

The Rest of the Story

Studies in the Book of Acts

***“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it –
but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”***

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Text

Acts 6:1-7

Topic

The apostles instruct the Church to choose seven men
to wait on the tables of the widows

Title

Tips for Waiters

Acts 6:1 Now in those days, when *the number of* the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

Acts 6:2 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.

Acts 6:3 Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of *good* reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;

Acts 6:4 but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Acts 6:5 And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch,

Acts 6:6 whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

Acts 6:7 Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Introduction

The last time we estimated the total number of believers in the Book of Acts we said it was around ten thousand. The first Church was a megachurch.

What size staff would a Church of ten thousand have today? It would be huge.

The first Church had a staff of twelve men. **That's approximately one man for every thousand believers!** Add to that the fact they restricted themselves to **the ministry of the word and prayer**. How could so few accomplish so much?

We see how they could accomplish so much in these verses in chapter six. God gifted these men and gave them to His Church to teach the Word. As the Word spread and needs became apparent those who had received the Word were raised-up by God to meet the needs. The staff of the Church was the twelve *plus* every able-bodied believer.

Tucked away in this passage is an illustration. The words **serve tables** (v2) can refer to a *waiter* serving food. The apostles said it wasn't **desirable** that they both prepare the food and serve it. Think of a four-star restaurant. You want the chef in the kitchen and a staff of waiters and waitresses buzzing around you. Think of the Church as a staff of waiters and waitresses waiting for the order to come up so they can serve.

I'll organize my thoughts on these verses around two points: #1 You Are Given Gifted Men Who Wait Upon God's Word, and #2 You Are Gifted Men and Women Who 'Waiter' God's Word.

#1 You Are Given Gifted Men
Who Wait Upon God's Word
(v1-2)

Two distinct groups of Jews were in Jerusalem. The native Jews were called Hebrews. Descendants of the exiled Jews who returned from Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra, they were intensely nationalistic, vigilant in the observance of the law and the traditions of the Jewish religion. They spoke either Hebrew or a form of the ancient language called Aramaic.

The other group of Jews was called Hellenists. The word refers to Greek-speaking Jews, or more accurately, Jews living in the Greek-speaking world around the Mediterranean who maintained their religion through the synagogues in their own cities. Some were descendants of the Dispersion, Jews who did not return to the Holy Land after the Exile and who were scattered around in various nations and cities. Others were part of the large number of Jewish merchants drawn away from Jerusalem for economic and business enterprises.

A tension and prejudice between these two groups had grown through the years. They didn't like one another. Here they were together in the Church. A problem arose between them.

Acts 6:1 Now in those days, when *the number* of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

The first Church helped **widows**. The Hellenists felt that their widows were being overlooked. They assumed it was deliberate. Their complaint may have been justified but the overlook was probably accidental.

You may have a complaint, and it may be justified. But that doesn't mean you are being overlooked or mistreated deliberately. Be careful ascribing motives to others. Only God knows the heart.

Acts 6:2 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.

Earlier in Acts we saw that believers with means were selling property and bringing the proceeds to the apostles to distribute to those less fortunate. The numeric growth of the Church put a strain on their distribution of money and other physical helps.

It wasn't beneath the apostles to **serve tables**. They were doing it up until now. It wasn't **desirable** for the believers that they devote any more time to serving tables at the expense of **prayer** and the **Word**. John Phillips put it like this: "There was no point in the apostles doing

something anyone could do when they [should] do things no one else could do.”

They thus established for us the understanding that the Church’s primary function is to build you up spiritually.

I’m glad it was the daily distribution that was strained and not their praying and ministry of the Word! No one was complaining that their Bible studies were dry, or that they were teaching the same thing over-and-over. It’s not a bad thing when there are unmet needs in a Church as long as the ministry of prayer and the Word is solid. As we’ll see in a moment, unmet needs only means that believers who are receiving the Word need to step-up and **serve tables**.

God gives the Church gifted men. The apostle Paul lists them in Ephesians chapter four:

Ephesians 4:11 And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers,

Earlier in the letter Paul wrote to the Church at Ephesus he said that **apostles** and **prophets** were the men who laid the foundation for the Church (2:20). There are no **apostles** today who meet the qualifications listed by Peter in the first chapter of the Book of Acts. Though some have the gift of prophecy, they are not **prophets** in the first century sense. Apostles and prophets laid the foundation. Now **evangelists** and **pastor-teachers** are the gifted men given to the Church to build upon the foundation.

As much as is possible the evangelists and pastor-teachers should be focused on prayer and the ministry of God’s Word. It is not desirable for a congregation to have their pastor or pastors leave the Word for other ministry – even good and necessary ministry.

Instead the pastor ought to wait upon God’s Word. **Others are then raised-up to waiter and waitress it!**

#2 You Are The Gifted Men And Women
Who ‘Waiter’ God’s Word
(v3-7)

Having set forth their priority the apostles tell the multitude how to proceed.

Acts 6:3 Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of *good* reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;

These are four prerequisites for all service in the Church:

1. **From among you** reminds us that a person must be born again in order to serve God's Church. It may sound basic but you'd be surprised how many people serve in Church's who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I would add to this that, as much as possible, you should first look within your own fellowship for servants.
2. **Good reputation** is from the same root word for *witness*. They must have a good witness and be living in such a way as to be good witnesses.
3. **Full of the Holy Spirit** is interesting because all believers are commanded to be being filled with the Holy Spirit. It is the normal Christian life. The idea here seems to be that you look for people living the normal, Spirit-filled Christian life. In other words you don't put someone into service in order to help them become more spiritual!
4. **Full of... wisdom** is a fourth characteristic. We might call it sanctified common sense. Not everyone who meets the other three criteria has the common sense necessary to serve others in the Church.

There is nothing symbolic about the number **seven**. Commentators point out that seven was the usual number of men on a Jewish court but we can't know if this was their reasoning. The apostles must have thought seven guys could handle the task. Maybe they had a rotation where one of them was on-call each day of the week.

The task was defined as **servicing tables**. That can mean waitering or waitressing. But it also has a larger application. In those days money lenders and exchangers were described as those who sat at tables. We would call them bankers. Servicing tables doesn't just refer to physically setting down a meal in front of a widow. It carries with it

the idea of administrating and distributing benevolence funds and other physical helps.

[Acts 6:4](#) but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

The apostles would continue to devote themselves to their God-assigned tasks.

Do you know what your God-assigned tasks are? *Sure you do!* At least you know most of them. Just look at what you are and you'll see them. If you are a father or a mother, a son or a daughter, then those are God-assigned tasks. You are either an employer or an employee, a teacher or a student, and those are your God-assigned tasks. You'll find lots of instruction about them and all other such assignments on the pages of the Bible.

In the Church it can be a little harder sometimes to discover your assignments. The first thing to realize is that you most definitely are called upon to serve. God will raise you up to meet certain needs. As you receive the prepared Word you are to wait it – to serve it to others in very practical ways.

[Acts 6:5](#) And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch,

The seven men all had Hellenist names. It could be they were all Hellenists. I like that because it was the Hellenists who brought the complaint. The congregation then put the responsibility on them to serve. As someone once said, "The one who rows a boat seldom has time to rock it."

We do something like that here at Calvary Hanford. Often (though not always) if a person has some concern or complaint we try to involve them in resolving it. It seems Scriptural to do so.

Truth is we can't be sure these seven were all Hellenists. Many Hebrews had Greek names or were called by the Greek equivalent of their Hebrew name.

The only men we know anything about from the Bible are the first two. Stephen will become the first martyr; Philip will become the first missionary. It tells us that serving God is rewarded with greater service. **As you grow in the Lord you should be doing more in His Church and never less.**

Acts 6:6 whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

Laying on of **hands** derives from the Old Testament sacrifices. When you brought your sacrifice you laid your hands on it to identify with it. The animal was taking your place. When we lay hands on a person we are identifying with them – standing with them in their place.

This episode is often referred to as the choosing of the first deacons in the Church. The New Testament mentions evangelists, pastor-teachers, elders, and deacons as offices in the Church. Certainly these seven men became the model for the office of a deacon. When you study Church government from the pastoral epistles (First and Second Timothy and Titus) you look back upon these guys.

It's true that the word *deacon* derives from the words used in these verses. But it is interesting to note that both the seven and the apostles are described by those words in this chapter.

The apostles were *not* establishing any new office in the Church at this time. That would develop later in the story of the Church. They simply recognized seven men whom God had raised-up to meet a specific need in the Church.

I think this is important – maybe the most important thing this morning. The Church is not an organization. It is an organism – a living thing. It should only be organized when there is a compelling reason to do so, and then as little as possible.

If we pray and minister God's Word then folks will gather. As we gather needs will emerge. Rather than be upset that there are needs we should recognize that God wants to meet those needs. God meets the needs through believers who have been built-up. They are

then raised-up to serve. It is a natural organization that flows from the life of the Church.

Not everything is a need. There are lots of things people suggest that are really distractions. **It's why we must continue in prayer!** Without prayer we have no leading and will go off in a million different directions meeting needs that don't really exist; or that God isn't identifying.

We pray; we serve the Word. Real needs emerge. We believe God then raises-up the right people to meet those needs – people who meet the prerequisites.

Here is a simple way of putting what I'm saying: While there is such a thing as the office of a deacon in the Church, **every believer can and should be *deaconing*.** That is why I said the apostles were not here establishing an office. They were encouraging every member of the fellowship of believers to be ready and available to serve.

Luke's comments in verse seven reinforce this idea that all of us are raised-up to waiter or waitress for God:

[Acts 6:7](#) Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

- being changed to bring change -

I can't help but point out that as soon as they appointed these men that their workload greatly increased! There was more work for the apostles and for the seven. God only organizes to increase your workload.

Notice the comment about a **great many** Jewish **priests** becoming believers. Seeing what was happening these men who had dedicated their lives to serving God in His Temple gave their hearts to Jesus. They understood that the way into the presence of God was no longer through rites, rules, and rituals but through a relationship with the Lord.

Why mention them just now? Let me give you one possible reason. The priests were the guys charged with spiritual ministry and serving.

They were a separate, special group within the population of Jews who carried out the work of God on behalf of the people.

When Jesus died, rose, and ascended into Heaven He put an end to the Jewish priesthood once-and-for-all. Now *every* believer is considered a priest of God! We all can go before God and we all can minister for God.

Luke's mention of the priest's converting punctuates the theme of this story. God gives you gifted men to **wait** upon His Word and you, in turn, **waiter** His Word to others as you are raised-up a kingdom of priests who minister one to another.

Work on the prerequisites. Volunteer!



