

Maximizing the Ministry (Acts 6:1-7)

The admonition to care for the poor is found throughout the Scriptures (Exodus 23:11; Leviticus 23:22; Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Esther 9:22; Psalm 14:6, 41:1; Proverbs 14:21; Matthew 11:5, 19:21; Romans 15:26; Galatians 2:10; Luke 14:13, 21). It is one way that people in the community of faith show honor toward God.³⁹ How does showing kindness to the poor honor God? The poor are made in the image of God; showing kindness to the poor is a way of showing respect for His image while also rendering compassion where it is needed by our fellow human beings.

Within the segment of society regarded as poor there is a subsection that is especially dear to God's heart: *widows and orphans*. Widows, especially in the time of the first church, were particularly vulnerable to poverty and, per the dictums of Scripture, were looked after in special ways (Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18; Psalm 68:5; Proverbs 15:25; James 1:26-27). The early church had been mindful of this group. There was a daily distribution aimed at meeting the needs of widows. This distribution to the poor had worked for a while; it was effective when the group was fairly homogenous. But with the growth in the fellowship came a corresponding diversity in the demographics of the disciples. The church is now comprised of local Jews and those that have immigrated to Jerusalem. The local Jews speak Aramaic (or Mishnaic Hebrew). Those that have immigrated to Jerusalem are called Hellenists. Who are the Hellenists and how do they differ from the Hebrews? F.F. Bruce summarizes well:

The church of Jerusalem, we are now told, comprised both “Hebrews” and “Hellenists.” The main distinction between the two groups was probably linguistic: the Hellenists were Jews whose habitual language was Greek and who attended Greek-speaking synagogues; the Hebrews spoke Aramaic (or Mishnaic Hebrew) and attended synagogues where the service was conducted in Hebrew. Many of the Hellenists had affinities with the lands of the Jewish dispersion around the Mediterranean shores, whereas the Hebrews were Palestinian Jews; there were doubtless several minor social and cultural differences between the two groups. In the Jewish world as a whole there were tensions between them, and some of these tensions endured between members of the two groups who had joined the “disciples”⁴⁰

The Hellenists are Jews of the Diaspora that have assimilated some aspect of Greek culture – especially language. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, in his commentary on Acts 6:1-7 and explanation of the grievance growing among the Hellenists against the Hebrews, makes much of the foreignness of the Hellenist’s widows:

While the church was deeply concerned about taking care of the widows, there seems to have been a prejudice in favor of the locally born, Hebrew speaking widows, over the Greek speaking widows who had immigrated into the country.⁴¹

Out of the growth caused by the ministry of the word (Acts 5:42) came diversity. Out of the diversity arose discrimination and inequity. In order to deal with inequity and discrimination there would need to be an intervention by the apostles. The handling of the matter by the twelve contains principles of missional living that are sorely needed by many fellowships and individuals today. If we are willing to listen to the voice of their example our ministries, personal and corporate, can become more efficient and effective.

³⁹ He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD, And He will pay back what he has given. (Proverbs 19:17, NKJV)

⁴⁰ Bruce, F. F. (1988). *The Book of the Acts* (p. 120). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

⁴¹ Fruchtenbaum, Arnold G (2005). MBS159. Ariel Ministries.

Focus on the Main Thing (Acts 6:1-4)

¹ Now in those days, when *the number of the disciples was multiplying*, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. ² Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. ³ Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of *good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business*; ⁴ but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

Acts 6:1 The new community has been characterized by unity and sharing (Acts 4:32). In the recent past people that owned land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds to be distributed according to needs (Acts 4:34-35). Out of this generosity the needs of everyone were met - *until they weren't*. At some point it became obvious that the distribution stopped being fair. Greek-speaking Jews⁴² noticed that their Greek-speaking widows were neglected in the daily distribution of alms. The Hellenist's complaint against the Hebrews, a quiet grumbling that eventually erupted in open criticism, was that the Hebrews were only taking care of Hebrew widows; Hellenistic widows were overlooked.

The care of the widows is good. But when the care is not done carefully it can cause hard feelings, discontent, and even division. Although the number of disciples was multiplying not everyone was feeling good about how their fellowship was treating the Hellenistic widows. Can you imagine the complaint? "Excuse me, Peter, John, and the other apostles. Sorry to bother you guys with this but the Hellenists or Greek-speaking Jews are upset because their widows are neglected by the Hebrews in the daily distribution. That is, when the food pantry or money is given out the Greek-speaking widows typically get less or are left out altogether."

But who are the Hebrews and who are the Hellenists?

The main distinction between the two groups was probably linguistic: the Hellenists were Jews whose habitual language was Greek and who attended Greek-speaking synagogues; the Hebrews spoke Aramaic (or Mishnaic Hebrew) and attended synagogues where the service was conducted in Hebrew.

Bruce, F. F. (1988). *The Book of the Acts* (p. 120). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

Again, the Hellenists were Jews that had been “born outside the Land but had moved into the Land of Israel. These are the Diaspora Jews. Jews from the Dispersion who had migrated back into the Land of Israel.”⁴³ They believed in Yahweh and practiced Judaism. However, owing to their long and multi-generational residence in other countries, they did not speak Hebrew.⁴⁴

Acts 6:2 The twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples to disclose and direct. Trained by Jesus to lead they recognize the importance of ensuring the participation of the church laity in dealing with difficulty. First, they disclosed their assessment of the situation and how it related to their apostleship: **It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.** Notice that they did not speak against serving the widows.

⁴² The Jews that are Greek in their culture are variously referred to as Greek-speaking Jews (NET), Hellenists (ESV, NKJV), Hellenistic Jews (NASB), or Grecians (KJV).

⁴³ This quote is from notes on Acts provided to me by Dr. Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum.

⁴⁴ And the Hellenists did not read from Hebrew-based Scriptures; they read from a Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint.

But they said they should not be the ones doing it. Some will see in what they say a condescending attitude toward the needs of the poor. Some will read this passage and get the impression that the apostles believe themselves to be above serving widows. However, they have been trained to serve (Matthew 20:28; John 13:1-17), charged to serve (Luke 22:26; John 21:17; 1 Peter 5:3), and changed in order to serve effectively (John 14:26; 15:26). In seeking to understand the response of the apostles we must prayerfully consider their calling. The apostles were to have a special foundation-laying ministry (Ephesians 2:20) of preaching, teaching, and penning the word. Each of the following passages sheds some light on their decision in this matter:

- **Their Call to Preaching was the Main Plan** (Mark 3:14) - ¹⁴ Then He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him and that He might send them out to preach. This passage makes it clear that from the beginning Jesus had a preaching ministry in mind. Although He did teach them how to serve others in various ways, preaching was foremost among the reasons they were selected and trained.
- **Their Call to Preaching was Primary** (Acts 5:20; Matthew 10:14) - The angel did not tell the apostles to return to the work of distributing aid to the widows; they were directed to return to the ministry of declaring and teaching the word of God.
- **Working with the Word was The Ministry of the Spirit Among the Apostles** (John 14:23-26; John 15:20) - The apostles were supposed to teach all things that Jesus commanded (Matthew 28:18-20). The Spirit of God needed to have their undivided attention. As the Helper was bringing to remembrance what Jesus taught them, they could not be distracted by the distribution of alms. Such work could be done by someone else.
- **The Call to Preaching was Personal** (John 21:17) – Peter had pledged faithfulness but abandoned Jesus when he was faced with arrest and the promise of brutality. In a painful conversation with Peter the risen Lord both extended forgiveness and defined faithfulness. Jesus made it clear that the past failures were not important; He wanted Peter to go forward loving his lord by feeding His sheep. And the love language of Jesus was not ambiguous – feed His sheep, Peter. For Peter the priority of preaching was more than the calling of Christ on their apostolic band; it was deeply personal as well.

It is with their calling in mind that they must say *no* to the request for their personal oversight of the distribution to the poor. They say *no* in order that they would *yes* to what matters most - *their calling*. For the apostles to personally prevent the problem that has been presented they would have had to take an enormous amount of time away from **prayer** and **the ministry of the word**. That would not be **desirable**; they were called and trained for a ministry of the word. As we consider the response of the apostles we are given a principle for our own day-to-day decisions about what we should and should not do. If we are going to render excellence to God and His people through our living we do well to keep this in mind:

Excellence is never an accident. In order to effectively bring forth fruit you must focus. And there will be no casual completion of the

great calling that is on your life. You must concentrate on your calling (1 Timothy 4:15).

What can I do to become more fruitful in my calling?

- **Get Clarity on Your Calling** (Mark 3:14; Matthew 10:14; John 15:20; John 14:23-26; John 21:17)
- **Regularly Review your Reasons** (Psalm 1; Joshua 1:8) - Keep your plans for the year in view. Regularly retreat to review these plans and request from God insight into what needs to change. This helps with course correction when we begin to drift.
- **Delegate Some Duties** (Exodus 18:1-27) - Failure to delegate is the undoing of many. For those of us who want the ministry to grow we must make it a priority to spend time (1) mentoring the next generation, (2) involving other gifted people in the work we do, and (3) casting vision of what would happen with real focus.

Before I was blessed with an opportunity to serve as a pastor at Three Rivers Community Church in Martindale I was a volunteer with a few ministries in San Antonio, Texas. I remember like it was yesterday talking with a friend in the hotel lobby during a break at a winter conference. I was serving as a speaker with James Mendoza. (Pastor Mendoza is an outstanding leader and teacher at Vista Community Church in San Antonio, Texas.) While at the conference a friend and ministry staff member named Kelly Garren asked if I was going to sign up for another year. As much as I enjoyed serving as a speaker for their conference and for the campuses served by that ministry, I was certain that I would not be going much further with them. Why? Because I was not leading.

And in my home church, although I was asked to serve as a leader of a good ministry in that fellowship, I was certain that I would not be staying. Why? Because I was not teaching. During that same period of time I was also asked if I would lead media ministries for two different organizations. I gave each of them a *no*. Why? Because if I had accepted those positions I would not be focused in the areas that God has equipped and called me: *leading and teaching*. Friend, you must stay with what God had called you to do. Some will regard your steadfast decision to be undistracted as an indicator of arrogance. Nope. It is the outworking of a clarity and confidence in the calling of Christ on your life.

When we are asked to do something, we have to realize that saying *yes* will often mean saying *no* to something else. It is not arrogance or a lack of a servant's heart that will lead you to turn down an "opportunity" when it means being less available or unavailable for what God wants.

Acts 6:3-4 The apostles had already discussed among themselves the issue at hand. By the time they disclosed their assessment they were ready to give direction to the church. They directed the disciples to **seek out seven... of good reputation**. What kind of people? They give the qualifications along with the quantity requirement; essentially these are deacons.

- **Male** (1 Timothy 3:8-12) – Although there are many teachers who would like to neuter this text, the direction of the apostles is not vague; they instructed the disciples, both men and women, to

select **seven men** (ἑπτὰ ἀνδρας). The word for deacon does occur in the feminine in the New Testament (Romans 16:1). But in the identification of a role of a deacon, Peter and Paul, provide descriptions that are masculine. For example, in his letter to Timothy, Paul makes it clear that the deacon cannot be the husband of more than one wife. If the role were truly gender neutral, the same man who wrote that in Christ there is neither male nor female (Galatians 3:28), could have said as much when writing to Timothy.

- **Reputable** (Ecclesiastes 7:1; 2 Corinthians 8:18; 1 Timothy 3:8-9) – The men serving this role must have a good reputation. They will help to quell the complaining that arose if they can be trusted. Otherwise suspicions about their actions and motives will only make matters worse.
- **Spirit-Filled** (Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians 5:18-19) – The work of God cannot be based on human giftedness. Those who would work effectively in the church must be not just indwelt by the Spirit; they must be filled. This means controlled.
- **Wise** (1 Corinthians 2:12-13; Colossians 1:9; James 3:17) – Those who are led by the Spirit of God are not necessarily able to communicate effectively or help a group through a decision. They are surrendered in their heart but not wired to lead. The persons who will serve in this capacity must demonstrate the ability to take the counsel of the spirit and use it to effect good results for the church.

Watch God Work (Acts 6:5-7)

⁵ And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, ⁶ whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. ⁷ Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Acts 6:5 The direction was not onerous to the church. In fact, the whole multitude was pleased. **They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip**, and five others. Luke uses this moment to introduce the reader to two people that will be used greatly by the Lord to advance the mission of the church. Stephen's devotion and Spirit-filled testimony will help precipitate persecution that will help spread the gospel. Philip will distinguish himself as an exceedingly effective evangelist to people generally not respected by the Jews.

It should be noted that one of the men selected was not a Jew by birth. Nicolas was a Gentile from Antioch that had converted to Judaism; he was a proselyte. Further, if the names of the selected men are an indicator, church selected Hellenists; Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas are all Greek names. It is reasonable to suppose that they were selected to help ensure that the Hellenists that had raised the complaint would feel that those controlling the distribution would not be prejudiced against them. And herein is a principle from the early church about leadership:

When the demographics of church leadership do not reflect the demographics of the laity it is likely that the needs of the unrepresented groups are not being met.

Acts 6:6 The men were selected by the congregation. However, that did not make them deacons. No matter who was selected, until the apostles appointed them, they were only anointed and approved. The church was charged with selecting qualified men. Making them deacons was a step that was reserved for the spiritual elders of the church – the apostles. By two things the apostles conferred on the selected seven the new role of deacon: (1) prayer and (2) the laying on of their own hands.

Did these two actions really matter? Indeed, they did. In the history of the Jews the laying on of hands was the means by which leaders bestowed a blessing (Genesis 48:13-20) and commissioned successors (Numbers 27:23). After the apostles pray and lay hands on these men they are found to wield powers formerly only seen in the apostles.

- **Signs and Wonders by Stephen** (Acts 6:8) - ⁸ And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.
- **Signs and Wonders by Philip** (Acts 8:5-8) - ⁵ Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. ⁶ And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. ⁷ For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. ⁸ And there was great joy in that city.
- **Gifts Imparted by Paul** (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6) - ⁶ Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands.

Acts 6:7 The word **then** of verse seven tells the reader that the report is to be viewed as a consequence of prior actions. Three things came out of the decision to appoint deacons. First, adding the deacons to the ministry freed up the apostles to focus on the work they were called to do. With their additional focus on prayer and the ministry of the word **the word of God spread**. The phrase translated **the word of God spread** (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ ἠύξανεν) has the sense of something increasing in importance. It was used this way in the Gospel of John by the Baptist:

He must increase, but I *must* decrease. (John 3:30, NKJV)
ἐκεῖνον δεῖ αὐξάνειν, ἐμὲ δὲ ἐλαττοῦσθαι. (John 3:30, NU)

The word of God continued to increase (ESV). Second, the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. There is more freedom on the apostles to pray and to preach. Accordingly there are more people making decisions to trust and obey Jesus. Third, the ministry of the word began working among the priests. The term used for priests likely does not include the Sadducean aristocracy; there were as many as 8,000 priests in

the city. Most of them supported themselves by being bi-vocational. Among them were people like the godly Zechariah of Luke's gospel (Luke 1:5-6).

There are times when the work of God is hindered by our unwillingness to let things go. But there are people in the wings waiting. These people are eager to (1) serve the Lord and (2) use the gifts that are in them. Such was the case with Stephen. He was ready! Full of faith and the Holy Spirit, he was an untapped resource for the kingdom of God. By delegating some duties the apostles released into the kingdom the help of a man that was eager to serve.

The apostles were freed for their witness, and the word of God spread/grew. The strangeness of expression in describing the *word* as growing has often been noted. Perhaps the parable of the sower lies in the background.¹⁹ Here "the word of God" points to the proclaimed word as it was preached in wider and wider areas. The "word" grows when it is faithfully proclaimed and falls on fertile soil. In this instance it grew on unexpected soil—among the Jewish priests
Polhill, J. B. (1992). *Acts* (Vol. 26, p. 183). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

What about your ministry? Are you effectively reaching others or frustrated by a myriad of things you have to do that do not relate to your calling. For the local church the example and exhortation of the apostles speaks to us today:

Breakthroughs in ministry are often beset by a failure to focus. Better days and breakthroughs lie ahead for the local church when she can (1) free up leadership for prayer and the ministry of the word and (2) delegate day-to-day tasks to deacons.

Questions for Missional Community Discussion

1. Do the demographics of your leadership reflect the demographics of your local church (Acts 6:1)? Are the unrepresented people being heard by people who understand their culture and perspective?
2. Are there people in your midst waiting for an opportunity to step up? Have you clarified the path for moving into leadership? The lack of clarity can be sorely discouraging for those who desire to lead (1 Timothy 3:1).
3. How can the people in your organization communicate their interest in seeing capable people help with the ministry (Acts 6:3)?

Prayer

Lord, you are worthy of glory and power and honor. Help us see the people in our midst that you are wanting to use their gifts to bring about better ministry for this fellowship and breakthroughs for those outside. Where we are either holding people back or in the way of your work, open our eyes.