

The church had dramatically increased in numbers since Pentecost. The apostles were teaching all the new believers about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For the twelve to teach these thousands was quite a demanding ministry. They had to feel the great importance of correctly conveying what Jesus had taught. Our passage is about how they dealt with that great need.

The Jews in Jerusalem witnessed this growing group and the miracles done by the apostles. The average Jew living in Jerusalem had great respect for this growing community, but didn't dare join it unless they were willing to go in this new direction of believing in Jesus as the crucified Messiah (Acts 5:13).

With great growth comes problems of management. There were many Hellenist widows in the group. That may be because of a common custom of the time in which those Jews who lived outside of Jerusalem was to move to Jerusalem before they died. The women often outlived the men. The temple had established a support system for these widows, and the Christian community did the same. Both communities saw it as part of their obligation to God and as a witness to the outside world.

¹ 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. Acts 6:1 Let me first attempt to define the use of "Hebrews" and "Hellenists." Most residents of Jerusalem spoke Aramaic and Greek. This is not so much about language as it is about culture. Those who lived most of their lives in the diaspora, the nations other than Israel, were culturally different. They had their own Greek speaking synagogues. There was probably some difference in religious convictions as well. The Jews who lived all their life in Jerusalem would think of themselves as more blessed. Some of those Jews understood Hebrew and heard the Scriptures read in Hebrew in their synagogues. It was the common problem of one culture thinking itself better than another. That has been a problem throughout world history and in church history as well.

The Hellenist perception was that their widows didn't receive an equal ration to that of the local widows (Acts 4:35; James 1:27). There will always be some complaint of something being unfair: not enough hymns, or not enough support for a favorite mission, or wanting a different style, or emphasizing a certain doctrine. The flesh nature demands "my way" and sometimes that shows its ugly side in leadership as well as in the congregation (Matthew 16:24). What do you do? It is interesting to me that **the apostles didn't start an investigation into who was right or wrong. Instead, they sought a solution according to a Scriptural pattern** to be sure that all was fair and Biblical. We should carefully note what they did as it is our Scriptural pattern to follow. You'll be surprised at the outcome.

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." Acts 6:2 ⁴ But we will

devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Acts 6:4 The apostles called for a congregational meeting. Notice that it is referred to as the full number of disciples, meaning men and women. Disciple means "a learner," or "pupil." We are not to be pew sitters, or an audience, but rather to be students, learning the Scriptures, learning their application, and most of all learning to be like our Master, Jesus.

The apostles set boundaries and priorities. They had been given a mission by Jesus, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17) While this was of the utmost importance for the apostles, it applies to pastors and elders as well. Many pastors today spend the majority of their time in management and serving physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Then the congregation wonders why the sermons are more like pep talks than the explanation and instruction of the Word. It is a good thing that pastors model a life of service, for Jesus is our ultimate example of serving (Matthew 20:28). However, the vast majority of His service was teaching the disciples. After all, Jesus had said, "As the Father has sent me, even so send I you." (John 20:21) The Great Commission in Matthew tells us to make *disciples* of all nations (Matthew 28:19-20).

If there is one thing I regret, and one thing I hear other pastors say, it is that I wish I had developed a deeper prayer life earlier. I love Jesus because of who the Word declares Him to be and all I know He has done. That is intellectual, but it moves my heart. But when I am in prayer before my Savior, that is when my heart is touched and my love for Him increases in the depths of my soul. Pastors need to minister from this place of love for the Lord and direction of the Holy Spirit (John 21:17). **The apostles knew these two priorities were essential: prayer and the Word.** They devoted themselves to these two things. To be devoted means *strong, staunch*, and originally, "to persist obstinately in" or to "adhere to firmly." This is especially the call for elders but is also for every believer.

You know that I am convinced that God orchestrates the details of our lives. As I was leaving for vacation, I grabbed a book that I had almost decided not to read. The first few chapters were about the futility of church programs and formulas. I learned long ago that programs of man bear little or no lasting fruit. But I decided to go a little further in the book, or maybe I should say God prompted me to read more. The book then went into Acts 6:4. We, at Wayside, call that a Godincidence.

The book then turned to what we are to do as a church if the answer isn't man directed vision and efforts. If we have learned that unless the Lord builds the church, they labor in vain that try to build it (Psalm 127:1), and if we know that without Jesus we can do nothing (John 15:5), how are we to function? We have the answer in these verses. The elders devote themselves to the Word of God and prayer and appoint and equip others to serve. It is in the Word and prayer that we hear from God. It is our waiting upon Him as we worship Him where the voice of God is revealed to us for His direction. Then our actions are blessed and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Acts 13 will give us a perfect example of this, as the elders worshiped and prayed, the Holy Spirit spoke to them (Acts 13:1-3). The result was the missionary journeys of Paul and incredible fruit.

We have already seen in Acts the essential role of prayer. The disciples were devoted to prayer for ten days when the Holy Spirit was poured out on them (Acts 2:14). The church was in prayer when Peter and John were in prison and delivered by an angel. When the disciples were threatened by the authorities they prayed and were filled again with the Holy Spirit and boldness (Acts 4:24). We'll see the importance of prayer in the Apostle Paul's life as we continue in Acts, giving him direction that bore fruit.

The church is called to be a house of prayer for all nations (Matthew 21:13). While I have called for prayer, encouraged the creation of the prayer room, held all night prayers, and pray at every meeting, I have not been the example of a life truly devoted to prayer, or you, the church, would be following. I ask for your forgiveness. Sure we have the prayer chain. The elders pray when they meet, but it is as someone has referred to as zipper prayers. We start and end with prayer, but are our decisions and direction truly found in prayer or our opinions? I ask you to pray for me as I commit myself to be devoted to prayer and to see this church become a house of prayer.

I confess I gave up on prayer meetings long ago because they are so poorly attended. That is because in the way I led them they became merely a wish list that we present to God. There is nothing wrong with presenting our needs to God. We are invited to do so (Philippians 4:6). But we also need prayer that acknowledges our desperation for God's direction, prayer that invites correction and guidance. We need to cry out for our spiritual need to a much greater extent than we do for our physical needs (Acts 4:29-30). That kind of Spirit filled, life giving, heartbreaking prayer is essential if we are to be a church that bears more than wood, hay, and stubble (1 Corinthians 3:12-15). Please pray that your elders will find God's leading in this essential need for our church. Pray that He will make of us a house of prayer. At the very least, I'm asking each of you to commit the start and end of your day in prayer, prayer that not only presents your needs, but that waits upon God in silence, asking Him to speak to your heart. **What kind of a groom would never speak to his bride? What kind of a bride would never desire to hear the voice of her groom (Song of Songs 8:13)?**

Every congregation needs men and women who will hear God's direction in prayer to know His call to service. We need people to visit the sick, to help with the physical needs of others, to help with the facility, and other practical affairs of the church. In doing so, you free the pastor to do that which he is supposed to be devoted. That benefits the entire congregation, for the teaching will be more substantive. Thank you to our deaconesses and elders for helping so much in this area. Rise up oh men of God!

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. Acts 6:3 This is an Old Testament pattern seen in Scripture. When you have a problem and you don't know what to do, look to an example in the Word. Moses appointed leaders who met certain godly qualifications (Exodus 18:21). Moses was overburdened with judging everyone's issues and wearing himself out. Jethro suggested he appoint others to take that role so that Moses could spend time with God and to get direction for the multitude (Exodus 18:19-23). The issue is similar.

The disciples were to select seven men to take that burden from the apostles and see that the distribution was done fairly. The qualifications were that they be of good repute and full of the Spirit and of wisdom. The qualifications in **1 Timothy 3:8-12** describe in more detail what that kind of a life looks like (Titus 1:5-9). By the time the office of a deacon had developed, there were issues that had risen that needed to be addressed. Most of them had to do with being in the flesh rather than the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-17). While this passage simply says they should have a good reputation and be full of the Spirit and wisdom, the Timothy passage tells us in detail that this means not given to wine, dignified, not greedy, not speaking two different things, not a slanderer, but sober minded, the husband of one wife, having obedient children, etc. The Timothy passage ends with this promise. *¹³ For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.* 1 Timothy 3:13 That is quite an assurance for those who serve.

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. Acts 6:5 All were pleased with this suggestion of the apostles. We don't know exactly how they made these choices. Some suggest that they voted. Greeks often did so in a similar way to what we do today, by raising hands or by ballot. But the text simply says they chose. It may have been by nomination without objection.

Here is the great surprise. These names are all Greek names. While a minority of Jews who lived all their lives in Jerusalem had Greek names, it appears part of the solution was to select Hellenist men to be sure things were fair. If it were up to us, we might have suggested an equal number of Hebrews and Hellenists. Maybe, if we were generous, we would have one more Hellenist than Hebrews to make up the seven. This early church was so generous and wanting to be above reproach that they went overboard to make sure things were fair. One of these men, Nicolaus, was even a Gentile convert. I think we should take note of their generous spirit in not demanding their own way, but wanting any perception of wrong to be righted. These men had been seen by the disciples to be godly men whose example showed that they would look to God and do what was right.

If we look forward in church history from that point, we can see the hand of God in this decision, for in one generation the Gentile Greek speaking church would outnumber the Jewish Christians. Philip would do what the apostles were slow to do, take the next step given in Acts 1:8 by going to the Samaritans and was used of God to start a great revival (Acts 8:12-14). The rest of this chapter and the next is about Stephen, the first Christian martyr, whose witness was so powerful that the Hellenist synagogue thought he must be stopped. Serving is not an inferior role. If Jesus came to serve, then it is the highest role (Matthew 20:28). This is the upside-down world of the kingdom, so opposite of the way the world thinks.

⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. Acts 6:6 Again we have an Old Testament precedent. Moses laid his hands on Joshua to

convey authority to him to lead the nation (Numbers 27:18, 20). Here the authority conveyed was to be sure the distribution of goods was done without discrimination and that all were treated fairly. Again we see the central importance of prayer. No doubt the apostles were praying for the anointing of the Holy Spirit and His power in the deacons' lives. The results of this continued cooperation with the Holy Spirit are seen in the next verse.

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. Acts 6:7 How can the Word of God increase? Does that mean that the preaching opportunities expanded or that more people shared the gospel or something more? The week I prepared this message, the Japanese Bible study was on the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-8). The seed sown in good soil resulted in an increase of thirty, sixty, or a hundred times. Since it is the seed of the Word that is sown, the grain produced is the Word. When we share the Word with receptive souls, they share the Word with others. The disciples multiply and the Word increases. The Word increases and the disciples multiply. But it is not the once a week pew sitter that sows, but rather it is the disciples. It is those who learn and understand the Word and whose lives and words then spread the seed of God's Word to others (2 Timothy 2:2).

In addition, a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. Ordinary priests were divided into twenty-four different rotations to serve in the temple in two week shifts. There were about eighteen-thousand at the time of Christ. They lived all over Israel. They would all come in for the three pilgrim feasts to help with the service in the temple. Some of the priests were Essenes and their teaching would have prepared them to hear the Gospel and accept Jesus as the Teacher and Great High Priest. Some were Pharisees. I wonder if some of them may have become the Judaisers that Paul struggled against when they tried to have the Gentiles obey the Jewish laws as a part of their salvation (Galatians 3:1-7). Nevertheless, it must have been very encouraging for the disciples to see even the priests acknowledge that Jesus is the Messiah. The Sadducee priests would have the hardest time of any, but the miracles and signs may have even convinced some of them.

I know that we don't want to stand before the Lord one day and see all our efforts go up in smoke because they were merely our works and not those found in prayer, hearing the Holy Spirit's direction. Will you commit to a consistent prayer life? Will ask the Lord how He would have you serve Him? Will you commit this morning to be a servant of the living God, instead of serving your own temporal desires (Romans 6:12-13)? I think every single person here wants to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21). If that is true, we must commit ourselves to prayer that listens, surrenders, and obeys. People often ask about God's will. This is it. It is the blessed life. It is the life God intended for you, and desires for you to experience. It is a joy filled life. It is a love filled life. This is life eternal, to know God and Jesus whom He sent into the world (John 17:3) Would you bow your heads and pray with me for God to help us realize how important it is for us to become a house of prayer?

Questions

- 1 What was the problem?
- 2 What were the apostles' priorities?
- 3 How important is prayer? Why?
- 4 What was the suggested solution?
- 5 What were the qualifications?
- 6 How was it carried out?
- 7 What were the Scriptural patterns they followed?
- 8 What can we learn from the names?
- 9 Why was this good for the future of the church?
- 10 Will you devote yourself to prayer and seeking God's direction for your life?