

This portion of Acts chapter 6 has to do with choosing leaders. The organization of the early church was not neatly and completely laid out for the apostles by the Holy Spirit. They followed the flow of the Holy Spirit’s power; and when a problem arose, they did what moved them as they were guided by the Holy Spirit. This transitional chapter in the book of Acts tells us that we should be open to the Spirit’s guidance even in mundane things. He may be using it as a step onward to something truly significant. Sometimes out of the insignificant come the infinitely important things the Holy Spirit teaches us for our greater good.

Choosing church leaders is something all churches do—and do differently. Last week in his Church Humor blog for *Christianity Today*, Drew Dyke wrote: “The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) met in Indianapolis this month. The Southern Baptists did what Southern Baptists love to do. They ate and voted on things. A lot of things: Women preachers, invitro fertilization, potlucks in heaven, and appropriate jail sentences for beer drinkers. They also elected a new Pope...I mean, President. Apparently, they selected a pastor named Clint Pressley to fill the role. I was furious! I’m sure Clint will do a great job, Drew says, but I’m saddened that I was snubbed. Again. Is it because I’m not Southern? Or Baptist? Or conventional? Maybe, but it still stings. I was ready to lead on Day One! After moving into the Southern Baptist presidential “mansion,” I would institute some bold initiatives, and the first thing I would do is plant Southern Baptist churches outside the south. Radical, I know. But why be constrained geographically just because of your name?”

In the first century, there were two geographically separate groups of people who responded to the proclamation of the Gospel. The Jerusalem Jews were one of these groups. Descendants of the exiled Jews who returned from Babylonia to rebuild Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra, they were intensely nationalistic, vigilant in the observance of the law and the traditions of the Jewish religion. The other group were called *Hellenists*. The word refers to Greek-speaking Jews, or more accurately, Jews living in the Greek-speaking

world around the Mediterranean who maintained their religion through synagogues in their own cities. Some were descendants of the Dispersion, Jews who did not return to Palestine after the Exile and who were scattered around in various nations and cities. Others were part of the large number of Jewish merchants drawn away from Palestine for economic and business enterprises.

These Hellenist Jews were part of the crowd that observed what happened when the Holy Spirit filled the disciples on Pentecost morning. The saying of these dispersed Jews, "*This year in Jerusalem,*" expressed their longing to return to Jerusalem, the Holy City. Many of them remained in the city long after a return visit, and some became permanent citizens. But they did not lose their Greek cultural background and were never fully accepted by the Jerusalem Jews. A tension between these two groups had grown through the years. When both Jerusalem and Hellenistic Jews responded to the Gospel, they were drawn into a close relationship that could not otherwise have been possible. But the prejudices persisted even after they became followers of the Lord Jesus. In the account of this squabble, Luke allows us an honest look at an age-old problem. Just as happened in the infant church in Jerusalem, we often bring our prejudices into the new life in Christ and into our attitudes in the church. We sometimes have the illusion that the only solution to twenty-first century problems in the church is to get back to the peace and unity of the early days when the church was all that the Lord intended. But Luke helps us avoid nostalgia and see that our task is to live in our own day and time. And the only way to do that is to look for the potential hidden in our problem.

It is a comfort to me to know that everything was not perfect in the early church. The Hellenist converts felt that the Judean converts were given preference in the distribution of the offerings that had been collected from the members of the church in expression of their "all things in common" sharing. The Hellenists believed that what they had put into the common offering was not being equally distributed among their widows and people in need. There is a tendency in human nature to split the church into groups with different emphases. What the Lord has brought together we separate, and the budget often is the focus of the

conflict. Think of the examples of then and now: Local program versus world mission; caring for our own needy within the congregation versus caring for those in the community; the local congregation versus the denomination. Or consider the rifts between the high church style and the low church style, the Protestants and the Roman Catholics, the charismatics and the people who believe that most of the gifts were for apostolic times, traditional music and the contemporary music, doctrine focused versus relational people. I would call these differences the tyranny of **the either/or**. It's bringing to the gospel our previous preferences and wanting it all to go our way. What we miss is the potent formula of authentic Christianity: **the both/and**.

The lack of defensiveness among the apostles who, by the Holy Spirit's guidance, confronted the problem head on impresses me. If the Hellenists were disturbed about a seeming inequality, put them in charge of the distribution! Ingenious! Yes. But even more, it is Spirit-guided and wise. The qualifications of the Hellenists to be selected are significant. They were to be "*from among you*" (v. 3). Not just Greek-speaking Jews, but people who were involved in the church because of conversion and spiritual transformation. The second qualification is something that is hidden in the NIV translation. Verse 3 simply says, "*choose seven men.*" The NRSV says "*choose seven men of good standing,*" or of "*good reputation*" in other translations. The Greek word, *marturoumenous* refers to their witness. Certainly, the apostles wanted people of impeccable character, but that character should be a witness to Christ in them. The ultimate qualification is to be those "*who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.*" The evidence of the Spirit's indwelling would be the gift to penetrate the deep mysteries of God and apply them wisely in daily life.

These qualities should be the basis of leadership in the church today also. Our temptation, however, is to bypass these criteria and select people with natural abilities or training in a particular area. Important as these are, without the power of the Spirit, they could impede spiritual leadership of the church. It is perilous to lead a church on human training and experience alone. The qualifications for leadership in the church of Christ have not changed since the

first century. We can do church work without them but not the real work of the Holy Spirit.

Luke names all the men who were selected to be deacons. Note that all were Greek-speaking, as their names clearly indicate. And the selection was not done by casting lots as with Matthias before Pentecost, but through the guidance of the Spirit. These Spirit-filled men, who were known for their witness and wisdom, were brought to the apostles and consecrated with the laying on of hands. Peace and unity returned to the young church, and the central work of sharing the good news continued with a particular sign of blessing. And Luke tells us that a very interesting detail: “*A large number of priests became obedient to the faith*” (6:7). That means a large segment of Israel’s leadership was being affected. It also accounts for the alarm of the Pharisees over the influence of the disciples—and one Pharisee in particular.

The impact of this section of chapter 6 for today, in addition to helping us get our thinking straight about the basic requirements of church leadership, is to get us to see how every problem has in it the seeds of a greater potential we could miss if we had not gone through the problem. The apostles were hindered by trying to do everything. They were probably troubled by that more than the Hellenists! But when they faced the problem nondefensively, the Holy Spirit provided a solution which brought a strategy of expansion out of a squabble. From the time of their selection and consecration by the apostles, the deacons did so much more than wait on tables, important as that is. We read of their preaching and teaching, witnessing and converting people; we see Stephen and Philip breaking down barriers and moving the church to new frontiers. Problems are the prelude to new discoveries if we simply ask the Holy Spirit to help us.

Stephen’s name in Greek means “crown.” This crown could be one of regal power or a crown used as a symbol of triumph in the Greek games. Stephen’s mother and father did not know when they gave him that name that he would become a disciple of One who wore a crown of thorns. Through Christ the

deacon won a far greater crown than his given name intended. Stephen's character and radiance is evident in the way Luke carefully chooses to paint a word portrait of the first deacon. In verses 5 and 8, he tells us that Stephen is "*full of faith and the Holy Spirit,*" and "*full of God's grace and power.*" F. F. Bruce suggests that Luke may have used the word "grace" in its pre-Christian usage, meaning "charm," or charisma. I prefer to think that Luke hardly would have used such a key word as grace without its deeper implication of unlimited love, favor, and acceptance of the Lord. The grace of the Lord produced an identifiable charisma about Stephen. Luke tells us that he had the same power to do signs and wonders as Peter and the apostles, but he was also a person especially radiant with grace and an impelling and infectious graciousness about his witness. That impression is woven all through Luke's account of what happened to Stephen. He was a man full of faith, full of daring belief that all things were possible through Jesus. In a continuing experience of that unmerited favor and acceptance, his countenance was filled with the gracious disposition of Christ, and miraculous supernatural things happened to people who heard him teach. A person like Stephen, crowned with faith, grace, and power, becomes a magnet to people in need. But he also becomes a target of the opposition.

It was the custom in the synagogue in Jerusalem to have debates over religious issues. Stephen went there to tell the good news of Jesus Christ as Messiah, crucified Savior, risen Lord, and indwelling Spirit. That caused more than a pleasant exchange of ideas! But his listeners found the grace-filled Stephen difficult to resist. Luke remarks, "*But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke*" (v. 10). Stephen's gifts of charisma and wisdom were irresistible. Both the Hellenist and the Jerusalem Jews to whom he spoke that day could not help being impressed.

Christian friends, life isn't measured by how many problems we have but by how we respond to them. The apostles chose to work together to overcome their problems. We can too. Jesus did not give us permission to be overcome by trouble, but to accept his help to overcome it (John 16:33). Glory to God! Amen.

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