

Rise of the Diaconate

Text: Acts 6:1-7

Introduction:

The new born church has begun to face outward opposition, as the religious leaders and the Sanhedrin have sought, by threat and violence, to silence the testimony of the Apostles. However, emboldened by the Holy Spirit (in answer to prayer), the Apostles have stood their ground, continuing to faithfully proclaim the Lord Jesus as the Messiah, both in the Temple, and in every house. The Gospel of the risen Christ has made its way throughout all of Jerusalem, and is beginning to spill over into the other parts of Judea, accompanied and affirmed by miracles wrought by the Holy Spirit, through the hands of the Apostles. The work must go on! The work must prosper! The risen Christ reigns and has been given all authority in heaven and on earth, and He will prosper His church (the travail of His soul), until every last one of His elect is safely in His Kingdom, by union with Him. Lo, He is with us, even to the end of the age!

This morning, we move on to witness another potential threat against the church. This time, the threat is from within, as the vital unity of the Body, is threatened by a conflict, which is brought to the plate of the already exhausted Apostles. How will they handle this conflict? Indeed, as we witness the birth of the diaconate, here in Chapter 6, vital principles on "conflict resolution" will be given us, as well. And so, we ought to pay special attention to what God has preserved here for us, in Holy Writ, so that we might, likewise, "endeavor to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

I. The Conflict/Dilemma

[Read verse 1]. Good news and bad news! First, the good news is that the disciples were greatly increasing in number. The church was growing! However, the bad news is, that with that growth, the potential for schism and disunity begins to increase. And here, we find that a legitimate concern, which could potentially lead to accusations of racial discrimination, erupts. And if it is not handled in the right way, great damage could be done to the church, especially as the disciples begin to evangelize beyond the borders of Israel, and into the heathen lands. What happened?

In the daily disbursement, the Hellenistic (Greek speaking) widows were neglected. Remember, as people were selling their land, and laying the proceeds at the Apostle's feet, the Apostles would disperse the funds, according to the needs of the brethren. And certainly, as we know from other Scriptures (given, in both, the Old and New Testaments), widows were to be given priority in receiving charitable disbursements, as they were incapable of caring for themselves, and had no husband to care for them. The Apostles were in charge of ensuring that all disbursements were done fairly and properly. But, as the church grew, this responsibility began to overwhelm them, causing two significant problems. First, some widows were being neglected. In this case, the Greek widows were being neglected, producing what could come across as a racial preference. And so, they complained against the Jews. However, this was not malice on the part of the Apostles (as we will see in the resolution, they bring forth), but rather, they just struggled with finding the time to get to them. And then secondly, the overall responsibility began to diminish their ability to pray and preach the Gospel, which was their primary calling. And so, something needed to be done, allowing all widows to receive a fair share in the disbursement, while freeing up the Apostles to do what they were primarily called to do. Failing to address this, could and would cause the church to suffer greatly, from all angles.

Now brethren, before we consider the solution, brought forth by the Apostles, I want us to pause for a moment, and to consider how well this relates to problems found in the church today, which sadly, hinders the church's overall progress on all fronts. Indeed, the Scriptures teach us that God has gifted *every* believer, to serve the church in some capacity. What happens when many, or even some, neglect to serve in the local church, with the gifts that God has given them? Does it not greatly hinder the work? Does it not cause others to pick up the slack, stretching them thin, so that not only are they forced to neglect their own calling, but furthermore, the void that they are filling is left lacking as well. We will notice in a few moments, that when the Apostles correct this problem, what happens? As they overcome this obstacle, together, with the church, what happens? [Read verse 7]. God advanced them further, and brought more into the fold. Indeed, serving in the body; *everyone* serving in the body, is critical to the overall growth of the Body!

II. The Solution

[Read verses 2-6]. And so, the Apostles, rather than defend themselves against the accusations; rather than bring forth what could have been a very legitimate defense on their

behalf, especially considering the large responsibility they had, consider the vital unity of the church, and bring forth a solution. It can be very easy for church leaders to proudly defend themselves against every accusation brought against them by members of the Body. And there is certainly a valid and essential place for doing so, when the accusations involve moral issues. But, there is also a time *not* to focus on being right, but rather, for the sake of the unity of the Body, to listen, and to work toward a unifying solution. I am still learning that lesson. Well, the Apostles do this very thing.

They call, as it were, a congregational meeting. And at this meeting, they address the problem, and bring forth a solution. First, it is not right for them to serve tables, *not*, because doing so was beneath them, but rather, because they were called to preach the Gospel. For them, to remain serving in the ministry of the distribution of goods was not good. It would detract from their primary calling, namely, to minister to the needs of souls. And so, they would need to concentrate most of their energies toward the ministry of the Word and prayer. And such ought to be the primary focus of the ministry of pastors, today. Preaching, teaching, counseling, from the pulpit, house to house, next to hospital beds...etc, and prayer, ought to be the primary responsibilities of the pastor. That is not to say that they do nothing else, ever, but just that they ought not to be consumed with all of the other business of the church.

Who then is to take on the bulk of the other responsibilities of the church, and especially serving the physical needs of the brethren, as seen in our context here? Well, everyone should be involved in whatever aspect of the ministry, God has gifted them to serve in. But here, the Apostles set forth the blueprint for another office, which would oversee all such (mercy) affairs. Here, in chapter 6 of Acts, we have the birth of the diaconal office. The Apostles call *the church* to pick out men from among them (seven in this case), to fill this special office. And these men are to meet certain qualifications, so as to ensure that they faithfully and properly execute the responsibilities connected to their office, with a blameless integrity. Their example and their faithfulness in the execution of their duties, is vital to the unity and life of the church.

And what were the necessary characteristics, which these men were to have, in order to serve in this office? There are three given in our text (and while the Apostle Paul opens this up further in the Pastoral Epistles, for our purposes this morning, we will limit our consideration to the general terms, given here in the text):

1) They were to be men of "good repute." That is, they are to have a good reputation among the brethren. They ought to be *known* in a positive light, certainly without the markings

of scandalous behavior, gossip, discord sowing, and the like. Deacons ought to be proven men; men, who already exhibit the qualities of self-sacrifice, humility, servanthood, sobriety and etc.

2) They were to be "full of the Holy Spirit." It ought to be evident that the Holy Spirit was at work in and through them. The fruit of the Spirit, described in Galatians 5, should be evident in them (love, joy, peace, gentleness, kindness, goodness, self-control...etc). They are not perfect men, but they stand out, as men who genuinely and sincerely love Christ. And this is evident in their personal pursuit of holiness, and in their love and service of the brethren.

3) They were to be "full of wisdom." These men, though not necessarily called to be preachers and teachers, have a good handle on the Scriptures. They have a working knowledge of the Word of God. They are not novices, being bounced around by every wind of doctrine. They have a sure sense of what is true, and this is recognized by how they speak and live.

And so, these were the general characteristics, which were to be recognized in the men, whom the church would set apart unto this ministry of serving. They would take care of the distribution of finances and goods to the Body, and especially to the widows in need.

After offering this solution, we are told that it pleased the whole gathered body. And so, they set apart the seven men, listed in our text. Note, at least two of these men were also evangelists (Philip and Stephen), and one may very well have been a great influence in that mother church in Antioch (which was a home base for those who took the Gospel into the heathen regions of Asia Minor and beyond).

Following this selection, these men were set before the Apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

III. Conclusion

[Read verse 7]. The church faced another problem, which had the great potential of causing schism and harming the essential unity. But they addressed it in a God-honoring and biblical way. And in doing so, they both preserved the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and provoked further growth within and without the Body. Even a great number of priests became obedient to the faith! Perhaps, this example of humility and compassion, served as a glorious accompaniment to the Gospel message. Even as the miracles did this at that vital time in church history, so did the unity and self-sacrifice. Only, the latter continues to affect such

growth today. All in all, the risen Christ was acting in and through His disciples! And the church thrived!

Would it be that we would be a praying church, zealous for Christ and His Gospel, with every member serving and doing his share, according to each gift given by the Holy Spirit! Indeed, we are blessed to have deacons, and we desire to add more, but even the deacons, though bearing an office, are not called to do all of the "physical" (mercy) serving labor, anymore than the elders are called to do all of the "spiritual" serving labor. Oversight is critical, but all are to be involved!

[Note, this dilemma helps open the doors of evangelism to Judea and Samaria---and Ethiopia!]

AMEN!!!