

Acts 6:1-7

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[0 : 0 0] far we've seen God building his church through the proclamation of his word and through the power of his spirit. We started with 120 disciples of Jesus gathered together in an upper room for an early morning prayer meeting and already just in the first five chapters thousands have come to faith in Jesus, been baptized, and joined the community of the church. And the church has become a radically generous community sharing their possessions voluntarily with one another so that there were no needy persons among them. God has shown his power through signs and wonders and the apostles and all the believers have proclaimed God's word with boldness. But we've also seen that as the church grew they faced challenges and opposition. They faced persecution from the outside as we saw last week when Peter and John were arrested and thrown in jail.

They faced hypocrisy on the inside as we saw two weeks ago in the story of Ananias and Sapphira. But in every problem that the early church faced God provided exactly what they needed to deal with that problem. God provided courage for the persecuted believers and he frustrated the plans of those who oppose them. God brought judgment on Ananias and Sapphira to show that hypocrisy must not be tolerated in the church because it only leads to spiritual death. Now today in Acts chapter 6 we see the third major problem that the early church faced and how again God provided exactly what they needed and God continues to provide for us exactly what we need today. I don't know what you've come to church if you feel like you've come needing something or as you've been part of this church if there's something in particular that you've recognized that we need here. But the message of this text is that God provides exactly what we need. Now if you're here today if you're not a Christian or if you don't usually come to church some of today's sermon might feel like listening in on a family meeting.

We're talking about how the church is supposed to deal with its problems. But I hope that you'll see how a Christian community is meant to function according to the teachings of the Bible and why Jesus himself is so essential to everything that we want to be and to do as a church.

So let's look together. Turn with me in your Bibles if you have one or open the pew Bible in front of you if you'd like to look along there to Acts chapter 6. We'll be reading Acts chapter 6 verses 1 through 7. Just a short passage but a very important passage and a turning point in the book of Acts as we'll see.

So Acts chapter 6 verses 1 through 7. In those days when the number of disciples was increasing the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

[3 : 1 0] 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, 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 we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. 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 lay 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. Now in this passage, we see the problem that the early church faced in verse one.

We see the solution that God provided in verses two through six. And in verse seven, we see the result of God's provision. So let's begin by looking at the problem in a little bit more detail.

[4 : 27] Verse one, In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Now notice, before we look at the problem, three good things that are going on in this Jerusalem church. First, the number of disciples was increasing. People were becoming followers of Jesus Christ and the church was growing.

Second, we see the early Jerusalem church was multicultural. They included both Grecian Jews and Hebraic Jews. Now Hebraic Jews retain the traditional Hebrew customs and normally spoke Hebrew or Aramaic in their homes.

And in Jerusalem, they would have been in the majority. scholars estimate that 80 to 90 percent of the Jews in Jerusalem were Hebraists and likely they would have formed the core of the Jerusalem church.

Most or all of the apostles would have been Hebraic Jews. Now Grecian Jews or Hellenists, sometimes they're called Hellenists, were Jews who had adopted the Greek culture and language.

[5 : 43] And many of these Grecian Jews were not native to Jerusalem. Many elderly Jews who had lived most of their lives abroad would come to Jerusalem to live out their last years.

And so the Grecian Jews would have been the minority group. In general, they would have had less family support and fewer social connections in Jerusalem. And in that society, there was often, as you might expect, tension between these two groups.

The Grecians tended to be maybe a little more culturally liberal on certain issues. And the Hebraists tended to be more culturally conservative. But the Jerusalem church included some people from both of these groups who had become followers of Jesus the Messiah.

And the third thing we see, the third good thing about we see, is that this early church cared deeply for its most vulnerable members. There was already a daily distribution of food.

Every day. Fully funded by voluntary donations and likely prepared and delivered by volunteers as well. It doesn't say they had a huge paid staff.

[6 : 51] Now, widows back then were particularly vulnerable. They couldn't usually find jobs. So if they had no extended family to care for them, they relied on support from the local community.

And in the Old Testament, the people of Israel had been specifically commanded to look out and care for widows, orphans, foreigners, and other vulnerable people.

And the early church recognized that those commands in the Old Testament weren't just temporary ceremonial laws that they could ignore now since Jesus had come, but they reflected God's unchanging character.

And so they were continuing to carry out those commands to care for the most vulnerable among them. because God had revealed himself in the Old Testament as a father to the fatherless and a defender of widows.

And so we see the early church actively obeying God and reflecting his character by caring for these widows. But despite all these good things, despite all these good things, there is a problem that threatens to divide and distract everyone.

[8 : 00] The Grecian Jews complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked. Now Luke is very careful in how he describes this problem.

He doesn't just blame it on one group or the other. He says the Grecian Jews complained. And that word complained is the same word that's used in Exodus when the people of Israel are going through the desert and they start complaining and grumbling or murmuring against God.

It doesn't just mean they brought up the problem and said, here's a real problem. They gossiped about it, murmured about it. There was some dissension brewing.

See, gossip is talking to people who are neither part of the problem nor part of the solution. And gossip is always destructive to any community, particularly to a church.

On the other hand, Luke tells us that the complaint was reflecting some reality. These widows were actually being overlooked. There was a real problem.

[9 : 09] Now, it's not that the Hebraic Jews were intentionally malicious against the Grecian Jews. Most likely, they were simply neglectful. Maybe they didn't know the Grecian Jews very well.

And so, when they were delivering food and gathering together to cook it and deliver it every day, they just didn't think of them because they didn't really know them. or maybe the Grecian Jews lived in a different neighborhood that was a little more inconvenient or maybe a bad neighborhood that

they didn't want to go into or whatever it might be.

Maybe there had been a miscommunication since the two groups normally spoke different languages at home. They could probably both communicate in Greek or in Aramaic, but both of them had their language that they preferred.

Lots of, there could have been lots of reasons. But whatever the case, the Grecian Jews, the minority group in the church was being overlooked. And in our fallen state, we're naturally self-centered.

And so, we tend to overlook particularly the needs of people who are different than us. And all kinds of racial and cultural divisions can arise and persist simply through neglect, passive neglect, even if there's no intentional malice.

[10:23] the Grecian Jewish widows had a genuine practical need. But the situation, the way it was developing, had the potential to divide the whole church.

And division in the church, because of complaining and overlooking, it's a more subtle challenge than external persecution, where they're being thrown in jail. That's a pretty obvious challenge. challenge. It's also more subtle than hypocrisy and lying by two individuals. That's also pretty clear. But it's just as dangerous of a challenge.

And so, when the apostles hear about it, they gather the whole church together. They have a congregational meeting. And in verses two through six, we see the solution that the apostles propose to this problem.

Now, they say, it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom.

[11:28] We'll turn this responsibility over to them and give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. Now, think of yourself as the apostles. There are several things the apostles could have done when they faced this situation.

The apostles could have denied the problem. That often happens, right? No, that kind of problem wouldn't happen in our church. We're the apostles. Jesus Christ himself appointed us to be the leaders.

We know what we're doing here and we don't need your complaining. You know, as a leader in a church or in an organization, it's tempting to respond defensively to all criticism, especially when it comes along with a spirit of grumbling complaining.

Many pastors have been so deeply hurt by unfair criticism that they harden themselves against even loving and constructive criticism. This is a natural response, but it is a great danger.

And the only way to avoid this danger is to continually humble ourselves before God and receive our identity and our confidence from Christ alone.

[12:44] The apostles are humble enough to acknowledge the reality of this problem in their church. Well, the apostles could have also decided to simply divide the church along these ethnic lines according to the homogeneous unit principle which would later be developed in the 20th century.

Why don't you go and start a Grecian Jewish church and take care of your widows on your own and we'll stay here in the Hebraic Jewish Christian church and we'll take care of ours.

Now, humanly speaking, that probably would have been the easiest thing to do to split up and just leave each other alone. It's, you know, it's difficult to understand each other. You know, we prefer to speak different languages.

But if that had been the apostles' response, their first response, that would have set a terrible precedent because a church which follows Jesus Christ can never say to another follower of Jesus Christ, you don't belong here.

We must be open to all the people that God sends us, even if they're very different than us, even if they're very needy. And it's worth the time and trouble to work through the challenges of being a church which includes people from different cultural backgrounds with different practical needs.

[14:04] So the apostles don't deny the problem, they don't immediately separate the church. Well, the other thing that many of us would do, I think I would have this tendency to do it, is just take it over myself.

I'll take over the food distribution. I can organize a food distribution equitably, fairly, and make everyone happy. Those of you who are doing it, you must not know what you're doing. Get out of

the way, we'll take over, we'll do this.

But no. Well, you know, they probably were capable of doing that, but Peter knew that such a move would also be disastrous.

The apostles had limited time and energy, just like all the rest of us. Peter's very realistic here, and he knows that his primary responsibility as an apostle is to proclaim and teach the word of God and lead the church in prayer.

And so for the apostles to organize a large food distribution program at the same time would inevitably hinder them from carrying out their primary responsibility. It would be sort of like the captain of a ship deciding to go down and take over the run of the kitchen because the head cook is disorganized and the people aren't being fed in an efficient way.

[15:22] Now, if the kitchen isn't being run well on the ship, that's a problem because the crew needs to eat decently in order to be strong and be able to keep the ship working well.

But if the captain and his crew just leave the wheel, the ship is vulnerable to go off course and hit, crash on the rocks.

Now, today in the church we don't have apostles in the same sense as they did in the New Testament, but we do have pastors and elders who are primarily responsible for prayer and the teaching of God's word.

And at Trinity that happens not only through preaching but also through Sunday school classes, through small groups, and through discipleship of individuals and families. And as pastors and elders, this is our primary responsibility to lead this church in prayer and in the ministry of the word. And so we must prioritize spending time in prayer and the word on a daily basis to set aside the best time of our day to listen to God and his word so that when we listen to people, we listen to people in the context of what God has already spoken through his word.

[16:31] Now, this also means that there are some valuable and important tasks that as pastors we must not take on the primary responsibility of coordinating. There are some requests that at some times we must say no to.

So, we see the apostles don't deny the problem, they don't divide the church and they don't take it all upon themselves. Instead, what they do is they delegate this task to godly servant leaders.

The solution to the problem is that God raises up godly servant leaders to meet real practical needs and in doing so to preserve the unity of the church and the focus of its mission.

It's not just a job that has to get done somehow, it's a ministry that must be carried out in a way that reflects Christ. And the Greek word diakonia, from which we get the word deacon, means service or ministry.

And this word appears three times in this passage. Unfortunately, it's translated differently in almost all translations, almost all English translations. But it's the same word and it appears three times.

And verse one, the daily distribution of food, that's literally the daily diakonia or the daily serving.

[17:49] Verse two, wait on tables. Literally, that's serve tables. And verse four, the prayer and the ministry or service of the word.

It's the same word in all three places. And the point is, just as the apostles are in charge of the service or ministry of God's word, the deacons are responsible for the service or ministry of caring for the widows.

So the role of deacon is not an inferior church office for second-rate Christian leaders. It's an essential ministry. And in this case, it wasn't just a matter of distributing food efficiently, but navigating tense relationships between people of different cultural groups who weren't thinking very highly of each other at the moment.

That's a job that requires people who are full of the spirit and wisdom. And that's what the qualifications are right here.

It's not just anyone who's administratively skilled and efficient and willing. No. People full of the spirit and wisdom. And when we look in 1 Timothy 3, what Kate read for us earlier this morning, the qualifications for deacons are very similar, emphasizing godly character and good reputation, being worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine or pursuing dishonest gain, holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience, having been tested and found true.

[19:31] Now, before we go on, the apostles say brothers choose seven men from among you.

And so you might be asking, is it significant that they chose seven men rather than, say, six women?

Well, in the Jewish culture of that time, it was common to set up a board of seven men to oversee a particular task, seven representing the number of completeness.

So this would have been very normal and not surprising in the Jerusalem context. But as we look ahead later in the New Testament, there seem to be good reasons to affirm that God also calls women to serve as deacons and to coordinate particular ministries within the church.

So Romans chapter 16, verse 1, refers to Phoebe a diakonos, same word, a deacon of the church in Sancria. And 1 Timothy 3, 11, which is sometimes translated, their wives, is more literally the women, which could refer to female deacons in the church in Ephesus.

And throughout the New Testament, we see numerous women involved in evangelism, involved in hospitality, involved in caring for the poor, involved in prayer, involved in teaching, and other ministries.

[20 : 49] So sisters in Christ, let me encourage you. God has given you precious spiritual gifts. use them to build up the body of Christ and to bring glory to Jesus, your Savior, and ours.

At the same time, there's an important distinction here between the role of deacons and elders.

Paul describes the church in 1 Timothy 3, the same passage we read, as God's household.

And as with a husband in a Christian family, the elders in a local church are ultimately responsible for leading God's family and overseeing the church's teaching, just as we see the apostles doing here.

So in a healthy church, we will see godly men who are willing to step up and take responsibility, not just to care for their own wives and children, but also for shepherding the larger family of the church.

And brothers and sisters, this is a heavy responsibility. It's not easy to be a godly man, a loving husband, an involved father, and a wise elder.

[22 : 10] We fight against our own sinful nature, our tendency to be lazy and selfish or insecure and defensive. We fight against the pressures of our culture to be either macho and chauvinistic or passive and cowardly.

And we fight against the temptations of Satan himself. And so we, the elders, need your prayers as we seek to lead our families and lead other men and lead this church in a way that reflects Christ and his loving, initiating, and self-sacrificing leadership.

Now, brothers in Christ, make it your prayer and your ambition to develop the character of an elder as Paul describes it in 1 Timothy 3.

Now, you may or may not have the gift of teaching. Elders need to have the gift of teaching. But apart from having the gift of teaching and not being a recent convert, all the other things that Paul says of an elder is what you and I as men should be striving to be.

Above reproach. Faithful to your wife. Or if you're single, sexually pure. Temperate and self-controlled. Respectable and hospitable.

[23 : 32] Not given to drunkenness or violence or quarreling or greed, but gentle. Managing your family well. Being active in your wife and children's lives. Having a good reputation with outsiders.

So whether or not you have the gift of teaching and whether or not you ever are elected as an elder in a local church, strive to cultivate that kind of Christian manhood. Now, to those of you who are deacons, let me speak to the deacons for a moment because this passage is about the appointing of the deacons.

Let me say two things. Being a deacon is not just a physical task, it's a spiritual calling. In your daily service, you are representing Christ himself.

Christ is the head deacon. Christ said, I am among you as one who serves or literally one who deacons. Luke 22, 27.

So deacons, you are not just cleaning tables or calling contractors or counting money or coordinating meals for sick people. You're meeting these practical needs in order to preserve the unity of the church and the focus of our mission.

[24 : 45] You're keeping the deck clean and the crew fed and the motor running so that the ship can sail unhindered to our destiny in Christ. So as you fulfill your particular ministries, keep in mind not just your corner of the ship, not just your particular area, but the ship as a whole and look out in particular for anyone who might be being overlooked as the Grecian Jewish widows were.

Second, deacons are servants, but they are not the only servants in the church. And just as it would have been foolish for the apostles to coordinate the whole food distribution by themselves, it would

be foolish for the deacons to attempt to do all the work of the practical needs of the church on their own.

Your role as a deacon is to facilitate the service of the whole church, to help other people, to help all of us learn to serve one another like Christ.

So you must not find your identity in your serving. Your true identity is in Christ alone. And so you are free to serve and you are also free to step back and let others serve.

and not feel guilty about that. In fact, when you invite someone else to serve, you are not overburdening them. You are giving them an opportunity to become more like Christ.

[26 : 22] Now to those of us who are not deacons, let me say two things as well. First, look to the deacons as people who can help you learn to serve like Christ. The best way to do this is to volunteer to serve in some way alongside them, which would be a great encouragement to them.

If you approach them and say, can I help with this? Second, help us identify people whom we might recognize as deacons.

Notice, the apostles didn't just decide on their own who should be the deacons. They asked for the input of the whole church. And in the same way, we as the elders need you to help us identify people who display the character of a Christ-like servant.

Because in one sense, we don't make anyone a deacon. A deacon just means a servant. We recognize people who are already serving. If you just have the gift of administration, that doesn't automatically make you a deacon.

Just as if you have the gift of teaching or you went to seminary, that doesn't automatically make you an elder. You need to be actively serving or actively teaching and shepherding and discipling others.

[27 : 38] We recognize people who are already serving and we ask them to take on a particular role. So if you know someone like that, encourage them, first of all. And if you think they should be a deacon, talk to one of the elders and suggest them.

That would be very helpful to us. So we see God raises up godly servant leaders to meet the church's practical needs then and now. And in doing so, to preserve the church's unity and focus. And we see these first seven deacons listed in verse 5. Now if you read that, if you read that verse, if you read the names of the deacons, you probably don't recognize most of them. And in fact, we don't really know anything about most of them except for Stephen and Philip.

And a little bit, it tells us about Nicholas. But we do know that at least some of them were Grecian Jews. And we know that because their names are all Greek names, which were more common among the Grecian Jews than the Hebraic Jews.

And one of them, Nicholas from Antioch, was a convert to Judea, so certainly he probably, certainly he was not from a Hebraic background. Now remember, it was the Grecian Jews who had been complaining that their widows were being overlooked.

[28 : 59] And it's not a coincidence that the apostles appoint some people from that very group that's being overlooked, they find some people who are godly, full of the spirit and wisdom, and appoint them to assist in coordinating the food distribution.

And this is very wise. Thus, the Grecian Jewish deacons would have instinctively understood the needs of the people from their own group. And the Grecian Jewish widows would have had someone in the leadership that they knew they could talk to and felt comfortable talking to. So the apostles were not self-protective and insular. It's not an in crowd that nobody can ever break into. They were willing to entrust important ministry responsibilities to people from a different cultural background who are godly, wise, and spirit-filled.

Because they knew that God was building his church. It wasn't their church. Trinity Baptist Church isn't our church to do what we want to do.

It's Jesus' church. Christ is building his church. So let's receive what God provides and follow where he leads.

[30 : 17] And the result of all this is dynamic. Verse 7 just tells us the beginning of the results. Not only were the widows fed, the complaining stopped, and the church became one big happy family again, but the gospel began to spread outward like wildfire.

Verse 7, the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly. A large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Now the priests mostly lived outside Jerusalem. But they would come to Jerusalem for two weeks every year for their service in the temple. And so any priest who became a follower of Jesus while he was in Jerusalem automatically became a missionary to his hometown when he went back home.

So the gospel began spreading out from Jerusalem, out to the wherever all these priests are from. And it didn't stop there. The next three chapters of Acts, Acts 6, 7, 8, are all about the evangelistic ministries of Stephen and Philip, two of the early deacons.

See, these deacons were appointed to coordinate care for the widows. But they weren't only confined to that ministry. That was only the beginning for some of them of their ministry.

[31 : 36] As they provided for the Grecian and Hebraic widows with compassion and wisdom, God flung open doors for the gospel, particularly among minority groups and internationals living in Jerusalem.

You know, when the Grecian Jewish widows were being overlooked and complaining in the church, guess what happened to any possibility that the gospel might spread among the Grecian Jewish community?

Probably didn't help it. But when the Grecian Jewish widows are being provided for and included in the family of the church, the church's outreach to their community, to non-Christians in their community, also flourished.

And so verses 8 and 9, I'm jumping ahead a little bit, Nick will get into this next week, but verses 8 and 9, we see Stephen proclaiming the gospel to Grecian Jews from the synagogue of the freed men. They were a group of freed slaves who had a synagogue in Jerusalem, Grecian Jews. Then we see him engaging Jews from as far away as North Africa from Cyrene in Libya and Alexandria in Egypt and modern-day Turkey, the provinces of Cilicia and Asia.

[32 : 46] And in chapter 8, we see Philip proclaiming Jesus in Samaria to the despised, again, the despised Samaritans, another minority group, and then to the eunuch from Ethiopia on the desert road.

See, God is concerned that we meet the needs of all people in this church from every cultural background. And God is concerned that internal conflicts and complaining in the church be resolved in a gracious and truthful way.

God is concerned that the elders and pastors be free to lead and teach and disciple without being distracted. But God is also concerned that the good news about Jesus spread to people and places that we're not yet reaching.

To the people who live across the parking lot in the housing authority building, many of whom are recovering from addictions or falling back into them. To the professionals and commuters who have moved into 360 state and the ninth square lofts.

To the 8,000 students at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, only about 20 of whom gather regularly on that campus for Christian fellowship as far as we know. To the Iraqi and Afghan and African refugees who settle in New Haven each year with the help of Iris.

[33 : 58] To the lonely and neglected elderly people in nursing homes in almost every town. To the groups of people that you know and I don't. God is raising up his people, including you and me, to be servant leaders, to preach his grace and carry out his mercy so that all people may know the glorious transforming power that is found in Jesus Christ alone.

Satan had tried to destroy the church through external persecution, through internal hypocrisy, and finally through division and distraction, but God was building his church and God is building his church today, giving his people courage and boldness in the face of persecution, bringing his righteous judgment and purification in response to hypocrisy, and providing godly servant leaders in the face of division and distraction, and God continues to build his church in these ways today.

He will provide exactly what we need to face whatever challenges may come our way. Let us pray. Our Father, we thank you for your gracious provision for this early church.

we thank you that in a complicated and delicate situation that you provided godly servant leaders to meet the needs within the church, to keep the church united and together, to support the apostles and their ministry, ministry, but also that the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ might spread outwardly, might spill over, that it might spread like wildfire.

Lord, we pray that you would continue to be doing that in this church today. give us confidence that whatever problems we may face now or in the future, you will provide us all that we need.

[36 : 12] We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.