

May 30, 2021
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Acts
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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SERVANTS OF GOD Acts 6:1-7

Community Baptist Church is a bit unique in some ways. First is the obvious fact that Baptist churches traditionally do not have a plurality of elders. Typically a Baptist church will have a pastor or multiple pastors who serve as elders. In addition to the pastor(s), the church will have a board of deacons whose purpose is to assist the pastor(s) in leading. Also typical is for a Baptist church to have a board of trustees who maintain the physical plant, the facilities, and lead in financial and legal matters.

That is not our pattern of operation. As you know, we have a couple of vocational pastors who serve as leading elders. We are vocational in that serving as ruling elders our sustenance is provided by the Church. Helping us lead and administer is a board of lay elders. They have other jobs or responsibilities in life, but also serve as spiritual leaders, teachers, and administrators. Then we have a board of deacons who do what trustees do in most Baptist churches. They maintain the practical, physical, financial matters of the assembly. Who these people are, what they are like, and what they do is one of the issues our text addresses.

Another unique characteristic about Community Baptist Church is the strong emphasis we have on preaching the Word of God. We believe that Christ has not changed His plan for building His Church since the day He began the process almost 2,000 years ago. We still believe the Bible is sufficient to teach the truth of the gospel, to lead sinners to faith in Christ, and to make saints more like Christ. Because we believe that the Bible is sufficient to do exactly the work Christ intends to do in us, we put much emphasis on corporate

preaching and teaching of this supernatural Word. We believe God does a supernatural work when His Word is declared publicly.

That too is an issue our text addresses. Very soon in the Church-building process, it became clear that, because Christ was bringing more and more people into the Church, the Church was experiencing some serious growth pains. The early Church dealt with problems that we don't have to deal with. And yet there are similarities. In short, the logistical problems centered on pragmatic, earthy, mundane, financial matters. The lessons are very simple to see and very important for us to remember.

A Practical Problem (vv.1-4).

The first members of the Church ran into a snag early on. The problem is stated in the first two verses of our text. There appeared to be some inequities in distribution of goods. *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 (v.1).*

Those first days were “disciple increasing” days. It is probably good for us right at the outset of this study to take a minute to understand the meaning of the word *disciple*. It is easy to think that there were twelve of them, and only twelve, because all four Gospel accounts refer to the apostles as disciples. For example, in Matthew 10:1 we read that Jesus “called to Him His twelve disciples.”

The word is *matheis* which comes from the Greek verb that means “to learn” (*manthano*). The disciple idea was not new to the early Christians because becoming a disciple had been a common practice since the Greek teachers and philosophers. In fact, the Greek translation of the Old Testament uses this word to describe a person who chose to be a devout follower of Yahweh. Based on the practice of the concept, we conclude that a disciple is someone who has made a conscience decision to follow Jesus in order to learn about Him and become like Him.

But because the term “disciple” would be used to identify the person from the moment he or she made the decision to follow Christ, it was possible for a person to be a true disciple or an insincere disciple. Therefore, even when Jesus used the term to describe the

twelve apostles as disciples, He knew one of them was insincere. So, too, the term is used to define all of the people who followed Jesus even if it was somewhat regularly. And it speaks of those who followed for the wrong reasons but were eventually exposed. In the context of the conflict about hoards of people following Jesus to get free food we read, *After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him (John 6:66)*. Real disciples would never do that.

Therefore, the text simply reveals that there were more and more people coming into the visible church. Positively, we like to think that all of them were truly born again. This should be the case because the emphasis is on the supernatural work of Christ building His Church. Obviously, throughout the story of the Church beginning, there is emphasis on the life-changing work of the Holy Spirit. But practically, we know that some of those early disciples were not sincere.

Surely there were those who were serious about deciding to follow Christ. But because the heart is deceitful, it is possible to say all the right words, join the group, but not be a genuine disciple. And so throughout the Church age there have been multitudes of people who know what to believe, what to say, but who have not experienced the miracle of regeneration. Eventually, the truth is known as we observe the fruit they produce or don't produce.

In that huge assembly of followers, which certainly numbered over 10,000 and maybe as high as 20,000 (the last figure given was 5,000 in 4:4), the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews. When the disciples were compounding in number by the day, *a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews (v.1b)*. The most expected question at this point must be, "What is a Hellenist?"

The term refers to a group of people who were not of Greek origin but who identified with Greek culture and especially the Greek language. This was a natural line of division in the early Church because the Jewish people living in Jerusalem spoke Aramaic or Hebrew. There were no doubt some people like Paul who was bilingual and would have been Hellenistic since he was from Tarsus, but gloried in being a Hebrew. The reference in our text is probably most applicable to Jewish people who had been living outside of Palestine but had moved back to Jerusalem. They would speak the

Greek language, conduct services in the synagogue in Greek, and maybe practice some Greek (Gentile) ways of living.

The specific problem was a matter of inequality. A conflict arose with the Hellenists *because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution (v.1)*. This was a perfect opportunity for Satan to damage the Church. He had already used persecution against it, but that resulted in more growth (4:1-13). He had tried to proliferate the sin of lying in the church, but God stopped that in no uncertain terms (5:1-11). Now Satan would try cultural division.

The problem centered on the daily care for the widows. Care for the widows had always been a foundational issue for the Jews according to God's law (Deut. 14:29; 16:11). God required care for *the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do (Deuteronomy 14:29)*. Later Paul would teach that it is the responsibility of the Church to take care of those widows who loved and served God but who had no family or other means for support (1 Timothy 5:3-16). The essence of the rule is stated in verse three, *Honor widows who are truly widows (1 Timothy 5:3)*.

It appears that the Hellenist group was convinced that their widows were being discriminated against – probably intentionally. That was a real and serious problem. How were the first Christians going to solve the problem? The apostles could not neglect the central work of the Church in order to fix the problem. *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" (v.2)*.

It was time to get organized. This is the practical and necessary side of the Church. Without some kind of structure, not only would the problem of food distribution grow, but many other problems material, physical and spiritual would become issues. Imagine twelve apostles trying to learn about and deal with all the needs physical and spiritual of maybe 20,000 people. What were they to do?

They called a church meeting for all voting members in good standing over the age of 18! Okay that is what we would do. In fact, the apostles' address of the problem looked much like our own

system. This truly was the first congregational meeting. It is doubtful that everyone, including all the women and children, showed up. It would have been almost impossible to address that many people. But the assembly was responsible to make this choice. It is interesting to note that the Bible never gave the assembly the authority to choose the elders/pastors/bishops.

The reason the apostles gave for wanting to find some helpers is because *“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables”* (v.2c). The Word of God was the primary focus of being witnesses for Christ. We will see more on that in a moment. Therefore, it would not be right that they should neglect the Word of God. The word preaching is not in the Greek text but is obviously implied. The Word of God to them was the Old Testament and the things they learned from Jesus. That was the source of their “witness.” To *give up* would be to leave behind, to abandon for something else.

The apostles concern was a matter of doing what was *right* and avoiding what was not *right*. The word translated “right” means pleasing, desirable. But who determines what is pleasing or desirable? Is that according to the apostles’ whims? Obviously, neglecting the Word would not be desirable to Jesus who commissioned these men to go and teach sinners all things that He had commanded. Nor, therefore, could it be pleasing to the witnesses to forsake God’s Word.

It would not be right for the apostles to forsake God’s Word even though the alternative was noble work. The alternative work was to *serve tables*. That is another way of talking about taking care of the material needs of others. The Greek word for tables speaks of a place where one eats food, which was the issue here. But it also refers to the money changers’ tables (John 2:15) which was also a need requiring distribution in the Church. The word for serve is *diakoneo* which gives us the English word deacon, an office in our church.

So what did the apostles propose to be the solution to the problem? They recommended that the assembly pick out some “table servers.” *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* (v.3). The people (all 20,000) were to agree on seven men.

That in itself would be a miracle. It might work though because there is no indication this was a Baptist church.

Basically, the apostles set forth three qualifications for the men the Church would choose. They needed to be men of good repute, full of the Holy Spirit, and full of wisdom. That was just the beginning of qualities required in the deacon. We can compare the later, more detailed list for men who would serve the same capacity. Paul taught that, *Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. 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 3:8-13).

Choosing men who could take care of the physical needs of the Church would free up the apostles so they could be devoted to prayer and work of the Word. They reasoned, *“But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word”* (v.4). This statement sets the standard for spiritual leaders, the office of pastor/teacher, overseer. Contrast today’s emphasis for many pastors to be the creator of programs, the overseer of multiple niche ministries, the facilitator of conversations, or the administrator of a corporation. There are some advisors who consider themselves to be experts in ministry who propose that the pastor is supposed to be equivalent to the CEO of a major corporation. Jesus Christ, the Master Builder of the Church, desires for pastors to devote themselves to prayer and to ministry of the Word.

There are actually two areas presented which are to be the “minister’s” focus. Obviously, the focus is on the Word, referred to more precisely in verse two as the Word of God. The second focus was to be on prayer. Those two duties are to be the focus of the pastor/teacher in every age. We are to be devoted to it, to remain constant, focused on it as the daily work. By the way, it is interesting that the word *ministry* in this verse is also *diakonia*. That means that the pastor is also a deacon of sorts. The pastor’s main service to the

assembly that Christ builds is devotion to prayer and preaching/teaching the Word of God.

Application of the Solution (vv.5-7).

As the apostles had instructed, the church went about to choose deacons (vv.5,6). The whole gathering chose because *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 (v.5)*. There is a certain irony in this record of the first Deacons. All of these names were of Greek (Gentile) origin. Everyone of the first Deacons was likely a Hellenist. Why? This is a good indication of the love, compassion, unity of the early Church. That Stephen is the only one said to be full of faith and the Holy Spirit is not an indication that the others were not.

We know the resulting ministry of two of these Deacons who happened to be preachers also. Stephen is known because God used him in remarkable ways to do signs and wonders. *And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people (Acts 6:8)*. He stirred enough attention as a witness to get arrested (6:9-15). His preaching was supernatural so that *they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking (Acts 6:10)*.

We also know a bit about Philip. He became known as the evangelist (Acts 21:8). Following Christ's command to witness outside of Jerusalem, Philip went to Samaria and *proclaimed Christ to them (Acts 8:5)*. God also did signs through him (Acts 8:6). Many people believed and were baptized identifying with Christ (Acts 8:12-13). But Jesus sent an angel to tell Philip to leave the successful ministry in Samaria and go down to the Gaza desert so he could evangelize the official from Ethiopia (Acts 8:26-38). Then the Holy Spirit miraculously picked him up from Gaza and set Philip down in Azotus where he just kept preaching the gospel (Acts 8:40). He must have been on leave of absence as a Deacon for awhile.

The other five Deacons are unknown to us because Scripture is silent. The only possible exception is that maybe Nicholas became the

founder of the Nicholaitan cult that is mentioned in Revelation 2:5,15.

The entire assembly chose these seven men to be Deacons and then the apostles dedicated them to the task. *These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them (v.6)*. It is possible to take this statement literally that the assembly set their choices before, in the presence of, the apostles. The purpose was for the apostles to pray and lay hands on them. This is a picture of apostolic approval. Paul reminded Timothy that the same formality affirmed his calling to be a pastor (2 Timothy 1:6). Also there is a reminder here that Christ ordained the apostles to be the human leaders of the Church in those early years.

Immediately, we read that after that major step in the building of the Church, Christ continued to build His Church (v.7). He multiplied the disciples. *And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem (v.7a)*. This statement reminds us that the more God's Word is preached, the broader will be the impact of it. Christ's desire is that His Word will be preached throughout the entire world – no person having not heard the Good News. As the messengers faithfully proclaimed the Word, Christ continued to use it to bring many into faith in Him. Multitudes in Jerusalem became disciples.

We know from the benefit of 20/20 hindsight that it was getting time for the bulging Church to burst her seams and spill out telling the gospel all over that part of the world.

The breadth of Christ's work often surprises us. Such is the case when we read that self-righteous sinners came to faith. As Christ was increasing the number of disciples, *a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (v.7b)*. This is not an indication that any of the high priest family came to faith. Every indication is that they continued to fight what they perceived to be a threat to their personal security. But many of the people who were engaged in temple worship, supported by the temple, became obedient to the faith. We can surmise that their faith cost them their job.

Sometimes we make the work of the Church too complicated. That is probably because we are so easily results-oriented. We invent, create, worry about, spend our time on doing anything and everything that is suggested or recommended because it appears these things

have results. But an honest appraisal of “results” only means more people. In time, we often learn that many of those effected people never really became genuine disciples. Our better use of time and energy will be the basics: 1. Prayer. 2. Ministry of God’s Word. 3. Ministering to who we have.