

The Choosing of the Seven (Acts 6:1-7)

What is taking place in this passage? The Church is continuing to grow and there is the beginning of a split that could potentially occur. This is an important passage because it informs us about how to deal with dissention in the church. The Greek speaking Jews are complaining that their widows are being over-looked in the daily distribution of food. First of all the Church has assumed the functions of the Temple in Jerusalem for the believers. The temple had two forms of welfare available for those in need. One was the "Poor Basket" which was a weekly distribution of food for pious widows and those in need. The widows who had begun to follow the apostles were probably removed from this assistance. Therefore the Church takes it upon itself to provide daily for their needs. However, the Palestinian Jews who are distributing the food are giving preference to the their own widows and not to the Greek speaking Jewish widows. Because all of the apostles, who represent the leadership of the Church, are Palestinian Jews there is no sensitivity or at least the feeling of discrimination.

The Apostles recognize that this is too big for them and they need help in the administration of the Church so that they do not get distracted from their two primary purposes – Teaching and prayer.

Choose seven men from among you. There is participation of the body in the solution. These men are qualified spiritually to do an administrative task. This is an important detail for us in the church who have many people doing many different things. Judging from their names, these are probably all Greek-speaking Jews who are chose to this office. How do you deal with the threat of discrimination in the midst of diversity? Make your leadership team equally diverse.

The apostles commission them, demonstrating that they recognize and authorize their office and authority.

They are back on the growth track once this problem is taken care of. Growth is the normal and healthy state of the church. We should be concerned if the church is not growing and seek out what may be the problem, whether sin, apathy, or insensitivity to the direction that the Lord is taking the church.

Large numbers of Priests come to the Lord. This is probably referring to the ordinary priests (like Zacharias in Luke 1) who were not part of the power structure in Jerusalem and were also oppressed by the religious leaders and high priests. It is usually those who are at the bottom of the power structure in any given society who respond to radical cultural change – like the coming of Christianity. That was seen in Jesus' ministry as he drew large crowds of the sick, demon possessed, poor, social outcasts like tax collectors and sinners. In Acts we see it in the Hellenistic Jews and now in the lower level priests as well as the widows and the poor of the city. Many times, it is the "wanna-bes" from these same classes who show great opposition because they are trying to work their way into the old power structure instead of embracing the new one like many of their peers are doing.

Here we see the growth of leadership beyond the ones who were with Jesus. The Apostles don't hold on to power and they act wisely to add a whole new class of people into the leadership mix. The Holy Spirit then confirms their leadership as they do signs and wonders and demonstrate the power to proclaim the Gospel as effectively as the apostles. As a matter of fact, the narrative switches to the deacons (Stephen and Phillip) rather than the apostles. The apostles become the confirming force while these new leaders and actually leading into the new expansion of the

Kingdom. The cultural diversity of these leaders also makes them the bridge to the Gentile world. It is from their class of people that Saul of Tarsus (The Apostle Paul) will arise and accelerate the growth and development of the church.

Stephen Seized (Acts 8-15)

Stephen, as one of these deacons is a man of Grace or favor and power. This seems to immediately cause jealousy and suspicion and opposition arises from Hellenistic Jews from the synagogue of the Freedmen (who were probably Jews taken as slaves in 63 BC by Pompey later released and returned to Jerusalem), Cyrene and Alexandria in Egypt, and Cilicia and Asia in Asia Minor. Here we see great Zeal for the Law and traditions from the Greek-speaking Jews and their use of this incident to prove their loyalty to the religious establishment in Jerusalem. They are using the same tactics that the Jews of Jerusalem used against Jesus (false witnesses and accusing him of blasphemy and threats to destroy the temple).

They brought Stephen before the Sanhedrin and saw his face like that of an angel. This indicates that it was glowing. This reminds us of the Transfiguration of Christ (Luke 9:29). It also echoes the face of Moses in Exodus 34:29-35. Moses descends the mountain with the Ten Commandments and his face is radiant. This acts as a confirmation of the authority with which Moses is speaking. In the case of Stephen, they are accusing him of speaking against Moses and the Law; but God is confirming Stephen's words in the same way that he confirmed the original giving of the Law. So whose interpretation of the Law are you going to believe? The one given by the religious leaders, which is not confirmed by God or the one confirmed by God in exactly the same way that the original written Mosaic law was confirmed? This sets the stage for Stephen's sermon, which is very important in the book of Acts as a reinterpretation of the history of God's people.