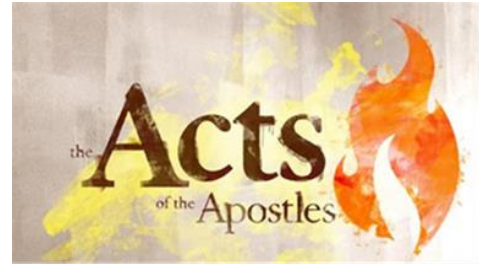


ACTS: THE STORY OF THE CHURCH – Part 8

The Rise of the Deacon

Acts 6:1-6

The Jesus movement was a God-thing, and it was showing no signs of slowing down. Jews and Gentiles were finding God through the Messiah Jesus. The initial movement leaders, basically 11-12 guys, were the primary teachers and evangelists. As the church grew they were forced to take on more and more administrative and practical duties, leaving them less time for their primary work.



The church was still amazingly unified so when a potential issue arose that could become divisive the disciples acted quickly to remedy the situation. It is important to understand the makeup of the movement at this point in time. There were the Jews native to Israel who spoke Aramaic and Hellenist Jews who were born/raised outside of Israel who spoke Greek. Many of the Hellenist Jews had immigrated to Israel but they continued to be much more Greek-like than the native Jews.

These cultural and language divisions could have been a divisive issue all by itself but up to this point it had not. The first flashpoint between the two “types” of Jewish followers of Jesus seems minor, but minor can lead to major quickly.

During these days, the number of followers of Jesus kept multiplying greatly. But a complaint was brought against those who spoke Aramaic by the Greek-speaking Jews, who felt their widows were being overlooked during the daily distribution of food (6:1).

The social welfare of the disadvantaged was woven into the tapestry of Judaism. Widows were not able to take care of all their basic needs so the Temple/synagogue would provide assistance. Making sure widows and orphans had food/clothing/housing was seen as the job of the faith community. Remember James speaking to “true and pure religion?”

True spirituality that is pure in the eyes of God the Father is to make a difference in the lives of the orphans and widows in their troubles, and to refuse to be corrupted by the world's values (James 1:27).

The Jesus movement had been seeking equality within and was making sure everyone had food and basic necessities. It is important to note that there was a process for the daily distribution of food. It is also important to note that the Hellenist/Greek Jews believed that some of their widows were being overlooked. Were they? We do not know but perception often forms reality, so a genuine problem was brewing.

So, what to do about this? Peter and John could have said to the other ten, “OK, let’s step it up. The Greek widows are somehow being skipped on the daily food distribution. Matthias, you are the new guy, you take Monday. James the Greater, you take Tuesday. James the Lesser, you have Wednesday...”

No, they expanded the ministry base to deal with the increasing demand for assistance.

The twelve apostles called a meeting of all the believers and told them, “It is not advantageous for us to be pulled away from the word of God to wait on tables. We want you to carefully select from among yourselves seven Godly men. Make sure they are honorable, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, and we will give them the responsibility of this crucial ministry of serving. That will enable us to give our full attention to prayer and preaching the word of God” (6:2-4).

In a snapshot at how unified the full movement was at this point verse 5 tells us: “Everyone in the church loved this idea.” This would not last long, but it was huge in establishing the practice of the church being nimble and wise in providing for solutions for the growing movement. There was no “book” for how to create a movement and keep it going forward. The key here was the genuine deep spirituality of the disciples and the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Qualifications

While this is not seen as the official creation of what we now know as deacon ministry, it laid the groundwork for it. The root word used is *diakonos*, which simply means servant. These seven new ministry assistants were to serve the

needs of widows and other like needs. Two of the seven would also become proclaimers and evangelists, although their primary work was practical service. Robert Thune describes their work as *mercy ministry*.

The qualifications of these seven men were lofty:

Honorable: This is good standing and men worthy of respect, suggesting a good reputation based on the opinions of others. Highly esteemed and noble also describe this qualification.

Full of the Holy Spirit and Wisdom: Pairing *full* and *Spirit* denotes a maturing faith. It can also be stated as deep spirituality that relies on the supernatural wisdom available through the Holy Spirit. This qualification is what allowed Stephen and Philip to also preach and evangelize.

Paul's first letter to Timothy provides additional qualifications for deacon ministry candidates:

Sincere: Honest, truthful and genuine.

Not indulging in much wine: No addictions and self-disciplined.

Not greedy: Needs no explanation.

Must keep hold of the great truths of the faith: Sound and consistent theology; no discrepancy in what they profess and how they live their lives.

Must first be tested: Faithful over a long period of time, thus a new believer needs time to mature before serving in this position.

A one-woman man (or a one-man woman): Faithful to spouse; sexually pure.

Manages his/her household and family well: Leads by example, provides for family and is respected in own household.

The prototype for deacon ministry began in Acts chapter 6 and forms the framework for today's deacon ministry. Has the job changed? Absolutely. The world has changed, as has the church.

It should also be noted that different persuasions of faith practice have differing deacon requirements and roles. Catholics differ from Protestants, Baptists differ

from Methodists, who both differ from Presbyterians and Episcopalians. In each and all service is the main role.

About women. It's clear that in Jerusalem in the 30's of the first century, women had not been afforded the same opportunities as men in faith development. In the classic Jewish tradition men were superior to women in matters related to faith. Women were not allowed to enter the main areas of the Temple. Women were not allowed to listen to the great teachers (Gamaliel was considered one of the all-time greats). Women in the time of Acts 6 were not prepared to take full leadership roles (see the above *mature faith* requirement). The same was true in the time of Paul's writings, although it was even more of a factor for Paul as he led the Gentile wing of the church. Gentile women had not been afforded a faith-focused education to an even higher degree than Jewish women.

All said to make this point: If we take Acts 6 and all of Paul's writings in the proper context (when it was written, why it was written, and to whom it was written) excluding women from deacon service today is not fair or very smart. Women have held the church together for eons. Classic Baptist missions had women at its very foundation and the most influential missional leaders I learned from were women.

Times have changed. Women can learn, be discipled and grow in faith in the same ways that men can. In proper context and reading Paul through the lens of almost 2000 years, my theology allows women to serve. We would not be where we are today if we took a hyper-literal view of Luke and Paul and their instructive teaching for the *early* church.

Amen and Amen.

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