

Acts 6--Seven Men Chosen to Serve

6 But as the believers rapidly multiplied, **there were rumblings of discontent**. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that *their* widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.

By this time, in church history, we have 2 groups of people converted to Christianity. Hebrew Jews and Hellenistic Jews. Hebrew Jews are those still obeying the laws and traditions of Judaism. They speak Hebrew, wear traditional clothing—and they are as *different* from Christians around them as say, the Amish are today from the rest of the Christian world. The **Hellenistic** Jews, on the other hand, have adapted to the Greek culture--they speak Greek and they dress like **Roman** citizens. So the Hebraic Jews look down on them as "second-class" because they **sold out—they have given up obeying the old traditions!**

It awes me how God speaks **today** through a book written 2000 years ago.

Turmoil in the church. One group sure they've got it RIGHT!—if you don't wear a suit and tie and like traditional hymns you're a second class Christian, clashing with those who believe if you are rigid in conforming to outward trappings then YOU are the one who sells faith too cheaply. And then there are Christians who discriminate against tattoos, or churches who don't have Wednesday night services...one way or another we all find a way to judge the sincerity of others' beliefs, **We forget that it is God and God**

alone whose job it is to judge our motives, our devotion and our spirituality!

Well, the Hebraic Jews forgot too. They thought it was *their* job to discern the worthy among them, and somehow **they** had gained control in the early church-- so they discriminated against the *Hellenistic* widows (those were the widows of the modern Jews) in the food distribution, and the widows *were going hungry*. Meeting the needs of the people in the church was and is an important priority, whether the need is hunger, sickness, emotional or psychological, the church has a responsibility-- and here in Acts 6, the need is to the widows... *women* who **could not work** and **had no means** of getting food. These were NOT women who made poor financial decisions or were just lazy, they had **real need** and **no** recourse. Biblically, the church is supposed to take care of this situation. When we are told to visit the sick, those in jail, the hungry, the word is *episkeptomai*. It means to care for, to be concerned about, to supply for their needs. It carries the idea of actively **looking** for them-- not waiting for *them* to come to *us*.

Well, today's church certainly falls short, not just our church, but the church in general—too many needy, too few hands, but that *wasn't* the situation in the early church, it was a clear case of discrimination. It was the Hellenistic widows who were neglected, so they come to the apostles and ask for help, and the apostles see that something **MUST** be done, **BUT, UNLIKE** today's pastor, they recognize that they must not get sidetracked from the mission to which they have been called, which is to **PREACH THE WORD AND** make

disciples of all people, baptizing them in the name of the father, the son and the holy Ghost. **That** is the calling to which Jesus Christ himself called them —NOT to work out the logistics of a growing church body. But SOMETHING must be done...and that is why disciples have to be raised up in the church--- just as true 2000 years ago as it SHOULD be today.

And just like today, they realize the situation has come up IN THE FIRST PLACE because they allowed themselves to get caught up in working with the food distribution when they should have been concentrating on teaching and preaching the word! THEY CAN'T DO BOTH. They **cannot meet this real need** and still perform **their** God-given priorities. So in verses 2-4, they discern the need for people to take over the physical needs of the church—in many churches these are the people called deacons—a very important position. They are also determining how these men will be chosen. Make no mistake-- It is a **big** responsibility they are handing off.

² So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, “We apostles should spend **our** time teaching the word of God, not running a food program. ³ And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility. ⁴ Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word.”

I read to you from the New Living Translation and not our pew Bible because I think it gives a little more weight to the work that was being done. The NIV says “serve tables” instead of run a food distribution program, and that sort

of puts an offensive tone to the message the apostles were conveying, as if the apostles were saying they wouldn't do the lesser chores—so to speak—and of course there ARE no lesser chores, and anyway that's not it at all— They were in no way looking down on this work, they were instead affirming what was written in the Old Testament, when Moses told Israel, "...[God] let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know...that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord"

(Deuteronomy 8:3). Our Lord also said, "Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man shall give to you" (John 6:27). People cannot live without the word of God. To neglect preaching would destroy the church—then and today.

The apostles were saying they DID recognize this need as very important **but** they knew they could not drain their own focus. It does not imply a dislike for caring for the needy nor that they thought they were too important for the work. To the contrary, they knew that such work was **vital**. In fact the standards for the work were high. V 2-3 tells us the men had to have a good reputation, in and outside of the church they had to be known as honest and reliable. They had to be full of the Holy Spirit, spiritually mature, which means people needed to see the fruits of the spirit within them, and they needed to be full of wisdom which meant they needed to know the Word of God, and to be wise and understanding, to have discernment, to be able to correctly judge the actions and motivations of people to whom they gave

care. Those chosen were not spiritual slackers. They were spiritual giants in the church. It was a high privilege.

The church in Acts had over 5000 members—they had the opposite problem that we have—so **many** people to care for—how easy it was for the apostles get side tracked ! There were so many responsibilities! But their obligation was the spiritual growth of God’s kingdom on earth. Others were chosen by God to oversee the church.

And so it should be today—big church, small church, the same needs exists—spreading the gospel to the unsaved should *always* be our first mission, but the needs of the church body do not ever diminish—and in a small church it is not always easy to find spiritual giants ready to say “Here I am Lord, I will serve”. It has become popular today to think of the pastor and the elders and the deacons as **one person, who can do it all**—serve the people, visit the sick, head up the church suppers, socialize on every front and write amazing sermons every Sunday and inserts for newsletters, give guest lectures—and Pastors get caught up in believing they can do it, and **seminaries teach us that we can do it**—the **only** place that preaches **we cannot do it, is the word of God**...in 1 Timothy where our call to be ministers clearly tells us we are called to preach, and here again in Acts where we are plainly told it is the **church body** where the spiritual giants are just waiting to be raised up. **You’re out there.** It is time for you to come forward and be counted. And more than that—it is time for the church body to support and embrace each and every person who comes forward to be counted.

Toward this end, the early church chose seven men who were responsible to meet these needs. We read about them in verses 5-7

⁵ Everyone liked this idea, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit) Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (an earlier convert to the Jewish faith). ⁶ These seven were presented to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them.

You know what is interesting about these seven names? They are all Greek names, implying that they were Hellenistic Jews, except the 7th. Hellenistic Jews, the ones the traditionalists looked down on! And the 7th, Nicolas, we know from the book of Luke, was from Antioch, so he was a Gentile convert, FIRST to **Judaism** -- then to Christianity. So **none** of the seven were **Hebraic** Jews. This doesn't mean the Hebraic Jews **couldn't** be deacons, or Church servants but those who best fit the spiritual requirements were those who by old traditional standards would have been judged "inferior". God sees us with a different eye. In the chapters to come, we read more about Stephen and Philip. Great men of God devoted to His service. Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr and was a powerful Bible teacher. Philip was an evangelist carrying the Gospel to an unreached and often hated group - the Samaritans. He had four daughters who became prophetesses and were influential in the life of Paul. Prochorus became the assistant and secretary to the apostle John.

Serving God in the food distribution led these men to several life choices. We don't all need martyrdom or missionary work to serve. We don't need to preach or teach, but we all need to serve. If God is laying on your heart a way to serve this church, will you slip a note into the offering plate today. Papers are in your bulletins today. We are growing and we are changing. Maybe you have filled out a paper before and never been called. Don't be discouraged please. Try again. We're growing. Perhaps you've been growing too. What can you do to serve? Will you sign this paper and slip it in the offering?

Because these seven stepped forward and began to serve and minister and meet people's physical needs, the apostles were able to devote more time to prayer and preaching, and look what happens

⁷ So God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the **Jewish priests** were converted, too.

Verse 7 is the secret to church growth. The Biblical method for growing a church numerically, spiritually and in ministry expansion is simply to **feed the flock**. Healthy sheep reproduce naturally. Sick and malnourished sheep curl up and die, or wander away looking for grass elsewhere. As the apostles are freed to focus on teaching, three things happen. **The Word of God spread**. People went *everywhere* talking about the Bible and what they had learned under the apostle's teaching. People take what they learn and spread it around. It comes out at work. It comes out in the neighborhood. It

shows itself in **changes of behavior** and **work ethics** and **family priorities**.

When the Word of God is **taught**, the Word of God **spreads**.

Secondly, **the number of disciples multiplied greatly**. Many people were not only **coming to faith in Christ**, but were also **continuing down the path of discipleship**. They were living their lives for Christ and were making a difference in the world **through the way they lived**. Finally, **a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith** also.

This means change was happening from the top. People who were antagonistic to Jesus and the early Church were now seeing that Christ truly did fulfill the Old Testament laws and prophecies, so they were becoming Christians and living in obedience to the truths of Christ. And **the key to it all** were the Church servants. **They let needy people know that they were cared for**. They let the **apostles** focus on *their* purpose of prayer and preaching.

Jesus Christ was the greatest Church servant of all. He came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28). Church servants follow in His footsteps by being strong but not harsh, gentle but not weak, caring and forgiving. The church servant is the pastor's, the congregation's and the community's best friend because he or she is Christ to them all.

May God bless you as you pray and consider how you might serve Christ and your church in the future. Amen.