

Acts Ch. 6 (DDC) – November 9, 2008

- Luke in the book of Acts is telling us the history of the early church... beginning with the ascension of Jesus.
- As we've been moving through Acts we seen:
 - The first meetings of the church
 - The pouring out of the Holy Spirit
 - The spreading of the gospel
 - We've also seen various miracles being done
 - And thousands of people coming to the lord.

(pause)

- You can kind of picture this movement that's begun.
- As we move from chapter 5 to chapter 6 there is a bit of a time gap.
- And many scholars believe that at the point of Ch.'s 6 the church has grown to as many as 25,000 people.
- So it had grown quite large.

(pause)

- Well like any organization that grows that large... there is bound to be issues.
- This was true for the early church.

(pause)

- A lot of people look back at the early church and kind of idealize it...
- They quickly point to it... and say "That is the way church should be."
- Well... in a lot of ways... I won't argue with that.
 - In the early church some amazing things were happening.

(pause)

- But it's easy to overlook that as the church grew... it began facing real problems
- Everything from logistical problems...
- To persecution... to direct attacks from Satan.
- Just like we face real problems they faced real problems.

Story about church planning and thinking there is an ideal right way... where every one is happy... you can't meet everyone's needs... there is going to be problems.

- Nope... there is going to be problems.
- There is going to be unhappy people.
 - Some legitimate
 - Some not legitimate

(pause)

- The more I get entrenched in church leadership, I hear:

- There's this problem here
- These people are unhappy
- My needs are being met here

(pause)

- The fact is... if people are involved... someone's not going to get their needs met.
- All you have to do is look around any church and you find unhappy people.

(pause)

- We experience it.
- The early church also, experienced this.
- So what do we do? Ignore it?

(pause)

- Thankfully... the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to record some of the problems the early church encountered...
- So we can see how the Apostles wisely responded when a problem arose.
- Tonight we are going to look at one such time.

So... let's begin in Vs. 1 of Chapter 6

Act 6:1 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.

Notes In Bible:

After "days" – Gap between Chapter 5 & 6

After "increasing" – Remember the church is around 25,000 people – very large now

- So in Verse 1 we hear about a problem.
- the Grecian Jews were complaining because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

(pause)

- The early church took its responsibility to help support widows seriously.

You guys ever think about how hard it would be to be...

- So the church would support these widows by making sure they had food.
- God expects us (as the collective church body) to take care of those who need help.
- It's not optional.
- It's expected.

- In return the widows were expected to serve the church faithfully as it talks about in 1 Timothy.

(pause)

- It wasn't just a well-fair program.
- It was the church taking care of their own.

(pause)

- Well it says... a conflict arises between the Hebraic Jews and the Grecian Jews (or Hellenists some Bibles say)
- The Grecian Jews are complaining that their widows are not receiving their portion of food.

(pause)

So in this conflict we have two groups:

- First the the Hebraic Jews.
- They were the traditional Jews and they made up the majority of the church.
- They embraced traditional Jewish culture

(pause)

- Second we have the Grecian Jews who were the minority in the early church.
- Grecian does not imply they were Greeks.
- But rather they were Jews who had followed the Hellenist's (or Grecian) culture.

(pause)

- The Greeks under Alexander the great concurred the majority of the ancient world.
- And with each conquest they brought culture to the ancient world.
- And even after Rome conquered over Greece... Grecian culture remained throughout much of the world even hundreds of years later.
- In fact that the New Testament is written in Greek
- One of the common languages of the day was Greek. .

(pause)

- So... at this time the Church is still made up of pretty much all Jews.
- Paul and Barnabas haven't been commissioned to take the Gospel to the Gentiles.
- We have two groups.
 - Jews who had adapted the Greek culture.
 - And Jews who were living by a strict Hebrew culture.

(pause)

- But it's important to note the preexisting tension between these two groups.
 - They are both members of the church
 - But there is preexisting tension

(pause)

- Hebrews tended to regard the Grecian Jews as unspiritual compromisers with Greek Culture
- Hellenists viewed the Hebrews as kind of “Holier-than-thou” traditionalists
- There was already a natural suspicion between the two groups.

(pause)

- Like any conflict... nothing is ever simple.
- But... by all accounts there is a legitimate problem here...
 - The Grecian widows are not getting receiving their portion of food
- The text hints that Grecian Jews felt there was partiality here.
- “Their widows were being overlooked”

(pause)

- However, the text does not suggested that the oversight was deliberate.
- We don’t see anyone to blame for this.
- 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.” MacArthur

(pause)

- So... did we set the mood?
- We start off... the church growing – around 25,000 strong.
- There arises a problem.

(pause)

- The Grecian Jews are complaining about the Hebraic Jews
- The complaint is that the Grecian widows are being overlooked in the passing out of bread.

(pause)

- It would have been so easy to sit and gossip
- And get mad... and turn bitter
- This would have been a great catalyst for the church to split.

(pause)

- But... to their credit... instead they come to the Apostles with this issue.

(pause)

Act 6:2 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.

Notes In Bible:

After “twelve” – so the original 11 and Matthais
After “disciples” – most believe this is the 120 original church members
that the Holy Spirit fell on in the of Pentecost

- I love this. – it’s easy to miss.
 - A real problem arises – some of the widows are not receiving food.
 - It’s brought to the Apostles... and what do the Apostles do?? Nothing?? *Wait....*
 - No!!
- (pause)

- They act... they gather the disciples.
 - And in their response they have already thought it through.
 - Someone needs to wait on the tables.
 - It’s implicit in their response that they have already determined a solution.
- (pause)

- I love this there is a problem and the Apostles hit it head on.
- We need to be that way – we can’t let things fester.

*Story about me being very confrontational ... story about me and my wife.
Need to hit things dead on... don’t let them fester*

- So... they hit it head on.
 - They have an implicit solution.
 - Someone needs to wait on the tables.
- (pause)

- When it talks about waiting on tables it’s not quite what we think of.
 - The task of waiting on tables speaks of handling the practical administration of the financial details relevant to caring for the widows.
 - “A table at that time meant a place where a money changers did his collecting or exchanging of money.”
 - When it says waiting on tables they are talking about overseeing the distribution of monies and provisions for the distribution of food to the widows.
- (pause)

- So there is a need in the church – some of the Widows are not getting food.
 - The Apostles have come up with a solution – someone needs to wait on the tables
- (pause)

- So the question really becomes who?
- (pause)

- The Apostles response is interesting:

- They say” It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.”

(pause)

- They were called to the ministry of the word of God.
- They understand their calling.
- They understand that as good stewards of their time they have... they have to prioritize.

(pause)

Story about Chuck smith and prioritizing

- God had not called the disciples to do everything for the Church.
- Nor does he call us to.

(pause)

- A pastor should not have his time consumed in tasks that are essentially serving tables.
- Yet there is something wrong with a pastor who considers some tasks “beneath” him.

(pause)

- That fact that the apostles busied themselves with the ministry of the word of God shows how consuming it is to preach and pray rightly.
- It’s not something to take lightly.

(pause)

- This is applicable to us individually as well.
- If you want to be used by God.... You must be a man of prayer and of the word.
- That has to be our first priority.
- We can’t let things interfere with their prayer or with their study of the Word.

My rant about reading the Bible and praying everyday

(pause)

- So... the Apostles aren’t gong to do this task.
- As good leaders... they understand they can’t do it and still effectively fulfill their calling.

(pause)

- So who is going to do it?
- Do you just throw someone at it?
- Do you take the first person that volunteers?

Act 6:3 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

Act 6:4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

Notes In Bible:

After “Brothers” – this is the Apostles speaking to the Church members

After “Wisdom” – ESV says “pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” - Three qualities

- So... to fill this task of taking care of the tables for the distribution of bread to the widows...
- They seek out men with certain qualities:
- If you find yourself in the position of leadership... and you are tasked with finding someone to fill a ministry... you would be wise in understanding certain qualities are needed.
- As you survey the issues that plague a lot of church in America... I believe a lot of problems could be prevented if we were more discerning in who we appoint as a leaders in the church
- Ministry is so important.
- It only makes sense that we seek qualified people.

(pause)

- And qualities described by the apostles describe the character of the men to be chosen
 - Men of good reputation,
 - full of the Holy Spirit and
 - Full of wisdom.
- The Apostles are more concerned with the internal quality of the men than their outward appearance or image.

(pause)

- So full of the Holy Spirit and Wisdom?
- Why this pairing?

(pause)

- It required a man both spiritually minded and practically minded.
- Important pairing.
- Way to often we see one extreme or the other.
- We must be both... so important.

(pause)

- It says they seek out 7 men.
- Why 7 men?
 - This may have been so that a different person could oversee the needs of the widows a different day each week.
 - Incredible practicality
 - And it's a sustainable solution

Comment regarding burn out

(pause)

- So the Apostles ask the church to choose 7 men with these qualities.
- Now notice what the Apostles say next...
- The say “We will turn this responsibility over to them”

(pause)

- The final decision rested with the Apostles
- The Church choose 7 men.
- The Apostles approved the men and turned the ministry over to them
- The final decision rested on the apostles

(pause)

- So the plan is choose 7 men... that are of good reputation, full of the Spirit, and full of wisdom.

Act 6:5a This proposal pleased the whole group.

...

- Now we can't say this was good decision only because the people liked it.
- Yet certainly God confirmed the wisdom of the Apostles through agreement among the people.
- It is important to note... the Apostles were lead by the Lord, not popular opinion.

(pause)

- Nevertheless... the church is please with this proposal...

Act 6:5b 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.

- Notice the seven men all have Greek names.
- Not only are they well qualified men with good reputation.... Full of the Sprit and Wisdom... but they are Grecian Jews them selves.

(pause)

- The Grecian widows are being left out.
- So.. choose men who won't forget about this small minority of widows.
- Men who are Grecian Jews.
- What a practical and effective solution.

(pause)

Story regarding my brother and going to get Texas Donuts with my Dad...

- I love the practicality.

(Long Pause)

- Now... it's clear between verse 5 & 6 that these men accept this call to ministry.
(pause)
- The ministry they accepted (taking care of the tables for the widows) is not one with lots of accolades and notoriety.
- Really it's kind of a behind the scenes ministry.
- But they step up and accept the call.
(pause)
- We should count it a privilege to serve the Lord in practical ways.
- If someone is not faithful in the small things... why would God elevate them to bigger things?
(pause)

Story regarding people that tell me they are called to the ministry but won't serve God practically... they just want Joe W. or Ken Ortize job.

- We don't see how faithful these men were behind the scenes.
- When you are faithful in the small things... God will give you more.
- I love what Chuck Smith says to people that want to go into the ministry but are curious how to start.
- He tells them to go teach a Sunday school class.
- Start there and be faithful.
(pause)
- As we continue on we will see the fate of 2 of these men.
- And we will see that they were faithful.
- And God did add to their ministry.
(pause)
- With the other men their eventual fate is not clear.
*It is interesting (on a side note)... one of them men listed is Nicolas...
Some conjecture that this is the same Nicolas*
(long pause)

- So...after they choose these men... obviously these men accepted their call to ministry... next it says....

Act 6:6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

- So these men... accept the call... and they are presented to the Apostles.
- And it says... in the form of electing these men to this position.... The Apostles prayed and laid hands on them.
 - Interesting the order

- They prayed then laid hands on them
- We do the opposite.

(pause)

- Among the Jews it was customary to lay hands on the head of a person who was set apart to any particular office (as show in Numbers chapter 27)
- It wasn't to impart any power or ability, but was done to "designate" that they received their authority or commission from those who aid their hands on them.

(pause)

Authority is something we in this day and age don't understand. We've rejected the idea of authority.

- Most Christians don't see any kind of Authority out side of God.
- I don't think that is a correct view.
- The Apostles had authority... not the ultimate authority...
- But they had authority through the Holy Sprit
 - Acting on behalf of the Holy Sprit
- And by laying on of hands they appointed these men to their position.

(pause)

- I think we often arrogantly take on this attitude that anybody can do anything.
- That is not the case.
- Some are called to do certain things... and others are not.
- The fact that we are given different gifts is evidence of this.
- Our gifting should correspond to what we are appointed to do.

(pause)

- It's the job of the Church leaders through the Holy Spirit to discern who is appointed and who is not.

(long pause)

- So these men are appointed.
- And based on their role... it's assumed these were the first Deacons that are appointed in the church.
- Now... these men are not specifically called Deacons here.
- The word Deacons simply means "servant"... and as described in 1 Ti 3:8-13 these men obviously fit the role.
- It is generally accepted that these were he first Deacons.

(pause)

- The term Deacon is kind of an archaic term.
- When I think of Deacon... our equivalent term would be say....Team Leader... or Ministry Leader
- So these men are the first leaders that were appointed specific to a ministry.

(pause)

- Once these men were appointed it goes on to say...

Act 6:7 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.

- Bottom line – the church leaders acted quickly and divisively.
- This situation could have brought division to the church.
- But instead... it says “so the word of God spread. The number of disciples increased rapidly.”
 - There is also this side note that “a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”
 - There were lots of priests in Jerusalem at this time.
 - This I think is intended to just be a side note.
 - That hey... “in addition to not splitting the church... the word of God spread... and even priests were being converted.”
- Considering all that could have gone wrong everyone involved deserves much credit.
 - Greetian Jews – made the need known, instead of complaining and whining and gossiping behind the leaders backs. They made the need known and they trusted the Apostles.
 - Hebrews – recognized the Hellenists had a legitimate need and trusted the solution of the Apostles.
 - The seven chosen men did the right thing. They accepted the call to an unglamorous service.
 - The Apostles did the right thing: They responded to the need without distracting themselves from their central task.
- I think Satan had two strategy’s in this situation... and they both failed.
 - Satan first strategy failed – He tried to divide the church
 - Satan second strategy failed – The Apostles were not distracted from their focus which is of ministry of the Word of God and prayer.
- So because the Apostles were not distracted from the ministry of the Word of God and prayer...
- it says the result is... “the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased **rapidly**...!!”

Jon Courson writes... “This verse should be stared, underlined and highlighted in all ministers Bibles. This is the secret to church growth and ministry expansion. It is simply to feed the flock. Healthy sheep reproduce it’s inevitable.”

- I love it.
- (pause)

- So now we have a bit of a section break.
 - And we get to begin to see the fate of one of the Leaders that was appointed.
 - A man named Stephen.
 - Next week we will see much more about him as we move into Ch.7
- (pause)

- Now... between verses 7&8 there is an indeterminate amount of time.
 - I think it's significant that we see Stephen's call to ministry before we learn about his fate.
 - So as we watch the events surrounding Stephen unfold... remember that he was called to the ministry.
 - And he accepted and faithfully served in a behind the scenes ministry.
- (pause)

- And because he was faithful... it says...

Act 6:8 Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.

- God did great wonders and signs through the Apostles.
 - But God also worked signs and wonders through others like Stephen.
 - One of the faithful men chosen to help the widows.
- (pause)

Act 6:9 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,

- There are a lot of different opinions regarding who these men that are opposed to Stephen are. – would be fun to discuss afterwards.
 - Many believe the mention of Cilicia suggests this may have been Paul's synagogue before he was converted.
 - Paul came from Tarsus which is in Cilicia (now day southern Turkey)
- (pause)

- We are not given all the details.
 - But some sort of opposition arose between members of this Synagogue and Stephen.
- (pause)

Act 6:10 but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.

- No indication that Stephen is smarter
- But rather these men (no doubt highly educated)... could not stand up against Stephen's wisdom... or the Spirit by whom he spoke
- In other words... he was speaking inspired of the Spirit

Story about sharing the gospel w/ Jeff and feeling inspired of the Spirit one time and note another time.

- So Stephen is speaking inspired of the Spirit.
- And these men could not stand up to that.

Act 6:11 Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God."

- They couldn't win a fair argument against Stephen... so they secretly stir up men to make accusations against Stephen.
- It's interesting that Luke notes these men were secretly persuaded.
- How would Luke know that?

(pause)

- It may be that Paul (Saul of Tarsus at that time) may have been one of the men persuading these men to say this.
- And then later... after Paul's conversion he tells Luke about this incident... and Luke records it in Acts.

(pause)

- Never the less... men have been persuaded to claim that Stephen is speaking blasphemy against Moses and God.
- A big deal to the Jews.
- If you recall that is the same claim they made against Jesus.

Act 6:12a So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. ...

- It says... "They stirred up the people"
- At this time... Stephen's opponents could do nothing until they got popular opinion on their side.

- Popular opinion can be easily shaped.
- The same crowds that praised Jesus soon called for His crucifixion.
- They loved the Apostles in Acts 2, but now they are against Stephen.

(pause)

- People are fickle.
- We as Christians should never let popular opinion shape the vision or focus of the church... or our personal ministry
- That should rest on something that is unshakable... and unchangeable.

- It should rest on God's Word.
(pause)

- But once they had popular opinion on their side... it says:

Act 6:12b... They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.

Act 6:13 They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.

Act 6:14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

- So they seize Stephen... and bring him before the Sanhedrin
 - Then they bring false witness who testify essentially that Stephen said... "Jesus is going to destroy the temple and change the customs given to them by Moses."
- (pause)

- Why would they make such accusations?
- Stephen had said these things.
- But his comments were taken out of context.
- Jesus says in John Chapter 2

Joh 2:19, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."

It goes on to say:

Joh 2:21 But the temple he had spoken of was his body.

Story regarding half truths being the hardest to defend against...

- Of course Stephen would never teach, against Moses and God,
 - But... what they were saying was partially true.
 - Jesus' body was the temple that was going to be destroyed and rebuilt in 3 days.
 - Jesus was the fulfillment of all the teachings and customs of Moses.
 - Stephen's comments were taken out of context.
- (pause)

- One of the commentaries I came across said:
Significantly, many of the same false accusations against Stephen were also leveled against Jesus. You are in a good place when people are treating you like they treated Jesus.
(long pause)

- So... Stephen is before the Sanhedrin.
 - Men are coming forward and not telling the whole truth.
- (pause)

- This is one of those times it would be easy to be frustrated with God.

- I could see myself... looking angry at these men... these liars.
- Looking distraught.

How does Stephen look?

Act 6:15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

- Reflected the perfect peace and confidence of one that knows and trusts his God.
- Stephen was at perfect peace.
- Not filled with fear or terror
- He knew his life was in God's hands.

(pause)

- Sometimes I think our face and our demeanor... tells people more than our words.
- I hope that when I'm speaking of Jesus... I appear to have the peace that Jesus promised.
- If I'm not at peace... I think my face will show it.

(long pause)

- Addressing his students concerning ministry C.H. Spurgeon said (and we will end with this:

“Men when you teach on heaven let there always be a glow on your face... a gleam in your eye... and a smile on your lips. When you teach on hell... your normal face will do fine.”

- When they looked at Stephens face they saw the face of an angel.
- Perfect peace.
- Let's pray.

Closing Prayer

- Next week Bob Carter will be speaking on Acts Chapter 7.
- We will see Stephens's response to the accusations being brought against him.