



GRACE

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SOLI ♦ DEO ♦ GLORIA

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Sermon Notes

The Choosing of the Seven

Acts 6:1-7

May 6, 2007

- I. **The Situation: *The Church is Growing***
- II. **The Problem: *There is Complaining***
- III. **The Solution: *Appoint Servants***
- IV. **The Outcome: *The Word of God Spreads***

- This story begins and ends with the spreading of the Word of God.
- Furthermore, with the identification of the Hellenistic Jewish community, it marks, once again, the fulfillment of the spread of the Gospel across cultural boundaries.

‘This is more than a story of the geographical spread of Christianity. It is much more the story of the gospel becoming a truly universal gospel, breaking the racial, national, and religious barriers in which it was born and carrying out a genuinely worldwide witness. It is the triumphant story of the inclusive gospel.’
John Polhill

I. **The Situation: *The Church is Growing***

- In Acts 5, Peter and the apostles are arrested for disobeying the orders of the Sandedrin.
 - In 5:28, the high priest states, ‘We gave you strict order not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.’
 - The high priest knew well the power of **teaching**.
 - Yet, despite his demands, Peter and the Apostles responded [Verse 29], ‘We must obey God rather than men.’

- Then, although the Sanhedrin ‘intended to kill them’ [Verse 33], Gamaliel convinced the ruling body to release the apostles.
- After flogging the, and ordering them, once again, not to speak in the name of Jesus [Verse 31], the Sanhedrin released the apostles.
- Yet, again, contrary to the demands of the Jewish leaders, Luke informs us that [Verse 42], ‘every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.’
- We, then, pick upon in Verse 1 of Chapter 6, where Luke states, ‘Now at this time while *the disciples were increasing in number...*’
 - In other words, the apostles were teaching and the number of disciples were increasing.
 - By all indications, this was a healthy church.

- ...until the second part of Acts 6:1: ‘Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, **a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews** against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.’

II. <u>The Problem: There is Complaining</u>

- The complaining in Acts 6:1 exists as the third attack by Satan in an attempt to cripple and destroy the young church.
 - The first attack of Satan came in the form of persecution [4:1-31; 5:17-41]. However, as a result of this satanic attack, the church actually grew faster[4:4]!
 - The second attack came in the form of the sin of Ananias and Sapphira [5:1-11]. Yet, this, too, made the church increase!
 - Now, Satan is attempting to attack the church by fostering dissension within the church.
- The Greek translated, ‘a complaint’ means ‘a complaint...expressed in murmuring’. The root of this word is used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, to describe the ‘murmuring’ of the Israelites against Moses in the wilderness.
- What seems to be the case, here in Acts 6:1, is that there were those who were complaining because the apostles, who received the money, were not distributing in a manner that the people believed was fair or equitable.

- ❑ One could speculate that the reason that the Hellenistic widows were being ‘overlooked in the daily serving of food’ was because of poor administration or supervision; however, we do not know for certain.
 - Also, one could certainly rule out the possibility that such neglect was intentional. What seems quite clear is that it was a mistake that was in no way intended by the apostles.
- ❑ Now, the complaint was ‘on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews...’
 - After the Edict of Cyrus, which allowed the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem following the Babylonian captivity, many Jews chose not to return to Israel. Rather, they either remained in Babylon or settled somewhere throughout the Empire. It is this group of Jews that came to be known as the Diaspora – as they were part of the dispersion.
 - Then, when Alexander the Great conquered the Middle East, he ‘Hellenized’ the empire, influencing it with the Greek culture, ideals, and language.
 - Therefore, the ‘Hellenistic Jews’ spoken of here in Acts 6 are those who were ethnically Jewish; yet, in their culture, language, etc. they were Greek.
- ❑ Luke, then, states what the basis of the grumbling was: ‘their [the Hellenistic Jews] widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.’
 - In ancient Jewish culture, widows, along with orphans, were considered especially helpless and dependent upon the community for charity. Because of this, the Old and New Testaments single out these two groups, commanding that the covenant community especially support them [Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29; Psalm 146:9; James 1:27].
 - Diaspora Jews often returned to Jerusalem during their final years of life so that they would die in the holy city. When the men would die, then, it would leave their widows often alone, helpless, and in a foreign land [although they were still ethnically Jewish]. It is certainly quite possible that the early church attracted such widows because of its practice of caring for the needs of the people in the covenant community.
 - Not only this, but, ‘According to the Talmud, Pharisaism made little secret of its contempt for Hellenists...they were frequently categorized by the native-born and assumedly more scrupulous populace of Jerusalem as second-class Israelites’

The Acts of the Apostles, Richard N. Longenecker
 - ‘The Jews had a weekly dole for resident needy, called the *quppah*. It was given out every Friday and consisted of enough money for fourteen meals. There was also a daily distribution, known as the *tambuy*. It was for nonresidents and transients and consisted of food and drink, which were delivered from house to house where known needy were dwelling. The Christian practice seems to have embraced

elements of both Jewish systems. Like the *tambuy* it was daily, and like the *qupphab* it was for resident membership.’
John Polhill

III. **The Solution: Appoint Servants**

- ❖ Within any true New Testament church, **the proclamation of the Word of God is central**...it is of primary importance. It is necessary to understand; however, that although not everyone is called to the task of teaching, this in no way makes the individual believer [who is not called to teach] sub-Christian or [ontologically] subordinate in their essence to those who labor in teaching the Word. However, it does make their respective ministry integrally related to the preaching and teaching of the Word. For, without the exercise of the gifts of service that many Christians are called to, the Word of God will not be taught, for those called to teach will be distracted from their primary task. Yet, when the servants of the church perform their duties, it frees the teachers of the church to perform their duties, and the Church's primary mission is accomplished.
- ❑ In the original text, the phrase translated ‘***It is not desirable*** for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables...’ [Verse 2] should, more accurately, state, ‘**It is not pleasing in God's eyes.**’
 - It would be easy to look at what the apostles say, here in Verse 2 and think that they thought of themselves as ‘better than’ or in some way ‘too good’ to wait on tables.
 - However, this is in no way what the context bears out.
 - The issue was one of calling. The Apostles were called to proclaim the Word of God. To neglect this duty, this calling, for something else, would have been disobedient.
- ❑ Therefore, in order that they not neglect the duty to which they were called, the Apostles urged the people to appoint seven men from among them to handle the task [Verse 3].
- ❑ This would, according to Verse 4, allow the Apostle to remain dedicated to the task of ‘prayer and the ministry of the word.’
- ❑ Then, in Verse 5, the ‘statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.’
 - Stephen will take ‘center stage’ in the following narrative, becoming the first martyr of the Early Church.
 - Philip will also become a major character, spreading the Gospel into Samaria.
 - However, little is known about the remaining five servants.

- Early Church tradition links Procorus with John, and stating that he became the Bishop of Nicomedia in Bithynia, later being martyred in Antioch.

- As simple as this decision to appoint the seven may seem, it freed the Apostles up to do what they were called to do – devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.
- The parallel to this passage and the contemporary church is powerful.
- As a church, we must continually ask ourselves the fundamental question:

What is the purpose, the chief end, of the church?

- To answer this question, it is good to also ask, ‘What is the chief and highest end of man?’ as the church is made of people – people who are gathered together in the name of Christ, who is the Head of His Church.

The Westminster Larger Catechism states that

‘the chief and highest end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.’

- Therefore, chief end of the church is also **to glorify God**.
- But, then, the question becomes **HOW? How does the Church primarily glorify God.**
- Throughout the New Testament, the answer to this question seems rather clear: The chief end of the Church is to glorify God through the faithful proclamation of the Word – through **TEACHING**.
- Recall, the Great Commission [Matthew 28:19-20], when Jesus tells His disciples, ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, **teaching them** to observe all that I commanded you...’
- Also, the Scriptures often link the function of teaching the Scriptures with authority.
- In 1 Timothy 3, when the Apostle Paul lists the requirements for the leaders in the church, the overseers/elders, the unique requirement for overseers is that they must be *apt to teach*. See also 1 Timothy 4:11-15.
- In 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul tells Timothy: ‘The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, **especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.**’
 - The ‘double honor’ here, in this context, is referring to payment [‘You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing’]; however, what Paul is doing is demonstrating the primacy of teaching in the church.
- It seems that many may believe that primary mission of the church is fellowship, or evangelism, or feeding the poor. And, although these are all important, they are all subordinate to the primary mission of the church: teaching.

- ❑ This is why the Apostles said, in Verse 2, ‘It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.’
- ❑ The Apostles, in the Book of Acts, had unique Apostolic authority, so a 1-to-1 correlation with Elders today cannot be fully made. However, what is clear is that the **primary** calling of the Elders of the church is **teaching**. Now, this certainly does not mean that the Elders of a church neglect certain ‘pastoral’ duties when necessary; yet, if the teaching of the Word of God is neglected, little else matters.
 - The Elders in a church are NOT called to be ‘visionaries’, ‘CEOs’, or motivational speaker. They are called to be, like the Apostles in this passage, first and foremost, teachers.
 - This is where the Western Church has failed significantly. In our quest for larger churches, Elders/Pastors have abandoned our primary calling to function in a way that seems more ‘effective’ all the while failing to fulfill our biblical roles.
- ❑ Yet, the application here, does not just extend to Elders, but to everyone in the local church body.
- ❑ Like the seven who were chosen, the members of a given congregation must help meet certain personal needs of its fellow members in order to free up the teachers of the Church to teach.
 - NOTE: Certainly the elders are not the only teachers in the church; however, they are the leaders in the church who are called primarily to the task of teaching.

‘A vital principle is illustrated in this incident, which is of urgent importance to the church today. It is that God calls all his people to ministry, that he calls different people to different ministries, and that those called to ‘prayer and the ministry of the word’ must on no account allow themselves to be distracted from their priorities...it is a real ‘ministry of the word’ to which pastors are called to dedicate their life...The word cannot spread with the ministry of the word is neglected.’

John Stott, *The Acts of the Apostles*

- ❑ Thus, every individual function of the church, while each important and necessary, exists as support [and therefore is subordinate to] the function of teaching.
- ❑ In other words, the question that each of us must ask ourselves is: ‘How is what I am doing in the church supporting its primary mission of the glory of God through the faithful proclamation of the Word?’
- ❑ This is why GRBC is NOT a program or ministry-driven church. The reason for this is because multiple ministries and programs often begin to ‘compete’ with the primary teaching function in the church.
- ❑ Often it seems that people attend certain churches, not because of the teaching they receive or participate in, but because of certain programs that are of personal interest to them. And although such programs are not inherently ‘bad’ they are NOT the primary function of the church.

- ❑ A church could be likened to an Army during wartime.
- ❑ The mission or purpose of the Army is to win the war through the use of force.
- ❑ However, not every member of the Army is a combat-arms soldier that fights ‘on the front lines.’
- ❑ There are **many** who are combat-support soldiers. For example, there are soldiers who ensure that those fighting are well-fed, clothed, etc. There are medics and doctors who care for the wounded. There are also those who collect intelligence using high-tech equipment. There are even those who ensure that the soldiers get paid on time. All of these functions are **absolutely necessary** for winning the war, although fighting in combat is of primary importance.
- ❑ Every member of the military takes great pride in knowing that his or her job affects the outcome of the war.
- ❑ When soldiers return from Iraq, the American public does not care what function they performed. What America is grateful for is that each soldier served to defend our country. Each one played a vital role.

- ❑ So it is in a church. Every one is important, although every individual does not perform the same function. Essentially, it is as though one could say that an individual serves in either teaching, or teaching-support. Yet, either function must be done to the glory of God.
- ❑ Examine the ministry of John the Baptist. His sole purpose in life was to prepare the way for Christ. He was called to decrease so that Christ might increase. That was it. Yes, he preached a baptism of repentance. Yet, His primary purpose was to ‘prepare the way for the LORD.’

- ❑ Yet, the most powerful truth concerning this principle is that it reflects the very nature of the triune God.
- ❑ We worship **one God** who exists in **three coequal, coeternal persons: The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit**. Each Person of the Godhead is fully God, ontologically [or in their very essence] equal.
- ❑ However, although each Person is ontologically equal, for each is fully God, a **functional** subordination DOES exist among the Persons of the Trinity. This is why Christ could say, ‘My Father...is greater than all’ [John 10:20]; and ‘The Father is greater than I’ [John 14:28]. He in no way meant that the Father is **more god-like** than Himself; rather, He meant, in His function, the Son willingly submitted to the Father and His will.

- ❑ Remember, God the Son [NOT God the Father or God the Holy Spirit] died on the cross. There is an eternal distinction between the three Persons of the Godhead. This truth must be maintained as well.
- ❑ Also, we were chosen by God the Father in Christ Jesus [God the Son], through His shed blood, by the regenerating and sanctifying work of the God the Holy Spirit.
- ❑ In other words, we were ‘born again’ by the power of the Holy Spirit, on the basis of Christ’s finished work, in accordance with the will of the Father.

Philippians 3:3 states, ‘for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh...’

The connection between the two concepts of worshiping in the Spirit and of glorifying in Christ should not be missed. When the Spirit of God works within us to promote worship, the one result that must surely come is that those so worshipping by the Spirit will give great glory to Christ Jesus their Lord. In keeping with what we have seen earlier of the Spirit’s chief mandate and passion to bring glory to the Son (John 16:14), here we see that the Spirit is the one who inspires worship within us, but that just as surely, the worship he elicits is focused on the Son. New covenant believers, those who have the Spirit, are those who are enabled truly to worship. But because the Spirit within them, the Spirit who enables their worship, is the Spirit who comes to glorify Jesus, therefore the Spirit works within their hearts so that they express the honor, majesty, greatness, glory, and grace of Christ in their worship.’ [p. 67]

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance, by Bruce A. Ware

Read **1 Corinthians 15:28**:

When all things are subjected to Him [the Father], then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.

Recall that Paul spoke of this day, when Christ will stand before every creature in heaven and earth as the exalted Lord, and every knee will bow and every tongue confess ‘that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’ (Philippians 2:11). While the Spirit elicits worship of the Son – for all proclaim that ‘Jesus is Lord’ – nonetheless, all worship of the Son, in and of itself, is penultimate. That is, worship of the Son, while right and true and glorious, must also recognize the One whom the Son Himself acknowledges as supreme over all, even over Himself. The ultimate object of our honor, glory, praise, and worship is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who Himself alone is over all. Just as the Son Himself will one day ‘be subjected to Him [the Father] who put all things in subjection under Him, that God [the Father] may be all in all’ (1 Corinthians 15:28), so we must recognize even now that all worship to the Son, while Spirit-inspired and Spirit-wrought, is always meant also to reverberate yet further to the glory and majesty of the Father.’ [pp. 154-155]

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance, by Bruce A. Ware

Read **Philippians 2:5-11**:

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of

death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, **to the glory of God the Father.**

- ❑ Therefore, just as the individuals of the church exist for one single purpose: the glory of God through the proclamation of the Word; so the Persons of the Godhead exist for one purpose: the **ultimate glory of the Father who is [functionally-speaking] ‘greater than all’.** [Again, this in no way violates that truth of the Trinity, that ALL three Persons are FULLY GOD.]

‘The youth minister, the music minister, the Sunday School teacher, the seniors’ pastor, the lay volunteer who are put in the spotlight by another in authority over them, should, like Jesus, reflect back their honor on the one(s) who have granted them the privilege and the training for their particular ministry. After all, it is not their work, first and foremost; all of us, in any and every capacity, work under authority – even if that ‘other’ is Christ, who is Lord of his church. And just as Christ who has the spotlight put upon him acknowledges gladly that he is doing the will of his Father and is seeking to honor his Father in all he says and does, so we too should give due honor and recognition to those in authority over us and not pretend that the work done is ours, independent of them. There is, then a reciprocal relationship in which the Father focuses attention on the Son, and the son gives credit and recognition to the Father who rightly deserves ultimate honor and glory.’

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance P. 67

IV. **The Outcome: The Word of God Spreads**

- ❑ The outcome of what the Apostles did is clearly mentioned in Acts 6:7: ‘The word of God kept on spreading...’
- ❑ The fact that Luke mentions, first, that ‘**the word of God** kept on spreading’ is significant.
- ❑ This should be our desired outcome: that the word spreads.
 - When the word of God is spread on fertile soil, it grows. This may be a reference to the Parable of the Sower.
- ❑ In other words, the number of people in our church could grow exponentially without the spreading of the word.
- ❑ Finally, ‘the number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.’
 - According to Jeremias, there were as many as 8,000 priests in Jerusalem at that time.

Recall the words of Peter in **1 Peter 1:23**: ‘for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God.’

