

The Church in Progress – Part II

The Need to Organize

(Acts 6:1-7)

Introduction:

1. On the heels of the persecution by the Sanhedrin the church grew for we are told:
 - “So they went on their way from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. *And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ*” (Acts 5:41-42)
 - The results of that preaching and teaching are recorded for us in Acts 6:1a; “Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number.....”
 - 1) They were increasing in number because lives were being changed and impacted by the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
 - 2) Their unity and love for one another made a profound impact on the community around them.
 - 3) Although they were already somewhat organized in that they knew where to meet and when, they collected monies and goods and distributed it to those in need, they kept count of their converts (at least at the early stages), and even dealt with sin by exercising church discipline; the need for further organization was upon them.

2. There was an apparent need for further organization to meet a specific need within the church that had developed.
- The Apostles themselves recognized their primary duty was their devotion to prayer and the ministry of the Word.
 - The immediate issue they faced was how to care for widows who were being neglected, but there were other underlying issues that also needed attention and it was clear to the Apostles that their primary ministry would suffer if they allowed themselves to be distracted.
 - It seems best that we see this passage as the church responding to a need or to something the Holy Spirit is already doing as opposed to them organizing a program and then seeking the Spirit's leading after the fact.
 - 1) Organization (within the church) is simply a means to facilitate or accomplish what the Lord is already doing....it is not intended to be an end to itself.
 - 2) It is dangerous to stifle the Spirit's working by making it impossible for Him to work by organizing the Spirit right out of the church.
 - 3) This model (Acts 6:1-7) teaches us more about the necessity of seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit than it does about the organizational skills of the Apostles and the early church.
3. What can we learn from this situation?
- Seek the leading of the _____ first before making plans that affect the church body.
 - Rely on the wise _____ that the Holy Spirit provides to each of us.

Understanding the Reason for Organizing (Acts 6:1-2)

1. The church had grown by large numbers
 - The last mention of any specific number was 5000 men (Acts 4:4), so a conservative estimate of total people (men, women and children) by the time of Acts 6 is about 20,000 people.
 - 1) With this rapid growth you can only imagine how difficult it was to adjust to all of the various issues.
 - 2) To me the issue that they are faced with was more of an attempt by Satan to bring dissension than it was an actual organizational problem. None the less the Apostles made a wise and discerning move under the direction of the Holy Spirit.
 - Let's identify the problem that the early church faced:
 - 1) In their midst were "Hellenistic Jews" (who had been dispersed throughout the world since the time of the Babylonian captivity onward) whose native language was Greek instead of Hebrew or Aramaic.
 - 2) The Hellenistic Jews probably used the Septuagint as their Bible instead of the Hebrew Scriptures.
 - 3) The culture of the Hellenistic Jews was more Greek than it was Hebrew or Judaic.
 - 4) The Pharisees were extremely suspect of these Hellenistic Jews and they were already considered second class citizens among the Jewish community.
 - 5) Thus even within the church they were considered a minority and may explain why they were overlooked.

- 6) It was the fact that they were overlooked that created the real problem in that they complained that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. (Acts 6:1)
- We need to understand that there was a standard for the caring of widows set forth in Scripture (both Old Testament and New Testament) and it was ingrained in the culture of that day. (Deuteronomy 14:29, 16:11, 24:19-21, 26:12, I Timothy 5:3-16)
 - What we don't know is whether the neglect was deliberate or not.....some commentators think so. Whatever the case this apparent strain that existed between Palestinian Jews and the Hellenistic Jews was now brought into the church and they had to deal with it.
2. The Apostles (The twelve) call together the congregation to seek a solution. (Acts 6:2)
 - The statement; “It is not desirable for us to neglect the Word of God in order to serve tables” and in verse Acts 6:4 it says; “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word” is probably best understood to mean:
 - 1) The Apostles recognized that their primary function (that which Christ called them to do) was to be **devoted to prayer** and perform **the ministry of the Word of God**. This was accomplished by evangelizing the lost and discipling (equipping) them. (Matthew 28:19-20, Ephesians 4:12)
 - 2) The phrase “**serving of table**” is probably best understood to mean the place where funds and supplies were administered for the widows.

- I think the clear distinction in roles is set here between those who administer the Word of God (later called elders, overseers, pastors) that have the unique privilege of praying, preaching, and teaching to those who respond to or meet the actual needs of the congregation.
 - 1) It will be these functions (prayer and administering the Word of God) that will mark the ministry of the Apostles and early church leaders throughout the New Testament and all of Church history.
 - 2) One of the other emerging roles is that of _____ or servant which will take shape especially as the church expands beyond Jerusalem. We see some of the early formations of this here in Acts 6:1-7, not so much as a bureaucratic governmental structure but a response to a need.

Establishing the Requirements (Acts 6:3-4)

1. In this specific case the role that those appointed to the task was to be filled by _____.
 - We see this from the phrase; “select from yourselves seven men” and the name of those chosen were all men.
 - This would not have been unusual for the culture of the time, nor would it be unusual from a Biblical perspective. The Old Testament record shows that leadership roles (at least within the Temple rules and regulations) are filled by men and in most cases our record of those who led Israel were most often men.
 - We will see women in the New Testament in roles of service in the church (i.e. Dorcas, Lydia, Phoebe, Priscilla, and even Phillip’s daughters), but at least in this case this specific role was to be filled by men. In addition the established roles of leadership (i.e. elders) within the church are to be men. (I Timothy 2:11-12, 3:1-10)

2. The second requirement is that the men chosen were to be from _____ their group.
 - They must obviously be _____
 - This seems to imply that the selection should come from those who had already been trained from within their own group.
3. The third requirement is that they be men of good _____
 - They would be responsible for the handling of funds and entrusted with the distribution of foods.
 - Paul in his letter to Timothy will mark this as a sign of an elder or overseer.
4. A fourth requirement is that they should be _____ of the Spirit
 - This implies they are completely yielded to the Spirit's control
 - You can see this displayed through several New Testament individuals. (**Stephen** – Acts 6:5, Acts 7-8, and **Barnabas** – Acts 11:24-26, as well as Paul himself)
5. A fifth requirement is that they possess _____
 - Wisdom comes from God and thus being full of the Holy Spirit is the root source of that wisdom.
 - A person in an overseeing role needs to have a solid biblical and theological foundation which wisdom will clearly produce.

Accepting the Roster (Acts 6:5-6)

1. The men that were selected were placed in this position to fill a specific need and it is probably best not to see this as the formal establishment of the office of deacon at least in this particular instance.
 - We only know of two (Stephen and Philip) who are mentioned later in Scripture and both of them will fill more of a role of an evangelist.
 - The formal “leadership” role in the church seems to be accomplished through and by elders (Acts 14:23, 20:17) as the church progresses further and thus this appointment of minister/servant seems to be for a specific task.
 - Whether this was the beginning of the formal office of deacon or not.....the fact remains that the Apostles deemed it essential to have qualified people to accomplish the task.
2. Here is the roster:
 - **Stephen** – will actually play a significant role (primarily through his martyrdom) in spreading the Gospel beyond Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). His character (which we will see later) is an example to us all!
 - **Philip** – will play a prominent role in Acts
 - 1) He will take the Gospel to the Samaritans (Acts 8:4-25)
 - 2) He will also lead the Ethiopian Eunuch to a saving knowledge of Christ. (Acts 8:26-40)
 - 3) His daughters will become prophetesses (Acts 21:8)
 - We know very little about the other five men mentioned

3. Notice how they were accepted (Acts 6:6)
 - They were brought before the Apostles
 - The Apostles no doubt prayed for God's leading
 - Upon recognizing this was God's will they laid hands on them
 - 1) This was became the common method of accepting a person into ministry or sending them out to do ministry. (Acts 13:3, I Timothy 4:14, 5:22, II Timothy 1:6)
 - 2) It is hard to go wrong when you have a consensus of affirmation from within the congregation.

Acknowledging the Results (Acts 6:7)

1. I think one of the primary results was the Apostles primary roles (prayer and administering the Word) was not compromised and further problems of discontent were avoided by such a wise solution.
2. In addition to that we see the benefit of such a wise decision as the "Word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem"
3. What was a third result that occurred (Hint Acts 6:7b)?

Concluding Thoughts:

Let me close this lesson by quoting John MacArthur; "The church today needs organization for the same reasons as the first fellowship. Pastors must be free to focus on the preaching of the Word and prayer. **Better organization can help meet the needs of all members and thus avoid conflict. And a unified well-taught church will be a powerful witness to the lost world.**" (John MacArthur; Commentary on Acts page 185)