

## Sermon 26, I'm Not an Apostle. Is the Church for Me?, Acts 6-8

**Proposition:** The ordinary Christians whom Luke portrays show the massive importance and high callings of non-apostles in building the church.

- I. The Subjects of the Reign of Christ, chs. 6-8
  - A. Widows, 6:1-7
    1. Supported by the Church
    2. Neglected by the Church
    3. Defended by those close to them
    4. Relieved by the Church
  - B. The Whole Congregation, 6:5
    1. Pleased by Apostolic Leadership
    2. Nominators
  - C. Stephen, chs. 6-7
    1. Ordinary Christian
    2. Wonder-worker
    3. Apologist
    4. Historian
    5. Martyr
  - D. Philip, ch. 8
    1. Ordinary Christian
    2. Missionary
    3. Evangelist
  - E. Others, 8:4
    1. Not Apostles
    2. Preachers
    3. Students of the Word
- II. The Point: The Church Is for Non-Apostles Too!

### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, this sermon definitely has some similarities to last week's sermon. It's another attempt to grapple with the big picture of where we are in Acts. Last week we looked at the manifestations of Christ's reign. This week, we're going to home in on one particular manifestation of His reign: How He rules different people and groups within the broader church. In other words, I want to pull out of the text what Luke has to say about those who aren't apostles. What non-apostolic characters appear in Acts, and what did they do for the church? With every character, I want to emphasize that these folks are not apostles. They are not the big guns like Peter and John. They are ordinary Christians, just like

you, who did not hesitate to contribute substantially to the Kingdom of God by their ordinary Christian walk.

## **I. The Subjects of the Reign of Christ, chs. 6-8**

So let's look at some of these folks in greater detail.

### **A. Widows, 6:1-7**

The first group Luke calls our attention to is widows. Now, our church is unique among all churches I've ever been in in this way: It has no widows. We have one divorced man, and his situation would certainly be parallel to that of a widow, or at least a widower. But the Lord has not called us in this congregation to tend any widows in our midst — at least not yet. That day will probably be coming soon.

We all know that a widow is a woman whose husband has died. That leaves her, generally speaking, without a source of social status, income, and protection. Widows are easy prey. The social conditions of our era may be different than conditions of the first century, and widows today may have more money than ever before. But Luke presents four different facets of the relationship between widows and the church in our text today.

#### **1. Supported by the Church**

First of all, the widows were supported by the church. There was a daily distribution to them — as we observed a few weeks ago, likely a daily distribution of food.

Now, Paul goes ahead and gives the qualifications for this church dole in 1 Timothy 5. They are certainly steep, but not impossible to meet by any means. Those who qualify for full support from the church certainly ought to receive it. Our denomination has a benefits branch that specifically devotes itself to caring for the widows of pastors. Brothers and sisters, this should be a core part of our identity: We care for widows! That's what a church does. That's what our church does. It's not an optional extra for some churches that go above and beyond. It's not a soup kitchen for the homeless in our neighborhood. That's optional. Some churches have that ministry and some don't. But we specifically go out of our way to help any widow that walks through our door. Yet that said, we see that the church does not always live up to this calling.

#### **2. Neglected by the Church**

Already in this early church the widows are being neglected by the very people who were supposed to care for them — their Christian brothers and sisters! A complaint arose, and though Luke doesn't specifically say whether the complaint was justified in this instance, surely such complaints have been more than justified many different times over the centuries. Could a widow charge that our church has neglected her? Could a widower come and say, "I was never invited. I was excluded. I was not wanted; I was not cared for?" May it never be! And now, while we don't have any widows among us, we should be practicing generosity and care for other needy people among us and around us.

#### **3. Defended by those close to them**

Luke also doesn't say that the widows complained. They didn't make it their business to come and say "I think that this church is way out of line." Instead, it was those close to the widows, in

this case those from their same ethnic group, who stood up and said “The church needs to get its house in order on this point.”

The world is enamored of whistleblowers — people who point out abuses and problems in their organization despite the very real risk that they could lose their jobs over choosing to speak up. The world used to not be enamored of whistleblowers. It originally got this idea (that the whistleblower is good) from the church. Does the church still practice this? If you say “Something is majorly wrong here. I’m going to talk to the pastor. I’m going to talk to the elders,” what do you think would happen to you in our congregation? Would you be welcomed, affirmed, and get to watch the powers that be take real steps to correct the abuse? That’s what the Hellenists of Acts 6 got to see at First Church Jerusalem. And then we wonder why the church multiplied so fast, why so many priests became obedient to the faith. Brothers and sisters, the honesty, transparency, humility, and responsibility of the apostles is apparent here. They listened to the whistleblowers who stuck up for the widows.

You’re not an apostle? Maybe you’re a widow. You’re not a widow? Maybe you’re a whistleblower. You’re not a whistleblower? Maybe you’re someone who listens to a whistleblower, someone who is more interested in using your position to set things right than you are in using your position to cover for yourself and a whole bunch of wrongdoers.

Don’t let the world have all the glory of whistleblowing. Yes, the church should not have scandals and abuses within it. But it will. And when it does, you and I can either choose to do something, say something, or remain silent and thereby affirm and accept the situation. The Hellenists wouldn’t do that. They cared too much about their widows. And the apostles responded in the right way.

#### **4. Relieved by the Church**

Indeed, though Luke does not say “And the seven new administrators did a bang-up job,” he strongly implies such a thing. The widows were relieved. Their needs were met once again. And it’s because the widows, the leadership, and the whistleblowers worked together to serve Christ faithfully within His church.

#### **B. The Whole Congregation, 6:5**

It would be absurd to describe the first century church as Congregational. They certainly did not believe or practice the idea that every local church contained within itself all the power necessary to do everything the church is called to do. That’s why Paul sent out special envoys like Titus, who was supposed to ordain elders in Crete because the local churches did not have the ability to carry out such a thing on their own. Nonetheless, though the polity described here is not fully congregational, there is an important role for the whole congregation.

#### **1. Pleased by Apostolic Leadership**

Yes, part of that role is simply to listen to the apostles and be impressed with them. The statement found approval with the whole congregation, Luke tells us v. 5. So far so good. But visions of polity where the congregation’s role is to be a flock of yes-men (e.g., the Roman Catholic polity) are certainly incompatible with what we see here. The apostles made a suggestion on how to move forward, and the congregation endorsed it.

## **2. Nominators**

But that suggestion involved ordinary Christians being nominators, looking around the church and saying “This guy is suitable for this role.” Indeed, though Luke doesn’t mention an election here (he does later on), the implication seems to be that the seven were chosen by acclamation. The congregation didn’t need to vote because it was obvious that these seven were the ones that everyone would choose.

Congregation of Harvest, do you take your role as nominators seriously? At this point, we try to have nominations for officers open every three years. In the times between, are you consciously meeting everyone in the church? Getting to know them? Evaluating in the back of your mind their suitability for office? I’m not saying that this is the most important facet of life in the church. But it is certainly a facet. A leader that the congregation can’t pick out of the crowd is not a suitable leader for the church of Jesus Christ.

### **C. Stephen, chs. 6-7**

Well, Luke tells us about two individuals. At least, he tells us about their work. The first of these men is Stephen. The name in Greek means “crown,” and with such a name it is indeed appropriate that he be crowned as the first martyr for Jesus Christ.

#### **1. Ordinary Christian**

Who was Stephen? He was not an apostle. He was a member of the church in Jerusalem. That’s pretty much all we know about him when his name is put forward for this new proto-diaconate. Yet we see more than that soon enough, as he, in the might of the Holy Spirit, goes out into the community and does some truly tremendous things for Jesus.

#### **2. Wonder-worker**

The first thing we see about him once he’s been ordained is that he goes and performs great wonders and signs among the people. Again, this is not an apostle. At most, he is a deacon — what the church has historically considered the “lowest” ordained office in the church. Yet he is not afraid, or unable, to do incredible things that demonstrate the power of Christ all over town.

God has not called many of us to be wonder-workers. If that’s your calling, go for it, of course. But the broader point here is that an ordinary Christian can do extraordinary things for God. We all pay lip service to that truth, but do you really believe it? Do you think that you, Joe or Jane Christian, really can do something for the Kingdom? Jesus thinks so. He thought so about Stephen.

#### **3. Apologist**

Stephen was also something that more of us will be: An apologist. That does not mean someone who says “I’m sorry.” It means someone who gives a defence of what he believes. Stephen powerfully defended the Christian faith in verbal argument with those who essentially said “The claims of Christ are not true.”

How do you become an apologist? It’s a combination of study and piety with natural skills. Some people will never be good debaters in an oral setting, no matter how hard they study and how much time they spend in prayer. Others are born to take command and shine brightly in such a format. The point, once more, is that verbally defending the faith is not a calling only for

super-Christians or apostles. It's for ordinary believers too. Obviously Stephen had trained for apologetics for some time before he was ever called to the diaconate. He was not thinking "Well, I'm not an apostle so I have no need to learn anything about what I believe." Rather, he was thinking "I'm a Christian and so I need to learn what I believe and why so that I can give an answer to anyone who asks." Apologist is not an office in the church; at some level, it is the calling of every Christian.

#### **4. Historian**

Stephen was also a historian. The level of detail and accuracy in his off-the-cuff remarks before the Sanhedrin (in what may have been a bit of a stressful moment) is extremely impressive. The man knew his OT inside-out. Do you? Again, being a biblical and church historian is at some level the calling of every Christian. You need to know where the church has been before you can speak with authority on where it is today. Ignorant pronouncements impress no one except the pronouncer.

#### **5. Martyr**

Finally, Stephen was a martyr. Brothers and sisters, of all the honored places in the church, this one may be the most inclusive. Not everyone can be a pastor, elder, or deacon. Not everyone is qualified to be the church secretary either, or the accompanist, or the nursery worker. But every Christian can be a martyr. You don't even have to be an apologist, a historian, or an ordained officer. You only have to be willing to trust Jesus to the bitter end. It is the most open place of honor in the church.

### **D. Philip, ch. 8**

Well, Stephen is not the only ordinary Christian who does great things for the Kingdom in these chapters. Philip is similar.

#### **1. Ordinary Christian**

He is an ordinary Christian. There is nothing special about him that Luke tells us.

#### **2. Missionary**

Yet he acted as a missionary. When the church was scattered by persecution, he went to Samaria. Now, Jews have no dealings with Samaritans. Philip knew that rule. And because he was a Christian, he didn't care about that rule. He deliberately went on down to Samaria. He was an ordinary Christian, but he believed in Jesus strongly enough to violate the old ritual purity codes that had been drilled into him since he was a child.

#### **3. Evangelist**

He was also an evangelist, instructed by the Spirit to tell the good news to an Ethiopian court official who happened to be driving his chariot down a desert road. If you go overland today from Jerusalem to Addis Ababa, the trip is 2,600 miles — roughly the distance from NY to San Francisco (2800 miles). Now, by all accounts ancient Ethiopia was not in the same place as modern Ethiopia. Commentators think that this eunuch lived at Meroe, which is a mere 1800 miles from Jerusalem — roughly the distance from New York to Gillette (1837 miles). This eunuch was serious about worshipping God. Incredibly serious. I don't know about you, but I have a hard time imagining a drive from NY to San Francisco in a chariot. Furthermore, just like

today, the route overland from Jerusalem to Meroe (or Addis Ababa, for that matter) is not the safest or the cleanest. Yet the eunuch made the trip.

OK, so Philip was picking a low-hanging fruit. Nonetheless, the point is that he served God as an evangelist even though he was an ordinary Christian and not an apostle.

#### **E. Others, 8:4**

Others, too, went everywhere preaching the word.

##### **1. Not Apostles**

They were not apostles; indeed, they made no claim to be apostles. The apostles stayed in Jerusalem. But the rest of the church went everywhere.

##### **2. Preachers**

And wherever they went, they told the good news about Jesus. Are you that confident in the good news about Jesus? Ordinary Christians can share the good news.

##### **3. Students of the Word**

These believers knew the word of God, too. They went everywhere preaching it. That means that they knew what it said. Do you know the word well enough to go everywhere telling people what's inside it?

#### **II. The Point: The Church Is for Non-Apostles Too!**

So what's Luke's point? The church is for non-apostles too! You're not ordained? You're not an apostle? Guess what: there is room for you in the body. You are needed. Non-apostles were needed in the early church, and they are needed today. Are you called to speak God's word? Yes, to your family at least and probably to your neighbors and students as well. Are you called to be a martyr? Hopefully not today. But if you are, will you be ready?

Brothers and sisters, Jesus wants all of us in His church. Live for Him; He died for you to bring you into His fold. Amen.