

Responsibilities within the Church

Acts 6:1-7

Introduction

There were various attacks by the Devil on the church, trying to ruin it at the beginning. There was persecution from outside, and corruption from within. Then there was the distraction of the leadership. Issues arose which diverted the time and energy of the leaders away from their God-given responsibilities. Today we come to one issue which was the cause of problems and difficulties in the church.

The Problem the Church faced

The problem arose from a trifling matter, as often. The work was growing and expanding; then suddenly there were complaints heard. As the Children of Israel had grumbled against Moses (Exodus 16:7; Numbers 14:27), so there was grumbling against the Apostles who had the money people had given from the sale of their land and houses (Acts 4:35). The complaint was not a new or a rare one. They were accused of not being fair in the way they were giving it.

Many widows were being cared for, and some had more than others in the daily distribution. These widows were unable to earn their own living and had no relatives to support them, so the church took responsibility, making a daily distribution of food. There were two groups in the church – Grecian Jews and Aramaic-speaking Jews. The former group complained that their group was being overlooked. There is no suggestion that it was deliberate, it was probably just poor administration.

The Grecian Jews spoke Greek; they were descended from Jews who were Jews of the Dispersion, living in lands of the Mediterranean. This had happened over the last 2-300 years. Now these Jews were caught up in Greek culture and thought. The Aramaic-speaking Jews were natives of Palestine, immersed in Hebrew culture. These two groups had been at loggerheads for years. The tragedy was that this rivalry had now spilled into the Christian Church, whose Head had abolished such distinctions.

So tension and ill feeling entered. This was inevitable since the church numbered 5000 and was growing all the time. Strains were inevitable. The fact that the Apostles were all from the Aramaic group, revered in Palestine, meant that they were obvious targets for criticism. They appeared to be favouring the Palestinian widows, treating the Grecian widows like second-class citizens – social discrimination.

This faced the Apostles with a problem. They were the leaders of a growing church, with only 24 hours in a day to carry out increasing responsibilities. A new arrangement was necessary. They worked out their priorities. They had been called to prayer and ministry of the Word. They could not also wait on tables because they did not have enough time. It was not that they thought the job was beneath them; it was just that their hands were already full. If they were taken up with a social welfare programme, they could not devote themselves to their main task.

The result was the first church business meeting on record. The Twelve put the situation before the church. They did not impose the solution, but shared it with all.

The Decision which the Church reached

The Apostles explained the situation, that they could not look after this work of distribution because of their commitment to the Word of God and to prayer. Their advice was to choose seven men, because Jewish practice was to set up boards of seven men for particular duties.

Spiritual qualities were necessary. Men who were **full of Spirit and wisdom** (Acts 6:3) were sought. Although the task might be mundane – collecting money, distributing it, giving out food, serving people at tables – it was still under the authority of the Holy Spirit. Wisdom requires discernment, common sense, shrewdness, and having “head screwed on right”.

Seven were chosen – all with Greek names, so they were probably from the section that were complaining. A sensible move – offering an olive branch, a gracious gesture. The whole church approved the move. The Apostles prayed and laid hands on them.

The laying on of hands was an Old Testament practice (e.g. Joshua, in Numbers 27:15-23, appointed to be Moses’ successor.) Also Rabbis were appointed in this way. Thus those in authority showed they were commissioning, and identifying themselves with the work to be carried out. The prayer was for the blessing of God and infilling of the Holy Spirit.

Some argue that this was the beginning of the office of deacon in the early church. Some go further and insist that in their church there must be seven deacons, no more, no less. But few lay hands on deacons and set them apart (except in parts of Wales). The laying on of hands is now restricted to ordination to ministry at the commencement of the service of ministry.

As a result, there was greater effectiveness. **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** (Acts 6:7). At this time there were 18,000 priests and Levites in Jerusalem, on duty for a fortnight each according to a rota. Perhaps the reason for the spread was because of the way they dealt with the problem, their concern to be fair, and to protect the weak and vulnerable. An impression was made on those watching the church from outside.

Lessons learnt from this story

Firstly the importance of getting priorities right. The Apostles were especially called to ministry of the Word and prayer. We are all called to be witnesses and to pray. But theirs was a full-time responsibility, and they had to maintain that at all costs. When other things claimed their attention, they had to let them go. They were wisely prepared to delegate and not try to do everything.

Delegation is not everybody's strong point. Some find it hard to let go of the reins. We are tempted to think we are indispensable, and are driven on by selfish ambition and a feeling that no one can do it as well as me. It takes humility to surrender control. The Apostles had this. At all costs, they wanted to be faithful to their calling.

We all have gifts, and all Christians are involved in ministry. We sometimes reserve the expression "Going into the ministry" to mean pastoral or evangelistic ministry. But we are all in "ministry"; we are all involved in a "fulltime work" – being a Christian is not just for Sundays!

The Greek words used for each role in this passage clearly have the same root. **The daily distribution** (v.1) - τη διακονια; **The ministry of the Word** (v.4) - τη διακονια; **Wait on tables** (v.2) - διακονιν. διακονος can be translated servant or minister, and is used constantly. The same word is used for deacon in Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8,12. Some are in the ministry in preaching and some in the ministry of caring for people, looking after widows. One is not superior to the other. Both serve God and serve people. Both require spiritual people.

So in the church leadership, the elders, including the teaching elder, have spiritual oversight and the ministry of preaching and teaching the Word, i.e. the spiritual welfare of the members. The deacons look after practical affairs, finance, administration, and social work. But all are in ministry. The spiritual qualities for both are the same, except elders must be "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2).

All members are also in the ministry, and should be spiritual people. They have spiritual gifts too.

Beware of drawing too sharp a distinction between elders and deacons. The collection in Antioch for the church in Jerusalem was given to the elders of the church (Acts 11:30). Philip was both a deacon and an evangelist (Acts 6:5; 8:5). The life and ministry of the church must be balanced, well-rounded, catering for the spiritual needs and physical needs, catering for the soul and the body.

But there is to be an emphasis on prayer, for that links heaven's resources with human helplessness. Being in touch with God is basic to Christian work. So prayer is fundamental, not supplemental.

Also there must be an emphasis on the preaching of the Word. Men must be urged to repentance and faith. Believers must be built up in the Word.

Yet, the practical is also important. God is concerned with the whole man. The church is not just a preaching centre, but a family home, a place of loving care and practical service.

We need to be filled with the Holy Spirit and His gift of wisdom (v.3). Not just the deacons and elders, but all members. Hearts must be open to His authority and power. The result will be practical wisdom, sanctified common sense, and spiritual discernment. We need the Holy Spirit, not just for spiritual "Sunday" matters, but also in our secular life and in the small matters of daily work and business. In everything, we need to be in touch with God, seeking His guidance and light. Even the matter of

making sure the widows all got their fair share was deemed a task that required men full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.

Ninety per cent of life is taken up with trivialities. Unless we have the Holy Spirit and wisdom in dealing with those trivialities, ninety per cent of our lives will be without God, His grace and wisdom. God's guidance and God's will needs to extend to all aspects of life.