

Acts 6v1-7 The First Deaconate

Introduction

So far in the book of Acts, we can see that the Church has come under attack by the

- The world (persecution),
- satan (deceit & moral compromise)

Now a new crisis appears. Unable to destroy the church by way of persecution and deceit, satan now tries to create a split in the church by getting believers to argue and fight with each other.

If satan had succeeded in creating an implosion within this church, the only church in existence at the time, then the effects could have been devastating. The media in our world loves to report about anything negative to do with Christianity and the church. So any form of dissension, pressure splits and arguments within the Church, is often reported with an almost earnest gleefulness by the media.

From this Bible passage, four questions quite naturally arise.

- What was the problem?
- How was it resolved?
- What happened after it was resolved?
- How can we apply it to church life, 2000 years after the event?

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The Problem! (v1)

- Good news - they were growing, but this had caused a problem!
- Bad news – Some widows were not being cared for!

Hebraic Jews = always had lived in the then nation of Israel, spoke mainly Aramaic and some Hebraic. Well used to life in a Jewish society, the Temple and avoiding those who were not Jews – the Gentiles..

Grecian or Hellenistic Jews = were part of the Jewish Diaspora, born elsewhere within the known world and had returned to Jerusalem. These mainly spoke Greek, and well used to working with Gentiles.

Widows were important to God, because justice is important to God. God is a God of justice and mercy. In the Old Testament, under the Law of Moses, God commanded provision for those who were widows, oppressed or uncared for. There was no NHS at the time in Jerusalem. The Apostles would have known about God caring for the widows and in Jesus teaching about justice for the poor and the oppressed. We know this because if you remember from Acts 2 and 4, people were selling and sharing possessions and ensuring that people within the Christian community were being looked after and cared for. This included making sure that everyone got fed, particularly those who had no family to care for them. Somehow, unintentional or not, this group of widows were missing out.

What to do?

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The Solution! (v2-6)

Three things about the solution

Transformation of the Apostles – James, Peter & John particularly (v2)

Its not stated here, but a transformation had taken place! Only a few short time ago, the disciples of Jesus had refused to wash feet as an act of service (Peter); some had wanted positions of power and greatness (James & John). Their old nature must have started asking questions and prompting them to react negatively. The world has attacked the church, satan has attacked the church, and now satan would have been using the Apostles old nature to attack the church. But – as they are transformed by the indwelling Holy Spirit and now have a new nature, the nature of Jesus Christ, they react much more righteously and judiciously.

All together now! (v2-5)

Notice they gathered **all** the believers together for a church meeting. They gave their opinion or judgment if you like, that their ministry or time would be better spent doing what God had called them to do – to be leaders of the Church, praying, preaching, evangelizing and discerning how best to apply the 3 years of teaching that they had had when traveling with Jesus Christ before His ascension. Their time, rightly so, was best spent doing that, for that was their ministry of service. But other people in the church gathering, who had a ministry of service and overseeing the food distribution, could spend their time doing that! So what of these seven men with Greek names? They were elected by the whole church, both Grecian and Hebraic, to perform this duty. They may already have been doing it, but now were being set apart especially for this role. These men were controlled by the Holy Spirit and were wise. They were chosen to give relief to the leadership so that the Word of God and prayer would not be hindered.

Commissioning (v6)

Interestingly enough, the word *diakonia* is translated here in the NIV as *ministry*. Another way to translate it is as deacons, as our sermon title suggests. But, they were not deacons in the way the

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Paul uses the word as part of a church government in 1 Timothy 3. Rather they were *deacons*, set apart for this specific task – it was their ministry. It may well have been from here, that Paul developed what some parts of the universal church understands of the role of deacons. So these seven men, were prototypes as it were, for the Paul-ine idea of deacons.

Note also that the Apostles didn't say their work was more important than serving. They were just following what God had called them to do, just as God had called these seven men to take responsibility for providing food for the widows. So they were commissioned by God, by the laying on of hands and set apart to perform it. We know only of Steven and Phillip and that they continued doing other ministries as well as this.

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The Result! (v7)

Growth and witness = conversion of former enemies... (v7)

Growth and witness = reasoning and transformation

Now that the Apostles had time for their dedicated and unique ministry, all the widows could be fed, and all believers able to participating within the life of the church. Not only that, Stephen was instrumental in reaching the Apostle Paul (Acts 7:58). Philip was instrumental in reaching the city of Samaria and won over for Jesus Christ, the Ethiopian Eunuch who then took the gospel to Africa. (Acts 8)

This growth was where the word of God increased in its effectiveness in the lives of those unbelievers who would listen to the gospel. This growth was not merely addition but multiplication! It was explosive! So explosive that even former enemies were becoming converts! Sadducees were Jewish believers who didn't believe in a bodily resurrection – yet they came to faith and started to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's not hard to imagine that some of those Priests coming to faith in Jesus Christ were former persecutors of the Church! They were watching the church to see how best to attack and debate them. Yet found that they were joining the church, rather than continuing to oppose it. The church was preaching one thing and acting upon it. There was no hypocrisy within the church. The church was transparent – it lived as it believed. The church was seen as transformative and servant-like. While the Church continue to reason with others about the validity of Jesus Christ's claims to be the Messiah, it would have not been effective if lives were not being transformed. If lives were not being changed, then no amount of reasoning alone would have seen the growth in numbers being added to the Church. Just as transformation and change alone would not have been the catalyst for growth, without the reasoning behind it.

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Conclusion

Transformation

As we have seen here, the first Church was a radical community of believers, growing quickly. The church today, also needs to be a community that is seen to be radical by the surrounding society. At Pentecost, the church community began when the Holy Spirit filled the Disciples (Acts 2v4). The hallmarks of this community were commitment and transformation. This community was radical. It was where people's lives were being changed as the Holy Spirit filled them. Instead of being a withdrawn people filled with fear of retribution from the Roman government and Jewish leaders, they became a people filled with boldness and joy. This church in Jerusalem grew by being a radical community imbued with radical individuals engaging with others and serving. It was a church where every member was asked and expected to play some role. Imagine this church here, if nobody straightened the chairs, vacuumed the carpets, made the tea and coffee etc. All vital parts of church life, and everyone can participate in the life of the church. I was glad to see in the handout Steve gave me that all members were encouraged to participate in some way within the life of the Church here in Bearwood.

Today's church will grow by building a strong community. And by church, I don't mean just Bearwood Chapel, but all churches in this area, this country and this world. In working with other local churches, a church community can be created which involves joining together isolated and solitary individuals where people are imbued with love, shown caring for each other, particularly the frail, elderly and young. Despite small differences in worship style and non-essential doctrines, local churches working together can show a world looking in, that all local churches are unified in some positive aspect. In doing this, churches can be a visible symbol of the invisible link that unites all churches. And we can do it, with what somebody once called a "*creative passion for the impossible.*" An inherent human need is the need to belong, and by fulfilling relational needs, the radical church community will become relevant to the people within it. It will then also become relevant to those who are on the outside and looking in. And people are looking in, all the time, whether you want them to or not. When systematic persecution comes to this country, and it will, local churches will need to work with each other and show that Jesus Christ is the reason for our hope and faith.

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This is shown partly by caring for those who are in need within the community as a whole, and not just in the Church. This involves improving present societal conditions, rather than remaining a conservative community, which merely repairs the status quo. In doing this, today's church will be emulating characteristics of this church we have read and heard about this morning. Jesus Christ is glorified, honoured as the Church community's spiritual health gets stronger and the community bonds in unity. I know of churches that are good at one thing but not the other. Some churches are excellent at social care and social justice, but are very weak in regards to teaching from the Bible and prayer. I know others who are the opposite – are faithful in prayer and bible teaching, but neglectful in regards to social justice. The church must be both as it endeavours to spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

The church must be a community of people, willing to be holy. By holy, I mean living a life of constant transformation into the image of Jesus Christ. Being transformed by the Holy Spirit as God's Word is read, studied and applied to your life. It is by being holy, that the church will grow, as we have seen with this church in Jerusalem. The role of the community engaged in radical transformation is to help people to be holy and not merely happy. Happiness will flow from holiness, but holiness will not necessarily flow from an induced 'feel good factor'. Good leadership, as we have seen this morning, stems from good accountability to each other and to the whole church community.

Ministry for all – serving!

The Christian life is not to be static or inactive. The Christian life is to be dynamic and active. As we have seen the word "deacon" here denotes ministry. Ministry is any service for Jesus Christ. When you serve as God's deacon in this way, God's honour is released. That's why the embryonic Church in Jerusalem grew and flourished. This is done because service shows the beauty and glory of Jesus Christ to those being served and to those watching. That is to be our motive for service.

I don't know you. I don't know how or why or if you serve in the Church here in Bearwood. But I do know that ministry and serving in some capacity is for all Christians. In some parts of the worldwide church, ministry is only ever used of the clergy, missionaries and other "professional

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Christians". And, with a few exceptions notably the Brethren movement, this was the case in most Christian denominations until 40 or 50 years ago. But since then, service and ministry has returned to its New Testament roots. Service and ministry is the domain of all those who would profess to call Jesus Christ as LORD.

Serving and ministry should never to be about what you and I can get out of it. When that is the motive, God is not glorified. God's glory and supremacy is our goal as Christians. Spiritual growth comes from serving rather than being served. This is because what ever is given in service of God and others, faith grows and Jesus Christ gives back even more. Jesus speaking in [Matthew 25v15-30](#) tells of the rewards for faithful service and the penalties for being faithless.

Serving others is a sign that you are trusting God and having faith in God. Serving God and others is the mark of a spiritually maturity and through service, the greatest servant of all, is reflected: Jesus Christ, who came to serve and give his very life for others ([Mark 10v45](#)). As Christians, we are to be as Jesus Christ ([Romans 8v28](#); [Philippians 2v5](#)) and to serve. Yet if we are honest, we sometimes feel incapable, just as Moses did ([Exodus 3](#)). An excellent example to follow is that of the deacon Stephen.

As the church, we are dependent upon each other, just as one part of the human body has dependence on another part. That is why we serve each other and use the gifts generously given by God. If we are Christians here today, you have spiritual gifts and talents, and you have a responsibility to discover and develop them ([1 Timothy 4v14](#))! As we have hopefully seen today, God has called all Christians into one ministry or another and equipped them to fulfill that ministry. So find where in this church, you can serve. Ask the elders and other Church leaders, how they think you can serve here.

Finally, if you would not call yourself a Christian here today, then I would urge you to look at this Church. You maybe here having investigated Christianity rationally but still need a bit more for one reason or another. In that case, I would urge you to see how this church cares for the poor and the widows of this area and the world, and match that against its dedication to Jesus Christ. Or you may be here, because you have seen the transforming work of this church with the poor and the widows, but feel you need a bit of something else. Then I would urge you to match this transforming work

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in individuals against what the Bible says and rationality. Maybe you are in one of those camps, you want to cross the line to faith, but just can't quite get there. Ask one of the Church leaders here, how they might be able to help you.

Let's pray.