

## Bible Study 21 – Acts 6:1-7 – Ministry priorities and the appointment of deacons

Text: Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” 5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

1. The church continued to grow: Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number...

a) The days in question were the early days of the church...

b) The church succeeded in making disciples in response to Christ’s command and commission...

c) The church was growing despite the opposition of the state...

2. A grievance arose in the church: a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

a) The church contained Christians of Jewish and Gentile descent from the early days... And among those of Jewish descent there were essentially two camps. Those referred to as having a Hebrew background were residents of Israel, while the Hellenists, belonged the diaspora. They came from all over the Greek speaking world...

b) Those Christians of Hellenistic or Greek background felt that their widows were being overlooked in the distribution of alms or charity...

c) Note the reference to the daily distribution to support widows and those in need. The early church prioritised and sought to look after her own. Christians voluntarily shared out of their substance for the maintenance or support of those unable to maintain themselves. The able bodied were urged to work... [see 2 Thessalonians 3]

3. The apostles gathered the church to resolve the matter: And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

a) The apostles summoned the whole church in Jerusalem to gather... The Christians are referred to as disciples because they are believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. They will remain disciples (learners) this side of the grave...

b) The apostles were to prioritise the preaching of the word rather than serve tables. They were also called to lead Christ’s church which necessitated the delegation and distribution of roles within the church for her to function effectively and healthily. ‘It was not right that they should neglect the ministry of the word and prayer for charitable and administrative roles.

This is a lesson that the church and especially ministers and missionaries need to swiftly relearn if we are to turn around the decline and demise of the church and the faith in our nation. Those called to the ministry of word and sacrament must prioritise these things over management-type duties. We must prioritise preaching and teaching to prepare God’s people for a plethora of roles within the church and nation. Our people need the means of grace to empower and equip them for service, as we ourselves do. Prayer and pastoral care, including visitation, are more important for the welfare of the church than committees and conferences. The study is more fundamental than social activities if the people of God are to thrive!

c) The apostles were not saying that charitable and other activities were unimportant. Rather they make clear that these good works were not what they were primarily called to do. To have concentrated upon such activities, important though they are, would have led to a neglect of the actual ministry and mission to which Christ had called them.

The Apostle Paul later writing to the church in Corinth likens the church to a body whose health and harmony is dependent on the various parts fulfilling their different functions. And so, the need continues for us to recognise our different gifts and graces and use them for the building up of the church of Christ, for the glory of God, and for the good of one another.

4. The apostles instruct and galvanise the church to choose seven men with the requisite gifts and graces for the task of ensuring that the distribution of charity was done without partiality: Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

a) The apostles instruct the church to choose individuals of sound character who were strong in the faith. These were the first deacons appointed in the church. Sadly, the offices and functions of ministers, elders and deacons have been somewhat confused and conflated in our contemporary church. That said, we would be wise to recognise the different functions and roles therein.

Paul expands upon this theme in his First Letter to Timothy where he writes: Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. 9 They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless (1Tim.3:8-10).

b) The appointment of deacons is designed to fulfil an important ministry in the church and permit the apostles (and bishops/pastors or preaching elders – what we call ministers) to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.

c) Note while there is unquestionable leadership in the church under Christ’s Headship, the whole church has a responsibility for ensuring her growth and good.

5. The church gratuitously (freely) choose seven men with the necessary gifts to serve the church in the administration and distribution of charitable giving. And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

a) The church chose men of Hebrew and Hellenist background to help allay any concerns about partiality...

b) The church followed the apostles’ instructions and hence chose men full of faith and of the Holy Spirit...

c) The apostles ordained the seven deacons with prayer and the laying on of hands. Setting them apart to fulfil this role and giving them responsibility in this area.

6. The church therefore continued to grow through the proclamation of the gospel: And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

a) The church recognised and prioritised the ministry of the word. The means of grace are fundamental and foundational to her worship and witness. And so, by the appointment of deacons (administrators or managers) the church freed the apostles to fulfil their primary duty and responsibility...

b) The church multiplied greatly in Jerusalem through the ministry of the word – the preaching and teaching of the Good News about what God has done for fallen humanity in and through the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour of the world.

c) The church received into membership many priests thereby who had been part of the establishment that had opposed the faith... This was the Lord's doing and it was marvellous to behold...

#### Questions

1. How should accusations of injustice be treated in the church?
2. How do we ensure that ministers prioritise the ministry of word and sacrament and do not merely become managers of parish charities?
3. How important is the division of gifts and graces, roles and responsibilities, within the church to the welfare of the body as a whole?
4. How do we recognise and utilise the gifts and graces that God has given to us?