

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #15

Acts 6:1-7

When chapter 5 ends, the gifted apostles were focusing their ministry on preaching and teaching (5:42). The church was growing because God's Word and God's Grace system was being accurately taught. Threats by religious and political leadership could not stop them, but Satan had another tactic to try to prevent God's men from preaching God's Word. His tactic was "internal division". As James Boice said, "the good days are over" (*Acts*, p. 111).

As we come to Acts 6, we come to the critical matter of organized leadership. If a church is to function properly, it needs men of God leading it. **One key purpose of organized leadership is to protect the proper focus on preaching and teaching God's Word in the church.** The church needs those God has gifted teaching God's Word, and it needs other qualified leaders taking care of everything else to make sure that this stays the focus.

Here is the first glimpse we get in the Church Age of this important God ordained system. As we go through these verses, you will notice that there are two offices. The offices are not specifically called here "elder" and "deacon", but most believe critical truth about these two offices begins right here.

Now there is something that we need to see from these verses that most churches have completely overlooked. It is the word or noun "disciple". This word shows up in these verses three times (6:1, 2, 7). **The noun "disciple" (μαθητης) is one in this context that is a synonym for believer.** As G. Abbott Smith said **it is a general term for any Christian** (*Greek Lexicon*, p. 275). Every believer in the first church was classified as a disciple.

The reason why this is so important to see is that most churches place a major emphasis on what they call "discipleship". Typically when they use this term they use it to refer to some form of special instruction or training manual that supposedly can take you to some deeper level of Christianity. But that is not how the word is used here. Truth is the word "disciple" was mostly used to refer to the twelve apostles. In fact, the actual word "disciple" is primarily used in the Gospels of Matthew (72 times), Mark (44 times), Luke (38 times) and John (77 times). **It is used only thirty times in Acts and not at all in the Church Epistles. The word phases out in the N.T.**

From this context in Acts, we conclude that any person who had believed on Jesus Christ was a disciple. This was not a special term in the Church Age used to describe one's progress or growth in Christianity or its doctrines. The reason why this needs to be seen is because discipleship courses are a dime a dozen and so are those who want to lead them. But there was no discipleship course at the beginning of the church. The church was meeting and the gifted apostles were teaching and the people were maturing. There is nothing that will ever replace being taught all sixty-six books of the Bible or all the doctrines in the Bible. Jesus Christ, when addressing the seven churches of Revelation never used the term disciple, advising the church to run some discipleship program. **If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you are a disciple and what you need is to come to church to be taught the Scriptures by those who have been called and gifted by God to teach them.**

Now it is obvious from these verses that the early church needed organized leadership protecting the apostolic teaching ministry, not discipleship programs. They needed organized leadership to protect the teaching of God's Word. The church needed godly men to govern church life so those gifted by God could keep their focus on preaching and teaching God's Word. What we learn here is this:

IN THE EARLY DAYS OF THE CHURCH, SATAN TRIED TO STOP THE APOSTLES FROM PREACHING GOD'S WORD BY GETTING THEM TO RE-FOCUS THEIR ATTENTION ELSEWHERE, BUT THE CHURCH OF GOD ORGANIZED ITSELF IN SUCH A WAY THAT IT PREVENTED THIS FROM HAPPENING.

A true church of God needs godly elders and deacons caring for it in such a way that it carefully protects the pulpit ministry. There is a critical responsibility in the church to see that God's Word is carefully taught and it is the responsibility of leaders to make sure this happens.

Now **verse 1** sets the stage for this subtle satanic attack and it gives us the background for part of the leadership responsibilities; and the background is **the church must deal with complainers**. Leaders of a church often have to deal with whiners and complainers. Sometimes the complaints are legitimate and sometimes not legitimate. **If Satan can stop the powerful preaching of God's Word through the complaints of people, he has accomplished his objective.**

The actual word "complaint" (γογγυσμος) refers to one who murmurs and mutters (*Smith*, p. 94). Unfortunately leaders are often drained by having to deal with people who whine, complain, murmur, and mutter. It is part of the job of leadership.

There had been a sweet unity in this church until Acts 6 and now the problems start because the church is growing. Satan was out to split this church and disrupt the unity that was so powerful. **Dr. Ironside said the two ways Satan will always try to destroy an impacting church are: 1) Inward dissension; 2) Outward persecution** (*Acts*, p. 151).

Kent Hughes said he knew of a church that split and there was a lawsuit on which side would get the church property. The church was in a denomination and so a denominational church court was established to hear the case and decide which side got the property. During the hearing, it came out that the split started at a church supper when an elder received a smaller slice of ham than the child seated next to him. This split the church; Satan won and the world got a good laugh (*Acts*, p. 93).

What apparently happened was there were many Jews from outside of Palestine who spoke Greek (Hellenistic) and were from the Greek culture, who were coming to faith in Jesus Christ and wanted to be part of this church. One commentator observed thank God they were coming into the church or the church could have become a little legalistic synagogue. These Jews did not speak Hebrew because they did not live in Palestine and they would have used the Septuagint O.T. Remember this church is in Jerusalem and it started off with mostly native Hebrews. But now the Gospel was reaching outsiders. The outsiders didn't act, talk, or live like the pure Hebrew Jew and as a result some prejudice began to creep in.

Now the main issue that prompts all of this was the “overlooking” of some of the widows. In both the O.T. and the N.T. (1 Tim. 5:3-16) it is clear that God monitors the treatment and the care of widows. Back in Biblical times the widows had no real way to support themselves. There was no social security, no Medicare or Medicaid programs, no retirement plans, insurance policies or pensions. So the responsibility to take care of the Christian widows fell to the church. The church should keep track of widows, but first responsibility falls to the family (1 Tim. 5:16).

According to **verse 1**, there must have been a daily serving or distribution of food that was given to the widows and the widows out of a Greek background were being overlooked or neglected. **The verb “overlooked” (παράθεωρω) is passive and not active, which means this was not an intentional neglect; it was action that just happened.** In other words, the leaders were not intentionally snubbing the Hellenistic widows in the daily serving of the food.

What is most interesting and important is that the word “serving” (**6:1, 2**) and “ministry” (**6:4**) is the Greek word (διακονία) from which we get our English word deacon. Although the specific Office of Deacon is not mentioned here, certainly the formation of the office is found here. One other observation may be made here, and that is **true church ministry that is apostolic in nature is intensely focused on preaching and teaching the Word of God, and it also does take an interest in the welfare of the flock.** Ministry is about both of these things.

There are three main responses to this text:

RESPONSE #1 - The response of the apostles to the problem in the congregation. **6:2-4**

There were twelve gifted apostles who knew God’s Word and Grace Age doctrine. Twelve apostles gifted by God who were responsible to teach thousands of people God’s truth. Now the apostles were faced with a major church leadership decision. So they made their decision and then called the congregation together to inform them. When they got the congregation together they gave them four messages:

Message #1 - It is not desirable for us to neglect the Word of God. **6:2a**

This is exactly what Satan wanted. He wanted the gifted apostles to stop preaching and teaching God’s Word and meet the physical needs of the people. God uses His preached Word to produce faith and Satan wanted it stopped.

Now there are a couple of things to point out here. **First**, the word “desirable” (αρεστός) means it is not pleasing or agreeable before God for us to neglect God’s Word (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 58). **Second**, the word “neglect” (καταλείπω) means to forsake, abandon, and leave behind the Word of God (*Ibid.*, p. 235).

Now don’t miss this; the apostles are saying it does not please God in any way if one called and gifted by God to preach the Word leaves behind or neglects his responsibility to expound the Word of God in order to focus on the physical needs of others.

The irony of this is for some people this is exactly what would please them. I could give you names of people who would be totally pleased if the minister would shirk all responsibilities to study to rightly divide God’s Word as long as he came to visit them. But this would never please God. I could give you some names of people who would be totally happy and couldn’t care less

if when they come to church a minister would stand up here and say nothing as long as he went to their house or called them on the phone and wasted precious study time helping them with something physical or emotional.

Do not overlook what is here; what actually pleases God and what pleases people are two different things. These apostles saw it properly; it is not pleasing to God for them to allow anything or anyone to interfere with their responsibility of studying and communicating God's Word. **The Word of God saves and the Word of God edifies and sanctifies.**

It is clear from this text that God has gifted some to preach His Word full time and that is exactly what they are to do. There are some who have been called and gifted by God to preach His Word and notice, **for one called to preach, the communication of God's Word and the care of the soul is far more important than the care of the body.**

This is so foreign to most churches today who believe we must make every effort to lure the person in by showing them we physically care about them. Churches have so missed this point that they put pop machines in so called "sanctuaries". They think it is all about the physical ease of the person coming to church. God says, "My Word communicated to people is the most important thing because that is what meets the spiritual need." The early church said, "Our first priority is to make certain God's people are fed God's Word."

One other thing needs to be stated from this text. There are many ministers who are neglecting the careful study and exposition of the Scriptures; and not because of the high demands of the congregation but because of their own spiritual decline and laziness. It is hard work to feed God's people God's Word week after week. This work is not to be neglected. The minister is to study to rightly divide Scripture every week as a workman that will not be ashamed (II Timothy 2:15). That is his job.

Message #2 - It is not desirable for us to neglect the Word of God to serve tables . **6:2b**

The noun "tables" (τραπέζα) can refer to a dining table or a money changer's table. Either way the point is clear. **It is not pleasing to God to have gifted apostles neglecting the Word of God because they have to take care of food matters or monetary matters.** Preaching and teaching God's Word takes priority over everything. It trumps all other responsibilities for a gifted minister.

In my first church a couple of elders told me the story of a minister that they once had. They said they were doing some landscaping and the minister would come out to help do the landscaping. Finally, these two elders said to the minister, we don't need you out here helping with the landscaping; we need you in your office studying to feed us the Word of God. That philosophy of ministry is straight out of this text.

Message #3 - It is the apostolic conclusion that the congregation needs to select seven qualified men to bring before us so we may put them in charge of this matter.
6:3

What is needed to make a church run right are trustworthy leadership men who can handle various physical matters of the church. These men would become as S. Lewis Johnson said, “the assistants or deputies of the elders”. There are all kinds of church ministry opportunities that are important. These men would handle the property, do the ushering, and take care of physical needs and probably the finances. Even serving tables is an important ministry, but it needs the right people of God doing it.

It is also important to observe that the final approval of the men selected would lie with the apostles who are functioning here as elders. The congregation had a say to a certain point, but it was the apostles who had the final say to determine whether their selection was proper.

Since apostles are gone, God has entrusted the oversight of the church to the elders. They have the responsibility to watch over everything. Congregational rule is really not a Biblical structure. The congregation is important and should be consulted, but the final decisions rest with the elders. This is God’s system of operation, not man’s.

The congregation was to look over the men in the church and select seven who met the proper qualifications. As near as I can determine, each of the seven were to meet three qualifications:

(Qualification #1) - Each man was to be a man with a good reputation. **6:3a**

Now the word “reputation” (μαρτυρουμενους) means he is to have earned for himself a good witness or testimony that he is a faithful man of God. The congregation was to look around, find seven such men and bring them to the apostles for their approval. The church must never put on the board a man with a bad reputation. The reputation must be that man loves Jesus Christ, that man loves the Word of God, and that man cares about the Church of God.

(Qualification #2) - Each man was to be a man full of the Spirit. **6:3b**

The man was not to be full of himself, but full of the Spirit. The man was not to be a cantankerous man of the flesh, but a man controlled by the Holy Spirit. Each man was to have an observable Spirit controlled life, not a flesh controlled life.

(Qualification #3) - Each man was to be a man full of wisdom. **6:3c**

The word “wisdom” (σοφια) means that this man was to demonstrate a mental excellence at the highest level, especially he was to be skilled and wise in the things of God.

Now notice the end of **verse 3** whom we may put in charge of “this task”. The Greek word “task” (χρηιας) is one that refers to legitimate need, matters of business (*Smith*, p. 483). There are legitimate business needs connected to God’s Church and the church needs good, godly men overseeing those needs.

Message #4 - It is our responsibility to devote ourselves to prayer and ministry of God’s Word. **6:4**

This philosophy of ministry goes against the grain of most churches who think their minister should be a CEO business manager, counselor and administrator. He is to be a prayer warrior and a Bible expositor.

Thomas Walker, the Oxford Bible scholar of the late 1800s said, “We cannot lay too great stress on prayer and preaching” (*Acts*, p. 171). Dr. H.A. Ironside said **if a man of God is to have power in public, he must pray in private** (*Acts*, p. 157).

These apostles are showing us what the real priority of the minister must be - prayer and ministry of God’s Word. Prayer and Bible exposition go hand in hand. This is critical. If a man is to be effective in his communication of God’s Word, he must be a man of prayer. Making God’s Word come to life for God’s people requires prayer and careful study of God’s Word.

Donald Grey Barnhouse said: “No man is ever going to be able to fill the pulpit adequately unless he spends thousands of hours year after year in the study of God’s Word” (*Acts*, p. 59).

RESPONSE #2 - The response of the congregation to the solution of the apostles. **6:5**

The decision of the apostles pleased all the church and they all got to work on finding seven godly men. The congregation brought seven men to the apostles for approval. It is interesting that of the seven, we only learn something extra about four of them:

The seven were:

- 1) **Stephen** - would become the first martyr. He not only met the three qualifications, but he also was a man “full of faith”. What this means is he was full of the faith grace system as opposed to the religious works system. He fully embraced the faith system of justification and sanctification and would be martyred for it.
- 2) **Philip** - would go on to become a key evangelist (*Acts* 8:29-40).
- 3) **Prochorus** - history says became a bishop and was martyred in Antioch.
- 4) **Nicanor** - we know nothing about, except he was a faithful elected deacon of the first church.
- 5) **Timon** - we know nothing about, except he was a faithful elected deacon of the first church.
- 6) **Parmenas** - we know nothing about, except he was a faithful elected deacon of the first church.
- 7) **Nicolas** - was a proselyte convert first to Judaism and then to Christianity. He was from Antioch and Antioch would become a powerful church with powerful teachers (*Acts* 13:1).

RESPONSE #3 - The response of the apostles to the choice of the congregation. **6:6**

The congregation brought the seven to the apostles, and they were accepted. The apostles prayed and laid their hands on them.

The laying on of the hands of the apostles meant several things in apostolic times:

- 1) It was a means of apostolic healing (*Acts* 5:12, 16).
- 2) It was a means of impartation of the Holy Spirit (*Acts* 8:17-18).
- 3) It was a means of ordination (*Acts* 6:6).

Now the result of the leaders protecting the preaching and teaching ministry of the apostles is found in **verse 7; God’s Word kept on spreading and new numbers of people believed on Jesus Christ, including many of the priests in Jerusalem.**

When you have a unified church that prays and is dedicated to the protection of the preaching and teaching of God’s Word, God will continue to increase and expand that church.