

Acts 6:1-7

"In those days, when the number of the disciples was growing, there arose a complaint of the Greek-speaking Jews against the Hebrew-speaking Jews, in which they alleged that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. The Twelve sent for the main body of the disciples and said, 'It is not fitting that we should abandon the word of God to serve tables. So, brethren, look about for seven attested men from your number, men full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom, and we will put them in charge of this business. As for us, we will give our undivided attention to prayer and to the service of the word.' This seemed a good idea to the body of the disciples. So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip and Prochoros and Nicanor and Timon and Parmenos and Nicolaos, who was a Gentile from Antioch who had embraced the Jewish faith. They brought these men into the presence of the apostles; and they prayed and laid their hands upon them. So the word of God progressed and the number of disciples in Jerusalem was very greatly increased; and a large number of the priests accepted the faith."

Throughout history, the Jews as a people have always had a greater sense of responsibility for their less fortunate brethren than most other peoples and nations.

In the synagogues there was a routine custom.

Two collectors went round the market and the private houses every Friday morning and made a collection for the needy partly in money and partly in goods.

Later in the day this was distributed.

Those who were temporarily in need received enough to enable them to carry on;

Those who were permanently unable to support themselves received enough for fourteen meals, that is, enough for two meals a day for the ensuing week.

The fund from which this distribution was made was called the "Kuppah" or Basket.

In addition to this a house-to-house collection was a daily collection for those in pressing need. This was called the "Tamhui," or Tray.

The Christian Church had carried over this custom.

Note that the first 'office-bearers' to be appointed in the church were chosen not to talk, lead, or teach but for practical service - ministry.

1) In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

God's new math:

- the Lord **added** to the Church daily such as should be saved Acts 2:47
- Here the number of the disciples was **multiplied**.
- But Satan has been working and has **subtracted** from the Church, when the Lord removed Ananias and Sapphira in Chapter 5.
- Now he hopes to "**divide**" it, pitting faction against faction.

Satan's prior attacks on the church

direct opposition

intimidation,

corrupt the church from within

before he is finished he will try persecution

Satan would learn that inward dissension is more effective than outward persecution...

he will almost win when let's the church prosper.

He would ultimately learn that a lazy, self-satisfied church was no threat to him

After He has added ,the Lord often must subtract in order to multiply and avoid division...to keep us of one mind.

The Jews, as a people, always looked on themselves as God's chosen people; and they were

God wanted to use them to make the rest of the world jealous of their relationship to God and to seek it for themselves – as a people, the Jews did not do well in this ...

They had interpreted chosen in the wrong way,

They regarded themselves as having been chosen for special privilege

They came to believe that God had no use for any other nation.

The worst of them declared that God had created the Gentiles to be fuel for the fires of hell;

The mildest believed that some day the Gentiles would become their servants.

They never dreamed that they were chosen for service

To bring all men into the same relationship with God as they themselves enjoyed.

The world outside of Palestine spoke Greek.

This is why, 285 years before Christ was born, the Jewish establishment empaneled 70 scholars in Alexandria, a major city and a major Jewish center, to translate what we call the Old Testament, into Greek. We call this is the Septuagint version (meaning 70 scholars). This took place from 285 to 270 B.C.

A Jew in those days spoke Greek,

A few might learn Hebrew to participate in the local synagogue.

Israel did not speak Hebrew as an official language after the Babylonian captivity, they spoke Chaldean Aramaic.

Hebrew was reestablished in 1948.

Hebraic Jews embraced the Jewish culture and tradition – as they knew it; they were mostly from Judea

The Hellenistic Jews were Jews born outside Israel which spoke Greek, they were still Jewish, but looked down upon by the native-born Hebraic Jews.

Hellenist Jews embraced Greek culture and were mostly from the Diaspora (all over the Roman Empire).

Hebrew Christians tended to regard Hellenist Christians as unspiritual sell-outs to Greek culture

Hellenists regarded Hebrews as holier-than-thou traditionalists.

The Grecians claimed that their widows were being neglected in the daily serving of food, discrimination set in.

A potential division in the young Church based on background and 'where you came from' – you weren't here when...

This is still a problem we face whenever a church grows beyond its history and tradition is challenged by new members who did not personally experience and thus do not revere it like the 'elders'...

'Can you believe how they dress?

'How can God use them? They're divorced?

'Can't allow these former homosexuals to fellowship with us. We shouldn't allow their children to be in the nursery with our children. What about the AIDS virus?'

They want to change what? Why we always done it this way...

The early church took its responsibility to help support widows seriously, because they often had no other support,

but they also expected these widows to serve the church faithfully.

(1 Timothy 5:3-16)

The Hellenistic Jews believed that the widows among the Hebrew Jews were receiving better care. There have been several reasons offered for this – all opinion since scripture doesn't tell us why:

"It was pure, ethnic, sectarian pride"

"It was not deliberate . . . more probably the cause was poor administration or supervision."

"In a congregation of that size, it was inevitable that someone's needs would be overlooked."

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, 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."

The apostles explain that they should remain faithful to their calling - to prayer and to the ministry of the word –

it would be wrong for them to spend their time serving tables or doing anything else.

God does not call anyone to be everything for the church;

What has God called you to do?

How many tasks / positions do you hold in the church?

The 'safe' answer is not to be able to say none.

If that is your answer, then why are you here?

What are you hiding and running from?

But, even worse, can you name 2 or 3 or more?

Does one every conflict with another for time and attention?

Which do you do and which do let slide – or do you compromise and do them all in a mediocre way?

If you are not able to focus on THE thing God has called you to, you have raised up pride and an possibly an idol in your life and are calling it service.

Even worse, you are likely doing someone else's job and are robbing them of service, worship and blessing. You are not 'earning' greater blessing yourself, you are just robbing them of the opportunity for God's blessing.

**Blowing out someone else's candle
does not make your candle burn brighter.**

**God has and will raise up others to serve if you get out of the way
and focus on the place of service He has called you to and placed
you in.**

We should do anything we can to meet a pressing need – to minister. We should be willing to do any task – no task is beneath us but neither should any other task divert us from the calling God has given us especially when God has others who are able to serve.

If God shows you a need, it is very likely He wants you to do something to meet it. If others show you a need, do what you can to meet it without letting it compromise your primary God given task...

Deacons >>> "men who serve".

Serving tables – does not mean they were only being waiters – that was only a part of the task

A 'table' at that time meant a place where a money changer did his collecting or exchanging of money.

Deacons were elected to see to all aspects of the distribution of monies and provisions to the needy among the fellowship – planning, administration and logistics - serving.

The fact that the apostles needed to "devote themselves to prayer and ... the ministry of the word" shows how consuming it was and is to preach, and teach and pray rightly.

Ministry – meeting needs - is a lot of work.

A young man said to Donald Grey Barnhouse, "I'd give the world to be able to teach the Bible like you."

Looking him straight in the eye, Dr. Barnhouse replied: "Good, because that's exactly what it will cost you."

Why did they choose seven deacons?

It may have been so that each one could oversee the needs of the widows on a different day of the week.

Note: The qualifications described by the apostles of the potential 'deacons'

- From among you – no non-believers, from the Jerusalem church
- Of good reputation – honest, of good character proven to be full of good works, good report, good witness

Note: witness is the word martyr: Skip to Acts 7:54.

Stephen becomes the first martyr, but he is not a "martyr" because he died.

He died because he was a martyr.

Martyr means to be a good witness right to the end.

Stephen became a martyr when he became a Christian – he gave up his life to save it when he was born again; saved by accepting Jesus as his Lord.

- Full of the Holy Spirit – spiritually minded and Spirit led
- Full of wisdom (sophia) – practical, good business men and administrators; possessing sanctified common sense

These were not to just be 'warm bodies',

They needed to meet specific requirements

But even so, the Apostles were far more concerned with the internal quality of the men than any outward appearance.

Note that the whole congregation, not just the apostles, made the selection of the deacons.

Notice also: "whom we may appoint" --> the final decision rested with the apostles,

Though they wanted and valued the input from the congregation, the final appointment was to be their own

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.

Seven men are chosen to serve tables; to administer the business of the church

Count it a privilege to serve the Lord in basic, practical ways

Don't see it as "unspiritual" burden to:

Clean, set-up, arrange, tear down, pick up ...

The same word is used for both distribution (verse 1) and ministry (verse 4);

the idea behind both is service, whether to the needy or to God's word.

Verse 7 should be starred, circled, underlined, and highlighted by everyone involved in ministry.

The secret to Church growth and ministry expansion is simply to feed the flock – spiritually and materially as necessary.

Healthy sheep reproduce.

The seven men all have Greek names, they were probably Hellenists **except Nicolas who was a proselyte (converted Gentile).**

Remember it was the Hellenists – the Grecian Jews - who felt that they were getting short changed, yet all seven, picked by the entire congregation of believers in Jerusalem, were non-Palestine Jews.

The people (and the apostles) show great sensitivity to the offended Hellenists by appointing Hellenists to take care of the widow's distribution.

- the people nominated the men, and
- after praying for God's guidance and approval,
- the apostles approved them by laying hands on them,

We usually lay hands and then pray. They prayed before the laying on of hands.

'Lay hands on no man suddenly,' (1 Timothy 5.22).

(Phil 4:6) Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.

Those with the complaint did the right thing (made the need known and trusted the solution of the apostles).

If someone comes to you with what they see is a real need, they believe it is a need and have a real concern whether you can see it or not.

If it's within your power to meet it, pray, get God's wisdom and do what can be done to meet it.

Those of the other party did the right thing (recognized that others had need and trusted the solution of the apostles).

The seven chosen did the right thing (accepted the call to unglamorous service).

The apostles did the right thing (responded to the need without distracting themselves from their central task).

A potentially divisive issue was defused

the gospel continued to go forth to the point many Jewish priests were being saved.

The greater trap laid by the devil in this was also avoided:

the apostles continued to place their focus in prayer and the word of God where it belonged.

Acts 6:8-15

"Stephen, full of grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. There arose in debate with Stephen certain members of the synagogue of the Libertines and of the Cyrenians and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia; and they could find no answer to his wisdom and to the Spirit with whose help he spoke. So they formed a plot to introduce certain men who alleged, 'We heard this man speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.' So they agitated the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon Stephen and seized him and brought him to the Sanhedrin. Then they introduced false witnesses who alleged, 'This man never stops saying things against the holy place and against the law; for we have heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.' And when all those who sat in the Sanhedrin gazed intently at him, they saw his face looking as if it were the face of an angel."

8) Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. 9) Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)--Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, 10) but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.

God did not only do wonders and signs through the apostles,
He used other, 'second and third wave believers'

Notice it was those who were full of faith and power.

Mar 16:15-18 And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. 16 He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. 17 And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; 18 They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.

Mat 25:21 His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will

make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.

If we desire to be used by the Lord, we must be faithful in the things He gives us to do in our service for Him.

The Scripture tells us not to despise the days of small things
(**Zechariah 4:10**),

Many people find themselves reluctant to do the seemingly insignificant tasks.

The way of the Lord is that we first prove ourselves in small things and, as we are faithful in them, He will give us greater responsibility.

The reward for faithfulness in service is greater service – not retirement and pension

Jesus said, 'Happiness is found in losing your life, in giving yourself away. Happiness is found in serving, not in being served; in giving, not in getting,' (**Matthew 10:39**).

Mat 10:38-39 And he who does not take up his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me. 39 He who finds his life shall lose it. And he who loses his life for My sake shall find it.

When you feel like throwing in the towel, pick it up instead.

Wash someone's feet – serve / minister to someone - and suddenly you'll be refreshed.

Stephen began by serving tables, helping feed widows

But because he was faithful, he was then elected to the office of deacon (Acts 6:5)

he went from a faithful follower to a deacon to a miracle worker because he was faithful at each step.

To the Jews – in addition to their understanding about being God's chosen people – there two things were especially precious

- the Temple, 'the only place' where sacrifice could be offered and God could be truly worshipped and
- the Law which could never be changed.

Stephen, however, said

- that the Temple must pass away,
- that the Law was but a stage towards the gospel and
- that Christianity – the Gospel - must go out to the whole wide world.

Stephen may have been the first Christian to recognize that the gospel was for the whole world, not just the Jews ...

Stephen enters into an active debate with Jews from a particular synagogue;

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, he shows greater wisdom than they - attribute his skill in the debate to the Holy Spirit.

The mention of Cilicia suggests this may have been Paul's synagogue before he was converted. He came from Tarsus in Cilicia.

And when they finally stone Stephen, Saul (Paul) was there.

The opposing Jews, defeated in debate, bring false accusations against Stephen

11) Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God."

12) So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. 13) They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14) For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

Many of the same false accusations were leveled against Jesus (***Matthew 26:59-61***);

you are in a good place – not comfortable but good - when people are treating you like they treated Jesus!

15) All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Stephen's face was

- not that mild, soft, angelic look – no chubby faced cherub with small wings and a bow as we see angels portrayed today;
- nor was it a look of stern judgment and wrath.

His face reflected

- the perfect peace and confidence of one who knows and trusts his God;
- it had the same reflected glory that Moses had as he beheld God intimately.

It is the look of a person who is so close to God they reflect some of His glory; a result of being in his presence (***Exodus 34:29ff***)

C.H. Spurgeon: "Men, when you teach on heaven, let there always be a glow on your face, a gleam in your eye, and a grin on your lips. When you teach on hell, your normal face will do fine."

In spite of the false accusations, lies, and anger and eventually the rocks that would soon follow, Stephen's face did not reflect hatred or horror but rather it reflected what he knew and saw – His Lord in heaven.

- He is at perfect peace, knowing that he is in God's hands and
- That Jesus promise to never forsake His own would see him through whatever life could do to him.