

The Selected Seven

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for the Sunday, July 28th. Can you believe I was sitting in our living room the other night and I looked outside and I thought, why is it so dark? And then I remembered, oh yeah, we live in Alberta.

Why was it a thousand degrees a week ago and now it's 13 in the morning and you put on a sweater? We live in Alberta. It's interesting, right, that time, as the song goes, time keeps on slipping, slipping, slipping into the future.

Do you feel that? Do you feel time moving? I often used to say to my dad when I was younger and less wise than I am now, I hope, you know, why are you so reflective on what was?

Still, what is yet to come, but why are you so reflective on what was? And he said, well, at some point you realize behind me is far more than what's in front of me.

What I remember, what I experienced in the past is now in the past. And what lies ahead is a smaller percentage of our lives all the time.

[1 : 07] Deep thoughts for a Sunday morning. Well, so a quick pastoral announcement. Someone asked me, a few people have asked me last week and this week, so how was your break a couple weeks ago?

And I said, great, I moved 500 paving stones and cut my lawn back to get ready for a concrete path. And he said, well, that doesn't sound like a very good holiday.

And I said, well, sometimes you need time to do things, right? So not super relaxing. So we will be away for a couple weeks now. And much to a few people's delight, we're actually going to rest.

We're actually going to go and spend time with family and just kind of re-energize in that way. So that'll be the next three Sundays. Don't panic. We will be back.

So Michelle, Connor, and I will be away. We'll be welcoming Paul again. Paul will be continuing in his Sonship series. So I mentioned last week that I hope you enjoyed it because we have more to look forward to.

[2 : 08] So Paul will be preaching on August 4th and 11th or 18th. Sorry, sorry, Paul, I'll give you a panic there. 4th and 18th. And then Pastor Luwam will be preaching on the 11th.

So I've seen these sermons. I've got a sense of where they're going with them. And you will be blessed. You will be blessed. So sermons won't be updated on the website or the phone line while we are away because I do that.

So I was talking to Leah and said, so while I'm away, I can still access sermons online, right? And she said, wow. And I said, what? And she said, why don't you actually take a break?

Why don't you actually stop for a bit and recharge your batteries and just let stuff rest? So while I'm away, people can contact the office or Vern directly, Vern Castle, with prayer requests or any sort of pastoral care needs because our elders will be available to care for you in that way.

And we really appreciate your prayers for safe travels. We will be driving quite a lot. And we will be heading into the mountains, not that part of the mountains. But yeah, we'll be traveling.

[3 : 14] And so your prayers for a time of safe travel and rest would be appreciated. This morning, we're continuing in our sermon series, our ongoing series, Acts to All the World.

And through this series, we've been exploring the New Testament book of Acts. And we're going to continue to do that. So I've touched base with a few people and said, is this boring you to tears?

And fortunately, the response seems to be no. So that's good because I do take people's temperature now and then and just see, you know, are things resonating? Is this helpful?

One person who shall remain nameless said to me, you have a gift for being able to read large passages of scripture without putting everyone to sleep.

So that's, I think that's positive too. Although if you do need me to phone you or leave you a voicemail that can help you put you to sleep, I can do that too. Have you ever wondered, question for everyone, why churches have boards or committees?

[4 : 18] Why do we have governance models or reporting structures? It is not to bore everyone, I promise. Ways of organizing ourselves as organizations, as bodies of people, as organizations that need to get things done.

Well, some of what we have in those areas in the contemporary church is to ensure that we're compliant with government requirements for charitable organizations. That's when you begin to nod off, right?

Some of it depends on the needs of various ministries that we have in our church. Contemporary church does lots of things. There's lots of ways in which God calls us as bodies of believers in different parts of the world, in different communities, to serve him in different ways.

So some of that, people need to organize and maintain, right? We recognize that. God will provide, but sometimes he says, here's all the resources, now go.

Here's everything that I'm doing behind the scenes for you. Now take this and go and do what I've asked you to do. But at its root, though, recognizing the need to have a broader model for church leadership actually originated with the early church.

[5 : 36] Did you know that? We're going to talk about it. So when we have congregational meetings, when people report to the congregation, when people do work on behalf of our church and in support of the missions of our church, we're actually doing these things in part as an echo of something that began in the early church community and actually finds its roots in the book of Acts.

Did you know that? Some nodding. Did you really know that? And so I encourage you to pray for and encourage the leaders of our church. Now I was thinking I was going to name names and have people put up their hands at least, but no.

So largely you will know who are the leaders of our church. And I'm not talking about me. I'm talking about the other people who do other work that is equally important, if not more so in some ways.

So to engage with congregational meetings, it's important. So do that. This is a public service announcement. Doing that, so showing up, contributing, showing interest, encouraging people who serve in leadership roles, helps contribute to the overall health and direction of our church.

So when people hear that you support what they do and you believe that they have sought God in doing what they're doing, it's helpful for them to hear that.

[6 : 59] Because sometimes we assume that people know they're doing a good job or they know that we appreciate them, but it doesn't hurt to remind them and to say that. So now that we've had that public service announcement, let's explore the origin of expanded church leadership as we see it play out in Acts.

And this is not going to be as boring as it sounds, I promise. So our passage for this morning, our focus passage is found in Acts 6, verses 1 to 7. It's not a very long passage, so you can grab your Bible or grab a Bible from the pew in front of you, and I will read it for us as well.

In those days, when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

So the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.

Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

[8 : 14] This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

So we've recognized in the past in this series that as the early church continued to grow, more and more people came to follow the teaching and example of Jesus and the truth of the gospel.

Problems increased as well. And we've talked about that a little bit. There were problems that came from outside the church. We've looked at those a little.

In Acts 4, we learned that the religious leaders from the Sanhedrin were, two words, greatly disturbed by what Peter and John were teaching and preaching about.

[9 : 19] They were proclaiming the truth of the gospel, and in Jesus, the resurrection of the dead. So they grabbed Peter and John, and they put them in jail overnight, before giving them a stern warning, we remember, and letting them go.

Then last week, we recognized that Peter and the other apostles defied the Sanhedrin's warning again, and continued to teach and preach in the temple courts in Jerusalem.

So the religious leaders were, we had one word, jealous. Again, Peter and the apostles were arrested and put in jail. But this time, we noted, they were also flogged because the persecution escalated.

And then they were let go. Then there were also problems that came from inside the church. So Christians don't disagree and argue about things much, do they? Christians don't tend to always agree, right?

We don't tend to always feel that love and harmony that we might want to have. We remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira that we looked at just a few weeks ago.

[10 : 29] And that's just one example of how, even with the same teaching and examples, we looked at that, right? Human pride and greed and jealousy can even invade the church.

Even people like Ananias and Sapphira, who were part of the church community, caused problems. So as we move to Acts 6 in our series and study together, we recognize that the difficulties and challenge continued for the church.

And as we've heard in our passage this morning, this is something that doesn't happen very often either. Members of the church were complaining, it says in the passage.

And as we recognized last week, that persecution of the church was escalating by authorities who weren't part of the community. So outside influences causing problems, inside influences causing problems.

Pretty challenging. So our sermon this morning is titled, The Selected Seven. I was going to call it The Magnificent Seven, but I didn't want to get sued. So in our passage this morning, if you don't know that reference, it's a Western from a long time ago.

[11 : 37] So in our passage this morning, Acts 6, we've looked at a bit about how the church successfully addressed a serious complication. So let's begin by considering some of the problems that were facing the early church at this time.

And we're actually going to identify people who like numbers and know where I'm at. Five. So we're going to look at five problems, but in honor of my dad, his tendency was always to be a positive thinker.

So he tend to term problems as challenges. So these are challenges instead of problems. And that's how we'll look at them. Does that sound all right?

I also tend to look at challenges rather than problems. So there's five. So the first challenge that the church faced was church growth. And you're probably thinking, what?

That seems like a great problem to have, right? And it is. But there's a reason that we sometimes use the expression growing pains, right? Increasing numbers in a congregation often can lead to challenges.

[12 : 40] Because group dynamics can begin to have an impact in positive and less positive ways. So it can become more difficult to know everyone, right?

And even cliques may tend to form. Even in small churches, based on common interests, based on common experience, how well we know each other, the history that we share with each other, the things that we have been through, good and bad, those things tend to form cliques.

And that can be okay as long as the cliques are aware that the non-clickers are important too. So as more people with diverse interests, opinions, and perspectives join a group, sometimes misunderstandings and disagreements can become more frequent.

That's just reality. It's human nature. The second challenge the church faced involved the distinction between the Hellenists versus the Hebrews in the church.

A little clarity. Hellenists were Jews living in Jerusalem, but were originally connected with the Diaspora Judaism. So they were Jews from the living in Jerusalem, but had perhaps come from

other areas.

[13:54] So they were characterized by the use of Greek as their principal language. That was their main language. And especially for worship and scripture. So that's interesting that that was the language that they used for those things, primarily.

And the Hellenists mentioned in Acts 6, verse 1, were Christian Jews. So let's be clear on that. They were Jewish followers of Jesus. And they just happened to be from other areas.

And Hebrews, this should be easy. Hebrews were Aramaic-speaking Jews. And now Aramaic is the language that people say, scholars say that Jesus spoke. They were Aramaic-speaking Jews who held to their native language and culture.

So they did not move to other areas in return. They had stayed in their area, steeped in their own culture. And so in Acts 1, 6, verse 1, sorry, we recognize that they are evidently Christian Jews as well.

And you might be thinking, well, what's a Christian Jew versus a Jew? So you may also hear the term Messianic Jew. So these are people who are of the Jewish tradition, but have come to recognize Jesus as the Messiah.

[15:06] So I have friends who are not Messianic Jews, who are looking for the Messiah who is yet to come, because they don't feel that Jesus is that Messiah.

And then a Messianic Jew, for example, is someone who says, yes, my tradition says there is a coming Messiah, and I have come to recognize Jesus as that Messiah.

So that's a Messianic Jew. Is that helpful? So the third challenge, excuse me, I'm losing my voice now. The third challenge the church faced involved the issue of fair daily distribution.

So daily distribution was a feature of communal Christianity. This was something that was important. And as we've noted in the past, the selling and sharing of possessions and property was a voluntary thing.

It wasn't mandated. It wasn't a requirement that people needed to meet to be part of this community. But it was a value that they recognized. But because they tended to share everything, people in the community relied on receiving their fair share of things.

[16:13] Because if you're looking for people to be generous and people to recognize your need in a larger community, that takes effort, right? And particularly in this passage, it's pointing out food was the issue.

So some felt in this group that that wasn't being done fairly. So that's something to note. The fourth challenge that the church faced involved the issue of neglect of widows.

Well, what does that mean? So we can see in 1 Timothy 5, 3 to 16, there's a broad passage that gives you context, that churches were called to care for the widows within their congregation.

That was a primary focus of ministry within the church. And there was also a focus on encouraging the families of the widows to respect and care for them as well.

So when a widow within the church community did not have a family to support them, to provide for them, to ensure they were looked after. It was the role of the church and the leadership of the church to make sure that was done.

[17:18] So we learn in our passage this morning that the Hellenist widows were being neglected. It says that in the passage. Particularly in this sense, in the distribution of food.

So this was understandably creating conflict between the Hellenist and the Hebrew believers. Because Christian or not, we tend to be pretty quick to recognize when something's not fair.

Right? I remember being, I don't know, five years old or something, and justice was important to me. This rule is not fair. Right? And we hear kids say that all the time.

But as adults, we recognize, I hope we recognize, what is fair and what is not. Right? And hopefully from a healthy perspective. We don't get what we want. That doesn't mean it's not fair.

But sometimes there is a requirement. We need balance. Right? So the fifth challenge, excuse me, the fifth challenge that the church faced involved the issues of the apostles being distracted.

[18:20] So the apostles began, they begin to recognize that there are many tasks that are needed to maintain and sustain the growth of the church. And that they couldn't manage them alone.

They came to recognize, wait a minute, there's lots of stuff that needs to be done here. And we can't do it on our own. We need help. So they called all the disciples. And remember, disciples, you are all disciples.

I am a disciple. That's not, and so the difference between an apostle and a disciple, the 12 called by Jesus were the apostles. A disciple is a follower of Jesus.

That is you. That is me. So that would have been the entire church. So they called everyone together and reminded them that they're the apostles' primary role, their calling by God, was the ministry of the word of God.

So their role was to continue to preach the gospel and teach people about God and his son. That was their calling and needed to be the primary focus of what they were doing.

[19 : 21] So now, here's where things could get a bit tense. So as I was reading this passage again this week, it almost sounds like, the way it's worded in the passage, that the apostles are somehow denigrating the work of the church because they refer to it as waiting on tables.

Right? So we likely hear that phrase, especially in a contemporary context, and we begin to think there's some kind of lesser than. Yeah, if you want to go and serve that party of four over there, you take care of that.

I'm the host, and I need to do more important things. Or there's a menial implication to that, right? We perceive that. But perceiving that actually reflects a bias in translation, and it's not found in the original text, not found in the original translation.

So when English translations say, wait on tables, like we hear in Acts 6, verse 2, in contrast to serving the word, which is what we hear the role of the apostles being in Acts 6, 4, they're using different words.

Wait and serve. That's the English translations are using different words. But they're using those words, different words, to translate the same Greek origin, which is diakoneo.

[20 : 41] That is the original word that is used, the Greek word that is used in Acts 6, 2, and Acts 6, 4. So how does the English translation land somewhere different, causing us to view those as different things?

Because the Greek word diakoneo actually means to serve. So therefore, a more literal translation would be serve tables, disciples, and serving the word, apostles.

Because both use diakoneo as their root, which means service, to serve. There's no implication that either role is somehow less important to God.

There's no sense that either role is less important to the church or less needed. And from diakoneo, we get the English words, I dare you.

Deacon, thank you. We get the words diaconate, which is still big and heavy. And then deacon.

Right? That's where that term comes from.

[21 : 46] That's where that concept comes from. So as we've recognized, the early church faced several challenges at this point in its development. But it's important to recognize that the apostles saw all the challenges that needed to be met.

They recognized the need. They recognized the importance of their primary calling to serve God and serve the church in preaching the word. And they also realized that the church needed to find a solution that everyone agreed on, that everyone accepted.

So what was the solution? Well, the apostles proposed a few things, actually. They called the disciples together. We need to remember again that all the people would have been considered to be disciples.

Just as all of us here this morning fit that definition, right? This would have involved calling together all the people connected to the church. Although scripture doesn't tell us how many people there were.

We can assume, based on these numbers that we've seen of people coming to the Lord over time in the growth of the early church, we can assume at this point this was probably a fairly large group of people.

[22 : 57] So the apostles then explained the need. They explained the challenges that the church faced. And in Acts 6, verses 3 and 4, they proposed a solution.

We've heard it already this morning, and I'll read it again. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them, serving the church beyond preaching and teaching.

And we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. So the apostles proposed that the disciples, the congregation, the larger church community, would select seven men.

Men with good reputations, as it says, who are full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Then once that selection was made by the group, we read in the passage, that the apostles would then appoint them to look after some of the important tasks of the church.

And why? So that those things would be covered, would be looked after, but also so that the apostles could focus more clearly on their calling from God.

[24 : 06] So we learn that the apostles' proposal was agreeable to the group. Everybody agreed. Everybody thought, great idea. So they appointed the men that we heard in our passage this morning, the selected seven.

So they chose Stephen, a man who is described as being full of faith and the Holy Spirit, who would eventually, spoiler alert, become the first martyr of the church.

Philip, who later served as an evangelist, along with Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas, who we read was a man from Antioch who had converted to Judaism.

So there's a good representation of people there. And it's interesting that as I read, as I prepared, commentators recognized that despite the church largely being composed of Hebrew Christians, all seven men that the church appointed to these roles, this role, were Hellenists.

Interesting. These four, seven men, sorry, were primarily Greek-speaking Jews. Feels like there's a progression of the church into the future, an outgrowth from its original roots.

[25 : 20] The selected seven. So the apostles brought them before the larger gathering of disciples. They were anointed with prayer and the laying on of hands. We read that in the passage.

So these men were not chosen lightly. The responsibilities that they were given were not insignificant. Sometimes the business of the church, I think lots of people, even when we start to talk about finances and things in the church, people get nervous, right?

Oh, we're not supposed to make money. We're not supposed to, you know, people get very nervous. But the reality is there are needs in the church that need to be met. It is as much an organization that has financial and reporting and other kinds of responsibilities as much as it is to proclaim the good news.

So somehow, sometimes people think the business part of the church is somehow less important, less valuable maybe even. But the day-to-day and the here and now are actually critically important because those things, those practical things, those needs have to be met to support the work of sharing the gospel of Jesus.

It's reality. So we get the sense that the appointment of these seven disciples to key ministry roles, these challenges would have been considered. The challenges that we've looked at already this morning.

[26 : 45] And that by appointing these seven men, those needs were identified and that they would be met in a godly, unified decision.

And we read that the overall congregation was pleased. They were pleased that needs would be met. So, what was the result? While the word spread again, we hear, the apostles were free to focus on their original intended calling.

They were able to focus on and devote themselves to the ministry of the word, to teaching and preaching the gospel of Jesus. So with roadblocks, with challenges addressed, the church began to explode exponentially again.

And that's what tends to happen, God willing, when the word of God is spread. So challenges can be regular occurrences for the church, especially when they grow rapidly.

Not only that, but Satan does what he can to hinder growth. He really does. He sows conflict and sinful motives. He causes confusion and complacency.

[27 : 59] He distracts the church as much as he can from its calling and its mission. Church challenges can cause issues. They can create broken relationships and tension between congregants.

They can distract people from important tasks and ministry needs. But church challenges can be solved successfully. When we keep our eyes, our minds, our hearts focused on God's will for his church and on our lives as disciples.

And when we make decisions together. By communicating well and keeping people informed. By as much as possible involving the congregation, that's all of you, in finding solutions.

In a healthy and godly way. That's the goal. And by doing that, by staying together, by keeping our eyes on Jesus, by working together in community, with our eyes fixed on him, we will move forward

together.

From this example of the early church in Acts 6, verse 1 to 7, and the selected seven, a congregation, I hope, we can see, that we've seen this morning, we can see how a congregation can learn to turn challenges, or trials even, into triumph.

[29 : 18] So we'll continue to do that together as a family of God in this place. My friends, God bless you. Amen.