

THE BOOK OF ACTS

CHAPTER 6

THE FIRST LOCAL CHURCH (1-15)

Belonging to and participating in a local church is of utmost importance for every born-again believer. The main function of the members of the local church is to relieve the pastor of the daily responsibilities so he may dedicate himself to prayer and the study of God's Word.

Ushers, greeters, counselors, hospital workers, children, and youth workers are all vital to the successful and effectual functioning of the local church.

Just as in the first local church, there are no perfect churches because there are no perfect people. But we can strive to walk free of strife and in the unity of faith with a heart to serve one another in the body of Christ. God offers His divine wisdom to all who will ask. We can walk in the same wisdom in which Stephen operated if we will only ask.

THE LOCAL CHURCH

Much is written in the New Testament about the daily operation of the local church, especially in the book of Acts. Foundational principles are established because the first local church at Jerusalem is far from perfect. Very little of what is written is being followed today.

THE PASTOR

The pastor is the final authority in the local church, and it is his responsibility to teach the Word of God. This is his only responsibility. Anything else is subject to his own personal desires, strengths and weaknesses, and ability to delegate. He is given a number of titles:

1. Elder (presbuteros): Describes his person and maturity. "The elders which are among you I exhort, who are also an elder, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed" (1 Peter 5:1).
2. Bishop (episkopos: overseer): Describes the pastor's responsibility and work. "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). Also 1 Peter 5:2: "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; . . ."
3. Pastor (poimen: shepherd): Describes the pastor's spiritual gift, responsibility to his congregation, and his qualifications (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 4:11; Colossians 1:25-29; 1 Timothy 3:7; 4:15-16; 2 Timothy 4:1-3; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

4. Deacon (diakonos): Describes the pastor's attitude toward the ministry: "But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4).

AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Other people in areas of responsibility are needed in the local church to enhance the pastor's role.

1. Elders rule and teach, e.g. Sunday school teachers, staff, etc. (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy three: 1-7; Titus 1:5-9).
2. Bishops are overseers, e.g. Sunday school superintendents (Philippians 4:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-7).
3. Deacons are helps ministers, e.g. ushers, communion servers, and greeters (Acts 6:3; 1 Timothy 3:8-13).

PRINCIPLES ESTABLISHED IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

No church is perfect. The government laid down in the word is not rules, but principles. Often, believers want to look back at the early church and emulate its ways. But the early church had strife, schisms, and divisions. We have everything the early church had and more. We have the same problems and the same Holy Spirit, but the word is now complete.

EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF THE LOCAL CHURCH (1-7)

Every growing church goes through pains and difficulties even when disciples are multiplying. Growth in numbers is usually met with murmur. Most complaints are usually "Things are not like they used to be."

The first major church problem is the treatment of Greek and Hebrew widows. Because the primary responsibility of the apostles is prayer and study, the people choose seven men to alleviate the problem. Again, the Word of God increases and the number of disciples multiply.

MURMURING OF GRECIANS AGAINST THE HEBREWS

Act 6:1 And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations.

And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations (diakonos).

The first major internal problem of the Jerusalem church is racial. Grecian widows feel they are not being cared for as well as the Hebrew widows. A faction arises as the Greeks rally around their widows.

Inequality probably did exist since the church leaders are Hebrews, but the problem was probably not intentional. The word “ministration” comes from the Greek word diakonos, which means service or work. The service being administered is the distribution of food and goods. Those distributing the goods are favoring the Hebrew widows over the Greek.

SOLUTION TO INEQUALITY

Act 6:2 Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.

Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, it is not reason (pleasing to God) that we should leave the Word of God, and serve (diakonos) tables.

The solution proposed by the people is for the church leaders to distribute the provisions. However, the apostles quickly see that their true calling and responsibility is in jeopardy.

The typical solution given by people for solving problems in a church is for the church leaders to personally handle the situations. They desire the pastor to pray for the sick, visit those in prison, and witness to those who need salvation. However, the pastor is not responsible for taking care of everyone, only to ensure that everyone is taken care off.

The true meaning of diakonos is brought out in this verse. It is the serving of tables. The deacon’s ministry is to serve others. This is the practical side of the ministry. Without the practical side, the Word could not be effectively taught to the people. When numbers increase, organization must change. Change is an important part of any growing organization.

THE SELECTION OF DEACONS

Act 6:3 Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.

The first qualification for the newly chosen helpers is an “honest report” (1 Timothy 3:7). They must be well-thought-of throughout the church and the community. Second, they must be filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) and speak with tongues daily. Finally, they must be filled with the Word (Colossians 3:16), so they can operate in divine wisdom.

The “business” spoken of here is not the financial business of the church. It is “this business” of taking care of the widows. Many churches believe this verse means deacons watch over the

business area of the church. But deacons watch over “this business,” the serving of the needs of the people.

Act 6:4 But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.

But we will give ourselves continually (primarily) to prayer, and to the ministry (diakonos) of the word.

Prayer and preparation of the word of God takes much time and concentration. Any ministry by a deacon or elder also takes extended times of preparation and concentration. One person, the pastor, cannot do both and effectively feed the sheep (Acts 20:28).

Moses faced the same problem with the children of Israel . His father-in-law, Jethro, proposed the same solution. Moses was to choose men to help him watch over the people so he could minister in prayer and the teaching of the Word (Exodus 18: 19-22). In both Exodus and Acts, prayer is mentioned before the ministry of the Word. Prayer hears from God to know His mind concerning what to give to the people. The Holy Spirit is the agent and power of prayer. He leads us into the Word. The pastor is also seen in this passage as a deacon. Just as every believer has work and service to perform, the pastor’s duty is to serve the Word of God to the people.

6:1-4 Faithfulness in Prayer and Spiritual Warfare, FAITH’S WARFARE. The early church learned quickly that their prayer had to be continuous because spiritual warfare is continuous. It became their first priority because Satan sought their defeat as his first priority. Thus, their earliest recorded administrative decision after Pentecost places the ministry of prayer (with the Word) as highest in importance.

As the church grew, circumstances required more of the apostles’ time. But realizing they needed more prayer, rather than increased activity, the apostles chose seven men to serve as deacons to care for the church. This freed them to focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word. Of the two, prayer, rightly, is listed first. Faithfulness to prayer recurs throughout Scripture. Paul would later tell the church At Rome to “be kindly affectionate to one another . . . continuing steadfastly in prayer” (Romans 12:10, 12).

SEVEN MEN CHOSEN

Act 6:5 And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch:

Notice each man chosen has a Greek name. Whether these men are fully or partially Greek is not known. All are probably Greek speaking and understand the needs of the Greek widows.

These are the seven men chosen and presented to the church leadership:

1. Stephen means “victors crown.” He is a teacher of the Word of God and will teach with deep conviction before the religious crowd. He is an excellent example and great tribute to the potential of promotion in the office of a deacon (1 Timothy 3:13). Stephen will also become the subject of Acts 7, as well as the first martyr of the church.
2. Philip means “lover of horses.” Philip will become the subject of Acts 8. He will become the first evangelist of the New Testament (acts 21:8).
3. Prochorus means “leader of a chorus.”
4. Nicanor means “the glorious.”
5. Timon means “honorable.”
6. Parmenas means “abiding.”
7. Nicolas means “victor of the people.” Nicolas is a born-again Greek who was also circumcised. He later became apostate and founded one of the early cult movements that opposed Christianity, a group known as the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:6, 15). He mingled Christianity with the worship of Aphrodite and formed a brotherhood which added other beliefs. Many Christians were drawn away. John associates their teachings with the doctrine of Balaam.

The choosing of Nicolas reveals that regardless of how well leaders are chosen, some will turn away. We sometimes blame ourselves or wonder where we went wrong when individuals turn against us. But this group of believers is doing their best to be led by the Holy Spirit. The seven men selected are even brought before church leadership. Even with all the safety checks in place, Nicolas easily became a deacon in the church.

God does not punish us today for what we will do in the future. He rewards us today for our present faithfulness.

Act 6:6 Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.

Although the people chose the seven men, they were ultimately approved by the church leadership. The people may have chosen people who look good outwardly, but often, leadership is in a position to know things others do not know.

INCREASE OF THE WORD

Act 6:7 And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

Before this time, the number of the disciples was multiplied (verse 1). Now the disciples multiplied greatly because the Word of God increased. When the church leadership is given the freedom to give more of their time to prayer and the ministry of the Word of God, the Word is able to increase. It is a simple progression. When dedicated members of the church (disciples) given themselves to helping the work of the ministry, the pastor is free to give himself in a greater way to prayer and preparation of the Word. The result is an even greater number of disciples arising and multiplying. Those disciples then go out and preach the Word, and the most difficult cases, the religious people, are won to the Lord. Those who witness to the religious crowd are not the pastor and church staff; they are the people of the congregation. One of those deacons who witnessed to the religious crowd was Stephen. He would soon give his life for the gospel.

THE ARREST OF STEPHEN (8-15)

Stephen, one out of the seven men selected to be a deacon, eventually teaches the Word with signs and wonders following. Stephen operates in the wisdom of God, and the religious leaders of the time cannot dispute his wisdom, so they bring false witnesses against him and had him arrested.

DISPUTE AGAINST STEPHEN

Act 6:8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

And Stephen, full of faith and power (dunamis: inherent power), did great wonders and miracles (semeion: signs) among the people.

Stephen is one who listened to the Word taught in the church. Because of this, faith came, and the power of the Holy Spirit is a result. Stephen witnesses in the city of Jerusalem and signs and wonders follow his teaching ministry, which causes an uproar among the religious leaders.

Act 6:9 Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines (liberated slaves), and Cyrenians (a Greek trade center of North Africa) and Alexandrians (Jews from Alexandria), and of them of Cilicia (a city of Asia minor), and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

Descendants of Jewish slaves make up the “synagogue of the libertines.” Their ancestors had been slaves under Rome who had been released. They are one of the groups who join together to dispute Stephen. Cilicia is one of the groups mentioned, and from this group, Saul of Tarsus (7:58). He might have even been one of the men arguing with Stephen.

Act 6:10 And they were not able to resist the **wisdom** and the spirit by which he spake.

And they were not able (ischus: endowed with enough) to resist the wisdom (word) and the spirit (anointing) by which he spake.

Stephen’s wisdom is from studying the word, and his anointing comes from prayer. If Saul is one of the men arguing with Stephen, we can see his humiliation. New Christians should have been too ignorant to know any of the word, and certainly too ignorant to humiliate a Pharisee in a public debate.

6:10 wisdom, *Sophia* (sof-ee-ah); Practical wisdom, prudence, skill, comprehensive insight, Christian enlightenment, a right application of knowledge, insight into the true nature of things. Wisdom in the Bible is often coupled with knowledge (Romans 11:33; 1 Corinthians 12:8; Colossians 2:3). In anticipation of our needing guidance, direction, and knowing, God tells us to ask for wisdom, assuring us of a liberal reception (James 1:5).

FALSE WITNESS

Act 6:11 Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak **blasphemous** words against Moses, and against God.

Then they suborned (bribed) men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.

Because the Pharisees cannot debate Stephen, they resort to illegal proceedings. Even the accusation is illegal because it is hearsay and not acceptable in court. But this does not matter to the Pharisees. They will falsely accuse Stephen just as they had Jesus.

6:11 blasphemous, *blasphemos* (blas-fay-moss); Compare “blasphemy.” From *blapto*, “to injure,” and *pheme*, “speech”; hence, slanderous, abusive speech.

Act 6:12 And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council,

Act 6:13 And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:

They mentioned the temple first, and the Word second.

Act 6:14 For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

The temple will be destroyed, but it won't be by Jesus. Jesus never said He would destroy the temple, and neither did the early church. The temple would be destroyed later by the Romans (Luke 21: 20-24). And by this time, the customs and ceremonies were already changing because Jesus fulfilled them all.

STEPHEN'S FACE SHINES

Act 6:15 And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

The men in the courtroom cannot take their eyes off Stephen. God's sense of humor is now displayed. The council has used Moses as evidence against Stephen, but God uses the same confirmation of His presence with Stephen as He had with Moses: Stephen is covered with the glory of God, and his face begins to shine just as Moses' face had (Exodus 34:30). The disciples have also observed this same manifestation of the glory of God, when Moses appeared before Jesus on the mountain (Matthew 17:2).

