

Reading: Acts of the Apostles 6:1-7 Serving the Church

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.'

⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

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Preaching notes: Here we have what may have been the first recorded "upset" in the church, unfortunately many more have followed over the years. Sometimes it is about some receiving preference over others or it may be over matters of doctrine, the choice of hymns or even seating arrangements. We must remember that this early church we read of in these first 7 chapters of Acts was fully Jewish yet also fully "Christian" - followers of Jesus Christ. Hellenistic implies Greek speaking and of course Hebraic being Hebrew speaking. It is even pointed out to us that Nicolas was "a convert to Judaism".

This passage clearly indicates that since the very beginning the Christian Church has served Christ by serving the needy in society. Here we have the daily distribution of food to the widows, albeit apparently skewed towards the Hebrew speaking widows. Not only do we have the first disagreement in this short passage but also the first division of labour, the church is growing fast and needs some organisation to carry out its mission to the poor. Notice that even the distribution of food (waiting on tables) requires those who are "full of the Spirit", every role in this expanding movement required someone who was passionate for the Lord Jesus. There are no roles in the church – then and now – that require greater or lesser faith, every role is serving Christ and requires commitment and passion for God, because everyone is both a disciple and a disciple-maker.

What I like so much about what we hear concerning this opportunity (we never have problems) is the matter of fact way it was resolved, quickly and fairly, to the satisfaction of all, with God given wisdom. "The twelve" apostles (remember that Matthias was chosen to replace Judas, Acts 1:20-26) rightly, do not wish to neglect the preaching and teaching ministry they are undertaking because it from this, led by the Holy Spirit, that more and more disciples are being made and coming to have a living and active faith in Jesus. Here we see the fruits of reliance on God's Holy Spirit: prayer, preaching, service and devotion; the exponential growth of believers. The priests who are mentioned at the end of the

passage (verse 7) would be Jewish synagogue priests indicating the truth of Gamaliel's words "if this work is of God, you cannot overthrow it" (Acts 5:39).

The praying and laying hands on the seven servers by the apostles is a practise that endures in the church today. God's Holy Spirit is working through the apostles, approving, strengthening and commissioning those who will undertake roles or tasks. Those of you who know your Bibles well will recognise the first two names of the food servers, Stephen, the great witness to Christ, will be falsely charged, arrested and killed by a mob (Acts 6:8 – 7:60) and Philip is a great evangelist to Samaria and to the Ethiopian (Acts 8:5-40). As believers we are all workers for Christ, first and foremost spreading the gospel message to make more disciples.

As disciples of Christ we are called to participate in the Great Commission (Matt 26:19) to go and make disciples. If each one of us, with prayer and the participation of the Holy Spirit, was able to disciple just one person, a neighbour, a friend or a family member, the church would double and then double again and so forth.

The church of the New Testament is never a safe or static place, it was always designed and blessed by God to be a vibrant group of people, believers, experiencing exponential growth and contagious faith. If we do not recognise that as being us now, then we (together) need to carefully retrace our steps back to the cause of the disparity between the current reality and God's intention. Our opening Psalm spoke of traveling the highway to God's kingdom, much like a pilgrimage, taking even a one-degree misstep will over time produce a huge disparity between where we are now and our original destination.

In closing, serving the church is never.... "I just welcome people" or "I just do the IT", did Stephen or Philip just wait on tables? And what of the other 5 of the 7, we do not hear of their exploits for Christ but undoubtedly they also achieved much for the Lord. As church we are a "called out people", each of us to be approved, commissioned and strengthened to make disciples and to keep ourselves accountable to each other. We provide the perspiration and God gives the inspiration and power and through the Holy Spirit, adds to our number. I look forward to what God will do through us in the days ahead. **Amen.**