

Office of Deacon (#2 the Problem) – Acts 6:1-7

I. Introduction:

- A. The early days of the church in Jerusalem were **as unique as** they were **exciting**.
1. People were being converted in prodigious numbers – unparalleled at any point since.
 2. And after the ascension of Christ a pair of God's angels offered wonderful encouragement to the eleven, which I'm sure they shared with the others – *“This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.”*
 3. Under the circumstances, and with the Messianic teaching those men had, don't you think they expected the Lord's return sometime during their lives – if not right away?
 4. They, and the church lived, served and worshiped under the expectation of the imminent coming of Christ.
- B. **Acts 1** tells us that the disciples entered into an upper room in Jerusalem, and *“these all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.”*
1. **Acts 1:14** speaks about 14 to 18 people – the disciples and a few ladies – before we come to **verse 15**.
 2. **Acts 1:15** says, *“And in those days (apparently a few days later) Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples... (the number of names together were about an hundred and twenty)...”*
 - a. Apparently it took a few days for some of the brethren to return to Jerusalem from Galilee.
 - b. Does that mean that the 500 brethren who were witnesses to the resurrected Christ were on their way?
 - c. Maybe they were still scattered across Galilee but will later become a part of the church in Jerusalem.
 3. A few days after that we come to **Acts 2:1**, which tells us once again that *“they were with one accord in one place.”*
 4. After the salvation and addition of the 3,000 souls, who continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, **Acts 2:46** says that they also **continued daily** with **one accord** and with **singleness of heart**.
 5. These people were so overcome by God's grace and salvation, and they were so excited about the Messiah's coming, that they had found nothing to disturb their unity and purpose.
 - a. They were focused on things above, not on things on the earth.
 - b. Not even the growing animosity of the city & the threat of persecution could disrupt their unity of spirit.
- C. The Apostles were publically preaching Christ in the temple, and I'm sure that many of those new believers were sharing what they knew of the Lord with their friends and relatives.
1. The Jewish priests accused the brethren – *“behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine.”*
 2. *“You have saturated the city with your teaching about Jesus the Messiah, His resurrection from the grave, and His soon return to establish the Millennial kingdom.”*
 3. This so angered the officials, they beat the servants of Christ & commanded them, once again, to shut up.
 4. And then come the last words of **Acts 5** – *“And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.”*
- D. Everything was going perfectly.
1. **The Lord's will was being accomplished without a hitch, including the lubrication** of persecution.
 2. **The gospel** was being spread. **Thousands of souls** were being stirred and many were converted.
 3. **God's enemies** were terrified and in retreat. **Satan's dominion** over Israel was in jeopardy.
 4. The potential for Christ's church in the city... the possibilities for Christianity... were unlimited.
- E. **And YET**, *“in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.”*
1. From our distant perspective – so far removed from the scene – we might think of this as a mere speed-bump in the blessing and growth of the church.
 2. But, in reality, it had disastrous potentials – which I'd like to consider tonight.
 3. This was the background and reason for the church to call for a few deacons.
 4. And those deacon/servants were a part of the protection and on-going blessing of that church.

II. Consider the bane of a **DISUNITED CHURCH**.

- A. Do I need to remind you that the **initial membership** of the **initial church** was **initially entirely Jewish**?
1. Those anti-Semites within Christendom, today, need to think about that.
 2. The name "**Peter**" may be a Greek name, but the name with which he was born was Jewish – "**Simeon**."
 3. Amidst all the Jewish aspects of his life was his protest against killing and eating non-kosher food.
 4. He was a Jew, and he was in the middle of the question whether or not converted Gentiles were truly converted if they didn't also become Jewish proselytes.
 5. All of the other first disciples – the Apostles – were Jews, primarily from the Jewish province of Galilee.
 6. And one of them had even been an out-and-out zealot for the Hebrew cause against the Greeks and Romans – Simon Zelotes.
- B. Despite the Jewish nature of the church, that doesn't mean they were all of one segment of Jewish society.
1. There were Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes and others being born again and joining the church.
 2. Before coming under the influence of God's grace, how well did the Pharisees and Sadducees get along?
 3. Wasn't it true that if they weren't facing the common Roman enemy, or even Jesus, they fought like cats and dogs?
 4. Their unconverted theologies were like oil and water – earthly and heavenly – spiritual and physical.
 5. But now they were one Christ & members of His church; they were arms & legs of the one body of Christ.
 6. **Acts 6:7** says, "**And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the PRIESTS were obedient to the faith.**"
 7. Most, if not all of those priests were raised Sadducees, now many of them were believers in Jesus Christ.
 - a. How many of those, who formerly had positions of religious leadership, potentially chafed at the lowly leadership of the Lord's church?
 - b. Remember, they had earlier called the Lord's disciples "**unlearned and ignorant men**," but now some of those formerly uneducated people were the pastors of these priests.
 8. And some of them who had fought each other from opposite sides of the Sanhedrin were worshipping together at the foot of the cross.
- C. But that was **only one area** of potential **division** within the church.
1. There were also the "**Hebrews**" and the "**Hellenists**."
 2. The term "**Hebrews**" in **Acts 6:1** refers primarily to the language the people used.
 - a. They spoke either Hebrew or Aramaic – the dialect common to that part of the world.
 - b. But to be a "**Hebrew**" in this sense was more than just language.
 3. For the most part, the "**Hebrews**" were born in the land of Palestine – natives to Israel and Jerusalem.
 4. As a rule they were raised with a firm commitment to the ancient Jewish faith and ancestral customs.
 5. If they weren't full-fledged Pharisees, they were sympathetic to them and certainly bore many similarities.
 6. They grew up with a guarded eye on those Jews who were not as "**Jewish**" as themselves.
 7. And that included the Sadducees who often leaned toward King Herod's family and Herod's compromises with the Romans and the Greek culture.
 8. In other words those "**Hebrews**" might have made **good Landmark Baptists**, keeping a wary eye on all the other Baptists in the world.
- D. On the other hand, the "**HELLENISTS**," or "**Grecians**," were essentially **foreign-born Jews** who, with varying degrees of religious strictness grew up with the Greek language and foreign customs.
1. The word "**Grecians**" in **Acts 6:1** is "**hel-lay-nis-tace**'.
 2. The families of many of these "**Hellenists**" had been part of the "**diaspora**" – the dispersed Jews – who had moved to other parts of the world for one reason or another.
 3. Now, they, or their children, were returning to the center of their faith, but bringing with them ideas and attitudes from the outside.
 4. I'm not talking about Greek proselytes to the Jewish faith, but actual sons of Abraham, who had grown up in the Greek culture.

5. I'm sure there were some proselytes among them, but most of these had the blood of Jacob in their veins.
 6. Generally they were more free-thinking and open to change.
 - a. They dressed differently – less conservatively – giving evidence of more contact with the Gentile world.
 - b. Most of them read the Septuagint – the Old Testament in its Greek translation – because they hadn't learned to read or speak Hebrew.
 - c. Many of them tried to balance their Jewishness with the new challenges which the Roman government and Greek culture brought to the world.
 - d. And as a result they were often more open to the gospel than the Hebrews.
 7. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that most of the new converts were "*Hellenists*" rather than "*Hebrews*."
- E. But of course, there were exceptions to this rule, and Saul of Tarsus was one of them.
1. He was born and bred in Cilicia, Asia – southern Turkey.
 2. He grew up in Greek society and was even a Roman citizen. He was a "*Hellenist*."
 3. But he was raised as a **very strict Pharisee** – he was a "*Pharisee even among the Pharisees*."
 4. He had returned to Jerusalem for his education, and even though he **wasn't** as **openly** "*Hellenistic*" as many others, he certainly had **a more liberal mind-set** – whether he admitted it or not.
- F. There was a **natural** and **cultural animosity** between those two kinds of Jews.
1. There was a **jealousy** on both sides, as each yearned to have a little more of what the other possessed.
 2. Perhaps the "*Grecians*" had more wealth than their native cousins, living in the better parts of town.
 3. Perhaps some of them had better clothing, and they could afford more luxuries and "*stuff*."
 4. And now Jews from those various backgrounds were being saved and brought into the Lord's church.

III. So let's take a closer look at that **CHURCH**.

- A. Jesus' ministry had been primarily among the "*Hebrews*" in Galilee.
1. Even though the Lord preached to all the people in Jerusalem, He was rejected by the Jewish leadership, and most likely few of His first followers came from among the "*Grecians*."
 2. Certainly without question, all of the **first disciples** were all "*Hebrews*." The **apostles** were "*Hebrews*."
 3. And now that the Lord had ascended into Heaven the leadership of the Lord's church was in hands of those "*Hebrews*."
- B. Acts 4:36** says, "*And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus, Having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.*"
1. What did Barnabas do with the proceeds of his estate in Cyprus?
 2. He gave it to the Lord, his Saviour, through His church.
 3. And physically what did that entail? He gave that money to the Apostles for distribution.
 4. Then, vying for the same attention, what did Ananias do with the money he gave to the church?
 5. **Acts 5:2** – He "*brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles feet.*"
- C. Should we assume that the 12 apostles were acting as treasurers and stewards of the church finances?
1. Wouldn't that be a logical assumption on at least two grounds?
 2. First, that is what the Bible seems to say in these two verses.
 3. And second, remember that during the days of the Lord Jesus, one of their number held "*the bag, and bare what was put therein.*"
 4. Under the leadership of the Lord, one of the Apostles had been the treasurer of the group – the church.
 5. And "*Jesus had said unto (that treasurer), Buy those things that we have need of against the feast; or ... give something to the poor*" – **John 13:29**.
 6. The Apostles were used to collecting the funds of God's people and using them as needed, so I have no doubt that policy continued after Pentecost in the Lord's church.

- D. But the dynamics of the situation were changing.
1. The Lord Jesus was not physically present with them; they weren't able to directly consult him on purchases and distribution of the funds.
 2. And the number of the disciples had exploded, now reaching into the thousands, including for the first time, wealthy people like Barnabas.
 3. So along with those thousands of people, the financial offerings were escalating exponentially.
 4. And what is the natural reaction when there is more food or money to disburse? The scrutiny intensifies.
 5. Besides that – the poor were no longer out there in the community surrounding them; they were actually within their own numbers.
 6. It was then that some of the old cultural differences began to surface – stirred by Satan and the depravity of the flesh.

IV. And that brings us to **THE PROBLEM**.

- A. *“And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.”*
1. Notice that Luke doesn't say that the Grecians **THOUGHT** their widows were being neglected; apparently they actually were.
 2. But I confess to having a dozen questions.
 3. For example, among the thousands of converts, how easy was it for someone to actually find or approach the church leadership when they needed help?
 - a. There wasn't a church building with offices for the staff.
 - b. There wasn't a sign posted somewhere declaring that the Apostles were available for consultation between 2:00 and 5:00 on Tuesdays and Thursdays.
 - c. There were no phone numbers available to call.
 - d. How were these very busy Apostles to know who had genuine needs?
 4. And as to these widows – were they **“widows indeed”**?
 - a. ***1 Timothy 5:16*** – *“If any man or woman that believeth have widows, let **THEM** relieve them, and let **NOT** the church be charged; that **IT** may relieve them that are widows **INDEED**.”*
 - b. Were any of the brethren expecting the church to take care of widowed aunts and grandmothers, while they themselves refused to do their duty?
 - c. Remember that the Lord Jesus dealt with that sort of problem among the unsaved Jews in **Matthew 15**.
- B. Another question regards **the need**.
1. I have known some widows who **needed much more** than others.
 - a. And I have known some who **THOUGHT they needed more** than others.
 2. Related questions might be, What other expenses did the church have in those days?
 - a. They didn't have utilities, missionaries and paid staff.
 - b. But were they buying or making copies of scriptures so that every new convert had them in their hand?
 - c. Were they hiring teachers to make sure the children of the illiterate converts would be able to read those scriptures?
 3. Was the care of the poor the only fiscal responsibility of the church?
 4. If I had to guess, I would say that was their only expenditure.
 5. And then as to the general neglect, how much of the problem was real and how much was perceived through the eyes of social prejudice?
- C. If you ask me, the Apostles were in a no-win situation.
1. Without a doubt, among the thousands of recent converts there **were** people **in genuine need**.
 2. And some of those people in need were often unknown to the church leadership.
 3. A woman, who had been saved three weeks earlier and baptized a week after that, may not have, as yet, revealed to anyone but her closest neighbors that she was near starvation.

4. The Hellenist living down the road, or who had led her to the Lord, might have determined that she was being “*neglected.*”
 5. And with hundreds or perhaps thousands of shekels and farthings, pennies and mites, available, how could the Apostles equitably distribute it all?
 6. Even if one of the twelve dedicated his life to that ministry, forsaking the preaching of the word, I’m not sure he could handle the load without at least seven people to help him.
- D. And so, there arose a ***murmuring*** – a ***grumbling*** among the Grecians.
1. But rather than coming to the Apostles and pointing out the problem, even if it was done with a bit of anger, they preferred to grumble among themselves about the apparent neglect.
 2. And that was more potentially problematic than the neglect itself.
 3. And, as I say, it is unlikely there was even a way for those needs to be presented to Peter or James.
- E. As I said in my first lesson, part of the reason God had been blessing that church was that the members were so united in spirit, purpose and prayer.
1. But now that unity was falling apart, not because of doctrinal differences, but through quarrels about money.
 2. The problem may have been real, but it should have been, and could have been, handled – if presented to the church leadership.
 3. Gossip and griping can only produce bad results.
- F. Not only have these first chapters in ***Acts*** spoken about the unity within the church, but the ***epistles*** exhort us towards unity.
1. The sheer number of exhortations point out that there is a natural propensity for disunity.
 - a. The Second law of Spiritual Thermodynamics comes into play – deterioration.
 2. ***I Corinthians 1:10*** – “*Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren... that there are contentions among you.*”
 3. ***II Corinthians 13:11*** – “*Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you.*”
 4. ***Ephesians 4:1*** – “*I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*”
 5. ***Philippians 1:27*** – “*Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.*”
 6. ***I Peter 3:8*** – “*Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren...*”
- G. Why are such exhortations needed?
1. Because the more we live in the flesh the more self-centered we become.
 2. Oh, we may cover our selfishness with noble platitudes – “*Our widows are being neglected*” – but it still boils down to “*us and our group*” over “*you and your group.*”
- H. But here is the issue: what should be the primary focus of the Lord’s church?
1. While not forgetting our Christian duty toward other believers, our first purpose should be Christ and His gospel.
 2. Why weren’t there men – wise men – among the Hellenists thinking about a solution to the problem without taking the Apostles away from the ministry of the Word? I hope there were, and we are simply not told.
 3. But it appears that when the twelve heard about the murmuring, it was they who went to the Lord seeking for a solution.

V. Conclusion:

- A. The point in this lesson is that we need to keep our focus on our God-given commission.
 - 1. To bring our eyes down, out of Heaven, is to open doors to disaster.
 - 2. Let's not start comparing ourselves with others; weighing our blessings against others.
 - 3. It's not our job to determine whether or not that another person is serving the Lord properly.

- B. What, generally speaking, is our primary responsibility as a church?
 - 1. We are told right here in the context – *“prayer and the ministry of the word.”*
 - 2. *“Preach the word, be instant in season and out of season.”*
 - 3. *“Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.”*

- C. Thankfully, we see in the rest of this chapter that wisdom and cool heads prevailed, so that God's blessing once again began to fall on the Lord's church in Jerusalem.
 - 1. Not only was there a solution to the immediate problem, with the ordination of seven deacons.
 - 2. But as **verse 7** says, *“And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly...”*
 - 3. Isn't this still the need of the hour?