

Acts 6:1-7

- How to deal with problems in the church -

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Introduction

- ❖ How to deal with problems in the church.
 - Choose men (or women) who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom, and who have a good reputation.
 - Keep your focus on the ministry of the word (preaching and teaching) and prayer.
 - Remember this. The church is not a project of men, nor a personal business, but the work of Christ, the Lord.
- ❖ Acts 6:1-7 is very instructive with regard to problem solving.

- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlap with other sermon outlines taken from the Letter of James. This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a “stand-alone”. You can also fit this outline into a series of sermons.

Context

- ❖ Acts 6:1-7 is part of the “first chapter of Acts”: 2:1–8:1 — beginnings in Jerusalem.

Pentecost (2:1-47)	
2:1-13	The Holy Spirit is given to the disciples
2:14-41	The Sermon of Peter

2:42-47	The Fellowship of the Believers
The healing of the crippled man (3:1-4:31)	
3:1-10	The healing of the crippled man
3:11-26	The speech of Peter
4:1-22	Peter and John defend the healing in front of the Sanhedrin
4:23-31	Peter and John released and Prayer
The believers share their possessions (Acts 4:31-5:11)	
4:31-37	Sharing
5:1-11	Ananias and Sapphira
Miracles and Wonders, Persecution (Acts 5:12-41)	
5:12-16	Miracles and Wonders
5:17-41	In front of the Sanhedrin
The Choosing of the Seven, Stephen (Acts 6:1-8:1)	
6:1-7	The choosing of the Seven
6:8-8:1	Stephen seized and his speech to the Sanhedrin, his martyrdom.

Form and structure

❖ An outline of Acts 6:1-7):

<i>Initial situation of growth: (verse 1a)</i>	In those days when the number of disciples was increasing,
<i>A problem arose: (verse 1b)</i>	the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.
<i>A solution proposed: (verse 2-4)</i>	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 will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."
<i>The solution accepted:</i>	This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor,

(verse 5, 6)	Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.
Continued and accelerated growth: (verse 7)	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.

- ❖ There are two observations to be made:
 - Compare:
 - Verse 1: “the number of disciples was increasing.”
 - Verse 7: “the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly.”
 - The importance of the Word of God:
 - Verse 2: “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God.”
 - Verse 7: “So the word of God spread.”

Technical, hermeneutical and historical notes

Widows

- ❖ Newman & Nida: “In Jerusalem there were many widows of men who had lived most of their lives outside of the Holy City, but had come to Jerusalem to die and to be buried. In order to care for these widows the Jews had set up means whereby they would be given money for food. Evidently the Christian community had adopted a similar custom. *The daily distribution of funds* is literally ‘in the daily distribution,’ and may be taken to refer either to *funds* (as in the TEV) or else to food. In light of the manner in which the Jews themselves handled the care for the widows, it is quite likely that the distribution is that of money rather than food.”¹

Verse 2, 4

- ❖ To wait on / to serve (ESV) = “**διακονέω**”: 4. **to carry out official duties, minister.**² 5. **Acts 6:2** poses a special problem: **care for, take care of.** To look after tables can be understood of serving food at tables, but it is improbable that some widows would be deprived of food at a communal

¹ Newman, B. M., & Nida, E. A. (1972, p. 134-135).

² Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 229).

meal. The term more probably refers to administrative responsibility, one of whose aspects is concern for widows without specifying the kind of assistance that is allotted.³

- ❖ Ministry = “διακονία”: 2. **performance of a service**; a. generally *service*⁴ (Acts 6:1, 4).

Verse 3

- ❖ The translations of the NIV and the ESV slightly differ. The NIV mentions two characteristics, where the ESV mentions three.
 - The NIV is preferred. “They have a good reputation because they are full of the Spirit and wisdom.”

NIV	ESV
Brothers, choose seven men from among you	Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men
who are known to be 1. full of the Spirit 2. and wisdom.	1. of good repute, 2. full of the Spirit 3. and of wisdom,
We will turn this responsibility over to them	whom we will appoint to this duty.

- ❖ Known to be / of good repute = “μαρτυρέω”: 2. **to affirm in a supportive manner**, *testify favorably, speak well (of), approve*. b. passive, **be well spoken of**, *be approved* (Acts 6:3).⁵

Verse 4

- ❖ will give our attention = “προσκατερέω”: 2..**to persist in something**. a. *busy oneself with, be busily engaged in, be devoted to*.⁶

Exposition

Verse 1

- ❖ The church in Jerusalem was growing continuously.

³ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 230).

⁴ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p.230).

⁵ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 618).

⁶ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 881).

- “About three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41). “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). “And the number of men grew to about five thousand” (Acts 4:4). “More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number” (Acts 5:14), despite the first problems (Acts 5:1-13) and the opposition from the Jewish leaders (Acts 4:1-31; 5:17-42).
- ❖ This growth was a work of the Lord Jesus Christ. His disciples obeyed his instructions (Acts 1:3). “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.”
 - The apostles teaching (Acts 3:11-26; 4:33; 5:28-32).
 - “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (Acts 5:42).
 - Wonders and miraculous signs (Acts 3:1-10; 4:16; 4:30; 5:1-11; 5:12-16).
 - The fellowship and the breaking of the bread (Acts 4:32-5:11).
 - Prayer (Acts: 4:23-31).
- ❖ “This is the first time in the book of Acts where *disciples* is used as a designation of the Christians.”⁷
 - This Christian community consists of people who want to learn and follow Jesus Christ (Mt 28:19, 20).
- ❖ The Jerusalem Church consisted of two groups:
 - “**Hebraic Jews.**” Jews from Judea, who spoke Aramaic.
 - “**Grecian Jews.**” Jews from the Diaspora (Acts 2:1-13; Acts 7:9), who spoke Greek.
 - Although it should not be the case, differences in language and culture between different groups can cause problems like unequal attention paid to them by the leadership, in this case, The Twelve.
 - “Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.”

Verse 2-4

- ❖ “**So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together.**” The Twelve shared the problem with the congregation and asked for their approval. This is important. If a group of the congregation
- ❖ “**and said, ‘It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.’**”

⁷ Newman, B. M., & Nida, E. A. (1972, p. 134).

- The Twelve could solve the problem by themselves at the expense of their ministry of teaching and of proclaiming the word of God and the good news that Jesus is the Christ.
 - **“to wait on tables” = taking responsibility for serving the ones who are in need.**
- This solution would inhibit the growth of the church. Therefore they come up with another solution.
- **“Word of God.” = “the message that comes from God.”**⁸
- ❖ **“Brothers, choose seven men from among you.”**
 - The Twelve didn’t select the seven themselves. The brothers are asked to choose among themselves. From the onset, The Seven will have the confidence of the brothers (and the Grecian widows).
 - The number of **“Seven”** might have a symbolical meaning of fullness.
- ❖ **“who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.”**
 - These are important requirements for every teacher and leader in the church.
 - Full of the Spirit means:
 - showing the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22, 23),
 - taking the Words of Christ by heart (and being able to teach and apply them; Mt 28:19).
 - He is **the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—**“
(Isa 11:2).
 - Wisdom:
 - “for understanding words of insight;
 - for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, **doing what is right and just and fair**” (Prov 1:2, 3).
 - Wisdom is a gift of the Spirit and at the same time, it can be acquired by listening and learning, asking the right questions (Prov 1:1-7; Lk 2:46, 51).
 - They serve and represent Christ.
- ❖ **“We will turn this responsibility over to them.”**
 - What did Peter mean? Did he mean that The Twelve would stay responsible for **“ministry of the Word of God”**? Did he mean that The Seven should become responsible for **“to wait on tables”** for both Hebraic and Grecian Jews?
 - It may be helpful to distinguish between specific responsibility and shared responsibility and between primary and secondary responsibility.
 - The primary responsibility of The Twelve is **“ministry of the Word of God”** and they have a shared responsibility together with The Seven with regard to **“to wait on tables”**.

⁸ Newman, B. M., & Nida, E. A. (1972, p. 135).

- The primary responsibility of The Seven is **“to wait on tables”** and they have a shared responsibility together with the The Twelve with regard to **“ministry of the Word of God”**.
- The different responsibilities were not the exclusive domain of one of the two groups, The Twelve and The Seven.
 - Acts 6:8-10 paints a picture of Stephan (full of the Spirit and wisdom), while he is not “waiting on tables” but discussing with members from the probably Grecian synagogues “of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia.” “Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.” Compare Acts 2:43.
- Newman & Nida: The phrase *give ... full time (NIV: will give our attention)* to should not be understood as meaning that the prayer and preaching were the only activities of the apostles; **rather, it was their main work**, in some languages, therefore, the equivalent is “we ourselves will have the work of praying and preaching the good news.”⁹
- A similar practical solution is found in Exodus 18.

Verse 5, 6

- ❖ **“This proposal pleased the whole group.”** There is unanimity among the brothers.
Compare:
 - Verse 1b: “complained.”
 - Verse 5: “pleased.”
- ❖ **“They chose.”** The names of these seven men have a Greek origin and probably these seven spoke both languages, Greek and Aramaic.
- ❖ **“They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit;”**
 - Stephen is mentioned first because Luke will tell about his work and martyrdom in the next chapters (Acts 6:8-8:
 - Wisdom and Faith are also mentioned by Paul as gifts of the Holy Spirit: “To one there is given through the Spirit **the message of wisdom**, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, **to another faith** by the same Spirit” (1 Cor 12:8, 9).
 - Philip is mentioned after Stephen. Chapter 8 of Acts has been devoted to his evangelistic ministry.
- ❖ **“They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.”**
 - These three elements are important for ordination.
 - Presentation = **“presented these men”**.
 - Prayer = **“prayed”**.
 - Confirmation = **“laid their hands on them”**.

⁹ Newman, B. M., & Nida, E. A. (1972, p. 136).

- “The laying of hands was a gesture taken over by the Christian community from the Jewish community. It symbolized not only the giving of a responsibility but, what is more important, the imparting of strength and of the community’s blessing.¹⁰”

Verse 7

- ❖ **“So the word of God spread.”**
 - “The (spiritual) obstacles have been removed.” The Twelve could devote themselves entirely to the ministry of the Word and prayer. The result is: **“increased rapidly”**
- ❖ **“and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”**
 - This final remark is notable. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ had made the daily offerings as part of the worship in the temple obsolete.

Application

- ❖ Local/regional/national churches can face many problems. These problems might inhibit the spiritual growth of the church.
 - If there are problems which can cause discord, stress, complaints, despair, impatience, the leadership of the congregation must ask if these problems are caused by external factors, or internal factors, or a mix.
 - External factors might be opposition from other religious groups, oppression, or persecution. In that case, prayer, faith, “love your enemies,” compassion are important.
 - Internal factors might be organisational problems (Acts 6:1), or disagreements concerning doctrine (Acts 15:1-35), disagreements concerning practices, or sins among brothers (Mt 18:15-20).
 - Problems caused by external factors cannot be solved by the leadership of a congregation. They are beyond their sphere of influence. In that case, prayer and wisdom is needed
 - Problems caused by internal factors must be solved by the leadership in cooperation with the congregation. Solutions might be: practical and organisational; Christian education and instruction.
- ❖ In Acts 6:1-7, the problem is recognised by the leadership (The Twelve). The problem and the possible solutions are shared with the congregation. The congregation agrees with the proposed solution and they will support the solution. In this case, they will look for men (and women)

¹⁰ Newman, B. M., & Nida, E. A. (1972, p. 137).

“who are who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3), “who are known to be full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts: 6:5).

- Faith = trust in God!
- Wisdom = the capability to make the right decisions, to give good advice, to discern the right moments, to know when to instruct, to rebuke, to admonish.
 - Knowing God, knowing man, knowing oneself, and the course of life, are prerequisites for wisdom.
 - “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with **the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.** All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:14-17).

❖ Priority:

- Serve the Lord Jesus Christ.
- The spread of the Word of God in teaching and proclaiming the Gospel is priority number one.
 - Word of God = The message that comes from God – ministers of the Word of God don’t proclaim their own message.

Quotes

- ❖ Chrysostom (A.D. 349 – 407, Archbishop of Constantinople): “For indeed great wisdom is needed in such ministries. **Do not think, just because he (Stephen) was not entrusted with the word, that such a person does not need wisdom; on the contrary, he is in great need of it.** (Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles 14.)¹¹
- ❖ “A full and faithful witness to Christ includes the witness of personal testimony, godly living, and acts of mercy and charity to our neighbor, without which the preaching of the Gospel appears barren.”¹²

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¹¹ Martin, F., & Smith, E. (Ed.) (2006, p. 71).

¹² Bloesch, D. G. (2002, p. 304).

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