

Chapter 15: The Ministries of Word and of Deed

Acts 6:1–7

Sometimes believers lament how complicated churches become with their structure, officers, and organization. Occasionally, someone will suggest that we need to “get back” to the simplicity of the early church. While there is always wisdom in going back to studying the earliest period of the church under the leadership of the apostles, and while there are certainly ways that churches could and should simplify their organization, it would be misleading to suggest that all structure in the church is a mistake. The early church indeed started without too much structure; however, as the church grew, more problems arose. Further, to address those growth-related problems, the apostles themselves set in place structures that we still benefit from in the church today. In this passage, we learn that *Jesus builds his church through ministries of word and of deed*.

Word Ministry (Acts 6:1–4)

As we start studying Acts 6, it is important to remember what we had seen back in Acts 4 regarding the early church’s method for distributing benevolence to those in need: “There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and *laid it at the apostles’ feet*, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus...Barnabas...sold a field that belongs to him and brought the money and *laid it at the apostles’ feet*” (Acts 4:34–37). Ananias also “brought only a part of [the money] and *laid it at the apostles’ feet*” (Acts 5:2). Money donated for benevolence was “laid...at the apostles’ feet,” and then that money “was distributed to each as any had need.” The passive “was distributed” does not tell us all the details of the apostles’ method of distributing the money; however, it suggests that the apostles were directly (if not exclusively) involved in the distribution.

This method seems to have worked up to this point; however, v. 1 tells us that as the numbers of “disciples” (the first use of the term in the book of Acts)¹ increased, the logistical challenges of meeting all the needs of the people in the church also increased. If the story of Ananias and Sapphira illustrated the problem of hypocrisy within the benevolence of the early church, now we see a new challenge that seems less intentional.² Luke suggests that the issues complained about by the

¹ “This is the first appearance in Acts of the noun for ‘disciples’ (μαθητῶν, *mathētōn*; twenty-eight times in Acts: 6:1, 2, 7; 9:1–2, 10, 19–20, 24–26 [3x], 38; 11:26, 29–30; 13:51–52; 14:20–22 [2x], 28; 15:10; 16:1–2; 18:23, 27; 19:1, 9, 30–31; 20:1, 29–30; 21:4, 15–16 [2x].” (Bock, *Acts*, 257.)

² “Luke narrates a second threat to the unity of the community as it cared for the impoverished members when well-to-do believers willingly shared their possessions by selling property (2:44–45; 4:32–37). Ananias and Sapphira had injected false motives into this practice (5:1–11); now the neglect of Greek-speaking widows among the believers threatens the harmony of the church (6:1–7). In both cases the apostles act decisively:

Hellenists arose only out of “a growth...in the number of disciples and a management problem that this growth is producing.”³ The “Hellenists” were Greek-speaking Jews who had been raised outside of the land of Canaan, and the “Hebrews” spoke Aramaic because they had been raised in the area.⁴ When families of Hellenists moved back to Jerusalem, and the husbands died, their wives were left without much of a support system of family in the area.⁵ However they had come into the fellowship of the church, they did not feel that the needs of their widows were being met.⁶

What, though, should we make of the “complaint”? Some, like Calvin, read this in an altogether negative light: “Hereby it appeareth that they were not fully regenerate by the Spirit of God...Therefore, this indignation smelleth of the flesh and the world.”⁷ Others are inclined to consider the complaint “justified,” without any ability to know to what degree there were ethnic, national, and/or other animosities at play.⁸ On the one hand, I do think it likely that there was a legitimate issue of administrative breakdown from rapid growth of the church.⁹ On the other hand, there may be a negative clue in the word “complaint,” which is the word that often appeared to describe the grumbling of the Israelites against the leadership of Moses:

This probably also involved a challenge to the leadership of the apostles. Not long after the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt, complaints about their situation and the leadership of Moses and Aaron arose (e.g., Ex. 16:2–12; Nu. 11:1; 17:5, 10). As in Acts 6, there was concern in Exodus 16 about the adequate provision of food. Since the apostles appear to have administered the community resources at this stage (cf. 4:34–37; 5:2), complaints about *the daily distribution of food* were thus also a challenge to their leadership. At the deepest level, however, such grumbling is condemned in Scripture because it is seen as a complaint against God’s gracious and providential care for his people (cf. 1 Cor. 10:10–11; Phil. 2:14–15; 1 Pet. 4:9). The antidote to such grumbling is prayer and a humble sharing of concerns with others.¹⁰

Peter’s confrontation of the hypocritical and lying couple ends with their quick demise, while the apostles’ confrontation of the problem of the neglected widows results in a restructuring of the ministries of the church.” (Schnabel, *Acts*, 325.)

³ Bock, *Acts*, 257.

⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 240–41.

⁵ “Diaspora Jews often moved to Jerusalem in their twilight years to die in the holy city. When the men died, their widows were left far from their former home and family to care for them and were thus particularly in need of charity. Many of them may have been attracted to the Christian community precisely because of its concern for the material needs of its members.” (Polhill, *Acts*, 179.)

⁶ Polhill identifies the most likely explanation: “Language barriers being what they are, it is easy to picture how some of the Greek-speaking widows were overlooked.” (Polhill, *Acts*, 180.)

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:231.

⁸ “We see only that the complaint was justified. How much party feeling between Hellenists and Hebrews was involved is difficult to say.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 241.)

⁹ “The way the problem is eventually solved indicates that it may well have surfaced not because of ethnic malice but because of a lack of administrative organization caused by the new community’s growth across diverse ethnic lines.” (Bock, *Acts*, 258.)

¹⁰ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 231–32.

How, then, will the apostles address the situation?

In fact, the apostles' response offers us an admirable picture of leadership. Anyone in leadership understands three major challenges. First, in the midst of the demands of ministry, complaints can be so discouraging that leaders are tempted to fight, flight (i.e., withdrawal), or freeze (i.e., do nothing in paralysis). Here, the apostles avoid those wrong responses by proactively summoning "the full number of the disciples" (v. 2a) to find a solution.

Second, the stress and demands of leadership often make any kind of criticism and complaint feel personal, even when everyone involved understands that the issues are not really anyone's "fault." For this reason, leaders are often tempted to hoard responsibilities out of a misguided idea that they must personally do all the work to prove their worth or to ensure a certain level of quality. In cases such as this one, the church's needs have simply grown beyond the ability of the apostles' to administer benevolence directly. That is not a personal failing, but only an entirely human limitation of capacity. Even Jesus had to escape the crowds at times because of his own human limitations of fatigue and need for prayer. Here, the apostles acknowledge their limitations: "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables" (v. 2b). The word for "right" does not refer so much to moral righteousness/evil, but to what is "pleasing" (i.e., in God's sight).¹¹ Therefore, the issue at stake "is a priority choice about observing the call of God...They should do what God has called them to do, namely, teach and witness."¹² Although *they* cannot "give up" preaching to serve tables, "someone else will be able to do this important ministry so that the apostles are free to keep preaching. In the apostles' view, this ability to prioritize activities and not be responsible to do everything reflects good leadership and stewardship."¹³ The work must be done, but the apostles do not need to do this work personally.

So, the apostles instruct the church to "pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty" (v. 3). From this, it is clear that this work of administration is deeply spiritual. The fact that these servants will be handling finances demands that they be "of good repute" on obvious grounds, but the requirement that these men be "full of the Spirit and of wisdom" suggests something more than just honesty. These men must be specially gifted and qualified to serve in this crucial role within the church.

Critically, the apostles close the proposal by restating and clarifying the critical work that they cannot neglect: "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (v. 4). Where they had previously been able to labor in the ministry of prayer and the word without struggling to handle the benevolence ministry as well, they now must pick and choose. They must give up something, and they recognize that their calling as apostles requires them to labor in prayer and the ministry of the word. Others can do the benevolence work, and, in fact, the apostles are trusting that the Lord has specifically qualified and empowered others to do the benevolence work. Therefore, they can entrust that work to those men so that they can labor in prayer and the word. This is commonly taken to express the priorities of ministers of the word today, and we should note

¹¹ "The phrase 'it would not be right' really means 'not pleasing in God's eyes.' Modern ministers sometimes misuse this statement as a biblical warrant for refusal to do the mundane administrative tasks in the church." (Polhill, *Acts*, 180.)

¹² Bock, *Acts*, 259.

¹³ Bock, *Acts*, 259.

the order of priority here: prayer first, and then the word. The ministry of the word is public and visible, and we often tend to judge ministers on their ministry of the word. We must also give attention to a minister's ministry of prayer—both the public prayers within corporate worship services, but also to the private prayer life of a minister. While we will not see that private prayer life, it is worth encouraging and praying for your minister's private prayer life.

Deed Ministry (Acts 6:5–7)

Luke writes, “And what they said pleased the whole gathering...” (v. 5a). Lenski argues that this language suggests that a vote was taken and, indeed, it is hard to know how Luke could gauge the pleasure of the whole gathering unless they expressed their views by something like a vote.¹⁴ The emphasis of Stephen as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” will be important for the next passage, when Stephen is arrested and put on trial for his faith. We will also see Philip again later serving in the office of an evangelist (Acts 21:8). The names of all these men are Greek; however, Lenski has cautioned against inferring that all of them were therefore Hellenists, since two of Jesus' disciples (Andrew and Philip) were clearly Hebrews, and yet they had Greek names.¹⁵ We should notice that the people themselves “chose” these men, in accordance with the apostles' instruction: “pick out from among you” (vv. 3, 5). From this, we should recognize that churches have the right to choose the men who will serve them as officers in the church.¹⁶

Since we see both Stephen and Philip later preaching, some have argued that we should not understand these men to be “deacons” in the office discussed in Philippians 1:1 or 1 Timothy 3:8–13, since the word “deacon” (διάκονος; *diakonos*) does not appear here.¹⁷ Nevertheless, this objection is overstated, since the word translated as “distribution” in v. 1 was διακονία (*diakonia*), and the word for “serve” tables in v. 2 was διακονεῖν (*diakonein*). It is not difficult to recognize that the apostles are ordaining *deacons* (διάκονοι; *diakonoi*) to *serve* (διακονεῖν; *diakonein*) the daily *distribution* (διακονία; *diakonia*).

¹⁴ “We may say, ‘the proposition’ was accepted by vote. The construction with ἐνωπιον [*enōpion*] is the language of the LXX, and ἤρεσεν [*ēresen*] is like the Latin *placuit* when a vote is taken. The entire assembly unanimously voiced its agreement. The election was held, but we do not know in what manner except that the apostles do not seem to have made the nominations.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 245.)

¹⁵ “All the men chosen bear Greek names, but it would be a hasty conclusion to state that all were Hellenists when we remember that two of the apostles, who were certainly Hebrews, had Greek names, namely Andrew and Philip. We, therefore, decline to draw the conclusion that, since the complaint came from the Hellenists, the Hebrews generously turned the whole work of ministration over to the Hellenists. Some of both classes of Jews were elected, the only fair and proper course. The one named last was even a proselyte. The select one of this class was also wise.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 246.)

¹⁶ See question #147 in : “Q: Have the members of churches an undoubted right to choose their own pastor, elders, and deacons? A: “Yes; churches, in common with all other free societies, have this privilege.” (Thomas Smyth, *An Ecclesiastical Catechism of the Presbyterian Church: For the Use of Families, Bible-Classes, and Private Members* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1841).) See also Preliminary Principle #6 in the *Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church in America: “Though the character, qualifications and authority of church officers are laid down in the Holy Scriptures, as well as the proper method of officer investiture, the power to elect persons to the exercise of authority in any particular society resides in that society.”

¹⁷ e.g., Polhill, *Acts*, 182–83.

Others have objected that we should not read this passage as describing a formal ordination: “These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them” (v. 6).¹⁸ Yet, in both the Old and New Testaments, God has insisted upon the laying on of hands to set apart those who will serve in the offices he has appointed (Num. 27:18–23; Deut. 34:9; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22; Heb. 6:2). This does not mean that the laying on of hands has any magical power in itself, for we should notice that they also “prayed,” thus asking for God to empower, lead, guide, and support these men in their work.¹⁹

The last verse in this passage is a transitional verse that we should read as the conclusion to this passage as well as the introduction to the next: “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem” (v. 7a). As a conclusion to this passage, we can see the outward success of the ordination of the first deacons on the ongoing flourishing of the gospels: “The apostles were freed for their witness, and the word of God spread/grew.”²⁰ The language of the “increase” of the word of God conveys two kinds of growth: (1) reaching more people (especially as “the number of the disciples multiplied greatly...”), and (2) every person who believed was built up more and more in the word.²¹ Due to the agricultural imagery of the word growing like a seed on fertile soil, Polhill suggests that Jesus’ parable of the sower may stand in the background of this passage.²²

This increase of God’s word led to two major consequences. First, “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (v. 7b). The language of “obedient to the faith” simply expresses that these priests believed in Jesus Christ as their Savior and obeyed him as Leader (cf. Acts 5:31; see also Acts 13:8; Rom. 1:5; 16:26).²³ This new instance of conversions to faith in Christ (especially among the priests) led to increased tensions that we will read about in the next section. Those tensions, however, will ultimately bring about a second consequence: a great persecution that will force the Christians to spread the gospel beyond Jerusalem as they are scattered through Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1).²⁴ As the church grows, persecution will grow as well. Yet, because the gates of hell cannot stand against Christ’s church, even persecution will only cause the gospel to flourish farther and wider in the world.

¹⁸ e.g., “This should not be understood in terms of postbiblical ideas of ordination. These seven were not ordained to an office, but were commissioned to fulfill a specific administrative task. In due course, the roles of Stephen and Philip changed, so that they became preachers like the apostles.” (Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 235.)

¹⁹ “Notwithstanding, because this ceremony should of itself be vain, they add thereunto prayer, wherein the faithful commend unto God those ministers whom they offer unto him....Hence we gather that the laying on of hands is a rite agreeing unto order and comeliness, forasmuch as the apostles did use the same, and yet that it hath of itself no force or power, but that the effect dependeth upon the Spirit of God alone; which is generally to be thought of all ceremonies.” (Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:238.)

²⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, 183.

²¹ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:239.

²² Polhill, *Acts*, 183.

²³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 258.

²⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 175–76.

Discussion Questions

1. How were benevolent gifts administered early on in the church (Acts 4:34–37; 5:2)? What factors contribute to the breakdown of this system of administration (v. 1)? Who were the Hebrews? Who were the Hellenists? How did the apostles evaluate the legitimacy of the complaints raised by the Hellenists? What do we learn about godly church leadership from the way the apostles address the issues raised by these complaints?
2. What factors lead the apostles to suggest appointing other officers who can handle the church's benevolent needs (v. 2)? How does this reflect on the apostles' understanding of the varying level of priorities within the church? Why do you think that the apostles direct the congregation to select those who will serve as deacons (v. 3a)? Why do the apostles set such a high standard for gifting, character, and competency of those chosen for this task (v. 3b)?
3. What do we learn about those who are selected to this role (v. 5)? Why might we understand these officers to be deacons, when the word "deacon" does not appear in this passage? What significance does Stephen have in the following passage (Acts 6:8–7:60)? What significance does Philip have later on (Acts 21:8)? What role do the apostles have in approving and ordaining these new deacons (v. 6)? What is the overall result of this arrangement in the church (v. 7)?
4. What does Jesus teach us about the importance of ministries of word and ministries of deed? How are his gifts reflected in the various officers within the church? As you think of your own role in the church, do you feel a sense of gifting and calling to serve more in ministries of word or ministries of deed? How does that sense of your gifting and calling lead you to seek out ways to serve in the church?