’ being the Messiah.

This conversion of priests, besides giving the Church a certain respectability in the world’s eyes, would also have had the effect of spreading the gospel throughout the land. The twenty-four courses of Jewish priests were scattered throughout Palestine and spent only two weeks a year at the Temple. Consequently, they were ideally placed to minister in the Church by virtue of their training and experience, their scattered residences, and the time they had available to devote to the Church’s work.

These priestly conversions were, of course, a major source of unrest about Christianity amongst the Jewish leadership. The inner circle of Judaism was cracking.

Thus Satan's third attempt to bring down the early church by sowing disunity and distracting and diverting the Apostles was defeated. What had started out as dissension with a real chance of disunity had been turned around and the body of Christ were in even greater unity. God had turned trouble into blessing as only He can. We need the spiritual discernment of the Apostles today to recognise the activity of both the Holy Spirit and the evil spirit. We also need their strong faith in the name of Jesus by whose authority alone we are enabled to overcome.

Let's close with a few words of prayer. Father, give us the same caring heart for the poor and the needy that the early church possessed. Help us to address and deal with our problems so that our church may be kept in unity. Enable each of us to be aware of our individual God given calling and not to allow ourselves to be diverted away from it. Let us recognise that all different ministries are equally important. Teach us to be vigilant and persistent in prayer for our minister, our leaders and indeed the whole body of our church and grant us that spreading of the word and increase of the faithful that we have heard about today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.