

A problem and an opportunity

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[0:00] Well, many of you may not know that before my retirement I was a university lecturer.

! At one point during my career I was a member of a research group and the head of the research group! One of these was that there are no problems only opportunities.

I always found this slightly irritating but one has to say that when one comes to Act 6 that appears to be very appropriate. We find in Act 6 how the problem is turned into an opportunity.

Presented with a problem the apostles come up with a creative solution and that opened up new opportunities for the gospel. Now, Act 6 of course is the well-known deacon passage.

The version we read out doesn't actually use the term deacon here but it's in the Greek. The word deacon comes from verses 1 and 2. In verse 1 we find a group of the church was being missed out in the daily diakonia, which literally I think means service.

[1:27] It's assumed in this case it probably means some sort of food handout the literal word in the Greek is the diakonia. And then following on from this, in verse 2 we find the verb diakonio, which means to serve, perhaps particularly to serve as a waiter, which is the way that most English translations translate it.

But it really just means someone who serves. The person, the diakonia is the service and the person who does it is the, or the act of doing it rather is the diakonia.

So that's where the term deacon comes from and it's why it's attached to this particular issue of food distribution. But of course the term soon became recognised as an office of the church and it's described as such in 1 Timothy 3.

So this appears to have been entirely an apostolic invention. It doesn't seem to be directly based on anything that Jesus taught. Except of course there is that passage that David has already referred to.

This is John 13, 13 to 16. Jesus says, You call me teacher and Lord, and rightly so, for that is what I am.

[2:50] Now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. So Jesus certainly taught us to serve one another.

But again, actually the word for servant in this passage is not diakonia, but doulos, which means a slave. And also of course this teaching was addressed directly to the apostles.

It did not create a specific role of deacon. But as the church spread and became more diverse, it was necessary to get organized. To develop a kind of internal dynamic, a way of working.

Any organization needs a culture or a dynamic in order to work. Otherwise nobody would ever know what they were supposed to do. So what was the, how did this happen then?

[4:06] The growing community, which had been noted in chapter 2, verse 46, as being united, singleness of heart, the King James Version translates that verse.

But this community, which had all been together, sharing everything, was in danger of dividing into cliques. It's important to notice that this was the real problem in verse 1.

It's not just an administrative slip-up. It was discrimination. Whether it was intentional discrimination or unconscious bias, we're not told.

But it was discrimination against a particular group. And that group was not happy about it. They complained, it tells us that. Decisive action was needed.

So what were the apostles to do? So they called the whole church together. Again, the NIV translation tends to be rather bland.

[5:15] Just says all the disciples. But actually this was quite a large number. The ESV translates it full number. King James Version calls it a multitude.

It seems to catch the meaning better. This was a large crowd now. And with all the possibilities for disorder and dissension that a large crowd and assembly can present.

As we see so often, a polite gathering can easily turn into an angry mob. But the apostles are on the case. Don't panic.

This issue mustn't be allowed to undermine the Great Commission. It mustn't get in the way of the ministry of the Word of God. But something has to be done.

So the apostles came up with this suggestion. And the crowd was won over. Unity was restored and the crisis was avoided.

[6:17] One or two things worth noting. It was the church which nominated the seven. We see that in verse three.

Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you. Judging by the names, they came from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

We were even told there was actually a Gentile convert. And this innovation of selecting the seven had an immediate impact.

Verse seven. The word spread and those converted including the priests. So, so far, so good.

Deacons are clearly a good idea.

And the church has acknowledged deacons ever since. As I say, it's an apostolic invention. Not something that's actually found in the teaching of Christ directly.

[7:16] But even by the end of the New Testament, it was a clearly established role. The only slight problem is finding out what they actually did.

And I'm not going to answer that question directly today. I'm going to ask some different questions instead. And the first question we might consider if we think about this is.

Isn't this rather over the top? If it's just a matter of handing out food parcels. Why does it need seven men full of the spirit and wisdom?

Surely you could just find some wealthy member who had a spare slave. Who could be trusted slave. Who could be allocated to the job. But no, the apostles say it needs seven men full of the spirit and wisdom.

And the second puzzling thing about this passage. Is that there's no description of the actual welfare system they put in place. The issue of welfare payments is a perennial problem.

[8:31] And it plagues churches and charities and indeed politicians. Down the ages. How do you help those genuinely in need.

While excluding the merely lazy or dishonest. The Bible does have quite a bit of teaching on this. But we don't actually find it here in this passage.

What do we get instead? Well instead we get in the next few chapters. The stories of two of those people on that list.

Of seven. Stephen and Philip. And they actually get considerably more space in Luke's account.

And it's allocated to many of the apostles. And yet none of that refers specifically to deacon issues.

And I might wonder why is this? Surely this is important as well. But Luke doesn't talk about that either. And if we look at the chapter again asking these questions.

[9:41] We can perhaps find some deeper things. If Luke is not concerned with those particular issues. What is he concerned with? Why do we get this narrative? As it's given to us here.

And it's worth noting the chronology is important. It's not a matter of. You know Stephen and Philip were made deacons. And then ten years later they moved on to something else. There isn't time for that.

We read about Paul's conversion in chapter nine. Again something we were thinking about. In David's questions earlier. Saul first appears in fact in chapter eight.

This is regarded by many scholars. Probably as early as AD 33 or 34. And from the chronology of Acts. It can't be much later than about AD 36.

So these were not events that took place long after the resurrection. They took place at least in a few years. Possibly in a matter of months. And it's worth noting that.

[10:48] That what Luke is at here is narrative. He wants us to understand the dynamic of what's going on. I mean doubtless the seven probably did pause briefly to sort out the widow issue.

Otherwise we would have been told they didn't. But presumably they did. But that's not to suggest they settled into the deacon job. And then eventually moved on to other things. That's not really a plausible reading.

The... What they did. We're told was what we read in the next chapters. This does require some thought. But I'm not going to go there either today.

Because Luke doesn't. We might do that on Wednesday. If you come along to the group Bible study. We might think about some of those things more directly. About what... How we do welfare. And what deacons actually do. They're both questions worth studying. But I'm not going to go there. I'm going to follow the narrative. In fact when you see this chapter in its context.

[12:03] It seems this passage has much to say about unity. And cultural identity. As much as about welfare. Welfare. What's the main theme of Luke's history?

It's of course the preaching of the gospel. More specifically. It's the great commission. The gospel will be preached in Jerusalem. Judea.

Samaria. And then to the ends of the earth. As David pointed out earlier. Philip preached first in Samaria. But there's an issue here.

Which is not perhaps immediately obvious. These boundaries are geographical. But they're as much cultural as they are geographical. We know the cultural difficulties that existed.

Between Jerusalem and Judea. And Samaria for instance. It's referred to many times in the New Testament. The New Testament. The New Testament. The New Testament. The New Testament.

[13:09] These are cultural boundaries. As much as geographical ones. Geographically. We had the Pax Romana. There was peace really throughout the Mediterranean region.

Under Roman rule. The New Testament. So if you wanted to get to. Athens. Or Rome. You just had to hop on a ship. Travel was fairly easy.

But culturally. They were a million miles away. They didn't just eat differently. Although they did. they did, of course, the Jews had particular eating rules, but they thought differently. Their value systems, as we say, were different. And as the Great Commission was put into practice, the church itself must become more diverse. Of course, as we see so often, diversity always carries the danger of disunity. If the main theme of Acts is gospel success, there's an important counterpoint of that struggle for unity and diversity. The church came under increasing cultural pressures as it spread out geographically and culturally. We find this theme both throughout Luke's narrative and on into the later books. It takes center stage, for example, in Acts 15, where they have to have a big conference to sort out a major problem in the church.

So, in a sense, this dispute here is a precursor of that. We do get this counterpoint throughout Acts of the, how do we maintain unity under the pressures of increasingly spreading gospel and culturally spreading gospel. The welfare system we've already read came under attack in Acts 5, of course, with the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira. But that really hurt nobody but themselves. This problem in Acts 6, verse 1 is much more serious. It could lead to a split within the church. And this particular problem is one that's imported from Judaism itself.

[15:56] Perhaps we need to just make it clear what's going on here. Many of the Jews, particularly those who lived in Jerusalem and around, stuck to the old Hebrew culture, which had been handed down from their ancestors. But others had been scattered through various wars and other things throughout the Roman Empire. And they had brought in, in a sense, into the Hellenistic, the Greek culture of the Roman Empire. They were probably born outside the Promised Land, as we know that Saul was.

They could probably speak Hebrew and Aramaic, but their first language was often Greek, the *koinonia*, the common language of the Greek culture.

They tended to have a more liberal attitude to the Torah, the Greek scriptures. And yet they were still fiercely Jewish. And as the church grew, it drew in converts from both these strands of Judaism. And this, of course, is what's happening in chapter 6, verse 1. Could the church maintain unity? Or would it become a sect of one side or the other?

Would it become a sect of Hebraic Judaism, or of the more liberal Hellenistic strand? That's the real problem that was presented to the apostles.

[17:41] Could the mistrust between these diverse converts be used to forge a new unity? Or would the old Jewish rivalries undermine the gospel?

That's why the issue required seven men full of the Spirit and wisdom. The apostles were literally making it up as they went along. But with the wisdom the Spirit gave them, they spotted the danger. These appointments were as much about church politics as they were about welfare. The apostles mostly were from a Hebraic background.

Not all of them, but mostly. The Hellenists were more used to the Greco-Roman culture of the Empire. And at a stroke, the Hellenists had transformed from a problem to an asset.

Asset. The real job of the seven, and why they needed to be full of the Spirit and wisdom, was to maintain the unity as the focus of the gospel changed from the Hebrew word to the Roman world, so that the ministry of the word would not be hindered.

[18:53] And this is the theme that Luke goes on to explore in the next few chapters. Stephen and Philip knew how the Greek culture worked. And that is what Luke goes on to tell us in the next few chapters.

So let's just unpick this a bit more. As we saw at the end of Acts 2, it all seemed so simple at first. All the believers were together and had everything in common.

Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day, they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people.

And the Lord added to the number daily those who were being saved. But this could not last. As the church grew, its very success would cause challenges.

And as I said, from this point of view, the fact that they were Hellenistic Jews within the congregation was a useful asset. They already had a foot in each world. And I'll suggest to you that this is perhaps why Luke puts this narrative here.

[20:18] Paul, of course, would be the greatest example of this. We first meet him in chapter 8, verse 1, and then in chapter 9. By contrast, in chapters 10, we find that Peter struggled to make the adaptation and to welcome Gentile converts.

He had to have a special vision from the Holy Spirit before he would make that move. But it was Stephen and Philip who made a start, who unpicked the church from its Jewish roots, as it were, and put it on the move outwards.

So in the end of this chapter, in verses 8 to 15 of chapter 6, we find Stephen going on to the offensive.

Peter and John had already come up against the Jewish authorities, as we know, but they had mostly tried to keep things calm. They'd said they would obey God rather than man, in chapter 4, verse 29.

They didn't directly attack the Jewish establishment. Stephen has no such inhibitions. Stephen takes the debate first to the Hellenistic Jews in verse 9 of chapter 6.

[21:44] We're told they're from, well, we're given a list of where they came from. Cyrene and Alexandria, the provinces of Silesia and Asia.

Basically, there's the Greek colonies along the North African coast and Roman colonies in Asia Minor. Particularly important, of course, was Alexandria on the North African coast, which was a great center of learning, probably at the time even greater than Athens.

Alexandria had a famous library, which is a bit like the British library that the British library today tries to assemble every book published. The Greek translation of the Old Testament was kept in the library there.

These men from these Greek cities would have been educated in Greek philosophy and rhetoric, as well as in Jewish theology, as it's clear that Paul was, for example.

But what do we find? We find in verse 10 that Stephen is beating them at their own game and debating with the Hellenistic Jews.

[23:06] they found they couldn't stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave Stephen as he spoke. So what do those Jews do?

They appeal to the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council. I think Luke has some intentional irony here. Stephen was appointed to bridge the divide between the Hebraic and the Hellenistic Jews within the church.

Now we find that those two factions in the Jewish world are being forced to make common cause against him. The Hellenists couldn't win on their own so they appeal to the Sanhedrin, the council in Jerusalem.

As the saying goes, my enemy's enemy is my friend or at least my ally. There's certainly some irony going on here. The very fact that Stephen starts to preach to the Hellenistic Jews forces the Jewish strands to take common ground against the church.

So Stephen goes to the Sanhedrin then.

[24:27] He's up to that game as well. And if you know the story, he opts for a full-on attack. But that's next week so we won't go there.

So what are we to make of this short chapter?

It is quite a short chapter but there's an awful lot in it. A lot of ideas in it. Botanists talk about hybrid vigour, don't they?

Sometimes when two cultivars of a plant are cross-pollinated the result is a new cultivar that's stronger and more vigorous than either parent.

And that seems to be what's going on here. What Luke may be telling us here is that the church had become a little stuck. The early successor, Acts 2, had maybe become something of a trap.

[25:33] Right into chapter 5 they're still meeting in the temple. See that in chapter 5 verse 22 and again in verse 42. In their discussions with the Jewish leaders in chapter 5 Peter and John refused to compromise their message.

They said we must obey God rather than man. They didn't really criticise the leaders. even the words of Gamaliel those words as it were of peace might have become a bit of a problem.

Do you remember what Gamaliel said in Acts 5 38-39? In the present case I advise you leave these men alone let them go for if their purpose of activity is of human origin it will fail.

but if it is from God you will not be able to stop these men you will only find yourselves fighting against God. Gamaliel one of the leaders of the Sanhedrin the Jewish leaders had suggested that the council leave the church in peace and just let it die out naturally was basically what he was saying wasn't it?

And there was a real danger here that the church would simply become another Jewish sect but it's in chapter 7 that Stephen's review of Jewish history left the leaders with nowhere to hide.

[27:11] Stephen is about to go on to the offensive. Was he right to do that? Well it has all the clarity of Jesus' own words in Matthew 23.

what did Jesus say about the Pharisees particularly? Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees you hypocrites you shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces you yourselves do not enter nor will you let those enter who are trying to that's pretty much the theme that Stephen picks up in chapter 7 but as I say we're going to look at that next week what Stephen and Philip brought to the mix was mobility the willingness to move on actually very different people of course Stephen's strength was confrontation as we see from the end of chapter 6 he would challenge the Jews head on and again spoiler alert it earns him a martyr's death in chapter 6 chapter 7 verse 60 and yet that was the death that would influence

Saul as he was then comes briefly before his conversion he was obviously influenced by that Stephen's death Philip in many ways Philip's ministry was quite different Philip's strength was being light on his feet perhaps one could describe it that way he seems to be always moving about at least in chapter 8 it even says he was found in how was it found in Caesarea wasn't it I can't remember now but he was certainly very mobile literally in his case he moved around a lot Philip realised that as in the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel the future lay with the exiles not with those who

stayed behind in Jerusalem and the result for

Philip was very different whereas Stephen earned a martyr's death Philip landed up with four daughters who were told who prophesied they were very different people yet Luke is very clear that both men were energised by the Holy Spirit embracing this diversity the church found a new hybrid vigour and it's worth saying a bit about this this is not the tribalism and the division of the multiculturalism which in the end just causes division but a new living and outgoing community diversity as I've said the world's version of diversity and inclusion just leads to division and misunderstanding we've seen that on our streets haven't we in the last few weeks often results in violence what does revelation have to say about this revelation 21 23 to 27 the city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it for the glory of

God gives it light and the lamb is its lamp the nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it on no day will its gates ever be shut for there will be no night there the glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it note that this is diversity not just the Jewish nation but the glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it yet nothing impure will ever enter it nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life this vision of the holy city is not a vision of a sterile uniformity where everything is in shades of grey but neither does it describe a superficial accommodation of different groups that at best manage to get on without killing each other and often don't even manage that we're told that the light of the Lamb is the light of the city it's interesting that at the beginning of Revelation there were seven lamps but in the city there's only one the Lamb himself is the lamp of the city the light of the Lamb is a pure brilliant splendid light it isn't a rainbow because the colours come together to create something greater than themselves this is what we start to see happening in

[32:47] Acts chapter six as the church embraces this new diversity something greater something more vigorous comes into being so what's the challenge of this for us it's a little bit philosophical I realised that when I was presenting it but there is a challenge for us and the challenge is to press forward Paul writes to the Philippians this not that I've already obtained all this or have already been made perfect but I press on to take hold of that from which Christ Jesus took hold of me brothers I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it but one thing I do forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ

Jesus all of us who are mature should take such a view of things if you think at some point you think differently that too God will make clear to you but he doesn't stop there he doesn't say well we just don't care about what's happened we just move forward he then says only let us live up to what we have already attained this last verse is important we don't honour the past by living in it we honour the past by living up to it therefore we press on like Philip and Stephen we shouldn't fear the future at least the future in the west looks pretty uncertain but we shouldn't fear it because the lamb is bringing all together in the end but with the power of the spirit we need to get up there and create it so we're going to finish with onward

Christian soldiers that delightfully Victorian hymn it was quite popular when I was a child we hardly ever sing it nowadays those of you who are younger may not even know it us oldies will have to sing loud so you know the tune actually we're not going to sing the version in praise in fact because they've taken out all the Victorianisms and I think they've taken out the bite of the thing when the hymn the original has the verse like a mighty army moves the church of God brothers we are treading where the saints have trod and that's what we're doing thinking about this morning of course there was as oldies may remember there was a parody that went around and said sometimes it's more like a mighty tortoise moves the church of God brothers we are treading where we've always trod but I hope that's not true of us we live up to the past and we press forward towards the high calling and the marriage supper of the lamb and the holy city where all the glory of the nations are brought together under the lamb so let's sing that hymn and then David will come up and close for us to go to the house and the