

January 10, 2021

# Choosing Leaders

Acts 6:1-7

(Series: Reimagining Church; Message Sixteen)

## REVIEW (SLIDE)

*August – focused on prayer and waiting...*

*September – focused on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...*

*October – focused on the early church's Rule of Life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer*

*November – focused on the Church's mission*

*This month – focusing on Spirit-empowered leadership*

## Scripture:

*In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup>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.*

*<sup>3</sup>Brothers and sisters, 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 <sup>4</sup>and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."*

*<sup>5</sup>This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup>They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.*

*<sup>7</sup>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 6:1-7)*

## Message

**He wanted to be a conductor in the worst way. His conducting style, however, was a bit idiosyncratic.** During soft passages he would crouch extremely low. During loud sections, he'd often leap into the air, even, on occasion, shout at the orchestra.

His memory was poor. Periodically he'd forget that he had instructed the orchestra not to repeat a section of music. Then during the performance, when he went back to repeat the section and they went forward, he'd stop the

piece and holler, “Stop! Wrong! That will not do. Again! Again!”

During one long, dedicated passage, he jumped high to cue a loud entrance, but nothing happened because he had lost count and signaled the orchestra too soon.

For his own piano concerto, he tried conducting from the piano. At one point he jumped off the bench and bumped the lit candles off the piano. On another occasion he knocked over some choirboys.

As his hearing worsened, musicians tried to ignore his conducting and get their cues from the first violinist until finally the musicians pleaded with him to give up conducting and go home. And he finally did.

Not everyone is gifted and called to be a conductor; and this would-be conductor wasn't very good at it, but he was fairly good at something else. You might have heard of him; his name was Ludwig van Beethoven - one of the greatest composers of all time. Good leadership requires a leadership giftedness.

**Already in its very brief history, the church has faced some **challenging issues:****

--In **Acts 4:1-21** and **5:17-40**, early church leaders were harassed, **beaten**, jailed and ordered to stop preaching and teaching.

--In **Acts 5:1-11**, we encounter the temptation of status and significance and the resulting **hypocrisy** of Ananias and Sapphira - and the fear their instant deaths brought to the early church.

--Now in **Acts 6**, there is another assault on the **unity** and **mission** of the church - not from the enemy, but from friendly fire.

## **DIVISION**

**The Church in Acts 6 is primarily Jewish with **two kinds** of Jews embracing the Christian faith.** Some had been born and raised in Israel/Jerusalem; they spoke Aramaic, like Jesus did. They were known as **Hebraic** Jews.

Others had been born away from Palestine but were now back in Jerusalem; they spoke Greek - the official language of the Roman Empire; they had been scattered during the diaspora and were known as Grecian or **Hellenistic** Jews. Some had returned to Jerusalem for the sole purpose of studying the Torah. Some had come as pilgrims to celebrate the feasts with thousands of others and had simply lingered. Some had come to settle down - to spend their last remaining years in Jerusalem so they could die and be buried there.

**In the tradition of the Jewish poor-relief, the Church offered **provisions****

**for those who were in need – benevolence, daily food, clothing, etc.** Some Hellenists felt they (i.e., their widows, etc.) were **being slighted** in the distribution (there is no indication it was intentional), but it caused dissention in the church! (Jesus hasn't been gone very long, and there is already conflict. Imagine?)

Conflict happens; people don't always agree; we like our way – we assume everyone else should too; when they don't agree with us, we talk negatively about them to discredit them – even if they are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

It didn't take too long in the world. Two chapters (Genesis 3) after we were created, we already messed up. Our sinful nature reared its ugly head three chapters after the Church was born; here it does again. **Acts 6** gives us an opportunity to acknowledge it still happens today.

There may have been a disproportionate number of Hellenist widows - people who had come back to Jerusalem and didn't have family or a support system in the area. But **seeds of discontent** were planted and took root. People started **complaining** (The Greek word in **Acts 6:1** means “*displeasure expressed in murmuring and secret talk*”).

Most complaining doesn't usually start with an evil intent or a harden heart; most complaining is rooted in **frustration**, misunderstanding, **hurt**, feeling marginalized, in being taken for granted or from simply being unhappy.

But like so many since them, they didn't take their concern(s) appropriately to those responsible (that is, to those who could do something about it), they simply complained about it – to anyone/everyone who would listen. Like a flu bug – or a viral pandemic - discontent and murmuring spread quickly and found its way into peoples' hearts and souls. A quarrelsome spirit festers quickly and spreads **dangerously fast**.

As is so often the case, this discontent was prompted by long standing and unresolved issues: Greek vs. Hebrew, home-grown vs. newcomer, financially set vs. under-resourced, old ways vs. new ways, your way vs. my way, etc. It now explodes causing division in the early church. Little issues can grow into big issues with an alarming rate of speed. Unchecked *murmuring* can sidetrack the church from its **mission**, negate its witness in the world and **destroy** a church (congregation) overnight.

**The Apostles (the Twelve) got wind of this discontent** (rumors always travel faster than encouragement and appreciation). They summoned the body of disciples (i.e., the early Church) **together** to deal with the issue.

At first glance it might look like the Apostles are saying, “*We're too important to serve tables; after all, we're apostles; we have more important things to do.*”

But that's not it! Remember the apostles had been in the upper room and had witnessed Jesus take a towel and basin of water and wash their feet - they're willing to serve.

They had heard Jesus say: "*The greatest among you will be your servant*" (**Matthew 23:11**); they were committed, all-in, to emulating Jesus.

This is more a message about serving God in the area of your **spiritual gifting** and calling (a theme illustrated here to the early church and repeated throughout the New Testament). Scripture tells us **Christ**, through His Spirit, apportions **gifts** to his disciples (followers) and calls/sends them/us out under His authority. The Apostles had been called to focus on the Word (teaching) and prayer.

It also reviews some foundational biblical principles for us related to Christ's Church; for example:

1. Christ (alone) is the (unequivocal) Head of the Church (It is not the pastor or elders). It is His Church. It is His will we must follow.
2. It is the Elders' role to discern what Christ (our head) wants/wills, share this discernment with the body of Christ and follow it obediently together.
3. The Church is not a democracy; it is not majority rules; we don't get to vote whether the Church will follow God's will or not. Christ rules!

The early church experienced conflict; so has every congregation since. Truth is, conflict is **inevitable**; normal, and can even be healthy - as long we need to deal with it in an appropriate manner - **face** to face (that is openly, rather than complaining secretly behind people's backs); graciously, humbly and lovingly; intentionally seeking resolution and **reconciliation**.

## DESCRIPTIONS

**The Apostles' calling was to lay a foundation for the Church.** This foundation not only comes through studying **Scripture** and extended **prayer** (key elements in all spiritual discernment) but acknowledges that Scripture and Prayer are the foundation itself.

When the Church is built on Scripture and prayer (i.e., on discerning and submitting to God's will), the Church functions as Christ, our head, intended. When the leadership recognizes that God has gifted every disciple and calls each disciple to use their gift(s) to serve Christ, each other and God's world, church is Church.

Notice how these Apostles **responded** to this new challenge:

1. First, they recognized the issue (we might say, the elephant in the room), named it and **addressed** it. They didn't ignore it; deny it; hope it'll solve

itself; pray it will just go away. They realized this was a spiritual attack to distract them from their calling to prayer and the studying, preaching, and teaching of God's Word. There is no doubt, they spent time in the Scripture and Prayer discerning their response.

2. Second, they called the disciples together (i.e., a congregational meeting) and presented them with their **response** – i.e., with their discernment. (Note: the congregation didn't get to vote on it).
3. Third, the disciples (i.e., congregation), realizing this response was the result of the Apostle's discernment of God's Will through the Scripture and prayer, *are pleased* (i.e., affirming of) with the "proposal."

(Sadly, few job descriptions today for pastors mention the study of scripture, prayer, and discerning God's will; truth is, I've never seen one that including studying the Scriptures and/or prayer; most emphasize preaching, administration/supervision, and pastoral care).

Without pastors and leaders (elders) devoted to the study of Scripture and prayer; the church has no assurance the decisions being making are actually "discernments" from Christ - the head of the Church.

Mike Singletary was a Hall of fame linebacker with the Chicago Bears (and a member of the WillowCreek Community Church). He tells of working 70-80 hours a week during football season to play an average of nine minutes each game: Hours running drills, watching game film, working in the weight room, running plays over and over and over . . . so that when he was called upon in the game, he could do what he was called upon to do . . . Those nine minutes a game made him a hall-of famer; but the 70-80 hours of preparation, allowed him to play those nine minutes with excellence.

Likewise, we need to be continually in the Word and in prayer so when we called upon to discern, we can hear God's voice clearly and have the courage to obey . . .

The Apostles set qualifications for **servng** (Christ and His Church):

1. "*People who are known...*" I.e., people of **character** who are well-thought off and have a track-record . . .
2. "*...full of the Holy Spirit...*" I.e., people whose words, discernments, and actions are **governed** by and show evidence of the Spirit's work in their life . . .
3. "*...full of wisdom.*" I.e., people who have experience **applying** God's Truth to their life . . .

Why do these people need all of these qualifications if they're [just] serving tables? Answer: because they're representing the body of Christ and Jesus

himself.

Apparently, there isn't a shortage of willing people who met the criteria . . .

**The Disciples (i.e. the congregation) are asked to discern who these people might be and present them to the Apostles for their approval. The congregation's discernment** "affirms" Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus.

This is an amazing set of seven being presented. Every one of these names is **Greek**; Nicolas is a Gentile name; they're chosen from among the Hellenistic Greek-speaking Jews (from the "murmuring group").

The far-larger, and more influential, group of Hebrew-speaking Jews are willing to defer (i.e., let go of) control of the entire benevolence ministry for the sake of unity and ministry (i.e., this is an amazing step of humility and submission; and an incredible gift to the Church). That's trust.

The apostles prayed about these men and "*laid hands on them.*"

This tradition has deep Old Testament roots. When one brought an animal for sacrifice, they would "lay hands on the animal" as if to say, "*This animal and I are to be seen as one. My sins are laid on him; his blood is being shed for me - as if it were my own.*"

Now in the New Testament, the laying on of hands continued to be used as a sign of **identification**. That is, you go as **member** of the **body** of Christ; you go on our behalf - because we don't all share the same specific calling or gifts. But we're on Christ's **mission together**. In the laying on of hands, they acknowledge their "co-mission" and so they "commissioned" them and send them out to serve . . .

**"The Seven" are often said to be the first "Deacons"; but that term is not used here.** They were appointed to meet a specific need; so it would probably be better to say, this is the first "ad hoc serve team" in the church. (We'll hear from Stephen - one of these "seven" - in this and the next chapter, and from Philip in chapter 8. The rest - we never hear of again; they offered their service quietly and (we assume) faithfully.

When they finished their assignment, we learn later in Acts - returned to their primary assignment/mission - preaching the Word, evangelizing the Gospel, making and teaching disciples.

Serving in the Church has always been **countercultural** - it requires hard work, **faithfulness**, and **sacrifice** without expecting (or receiving) much appreciation, influence or accolade.

## THE DEMONSTRATION

**The Church is to be built around spiritual gifting** (not just “gifting,” but “spiritual gifting.” We sometimes confuse a person’s abilities, experience, availability, success with “spiritual gifting”).

Those called to and gifted for “spiritual leadership” are not better or worse than those called to and gifted with serving gifts; each gift is absolutely essential to the body.

What’s more important - the head or the heart? Hands or feet? We could debate these issues for a long time; but why? The world debates such issues. Followers of Christ know we need each other; we know we’re all needed together for the body of Christ to be the Church God intended it to be.

**When the church functions together as a “body” - the Church grows.**  
**Notice the Text:**

First, *the Word of God increased* (or spread; **Acts 6:7a**). This phrase is used periodically in Scripture; each time it means that the Word (Jesus) was more widely proclaimed. Apostles and disciples were sharing the Word as a result of the Apostles (leadership; modeling) being firmly focused on the Word and prayer.

Second, *the number of disciples multiplied greatly* (or increased rapidly; **6:7b**). Solving this “conflict” in the church allowed the church to grow (contention, disunity, murmuring stunt growth - both personally and corporately). If the Truth gets told, some will accept it; if people prioritize making disciples, the church will grow.

People today are confused, distracted; many are just going through the motions. They are, whether or not they are willing to admit it, searching for meaning, something bigger than themselves, and an opportunity to make a difference. When Truth is heard and embraced, it resonates; it’s authentic; it makes a difference; it transforms lives.

Third, *a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith* (**6:7c**). Priests offered sacrifices daily; they were religious people performing religious practices; these priests are far removed from the wealthy chief-priestly families that adamantly opposed the Apostles. Many came to the realization that without Jesus - everything they did made little sense - and they became influential witnesses to Jesus.

Fourth, *Stephen (and Philip) did great wonders and signs among the people* (**6:8**).

- Stephen was a devoted follower of Jesus (*Have you made that **decision** yet?*)
- Stephen cast his lot in life with group called “The Way” (*Are you **all** in?*).

- Stephen learned the Word of God; studied the Scriptures faithfully (*Are you studying the Word **regularly**?*)
- Stephen decided to use his Spiritual gifts for Christ in His church (*Are you using your **spiritual gifts** for Christ in His Church?*)
- Stephen accepted the opportunities that came his way and the consequences that went with it. (*Are you **accepting** the **opportunities** extended to you as a member of this faith community - or putting them off and letting someone else do them?*)
- Stephen became a bold witness for Jesus. God opened a door for him; he stepped through it. He took a risk (*Have you taken any **risks** for the Gospel in the last month?*)
- Stephen decided if he were called on to pay the ultimate price, he would. (*Are you willing to take up your **cross** and **follow** Jesus?*). Are you willing to die for him? Maybe even more important, are you willing to live for him? Have you submitted your personal agenda and opinions to his will? Have you embraced your calling? Are you using your spiritual gifts for the building of Christ's Church?

**If the call went out to **choose seven** willing to serve or to lead or contribute, or pray, would **you** be in that number?**

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