

We ended chapter five with an account of how the gospel continued to spread in the face of great opposition, and the Apostle's attitude of rejoicing for being counted worthy of suffering for the name of Jesus. In chapter six, Luke returns to the theme of opposition, and how God used that opposition to spread the gospel. He sets up chapters six through eight in 6:1-7, which we will cover tonight.

This passage is often used as the proof text for establishing the office of deacon. We refer to the seven men mentioned in the passage as the first deacons. We use what we find in these verses to discern some of the basic qualifications for deacons, and we follow the Apostle's practice in deacon ordination.

The greater context of the passage, however, is that Luke here provides the backdrop for what is to follow, and should be a primary focus in our study of the book of Acts. Let's continue our observations by reading together Acts 6:1-7.

The first thing I need to point out is that nowhere in the text are the seven men mentioned referred to as Deacons. Later on, in Paul's writings, he refers to the office of deacon within the local church. The Greek word we translate as deacon literally means servant. The church appoints men to be responsible for service to the needs of the body. This is exactly the situation here in our text this evening, and thus these verses serve us well when considering people who would be qualified for service in the church. In Paul's writings, the distinction between Pastors, Elders, and Deacons is sometimes blurred, but the qualifications for all are basically the same.

As far as we can tell from the text, there is still only one church. By now the church in Jerusalem was what we might think of as a mega-church, with thousands of members. With rapid growth comes growing pains, and here Luke records the first conflict within the body of believers. The Grecian Jews complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

From time to time, problems will arise in any church. It sometimes comes from differences between individuals, or groups of people, or it may result from needs that surface that nobody anticipated. The text indicates that there were tensions between two groups of Jews within the fellowship of the common church, and the needs of some of the widow were not being met.

In our church, deacons help the pastors to resolve conflict and to meet the spiritual needs of the congregation. On those rare occasions where we might have conflict within the body, the deacons often take the lead in resolving those issues. Service and ministry to the body is their primary responsibility and they are such a blessing to the pastors because they join with us in trying to meet all the needs of the whole church family.

Remember that the church at this point was made up of all Jews. Most of the people in the congregation were Hebraic Jews, but a growing number were Grecian Jews. The Greek word here translated as Grecian, literally means that they were Hellenized Jews, although it could also refer to those who were Gentile converts.

The Samaritans to the north of Jerusalem had largely given up their claims to Judaism. Further to the north, in the region of Galilee and beyond, large numbers of Jews lived where their communities accepted the influence of Greek culture and philosophy. Some spoke only Greek, and did not have mastery of Aramaic. In Jerusalem and Judaea, the Jews better maintained the traditional aspects of their faith. They took a more conservative approach, and focused more on the letter of the law, and the traditions of the elders.

They realized an obligation to take care of their own, but according to their interpretation of the law, the Hellenized Jews needed to take care of their own. The combination of a natural rift between the two groups, and possibly some language barriers, resulted in the Hellenized widows not receiving their daily food allowance.

This was a very real problem that arose in the early church, and it had to be addressed. The Apostle's solution to the problem was to call what might have been the first ever, special business meeting of the church. When all of the disciples were gathered together, the Apostles made the point that it would not be right for them to neglect the ministry of the word of God, in order to wait on tables. The phrase wait on tables could refer directly to food distribution, or it could be a reference to money tables, thus they needed trustworthy people to handle the Church's resources to purchase the needed food so that the widows would not go hungry.

The Apostles were not being arrogant, as if to say that they were too good to wait on tables, they just recognized their priorities, and confessed that they could not do it all. They needed help to meet all of the needs of the congregation.

There is nothing that I do as Senior Associate Pastor, and Church Administrator, that is beyond Brother Carl's abilities. But many years ago, he and the church family recognized that he could not do everything that needed to be done, by himself. That is why I have a position here at Hickory Hammock Baptist Church. Just as important, the pastoral staff realizes that collectively we cannot do everything that needs to be done at the church. We rely upon deacons, support staff, ministry leaders, and Sunday School teachers, assigned to fulfill specific needs. Without the help of volunteers, in nearly every area of ministry, we could not have the facilities, and ministries, that have made this church so special. When we all work together, and each person invests himself or herself in his or her place of ministry, we function as a healthy body of Christ.

Notice that the church family chose seven men to meet the immediate need. The qualifications for this service were that they were to be full of the Spirit, full of wisdom, and have a reputation among the believers of possessing these qualities. In order for them to be filled with the Spirit, they had to be true believers in Jesus Christ. Being full of wisdom suggests Christian maturity, along with the ability to apply biblical principles to their lives, and circumstances. These men were not to be the most recent converts, rather they had a proven track record, that made it obvious to the church family that they could be trusted to handle the task. While I cannot be dogmatic, this criterion, in light of the relative youngness of the church, suggests to me that these men may have been disciples of Jesus before His crucifixion.

The church was pleased with the Apostle's leadership and chose seven men from among their congregation. I think it would be a stretch to say that every church should have seven deacons. What is important to understand is that they chose the number of men needed to complete that task, and these men were spiritually qualified to continue the work of the church. They were chosen in order for the Apostles to place priority on prayer, and the ministry of God's word.

It is interesting to note that all of the men chosen to serve had Greek names. This suggests that the church chose Grecian Jews to help the Grecian widows, and that would make perfect sense. Nicolas from Antioch is identified as a Greek convert to Judaism.

A literary analysis of the book of Acts gives us clues to the greater context of this recorded event. Through this account, Luke sets the stage for the gospel's reach into the gentile world: first to the Jews in Jerusalem, then the Grecian Jews, then the Samaritans, and on to the gentiles and the whole world. Of the seven men listed, we never hear of five of them again. But the first two mentioned, Stephen, and Philip, are the focus of the next two sections of the book of

Acts. Stephen is mentioned first, and is honored in the following text for being the first Christian martyr. In chapter 8, Luke focuses briefly on Philip's ministry. As with his gospel, Luke builds upon what he has recorded previously, and knowing this helps us to understand the proper context of each passage.

We have already seen that Stephen and Philip were known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. In our passage next time we learn that Stephen was also attributed with God's grace and power, and that he did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. In chapter 8, Philip performs miraculous signs, casts out demons, and heals the sick and infirmed. Do you see how Luke introduces, in our passage this evening, what lies ahead in his record of the growth of the church?

I wanted to focus on Stephen and Philip this evening to also address a teaching that I grew up with. As a child, I heard my pastors preach that the signs and wonders were gifts given to the twelve disciples, who became Apostles, in order to advance the early church, but were not given to others. Clearly Stephen and Philip were not among the twelve. Paul was an Apostle, and he was not one of the original twelve, and he writes about others, and he refers to them as Apostles.

I do not wish to confuse anyone, but we have to be honest with the scriptures. The word Apostle means one who is sent. We know that Jesus sent 70 others out with the gospel message while He still walked the earth, and they performed miracles in His name. The church continued to send others out as the gospel spread. The question then arises, are the gifts of healing, miraculous signs, and wonders still valid today?

John's writings came at a later date, and he does not mention signs and wonders, apart from His gospel. Most of the other books of the New Testament were written during the time frame of what is recorded in the book of acts. Paul is attributed with signs and miracles, as is Barnabas, but Paul was the Apostle to the gentiles. In some of Paul's writings he speaks of signs and wonders given to the recipients of his letters to help build their faith. But after his imprisonment, the New Testament is silent on the issue.

Historically, with a few possible exceptions, the church has not been witness to people who were gifted with the ability to perform miracles, but we should not limit God with dogma. In the microcosm of our own church we testify to the miraculous answers to prayer. The Bible says that in the last days, God will pour out His Spirit, and who knows what that might entail? On the other hand I know that there are those who deceive others by their claim to be able to heal the sick, and so we must be discerning about all such claims, without putting God in a manufactured box of our own design.

Once selected by the church, the Apostles commissioned the seven by praying for them, and the laying on of their hands. This is the model we follow here for the ordination of ministers and deacons for service, and for sending missionaries out on the field. We know that there is great power in prayer, but what about the laying on of hands? When we lay our hands on a person, is there some power or gift that is bestowed upon the one being commissioned? Yes, and no.

The physical act of putting your hand on someone means nothing, but there is a spiritual dynamic to the process of ordination, of which the laying on of hands is a part. When Debby and I pray together, most of the time we either hold hands, or embrace during our prayer. When contamination is not an issue, I usually take the hand of the person that I am praying for. Often in a group prayer, we take our neighbor's hand, or place our hands on their shoulders. There is something spiritual associated with the physical touch when we agree in prayer. It signifies that

we are agreeing in prayer with the whole of our being, both physical and spiritual. The laying on of hands during ordination has an affirming effect and the Spirit of God is free to do whatever He desires to do. It is not as if the person who is laying on their hands has some unique power, but in the process, if everyone's hearts are right, and all is according to God's will, God can gift that person for their ministry, in that time of prayer. In this way both the individual and the church can be encouraged.

Luke finishes this section with a statement that the church continued to grow, and he adds that a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. The priests were all Levites, and they either were Sadducees, or worked for the Sadducees.

It was the Sadducees, remember, that persecuted the Apostles, but the result of their stand upon the gospel of Jesus Christ was that they won over many of those who previously opposed them. This is why it is important that we be willing to take our stand upon the gospel and the word of God today. People's eternal souls stand in the balance.

If you are here tonight and have not received Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, your eternal soul stands in the balance. Why not confess your sin to God and receive Jesus into your heart, then join the rest of us in our stand upon the gospel.