

The Body: His Plan, Our Part

Part Three: Deacon Served

Acts 6:1-7

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on April 7, 2024.

Read Text

In Response to the Church's Growth

In writing Acts, Luke is careful to communicate the story of the amazing growth of the early church in the years after Jesus left the earth and sent his Spirit to empower his followers back in Acts 1:8. Frequently, Luke remarks about the growth.

- In Acts 2:41, he tells us that 3,000 were added to the Jerusalem church.
- In Acts 2:47, we read about the Lord adding to their number daily.
- In Acts 4:4 we see that the church in Jerusalem had grown to 5,000 men.
- In Acts 5:14 we read that more believers than ever were added to the Lord, both men and women.
- In Acts 9:31 Luke writes that the church throughout Judea and Galilee and Samaria were walking in fear of the Lord and it too was multiplied in growth.
- In Acts 13:49, we see that the word of the Lord spread throughout the entire region of Pisidia. In 16:5 the same occurred in Galatia. And in Acts 19, also in Ephesus.

Clearly, the Holy Spirit wants us to know about this rapid growth of the early church throughout the book of Acts. These are victories of the gospel in the past that are strong and challenging reminders for us in the present. The Holy Spirit was working in power as the gospel was being shared, and Jesus's teachings were being taught by the disciples.

Not A Perfect Movement

Luke is also careful to point out that this growth was not fully perfect. The early church had its share of difficult members. When you cast a net into the sea of the world, you will pull in good and bad alike. And the church then must discern how to handle the bad.

In the early church we see deceitful Ananias and Sapphira in Jerusalem. We read about the power-hungry Simon the magician in the Samaritan movement. We read about fearful John Mark who abandoned a missionary endeavor. We also read about the confused theology of Apollos in the Asian movement and how he must be trained more completely.

We also read about a group of people in Ephesus who profess to be Christians but are also concealing a practice of black magic.

A true movement of the Spirit of God in this fallen world will always sweep some debris into the church. When churches grow today, they are also in dire need of true instruction through the ministry of the Word. Just like the early Christian movement we see unfolding in Acts. When the kingdom of God sweeps through a region, it is just like tossing a net into the ocean. It will gather all sorts of animals that must then be sorted out. This is similar to what Luke is writing about and celebrating in the book of Acts. He is highlighting the work of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is easy to gloss over the working of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. This must always be the main vision of any true church. To see the kingdom of God grow by people hearing and receiving the message of the gospel. And as that growth occurs, it will inevitably lead to issues and obstacles within the church that must be dealt with.

Luke does that deftly here in Acts 6. Luke shows us how various threats to the church and obstacles to growth were overcome. That is what Acts 6:1-7 is concerned with.

Note how bookends this section referring to the growth of the church. “In those days the disciples were increasing in number...” and “So the word of God spread, the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly in number, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.”

Between these two references to growth is a threat to the early Christian movement of the church and how they overcame that threat. The point here is to teach others since how the growth of the church is threatened and how to overcome those threats.

A Double Pronged Threat to the Kingdom

We read about two parts of this threat in Acts 6. First, we see a conflict rise between the Jews who speak Greek, called the Hellenists and the Jews who speak Aramaic or Hebrew. The Aramaic or Hebrew speaking Jews would have been the established group, those who had grown up in Israel and been faithful to the Jewish faith. They had learned the Torah and were familiar with and faithful to the tradition and history.

They had remained faithful also to Jerusalem and Palestine and refused to adopt the language system of the pagan Greeks. And then, at some point, these Jews converted to faith in Christ.

The Hellenists would have either been part of the Jews scattered over the previous centuries into the Roman Empire, learning the language and culture and then at some point returning to Jerusalem for festivals and holy days, clinging to their Jewishness by faith if not by culture. These would have been considered outsiders by the other group. And as the church grew, it largely grew in two specific demographics: Gentiles and Greek-speaking Jews. Consider that the New Testament was written in Greek, save for a few phrases or comments in Aramaic. This was the audience targeted even by James, writing to the Jews scattered across the Empire. The movement of the gospel was making huge inroads in those two groups: Gentiles and Greek-speaking Jews. There was also growth in the Hebrew Jews, as we see even leaders in the Jewish temple, priests, come to faith in Christ. But the significant growth will speak Greek.

This growth led to problems. As the church began to grow, it became a strain on the infrastructure to care for the various widows. The resulted in a failure to take care of these newer Greek-speaking widows. The Hellenists “murmured” or “grumbled” or complained about them being overlooked. The old guard was not making space or resources available for the new faces.

This is a cultural and ethnic tension within the Jerusalem Christian movement. Now, it is possible that already in Jerusalem, there were two distinct Christian movements separated along those lines.

We read about specific synagogues for just Greek-speaking people in Acts 6 that existed alongside Hebraic synagogues. There was a cultural and ethnic dividing line. Which meant that the distribution system that had been developed back in Acts 4 was no longer functional for this newer group. If this was to continue, this could have been detrimental to the growth and the reputation of the Church. It would have also diminished the glory of Christ in the world. This is a potential setback that Luke tells us needed to be taken seriously. That is the first part of this threat to the movement of the Word of God. The cultural divide.

The second threat would have occurred if the first threat were solved in the wrong way. You can see this in verse 2. The disciples gather up the body of the believers there and addressed the solution presented to them by the body. At some point, someone pressed the disciples to stop spending so much time in prayer and the preaching of the word and make some more in person appearances at the daily distributions so everyone could be taken care of.

That might have been the easiest solution. “Why don’t you all come down and help take care of this mess. We don’t trust the people in charge of it now, so you should come down, every day, and for the hours it takes to distribute things, to sit and visit and talk through this with the widows and their families. To help evaluate and then make decisions in how best to accommodate all of the people who need help.” Can you imagine the time that would have consumed? Well, the disciples sure did.

They first had to remind the Church what the main thing was and always will be. They could not leave behind the ministry of the Word. They could give up that time of prayer and study and preaching preparation to, “wait tables.”

Now, that could sound defensive, especially to those who don’t really understand or value the prayer and preached Word. Some practical person said that if the apostles just had a more hands-on approach, this problem of neglected widows would disappear.

And that is true. It probably would have. If Peter and John were there making sure that everyone got all the bread and oil and other items, it would have become a smoother operation.

But the rapid spreading of the Kingdom and the Church would have diminished exponentially. Neglecting the ministry of the Word is a calling. Serving tables is not.

Luke clearly points out that the temptation to do this is a major threat to the movement. He underlines the importance of the ministry of the Word. He does this by linking together the phrases “word of God” in verse 2 with “the word of God” in verse 7. In verse 2, Luke quotes the apostles as saying that leaving “the word of God” would be a grave mistake.

And then in verse 7 he tells us the end result of NOT leaving the Word of God: “And the word of God increased and the number of disciples multiplied greatly.”

Noticed that Luke does NOT say that because the widows were accommodated, the church multiplied greatly. The multiplication, the growth of the Church, is connected to the ministry of the Word – the prayer and the preaching and teaching of God’s Word. That doesn’t mean that other things are not important. They are important. They are just not *as important* as the prayer and preaching of the Word.

There are multiple needs here, not just need that all widows got served. There was also a pressing need that those who are called to the ministry of the Word must maintain their emphasis on the ministry of the Word. When other things come along, things that must be addressed, they must be addressed in a way that maintains the emphasis and the primary focus on the prayer and preaching of the Word. So, men are designated to take care of the first need so that the most important need continues to be addressed as well.

The Word of God kept spreading and bearing fruit because the apostles did not make the strategic mistake of leaving their main calling and most important focus on the Word to fix a pressing problem. Luke is clear.

The biggest threat in the church is NOT against our comfort, our tradition, our facility, our history, our infrastructure, or our worship preference. The biggest threat in the church will always be against the Word of God to keep spreading and bearing fruit.

Whatever threatens the ministry of the Word, according to Luke here in Acts 6, threatens the growth and expansion of the Kingdom. And Luke also tells us that threat in Acts 6 is not a terrible thing. It is a good thing to take care of people. That is not something bad.

In and of itself, it was good and appropriate for the apostles to express their humility by serving tables and getting involved, rolling up their sleeves and throwing around a little elbow grease, caring for the widows’ needs. James, the brother of Jesus, who was no doubt in the church during this issue, wrote several years later emphasis taking care of orphans and widows. This would have been a good thing for the disciples to do.

But it would have been a mistake for the kingdom and for the Christian movement. Sometimes, much to the dismay of some folks who have other priorities in the church besides the ministry of the Word, not having the pastors or elders present seems inexcusable. And perhaps sometimes it is. But many times, pastors and elders sacrifice time away from the prayer and preaching of the word to go and wait tables. That is the mistake. To elevate the good over the best.

Luke details two parts to the threat here. 1) The conflict that resulted in neglected widows and 2) the danger of solving that problem in a shortsighted way that would have diverted the apostles from the ministry of the Word of God and prayer.

Solving the Issue

The Holy Spirit led the apostles to overcome both parts of the threat by not playing them against each other. The apostles instruct the church to designate seven Hellenistic leaders (all of them had Greek names), who were full of the Spirit and wisdom, to meet that need. Then the apostles continued devoting themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer.

Luke loved that solution. He celebrated it. The widows were cared for and the ministry of the Word was not shuttered off to the backseat. Both issues were important. Either one of them could have devastated the early church and ended the rapid growth. The solution was the diversity of gifts and understanding more clearly the calling of leadership. This solution also meant the institution of the Biblical office of deacon. This meant a new kind of teamwork within the body of Christ.

Luke celebrates the triumph of the church by showing its results. The word of God [that had not been forgotten, forsaken, or diminished] increased; the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were converted to Christ.

That is a HUGE win for the gospel. It is a resounding defeat for the enemy. Solving this issue resulted in a new evangelistic breakthrough. Because priests, who had once been hostile in their opposition to the gospel, are responding the Word of God and turning to Jesus – the one they disputed, arrested, and killed. By guarding the Word and also caring for widows, God honored this with fruitfulness and power.

When Luke writes about the Word of God, he speaks of it as a living organism. He describes its growth as a living thing. Now, we know that according to Hebrews 4, the Word of God IS living and active. It is the power of God unto salvation. It is a great message, the only one that changes lives and impacts eternity.

And it is imperative that we do not allow obstacles – inside the church or outside – to hinder the Word of God here at First Baptist Martinsburg.

The apostles at Jerusalem wanted to deal with the issue, to be sure. But it was not more important than the main ministry of the Word that the apostles were called to.

The solution was the implementation of several men who could help meet this need. So, men of 1) good reputation, 2) full of the Spirit, 3) full of wisdom were to be appointed to meet those needs.

Deacons were not tasked with the ministry of the Word, which was clearly prioritized as the main task of the church leadership. That said, deacons were clearly men of the Word, as Stephen and Phillip would prove later on. They were called on to share the gospel as well as stand for the Lord.

But they were never tasked with the ministry of the Word.

Deacons were called to serve:

- as need arose
- to oversee the distribution of benevolence funds
- to serve
- to distribute resources
- to help newer disciples assimilate into the life of the church without as little friction as possible
- to diffuse cultural and ethnic problems within the church

We have four men serving as active deacons. It is important that you understand that they are ministering to meet needs as well. It is also vital that you understand that they have crucial ministries to oversee.

Our deacons support and help oversee the ordinances of the church. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are significant moments in our worship and they are tasked with leadership in those areas.

Our deacons have ministry to families within the church, making sure at several times throughout the year to minister to homebound, widows, widowers, families in struggle and helping to minister to children.

You should be praying for them as they continue to seek the Lord's counsel and wisdom in the best ways to go about fulfilling their calling to this second Biblical office.

How can you help? First, pray for them. Don't go to them with your advice, your point of view, your perspective, your problems, until you have sufficiently prayed for them. If a deacon hears enough murmuring, it can become toxic for them and it makes it difficult for them to come alongside pastoral or elder leadership in support, working together on the same team. Before you decide to lodge your protest, pray for them and their families. Pray that their children and grandchildren would experience deeply the loving and saving grace of Jesus every day.

Pray that they would have the right wisdom and words to say to the widow who is hurting or lonely. Pray that they will be sensitive to the Spirit in helping the single mom or the struggling family that is not sure how to make ends meet, get bills paid, food in bellies and medicine to sick loved ones. Pray that they will continue to stand for the Lord themselves when called for. While deacons were not tasked with the ministry of the Word, they certainly did stand for Jesus. Stephen did.

Pray for them as they have opportunities to share the gospel. Philip modeled that.

Pray for them as they continue to address the material needs of people within the church.

And pray that the ministry of the Word is undergirded by the ongoing efforts of the deacon ministry.