

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE FIRST DEACONS

(Acts 6:1-8)

OUTLINE

Key verse - 4

1. The cause of the election (1).

A. The murmurings of a group within the church.

B. The apostles said that it was not best that they should leave their work (2).

The apostles teaching as to the minister's work.

A. Negatively (2).

(1) Not caring for the poor.

(2) Not keeping the church out of debt.

(3) Not ministering to the aesthetic tastes of the people.

B. Positively (4).

(1) Prayer.

(2) The ministry of the Word.

2. The early call for an election - To take away dissention.

3. The method of choosing - The people were to choose (2).

4. The qualifications of those chosen (3).

A. Men of the church - "**look ye out among you.**"

B. Men of good report.

C. Men full of the Spirit.

D. Men of wisdom.

5. The manner of setting apart those chosen (6).

6. The mark of God's blessings upon the more complete organization of the church (7).

“Disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly”

7. Some of the new deacons did more than the work assigned (8).

A. **“Stephen, full of grace and power”**

B. Philip the evangelist

It is interesting and instructive to watch the growth of the early church. With the growth of the church opposition increased and new perils arose. First there was opposition on the part of the rulers, then persecution, then more bitter persecution. The church was threatened by hypocrites and dissention within, but after every new difficulty we are told that many were added to the church. The first verse of this chapter follows the account of the first persecution and yet it tells us that in these days **“the number of the disciples was multiplied.”**

In the last chapter we were confronted with a common danger in a growing church, namely that of hypocrites finding their way into her midst; in this we are confronted with another oft occurring danger, that of dissention within her ranks.

THE CAUSE OF THE ELECTION

1. The murmuring of a group within the church led to the election and ordination of deacons. The Greek word from which we get our word, deacon, occurs in this passage. It is translated, serve, or ministry. It is used of the apostles as well as of those whom we call deacons. The apostles served or ministered in the Word. The men who were chosen upon this occasion, were to serve or minister to those at tables, or in general, to serve as financial officers of the church.

It will be remembered that shortly before, **“And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common”** (4:32). As the church grew rapidly it would be exceedingly difficult to make sure that all received an equal share from the common store of provisions. It was at least charged by the Grecian Jews that their widows were not receiving their share in the daily ministrations. We are not told whether the charge was true. We may infer that it was not wholly without foundation.

This was not a dissention between races as many have inferred. It was not a case of Greek set against Hebrew; both groups were Hebrews. Those who complained were Grecian Jews or Hellenists. The Hellenists were Jews who were reared in a country where the Greek language was spoken and who had learned to speak Greek. They held to the Hebrew religion and were really Hebrews. Those within Palestine, particularly in Jerusalem, spoke Hebrew or Aramaic and held more closely to the Hebrew customs and traditions. The antagonism between these two parties had arisen during the days of the Maccabees.

2. The apostles said that it was not best that they should leave their work.

Here we have a distinction drawn between the apostles' work and the deacons work. The work of the apostles was especially the ministry of the Word and prayer. That is the work of the minister of the Gospel today. It is well that we shall note carefully the teaching of the apostles concerning the work of these officers in the church.

First, negatively, the chief work of the minister is,

(1) not caring for the poor. This is a good and important work. It is so recognized by the apostles. The apostles had evidently helped to manage this work for a time, but they saw that the time was rapidly approaching when they might give all their time to it and neglect the work to which they were called and set apart - prayer and the ministry of the Word. The apostles did not object to looking after the poor widows because it was a less dignified work; they were humble men and willing to be as nothing for the honor of Christ. They did not object because the work of serving tables was too hard. The apostles were willing to toil day and night for the honor of Christ. They wished to follow their calling, the divine appointment of their Lord.

Their work was, (2) not keeping the church out of debt. It is an important thing to keep the church out of debt. It is an important thing to keep the church out of debt. But this is not the minister's chief work. If this work falls upon his shoulders he will not be able to give his thought, time and energy to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

Moreover, their work was, (3), not ministering to the aesthetic tastes of the people. They said, "**It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables**" (6:2). The work of a minister is not chiefly that of an entertainer. One day while returning from public worship in an eastern city a friend pointed out a church building in the distance, and said: "There is such a place of worship. They pay their minister eleven thousand dollars a year to entertain them." How many people in our day have forgotten the apostolic advice and example! If we could only save people: if we could only gain eternal life through entertainment; but it was never according to the divine plan that we should. The people of God should enjoy life, they should enjoy the fellowship of one another, but it was never the divine plan that the minister of the Gospel should give a great deal of thought, time or energy to this phase of human life.

Second, positively, the chief work of the minister is (1) to give himself to prayer.

The burden of the apostles' work was, and the burden of every minister's work ought to be, not caring for the poor, not keeping up the finances, not providing entertainment, but as an important part of his work, engaging in, and leading others in prayer. No Christian, much less any minister, can afford to neglect prayer to God. The apostles were determined to "**continue steadfastly in prayer.**" Our Lord both by example and precept taught us to be diligent and fervent in prayer. The most devout and successful missionaries, have been men who continued in earnest prayer. Such men as John G. Paton, Hudson Taylor, and Jonathan Goforth have been men of unwavering belief in the power of prayer.

We must first go to God in prayer for our own spiritual benefit and growth in grace, and then we must be much in prayer for the welfare of others about us.

Hudson Taylor said: "He believed that to deal with God is at least as real as to deal with man; that when we get to prayer we get to work, and work of the most practical kind."

Mr. F.W. Baller, after attending a meeting which Mr. Taylor led, wrote: "I had never heard any one pray like that. There was a simplicity, a tenderness, a boldness, a power that hushed and subdued one, and made it clear that God had admitted him into the inner circle of His friendship. He spoke with God face to face, as a man talketh with his friend. Such praying was evidently the outcome of long tarrying in the secret place, and was as a dew from the Lord. I have heard many men pray in public since then, but the prayers of Mr. Taylor and the prayers of Mr. Spurgeon stand all by themselves. Who that heard could ever forget them? It was the experience of a lifetime to hear Mr. Spurgeon pray, taking as it were the great congregation of six thousand people by the hand, and leading them into the Holy Place; and to hear Mr. Taylor plead for China was to know something of what is meant by **'the effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man'**." (*The Growth of a Work of God*, pp. 55, 220).

The chief work of a minister is (2) the ministry of the Word.

The minister of the Gospel should not think that he can pray and then neglect the ministry of the Word, nor should he think that because he preaches much he may therefore neglect prayer. One is just as important as the other, but the ministry of the Word occupies more of the minister's time. It did with the apostles and it should with us. There is a crying need for true, earnest, devout preaching of the Word today. The average member of the Christian church knows little of the Word of God. Men and women have better opportunities to know the Bible today than they had years ago, but multitudes do not avail themselves of the opportunity.

In many instances the church will not tolerate a minister who purposes to give his time to prayer and preaching the Word. They want him to give his time to a multitude of vagaries. They are proud of their preacher if he is frequently honored by being asked to speak at clubs and societies and banquets.

They are sometimes better satisfied to have him take an active part in a popular club than in the prayer meeting. Not long ago I listened to a widely-known Bible teacher who said: "People say, 'my you ought to meet our preacher, he is a fine fellow'. Or they say, 'you ought to hear our preacher, he is such an orator'." "But," continued the teacher, "I don't care how your preacher looks, I want to know what he says. I am not out to hear his flow of oratory, I want to know what he says. What I am concerned about is the Word, the teaching of the Word." He said at another time, "I get letters all the time from people saying: 'I have been a member of this church in this town for years. It used to be we could go to church and hear the Word preached and come home satisfied. Now we hear an essay on some sociological or philosophical subject, or we hear an attack upon the inspiration of the Bible, or doubt thrown upon the Deity of Christ.

What will we do?' My reply invariably is, flee from such teaching as you would flee from the pestilence, I would not sit under it for ten minutes." Oh for a new, for a stronger, for an unceasing emphasis upon the teaching and preaching of the Word of God!

THE EARLY CALL FOR AN ELECTION

We have considered the reason why the apostles were not willing to attend to the finances of the church themselves, and why some wanted a new and more smoothly working system. They called for an election of deacons without delay in order to take away any cause for dissension in the church. The apostles were above the tendency of those who have a lust for power and desire that every office shall be centered in them. They might have said, "We will open up a new soup kitchen and place John and James in charge of it." The management of this part of the work would not then have been taken from their immediate oversight. They saw it would be better, and they were evidently directed by the Spirit of God, to leave it to a special group of men to serve tables, while they continued to serve in the ministry of the Word and prayer.

Misunderstandings may usually be quickly healed when honest efforts, guided by love and wisdom prevail. One of the greatest sources of weakness and trouble within the church is dissension. There may be a charge of misappropriating funds, as in this case. Often the one who brings the charge has not taken the trouble to investigate the facts. He might possibly have discovered, very easily, that his suspicion was not well founded. The apostles wanted to bring an end to dissension at once, and to so perfect the organization of the church that such a cause for dissension should not occur again.

THE METHOD OF CHOOSING

The method of choosing the deacons was democratic. The apostles "**called the multitude of the disciples unto them**" (6:2) and told them to select from among themselves seven men whom they might appoint over "**this business.**" That the people, along with the apostles, were anxious to heal the dissension is shown from the men whom they chose. They all have Greek names. One of them, Nicolaus, was a proselyte, which means that he was a Greek who had accepted the Hebrew religion. The other newly elected deacons were apparently all Grecian Jews. The Hellenists would now have men of their own company to look after their widows. The church in choosing these men showed that it was willing to trust devout men from among the Grecian Jews to attend to the distribution among all classes. They would take away every excuse for complain on the part of the Hellenists by placing this work in the hands of their own men. The method which the apostles followed in the election of officers for the church is seemingly the method which they intended the church should follow in after years, which is, the election of her officers by the members of the church.

THE QUALIFICATIONS OF THOSE CHOSEN

1. They were members of the church. The apostles directed that those chosen were to be from among their own number. They may seem merely incidental, but the wisdom of their plan is apparent in our day when there are often men chosen to act on official boards of the church who are not members of the church. God wants his work, even to the handling of his money, to be committed to consecrated hands.

2. They were men of good report. They desired to secure honest men in whom the church had confidence by reason of their reputation. Occasionally the church has learned to her sorrow that she has placed confidence in men who were not honest, who misappropriated her funds. When the church has confidence in her financial officers it does much to increase her liberality, but when she lacks such confidence her members very naturally withhold their gifts from them. Men of such qualifications as those of the first deacons realize that their Master sees all their actions, even those hidden from men, and they live and act as in His sight. They gave the character of a clerk who was one day approached in this manner: “Robert, you must give me good measure; your master is not in.” Robert looked solemnly into the man’s face and replied, “My Master is always in.”

3. They were men full of the Spirit. The question is sometimes asked: “Cannot a man handle dollars just as well if he is not spiritual?” The fact that a man is spiritual assures him companions that he is honest. But supposing he is honest, why should he be spiritual? He should be a spiritual man in order that he may be deeply interested in the work. He should not only be a man who would not misappropriate the funds of the church, but he should appropriate every cent to the best advantage. He should realize that he is handling, not merely dollars, but the Lord’s money. He should desire that it shall count most for the Lord’s honor and that it should be best used in the Lord’s service. We are accustomed to think that a minister or an elder should be a man full of the Spirit, but frequently we forget that deacons should be also men filled with the Spirit. If they are to talk with their fellow-members about Christian liberality they cannot do so with God-given power unless they are men filled with the Spirit. If they are to help to plan concerning the distribution of the funds of the church they should be Spirit-filled men in order that they may have divine guidance in this very important matter. A board of Spirit-filled deacons can do a vast work in promoting the liberality of a congregation in which they hold office. They can interest the members in the various departments of the work of the church and they can show them the great responsibility which God has placed upon us in making us stewards of His resources. There are never-ending possibilities on the part of Spirit-filled deacons in the church of Christ.

4. They were men full of wisdom. Some take a narrow and limited view of the deacon’s work and think that it does not take much wisdom to pass the collection basket and keep a record of the amount given. But this is only incidental in the work of the deacon, if he does his work well. He is called upon to consider the poor, and he should give wisely and justly. He should explain and emphasize the needs of the church to the people. He needs to have such a spirit of wisdom that he may speak the proper word and return a soft answer to those who are critical.

The following example comes to my mind. A special collection had been announced for a certain cause in a church. A woman to whom that cause appealed gave, as she thought, quite liberally. She thought that all others felt as she did and that the collection would be large. When the amount contrived was announced she noticed that it was little, if any, larger than the sum which she had given. She went to the pastor and charged the treasurer with misappropriating the money. The pastor took the matter to the treasurer and found that he had, not only a receipt for the money, but the cancelled check to show that the money had gone as it had been directed. He was vindicated. If the treasurer had become angry because of the charge made against him, and had not acted with wisdom there might have developed serious trouble in that congregation. He acted in a Christian spirit and no dissention developed. What a wonderful blessing it would be to have men like Stephen and Philip in the deaconate in the church!

They were men who had lived close to God. They were men who knew and loved their Bibles. They were men who could present the Biblical claims, not only as it presents the duty of tithing, but concerning the various claims of God upon the life of the Christian. they knew what real stewardship was; they loved to see it, and they loved to exemplify it in their own lives.

THE MANNER OF SETTING APART THOSE CHOSEN

They were ordained with prayer and the laying on of hands. This method given by the apostles has been followed by the church of Christ since that time. It had been the custom throughout the history of the Hebrew people to lay hands on a person who was set apart for a particular office. Prayer was offered in order that God's blessing might be invoked upon those who were undertaking this office. The laying on of hands was not for the purpose of imparting new power or ability, but to indicate that the men set apart received their commission from those who laid their hands on them.

THE MARK OF GOD'S BLESSING

The mark of God's blessing was upon the more complete organization of the church. Dissention disappeared and **“And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly”** (6:7). Even **“a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.”** The church had grown rapidly before, but it had not reached so many of the priestly class. We mention this, not because the souls of priests are more precious in the sight of God than are those of others, but because the priests were more prejudiced and harder to reach with the Gospel. This is no doubt the reason that the priests are especially mentioned in this connection. It is an indication of the increasing influence of the Gospel and of the power of the Spirit to overcome the hardest hearts when the members and officers of the church are filled with the Spirit. A false move on the part of the apostles at this juncture might have led to a divided church. The action which they took, blessed by the Holy Spirit, led to a notable enlargement of the church.

The effort of Satan was again defeated. He had tried to stop the growth of the church by persecution. When that did not succeed he had induced some hypocrites to come into the church and lie concerning their devotion.

When that did not succeed he had brought dissention within the church. But the Spirit of God overcame all of these efforts of Satan to His own glory and the growth of the church. The church grew, not more slowly, but more rapidly, for we are told that the number of the disciples was multiplied exceedingly. There is increasing evidence as we follow the history of the early church that Jesus was no longer straitened; that He had indeed sent fire on the earth, and that He was continuing to work and teach mightily by His Spirit through His disciples.

SOME OF THE NEW DEACONS DID MORE THAN THE WORK ASSIGNED

“Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people” (6:8).

As soon as Stephen is laid aside we hear of the great work which Philip wrought, of his power to win men to Christ and the signs which he did. As for the others the record is silent. Stephen was full of grace and power. He could not stop with serving tables. He was ready to serve the Lord with all his might. He was eager to serve by witnessing as well as to serve by helping the widows.

The powerful and earnest preaching of Stephen no doubt had much to do with the multiplication of the disciples which has just been mentioned. He gave proof by signs and wonders that he was speaking a message from on high. He trusted not to self, but to the Spirit of God to convict men of sin and convert them to Christ. His strong faith was rewarded by seeing his appeal win men. Many were led to Christ, the church rejoiced in the new messenger who confounded the opposition by his success, but by reason of this very success the persecutors of the church were driven to fury.

Oh for a spirit within the church which shall lead her members and her officers, not to be content with the fulfillment of the letter of prescribed duties, but which shall lead them to go far beyond that which has been laid out for them to do! Would that all of God's servants like Paul were eager to leave the past and the ordinary things behind and to press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus! If the whole church were on fire for Christ, if the whole church were witnessing with power, Satan would strike back with all of his power, it is true, but the church would be revived and grow with exceeding rapidity. We would not recall Stephen from his place in glory if we could, but we would call forth other Stephens from the ranks of the church in her multitudes of centers throughout the world and exhort them, trusting wholly in Jesus Christ, to go forth filled with faith and power.

May God grant that the mantle of Stephen shall fall upon the deacons, officers and members of the church throughout the whole world!

QUESTIONS **(Acts 6:1-8)**

1. What was the cause of dissention within the church at this time?
2. What was the proposed remedy?
3. How did this help to complete the organization of the church?
4. What were some of the things which the apostles said should not occupy their time?
5. What were the things that should occupy their time and effort?
6. What is the meaning of the term deacon?
7. What were to be the characteristics of these servants of God whom we call deacons?
8. How did their standard of selection compare with ours?
9. Who chose the deacons?
10. Who set them apart for their work?
11. In what way did they do this?
12. What was the nationality of those who were chosen at this time?
13. Why did they choose Grecian Jews?
14. What usually becomes of dissentions when love and wisdom are exercised?
15. What mark of God's blessing accompanied this act of the church?
16. Why is it pointed out that a company of priests believed?

17. Up to this time in the apostolic church what three different ways had Satan used to stop the growth of the church?
18. What was the result in each case?
19. Which of the seven deacons first began to do more than he was asked?
20. What are some of the lessons for our officers and for all of us today?

~ end of chapter 13 ~

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