

The Acts of the Apostles

“A study of the application of theology to the work of the church as a group”

Chapter Six Choosing of the First “Deacons” and an Introduction to Steven

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Acts 6:1 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.

Acts 6:2 And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.

It is important to realize that Satan had already tried to stop the church by persecution and then by internal corruption. But God had acted to counter these attacks by Satan. Now he was trying a third method that we also see in churches today: dissension among the members. We need to always be alert to these same tactics being used against the church today. It seems that the Greek Christians felt like they were being neglected by the Jewish Christians. Today also it is too easy for people to form cliques.

The number of saints in this group quickly grew to a size such that the apostles could no longer take care of all of the physical and spiritual needs of all of the members. The number stated as 5,000 probably was only the men so the total number of people in the congregation could easily have been about 20,000. The apostles recognized the need and met the need with action. They knew that God had given them knowledge, wisdom, and the direct interaction with the Son of God so that their primary actions had to be the imparting of the word of God to His children. Therefore there was a need for another group of leaders to help with the physical needs of the children of God. The Apostles also set the major tone for the church for they are “not to neglect the word of God to serve tables”. So the primary function of the church is not a social gospel but it is as told to us by our Lord:

Matt 28:19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,

Matt 28:20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

God gives His chosen people their needed faith so that they can believe and the body of Christ is to make disciples and baptize the chosen ones. About 30 years ago the modern church departed from this task and acted like mere humanitarians. We certainly are to help people in need but the primary purpose of the church is to teach and baptize. I want us all to remember why we are now studying this great book of Acts. We wanted to better understand the true function of the church and to determine ways in which we can better function as that church today. The tendency of the church is to act totally in a

human manner and we must resist such a temptation. We are to lift up the name of Jesus Christ and the reason that He came here.

Matt 5:17 "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill."

Matt 10:34 "o not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword."

Matt 10:35 "For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;"

Mark 1:38 "And He said to them, "Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, in order that I may preach there also; for that is what I came out for.""

John 9:39 "And Jesus said, "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see; and that those who see may become blind.""

John 10:10 "The thief comes only to steal, and kill, and destroy; I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly."

John 12:27 "Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour."

We see that Jesus tells us that He came to

1. Fulfill the Law. Nobody but God Himself could keep all the commands of the law in all of its implications and explicit actions.
2. He came to wage the final war against Satan and not as the Messiah that would bring Israel into an era of worldly peace and prosperity and dominion.
3. He came so that only God would rule and even the family units would not be the primary units to serve. Jesus came so that the division between the truth of God and the teachings of men would be absolutely clear and that people would have an absolute allegiance only to Jesus. Even the family units would be become second to Him.
4. Jesus came to preach the true Gospel message.
5. He came to bring true judgment into the world so that those who did not claim to have any understanding of the truth would receive the truth and those who claimed to understand the truth would be revealed as people blind to the truth.
6. Even the religious thieves are revealed to be people seeking only to take from people to build up themselves in material and political power. Such people came as thieves and liars but Jesus came to bring abundant eternal life.
7. Lastly we see that Jesus said that He came for the final function of His awful treatment including the crucifixion.

Another comment could be made at this point concerning the functions of God's assembly of children. Some people argue that if the church were taking care of its needy members in the way that the early church did then there would be less need for the government to have a welfare system. Of course the welfare system is a complicated situation. However most of the people in need are not members of a church and so would not fall under the benevolence system of the church. Even in churches that have an extensive benevolence system there is still a lot of fraud involved as some people take advantage of the churches and just move from town to town taking advantage of the

church's generosity. I am sure that every church should have a benevolence committee with people so involved who know how to properly use the resources of that church. But the church is not the government and it is not intended to be the welfare system of the state. We must never let such a duty be delegated to the church.

Acts 6:3 "But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.

Acts 6:4 "But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."

Acts 6:5 And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.

Acts 6:6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

The Apostles told the people to choose seven men of spiritual purity and wisdom so that the Apostles could put them in charge of taking care of the physical needs of the disciples. This request was well received by all the congregation and they chose seven men to bring forward to the Apostles. We see that one of these men was Stephen and we are soon to hear more about him. It was his martyrdom that led to the church spreading out from Jerusalem. It is interesting that all seven names of these first deacons are Greek with one of them being a convert to Judaism. Philip took the gospel to the Samaritans and to the Ethiopian eunuch and four of his daughters became prominent church members. There is nothing definite recorded about the other five men.

At this time in its growth the church ordained the first deacons, which means "servant". It is very important for us in our time to use the same criteria when choosing servants for our congregation. The men must have a good reputation and they must be full of the Spirit and of wisdom. Certainly these are not the traits that are the most cherished in the world. We like our leaders to have charisma, to be powerful in the community, and to have considerable wealth. The people that are chosen for servants must not be people who are proud of their new designation.

It may be a mistake to call these seven men the first deacons in the church. The word "deacon" is not used in Luke's writing of Acts but the word "elder" is used. Whether or not these men were the first of this particular administrative unit of the church is not clear. But God did raise up these men at a crucial time in the history of the church to serve it in its great initial growth. I would say that whether or not these men were "deacons" as we understand the term today is a "pernt" and not worthy of further discussion.

Acts 6:7 "And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

Acts 6:8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

Acts 6:9 But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.

Acts 6:10 And yet they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

Wow, not only were the ordinary people becoming children of God, but many priests were also becoming Christians. Evidently none of the high order priests were included in this statement for those continued in their ruling roles. But many of the ordinary priests were becoming Christians. One of the newly chosen servants, Stephen, was particularly blessed by God with grace and power and he performed great wonders and signs out in the open. So the actions of Stephen were being observed throughout Jerusalem and this was creating a particularly significant problem for the Jewish leaders. Stephen was then to become the first recorded Christian martyr. In the New Testament church only the apostles, Stephen, Philip, and Barnabas performed miracles. The imperfect tense of the word "was performing" shows that Stephen was continually doing these miracles and signs. Stephen could do these acts and live his life with such abandon because he was totally led by the Holy Spirit as he was filled with grace and power.

Synagogues were places where Jews would gather to read Scripture and worship. They originated during the Babylonian captivity and there are estimates of over 400 such synagogues in Jerusalem at this time. Luke mentions three such synagogues. One was the Freedmen and the members were descendants of Jewish slaves captured by Pompey in 63 B.C. They were later freed (hence the name) and formed a Jewish community in Jerusalem. The Cyrenians and Alexandrians were from two of the major cities of North Africa. Cilicia and Asia were Roman provinces in Asia Minor. It is interesting to note that Paul's hometown of Tarsus was in Cilicia and he probably attended their synagogue in Jerusalem. Since Paul was a student of Gamaliel, he may even have taken part in the debate with Stephen.

Even such learned men could not win the debate with Stephen for he was full of wisdom and the Spirit.

Acts 6:11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

Acts 6:12 And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and dragged him away, and brought him before the Council.

Acts 6:13 And they put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place, and the Law;

Acts 6:14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."

ACT 6:15 And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

What happens now is not uncommon among humans. When they cannot win an argument with knowledge and wisdom, they often revert to lies when the situation is very

critical to their position in the community. The actions taken against Stephen are very familiar to us who are familiar with what happened to our Lord Jesus. They brought many of the same lies about Stephen that they brought against Jesus. It is so very fascinating that since the people made charges against Stephen that he was speaking against Moses, that God made Stephen's face shine with the same radiance that glowed on the face of Moses.

Just as lies are a common tool of Satan, twisting the truth is also in his toolbox. We see in the above verses several words and actions of Jesus that were misunderstood and used accusingly against Him and against Stephen and other disciples.

Any threat the people perceived as a threat against the temple was very serious because of its religious and economic impact upon the community. The witnesses said that Stephen's teachings were a threat against the temple because he maintained that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs that had been handed down from Moses. We see here some of the twisting of the truth as Jesus had indeed said something about destroying the temple.

Mark 13:2 "And Jesus said to him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another which will not be torn down.""

Of course this prophesy of Jesus did indeed come true. The statement of Jesus about His body was also misunderstood and used against Him by liars at His trial:

Mark 14:57 "And some stood up and began to give false testimony against Him, saying, Mark 14:58 "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and in three days I will build another made without hands.'"

Mark 14:59 And not even in this respect was their testimony consistent."

The people seemed to really think that the Christians were going to destroy the temple and all of its related businesses and were going to take away the teachings of Moses. But of course Jesus said that He did not come to destroy the Law but to fulfill it. The fear of the people and the high priests for their livelihood and religion led to many false accusations against Jesus and similar false accusations against Stephen.

We are now about to be blessed with the longest recorded sermon in Acts. No doubt Saul was there and would have remembered the look on the face of Stephen but, as with all of us, it took a direct intervention by the Lord for Saul and for me to recognize the true glory of God and to bow before Him in adoration, praise and honor.

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