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Acts 6:1-7 “The Roles of the Pastors and Congregation”

Intro. We have already seen in our study of Acts that the early church made every effort to meet the needs of those in their fellowship who were poor and needy. (Read & review 2:45; 4:32, 34-35 & 37.) Not only did the apostles receive their offerings, but they were also entrusted with the responsibility of distributing to those in need. And there were many needy people in the Jerusalem church, because many of those who were saved on the day of Pentecost had come from other countries. They stayed in Jerusalem without any possessions or jobs. The widows were especially needy. So the church continued the Jewish tradition of helping widows when they had no other means of support (cf. I Tim. 5:3-16).

Well, at a time of wonderful love and generosity; at a time of tremendous church growth, here in chapter 6 we read of a problem that developed over the practice of caring for widows. One group of widows felt that they were not getting their fair share of the daily distribution of food. This was possible, even though it is very doubtful that the neglect was intentional. Greek speaking Jews, who were not natives of Palestine, were used to feeling discriminated against by Palestinian Jews. The Hebrews of Palestine often felt that these Jews had been polluted by Greek and Roman culture. So the Greek speaking Jews murmured and complained about their widows not getting enough of the daily distribution of food. This was indeed a problem. The problem was made worse by the tremendous growth of the church. In spite of that growth, the same 12 apostles were still doing all or most of the benevolent ministry. But the situation was faced publicly and immediately with a view to removing the grievance. And with every problem there is an opportunity to learn from our mistakes and do some good. This situation gave the apostles the opportunity to reestablish their priorities, and to delegate this benevolent ministry with others. This text of Scripture gives some important guidance concerning church leadership and organization, and the principles that I will share are still relevant today.

So notice with me first of all:

I. THE PRIORITIES OF THE PASTORS

What is the job of a pastor? If you were to list the top five ministry assignments of the pastor, what would you say? What matters more is what does the Word of God say? In chapters 4-6 we have clear indications that they also became very involved in receiving offerings from the church, and distributing them to those in need. By chapter 6 they were spending a significant amount of time ministering to the physical needs of people. They realized that this was not right. So they give a clear indication of what the main job of the pastor is. First, a pastor should be devoted to:

A. Prayer - In v.4 we read, “But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” It may be significant that prayer precedes the ministry of the Word. It would appear that prayer is the highest priority. You see, preaching and teaching without prayer is hardly more than human exercise. Often the ministry of the Word seems so powerless, weak, and dry because there is so little prayer behind it.

By including prayer, they hinted that this was a time-consuming exercise and one which was indispensable to effective ministry. Jesus Himself spent much time in prayer, especially according to Luke's gospel (Luke 5:16; 9:28; 11:1; 18:1; 22:41). There would be times when Jesus would pray all night long (Luke 6:12). Eph. 6:18 says that we should be "praying always..." In addition to my personal prayer times each day, I pray with Drew during our weekly staff meetings. I pray with the groups who gather for the Wednesday night and Friday morning prayer meetings.

One role that a pastor has in prayer is that of intercession. A pastor should pray for others. Col. 1:9 says, "For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you...." Friday I went to the hospital to pray with Wenda Moore, who is experiencing heart failure. Thursday Cheryl and I went to pray with the Bennett family. I pray with others as part of my visitation ministry. But you know, I remember a survey that revealed that the average pastor spends only 5 minutes/day in personal prayer. Based on this text of Scripture, that is certainly too little time in prayer for a pastor or any Christian. Yet the busier we become with the affairs of this life, the easier it may be to neglect our times of prayer. Pray that Drew and I will devote ourselves to prayer as we ought. The more we pray as we ought, the more of God's power will flow through our ministries.

Another priority of the pastor is:

B. The Ministry of the Word of God – Again, v.4 says, "But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." The word translated "ministry" in v.4 is translated "serve" in v.2. They were saying, "We'll serve the Word; you get others to serve the tables." They realized they had recently neglected what their true priority should be. Back in 5:42 we read, "And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ." The ministry of the Word had been an ongoing practice in their lives. This was because Jesus had commissioned His apostles to preach the gospel, and to make disciples by baptizing them and teaching them all that Christ has commanded (Mt. 28:19-20). In Luke 9:59-60 Jesus said to someone, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Then Jesus replied, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." Non-Christians can take care of many earthly responsibilities, but only God-called Christians can preach the gospel. In 1 Tim. 4:13 Paul said to Timothy, "Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." He also said to Timothy in 2 Tim. 4:2, "Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort...."

1. The Recipients of this Ministry - The ministry of the Word is directed toward 2 different groups of people. Toward the saved we are to make disciples and train them in ministry (Eph. 4:11, 12). A pastor will minister God's Word to the sick and bereaved, as well as others who are going through times of trouble. A pastor should share God's Word with those who are straying from the Lord. Then we have a ministry of the Word toward unbelievers. This involves gospel preaching and personal witnessing. Paul told Timothy in 2 Tim. 4:5, "...do the work of an evangelist...."

2. The Commitment to this Ministry - Notice how pastors should be committed to the ministry of the Word. The word translated "give ourselves continually" (*proskartereo*) means "to be steadfastly attentive unto." That requires a commitment, not only to do the ministry of the Word, but also to prepare for the ministry of the Word. Every Bible teacher in our church knows that teaching and preaching requires preparation. We must spend hours in preparation each week, and I typically preach and teach three times each week. I wish I would spend 20 hours in preparation each week. I probably spend closer than 15 considering all of my responsibilities.

The story is told that once after a great Bible teacher had finished teaching, a young man approached him and said, "I'd give the world to teach the Bible like you do." The teacher replied, "That's exactly what it will cost you."

It is easy for a pastor to fail in proper use of time. Some pastors do not spend enough time in the ministries of prayer and the Word. There is no time clock, no boss that is always looking over your shoulder. So a great deal of self-discipline is needed, especially regarding the ministries of prayer and the Word. There are so many other activities that can be done. They are more like Martha in Luke 10:38-42. She spent all her time preparing a meal in the kitchen while her sister Mary sat at the feet of Jesus to hear Him share God's Word. When she complained to Jesus, he affirmed the priority of hearing God's Word. A preacher can always find good things to do while he neglects the ministry of the Word. Benevolent ministry is good. But a preacher should not substitute benevolent ministry for the ministry of prayer and the Word of God.

So we have seen from our text to of the priorities of a pastor. Now let us see:

II. THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PEOPLE

I want to give you three priorities and responsibilities based on this text of Scripture:

A. Be a Disciple – Notice that v.1 gives one of the most common designations for believers in the early church. They were called "disciples." That word is found 28 times in the book of Acts. In Mt. 28:19-20 Jesus commanded us to go and make disciples. As we seek to evangelize and to teach, Christians should be willing to learn and be taught. A disciple is a learner. You are to be a student of the Word. If one of my main responsibilities is to teach the Word, one of your main responsibilities is to be my disciple. You should maintain a teachable spirit. You should bring your Bible, and when the Word of God is preached or taught in Bible study, you should follow along and learn God's Word.

The ministry of the Word involves more than helping you grow and mature as a Christian. It also involves training in ministry, just as in Eph. 4:11-12. Godly pastors and officers alone cannot make a church grow; every member must do his part. Every member needs to learn how to serve the Lord in some way. I hope we will offer you more opportunities to be trained in ministry.

B. Do Not Murmur; Maintain Unity – In the last of v.1 we read, "...there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution." This problem arose even during a time of spiritual revival and expansion. But that is when Satan is most interested in hurting the ministry of the Church. There are 3 tactics he will use, as illustrated in the book of Acts. In chapters 3 and 4 of Acts he tried persecution. In chapter 5 he led some members to commit serious sin to contaminate the purity of the body of Christ. And now, in chapter 6, he is trying to damage the church through dissension. He knows that dissension and disunity in a church can make effective evangelism impossible.

Any church is going to have problems to develop. Christians still have human imperfections, so problems are inevitable. In the Jerusalem church, unity was more difficult to maintain because there were two different language and cultural groups! But problems are not invincible. The issue is, "How are we going to respond to those problems?" There is a right way and a wrong way. One wrong way is to murmur. This is a bad method of raising objections. In 1 Cor. 10:10 Paul specifically commanded us not to murmur. Instead of murmuring, we should go

directly to the person responsible for the alleged wrong, and discuss it with that person. If that doesn't solve the problem then take it to the leaders of the church.

Another principle to follow is this, we should show love and grace to those we feel have wronged us. In love we should set aside our differences and seek the good of all. An example of this is found in who was selected in v.5. Every person selected had a Greek name. They bent over backwards to see to it that the Greek-speaking Jews were not being discriminated against. The Hebrew segment showed real grace in selecting men to serve who belonged to the aggrieved minority. They were willing to yield to others in love. They sought to maintain unity in the fellowship. But if we were going to address this problem today, we would probably elect four Hebrew speaking Jews, since they were the majority, and three Greek speaking Jews.

C. Elect Leaders Who Will Assist the Pastors - In v.2 notice what the apostles said to the members of the church, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables." The church had grown to well over 10,000 members, and yet the 12 apostles were trying to do all the same works they did when the church had 3,000 members. They hadn't had time to adjust to their growth, and they were faced with the logistical impossibility of ministering effectively to all those people. The apostles were becoming overloaded.

So what did they do? The apostles said in v.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." Their service was of a practical sort and did not extend to the "ministry of the Word." "To serve tables" is not to be minimized. Jesus exalted the work of a servant. But this does not exclude deacons and other lay leaders from participating in the spiritual work of the church. Stephen and Philip witnessed and preached the gospel to others.

So the church should help the pastors stick to their priorities. Few things are so unfit as a man called to any aspect of the ministry of the Word to be found bogged down in minutiae which others could be handling effectively. Sad but true, many dear and true ministers of God have but little time for prayer and study because their members keep them so occupied with secondary things. Many believers will be called upon to give an account at the judgment seat of Christ for pressuring their pastor to spend his time doing less important things than prayer and the ministry of the Word.

I heard about a certain pastor who ironed clothes for one of his elderly church members. Somehow that became a part of his pastoral duties! That was a good work. But is that not how a pastor should spend his time. Others in the church could have done that for her if she truly couldn't do it herself (cf. Gal. 6:5).

What this means is this: do not ask me to do something that you or someone else in the church is capable of doing just as well or better. A pastor should have a servant spirit, and he will have a hard time saying "No" to requests of all kinds of additional work. Too many congregations languish in spiritual infancy year after year because their pastor does not have time to pray and study enough to give them real spiritual food. He doesn't have time because he is distracted by a congregation that has unbiblical expectations of their pastor.

Our pastors work with our committees and ministry teams, and too often Drew and I end up doing too much of the work of the committee. We can accept some responsibility for this, but we need more laypeople to accept leadership positions for our committees, and we need more people accepting assignments and other responsibilities. I am thankful for all the workers in our church to do accept ministry responsibilities.

So the congregation not only needs to elect others to help in the ministry of the church, but they should also accept ministry from men other than the pastor. Should the prayer of the deacons be less effective than the prayer of a pastor? We believe in the priesthood of the believer (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). If a deacon visits with you and prays with you in the hospital, that should be fully acceptable to you.

Notice that these ministry leaders were not appointed by the apostles but by the congregation. That is one reason why we ask the congregation to nominate deacons, and to vote in the election of deacons. Next Sunday we are asking you to do this. As you plan to participate, notice that there are three qualifications mentioned in our text. First, they had ethical qualifications, having a good testimony. They were to be of sterling character and conduct. They needed to be fair and honest in the distribution of food. More detail is given in 1 Timothy 3. Secondly, they should give evidence that they are full of the Holy Spirit.¹ Even common duties are to be discharged by spiritual men and in a spiritual way. When God chose the leader to follow Moses, He said of Joshua in Num. 27:18, "Take Joshua the son of Nun with you, a man in whom is the Spirit...." Someone who is full of the Holy Spirit should certainly bear the fruit of the Spirit as mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23. Finally, they had practical qualifications, possessing the wisdom to manage this operation. Wisdom combines theoretical understanding and insight with down to earth common sense. You have a responsibility to nominate men who possess all three of these qualifications. I believe that all *leaders* of the church should have these qualifications.

Now if the pastors will make prayer and the ministry of the Word their priorities, and if others take care the other needs in the church, then notice with me last of all:

III. THE RESULTS OF KEEPING THESE PRIORITIES

The result of this action was the general growth of the church. Unity promotes church growth. Divisiveness hinders church growth. Sticking to the priorities promotes church growth, while getting sidetracked hinders church growth.

So notice with me the results of the apostles reestablishing their priorities, and involving others in the ministry of the church:

A. More Hear the Word – In v.7 we read, "Then the word of God spread...." Since the preachers were relieved of the daily ministrations of food, they had more time for prayer and the ministry of the Word.

B. More Get Saved – Next we read in v.7, "...and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem." Once again, the church was growing by great numbers.

C. More of God's Power Is Manifest – The last of v.7 says, "...and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." The fact that even the priests were getting saved was an amazing demonstration of the power of God. They would be the last to break ranks with the sacrificial worship of the temple. Their sacrifice would be greater since they would lose their status and feel fullest weight of hatred against Christians. But I am sure that there were some devout priests, like

¹ When Moses needed assistance, God gave 70 elders to work under him. In Numbers 11:17 God says, "I will take of the Spirit that is upon you and will put the same upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone." Likewise, Numbers 27:18 says, "Take Joshua son of Nun, a man who has the Spirit in him, and lay your hands on him."

the father of John the Baptist, who were willing to face persecution in order to follow Jesus, their true Messiah. And the ordinary priests were socially and in other ways far removed from the wealthy chief-priestly families from which the main opposition to the gospel came.

Conclusion: My first appeal is to those of you who will be asked to serve as deacons. We need some good men who will work side by side with the pastors to minister to this congregation. Either deacons is hardly enough for our size congregation. We also need more people to chair committees and ministry teams. The better our committee and ministry teams function without pastor oversight and involvement, the more we can devote to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Jesus modeled what it was to be a servant. Will you say to the Lord today, “I will serve you. I will serve in the ministry of this church. I will help lighten the load of our pastors.”

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1954); H. Leo Eddleman, *An Exegetical and Practical Commentary on Acts* (Dallas: Books of Life Publishers, 1974); Oliver B. Greene, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 1 (Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1968); Everett F. Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); John MacArthur, Jr., *Keys to Effective Evangelism: Acts 5:12-6:7* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1988); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Outline Studies in Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956); Curtis Vaughan, *Acts: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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