

Prayers

Opening prayer

Jesus, You heal my body's wounds, and I thank You.
Holy Spirit, You heal my spirit's brokenness, and I praise You.
Father God, You heal my soul's sinfulness, and I worship You.
Make me whole again, and more like You, Almighty God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

General theme of the week: CULTURE

1. For yourself

Pray for your work, and ask the Lord to bless you in all that you do today. Place this before Him and ask whether there is anything within your work that is unworthy of a man or woman of faith, and if so, what you should do about this

2. For your friends and family

Pray for your friends and family, especially those whose lives are somewhat different to your own. Seek the Lord's help in understanding those things that are very different to life as you understand it

3. For the church and its work

Pray that the church will not shirk its task to bring the message of God's love to all who need it, in whatever culture or life experience

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray against all forms of prejudice, especially those that are endemic in your society. Pray against the evils that trap people into selfishness and self centeredness

Meditation

As each and every leaf and flower bursts into life,
Lord, flood my needy senses with Your living joy,
And may the radiance of your glorious brightness
fill my life.

As each and every seed finds life within the soil,
Lord, energise my dormant soul by Your capacious love,
And may Your kind and gracious faithfulness
flower within me.

As each and every plant now reaches up and outwards,
Lord, stretch my mind to touch Your plenteous righteousness,
And make me grow in joy and heavenward peace
In You, forever.

Glory be! I live my life, I breathe, I grow, I toil for You
I give my all so You may live through me within Your world
And all the great creativeness You have designed
Is found to work in me!

Bible Study

Bible passage – Acts 6:1-7

¹ Now about this time, when the number of disciples was increasing, those who spoke Greek complained against those who spoke Hebrew because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. ² So the twelve called together the whole group of disciples and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables, ³ fellow believers, so choose from among yourselves seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom. They can take over this task from us, ⁴ while we will continue to devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.'

⁵ The whole community was pleased with what was said, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ They brought these men before the apostles, and after they had prayed they laid their hands on them.

⁷ The Word of God continued to make progress; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a large number of priests accepted the faith.

Review

The church is challenged to broaden its leadership, and seven god-fearing men are selected to assist in administering the work of the church, whilst the apostles focus on the ministry they have been given.

This famous passage from Acts offers us yet further insights into the workings of the early church. The overall theme is that the momentum of growth was unstoppable, as Luke writes both at the beginning of our passage (6:1) and also at its end (6:7). However, each time he says this, Luke adds something interesting. At the beginning, he reports a problem amongst the believers that led to the apostles making some changes to the organisation of the church's leadership. Then, at the end, after saying that the 'Word of God continued to make progress' (6:7), he paints a picture of significant growth in Jerusalem, intriguingly amongst the priesthood! As we conclude our study, we will find that there is an interesting connection between these two.

Luke's story about the need for helpers to work alongside the apostles is easy enough to understand. The issue arose amongst the poorest in the church, who were widows. In those days, widows had few rights and little to live by, and the church's policy of sharing all things, especially food, would have been particularly important for them (2:43f. & 4:32f.). It is therefore not surprising that as numbers grew, so did the possibility for dissention and strife amongst different groups. The church, however, took the responsibility to share wealth seriously (5:1-11), so its distribution had to be seen to be fair.

Luke tells us that a division arose between the Greek speaking and the Hebrew speaking believers over who was getting a fair deal for their widows. The complaint itself implies that each group regarded themselves as a distinct identity within the church, based on language and culture. Yet it is not clear why the problem arose; we can guess that those who spoke Greek were believers from outside Jerusalem, and they may have been envious or suspicious of the Hebrew speaking believers from the city, thus creating tension. But all this is mere speculation however, and any number of reasons could lie behind the complaint. Yet having raised the problem, Luke says no more about it; he is only interested in its solution! The only interesting fact that we can glean is that having begun by sharing meals together after Pentecost (2:46), the believers had now developed a daily distribution of food, which is just what we would expect from a group who had signed up to share all worldly possessions (4:32-37).

By the grace of God, the apostles dealt immediately with this problem before it could tear at the heart of the community. They did this not by attacking the problem, assigning blame or identifying offenders. They accepted that the problem had arisen because they needed to reassess their own leadership, and they proceeded to do this. They summoned the whole group, and although Luke does not say so, we imagine that everyone attended this first ever church meeting! No one would have stood for the 'I'll get there if I can make it' attitude of today, this was a matter of common interest and its solution would require common consent.

In what they did next, the apostles appear to have been guided by the famous example of Moses. When in the desert, Moses was upbraided by his father-in-law because he was taking too much work on himself, and as a consequence, was not able to lead the people properly. After this, Moses chose 'able men' and

appointed them to 'judge the people' (Exodus 18:24-27). In a similar way, seven worthy and spirit-filled Christians were chosen to 'wait at table' (6:2), and therefore leave the apostles free to focus on 'prayer and the ministry of the Word' (6:4), a phrase referring to the worship life of the church and the preaching of the Gospel.

The division between the one who preaches and the one who 'helps' has persisted through the years. This is partly because the Greek word 'diakonos' is used here by Luke in the phrase 'wait on table' (or possibly 'serve at table'), and to this day, we appoint people to the position of 'deacon', which is one of service. But although the men appointed here were called to a general task of helping, the overall emphasis seems to be more on the free and fluid work of the Spirit to deal with problems as they arose. The early church grew because the Holy Spirit was able to do new things in the church as required.

Lastly, as we come to the end of our passage, we read that large numbers of priests became Christians! They had moved their allegiance away from a highly institutionalised religion, Judaism, to the early church with its trust in the Holy Spirit and ability to be creative. Its leaders did not rule by dictat, they found agreement by common consent, and the contrast is deeply challenging. People say that what happened in the days of early church cannot be repeated, but this is only true for the church as an institution. If the church divests itself of 'institution' and once again becomes truly 'spirit led', then it can once again become a church that God can use for the next generation.

Going Deeper

- Notes on the translation of the passage
- Greek speaking and Hebrew speaking?
- The division of labour
- The choosing of seven men of good repute, full of faith and the Holy Spirit
- Stephen and the rest of the helpers
- Nicolas and the Nicolaitans

Notes on the translation of the passage

V1 'those who spoke Greek complained against those who spoke Hebrew'

Other translations:

'Grecian Jews ... against the Hebraic Jews' (NIV)

'Hellenists complained against the Hebrews' (NRSV)

The name 'Hellenist' refers in general to the Greek language and culture of the Roman world in the first century AD, and this is the first time that the word appears in the Bible. The name 'Hellenist' is linked with the name of 'Helen of Troy', the legendary Greek heroine. The Greek language persisted after the Greek Empire gave way to the Roman world a couple of centuries before the time of Christ, because of the way that it came to be used throughout the known world, and also because the Roman emperors did not insist that Latin was used instead of Greek. Latin remained the language of Rome alone until sometime after Christ.

In order to try and bring some clarity to the reader, the NIV translates 'Grecian Jews'; but any name we use requires some explanation, so it is best to keep to the term used in the Bible and explain this. The term 'Hellenists' here refers directly to Greek speaking Jews in contrast to those who originated in Judea and Jerusalem who could speak Hebrew as well as the Aramaic language common in that region.

V2 'to wait on tables'

All the translations, more or less, agree that this is an appropriate translation of this phrase, but there is a big question mark over what it means. To begin with, the first words 'to wait', is the Greek words from which we get the term 'deacon', and so this passage is one that is often used when attempting to define the role of a 'deacon' in a church. Secondly, the term 'tables' can refer to the serving of food, but just as today, it can have mathematical meaning, and some suggest that this phrase refer to the onerous task of dividing out money as much as food. Despite this, it is obvious what the problem was from the rest of the passage, so in this case, the alternative meaning of this word matters little.

Greek speaking and Hebrew speaking?

No amount of scholarly learning can discern the exact nature of the dispute here in this passage, and Luke faces us with something of a mystery. Was it that the natural born residents of Jerusalem (Hebrew speakers) had more influence with those distributing the food than believers who came from elsewhere (the Greek speakers)? Also, why does Luke speak of 'Hebrew' speaking people, for the residents of Judea and Jerusalem naturally spoke a different language, Aramaic, and the ancient language of their forefathers, Hebrew, was not commonly spoken in Jesus' day!

It may be that Luke was generalising a problem, so that in his report, people could not 'take sides' in hindsight. No one was right or wrong, and Luke seems to be at pains to ensure that at this point in his story of the church, no blame can be laid at the door of any group in the church, which is not laid at the foot of all. In truth, the neglect of anyone in the daily distribution of food was an offense against everyone. This is why the twelve called together the entire membership of the church; 'all the disciples' does not mean all those who walked with Jesus in this life, the word 'disciples' has by now come to mean all believers, and according to the count recorded in Acts 4:4, this meant a gathering of more than four thousand!

Some reckon that such a meeting was impossible, but I am of the opinion that we are not in a position to judge whether it was possible or how it was done. In days without social media networking and the like, it was far more normal for large crowds to gather and hear a speaker or agree on a course of action. Such things happen throughout the Bible.

The division of labour

The apostles decide that they must not ignore 'the word of God in order to wait on table' (6:2), and later on, to devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word' (6:4). What seems to be in the apostle's mind is a division between the work of proclaiming the Gospel and the work of administering the church's other responsibilities, specifically the dividing out of the resources of pooled wealth. The word used by Luke for 'prayer' in verse 4 (the Greek word 'prosceneuo') suggests that this meant the worship life of the church in general.

This division of function has continued within the life of the church for centuries, and in general it has served the church well. What we should perhaps bear in mind is that although the community of believers clearly held the apostles in high esteem, there does not appear to be any sense of hierarchy within this division. Indeed, Luke goes out of his way to emphasise the godly qualities of those elected to the task of helping; they are 'full of the Spirit and of wisdom'. For those who are full of the Holy Spirit there can be no hierarchy of leadership, only mutual respect for the tasks to be done for the glory of God.

The choosing of seven men of good repute, full of faith and the Holy Spirit

There is no other description of the election of the seven men except that they were 'of good repute, and full of the Spirit and of wisdom'. The people who made up the early church seem to have had confidence that they could discern who had received the Holy Spirit and who had not; that is, who was 'full of the Holy Spirit'. We might be tempted to think that people recognised the presence of the Holy Spirit in people who could 'speak in tongues', just as the apostles did on the first day of Pentecost; indeed, this seems to be the case in a number of incidents reported by Luke (e.g. see Acts 10:44f. 19:1f.). But within a short space of time, the church seems to have accepted that a wider understanding of the gifts and graces of the Holy Spirit was necessary. Paul speaks of the 'fruit of the spirit' (Galatians 5:22f.) and also of the prime importance of love in all the church's affairs (the general theme of 1 Corinthians 12,13,14). The exercise of wisdom appears to have been necessary, and this implies that a simplistic understanding of who might be filled with the Holy Spirit was unhelpful.

In addition, the seven men were required to be 'of good repute'. This characteristic was necessary because they had to carry the trust of both sides of a potential division between Greek speaking people and Hebrew speaking people (6:1). This quality is sometimes forgotten today, or it is abandoned because people find it impossible to assess, but this is unfortunate. Those who lead the church in any capacity need to be people who can be trusted by as wide a range of people as possible, for the Gospel is first and foremost an appeal to all people to hear God's Good News. If people are put off because of the prejudices or inadequacies of a speaker then a human barrier has been placed between God and those who need His salvation. Jesus said of such '*woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes ...*' (Matt 18:7f.)

Stephen and the rest of the helpers

Those elected are seven men, of whom we read more about Stephen in the rest of the chapter and in the next chapter of Acts (6 & 7). Stephen is mentioned at the head of the list, meaning that he was probably the leader of this band. His qualities are outlined as being a man '*full of faith and the Holy Spirit*' (6:5). It will not be long before these characteristics are put to the sternest test, but they stand as a description of godliness to which generations of people have aspired. The two qualities balance themselves perfectly, for faith is a

form of human choice and the Holy Spirit is a gift of God. The one who exercises faith does so by constantly choosing the things of God in everyday life, and the one who is open to the Holy Spirit can access the things of God beyond human understanding and comprehension. Stephen appears briefly on the pages of the Bible as someone who is a model Christian in practical and spiritual faith and witness. We will read more about him tomorrow.

Nicolas and the Nicolaitans

It is impossible to say much more about the rest. It is unlikely that the 'Philip' mentioned here is the same Philip as the apostle Philip, for obvious reasons, and the other named helpers are not mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament; that is, with one possible exception. The last named person is Nicolas, who is identified as a 'proselyte from Antioch' (6:5). Firstly, it is significant that Luke reports that this man is from Antioch, for Antioch was the first major Christian centre after Jerusalem, and the place where Paul and Barnabas went to teach the church, before being commissioned as missionaries (Acts 11:19-26, 13:1-4). This was the first essentially Gentile church and its link with the early church in Jerusalem is established through this person 'Nicholas'.

Lastly, there is mention of Nicolaitans in Revelation of John (2:6,15), where the followers of this party are roundly condemned by John in his 'prophecy to the seven churches'. Scholars have attempted to try and find a connection between the Nicolas of this passage of Scripture and the man behind this party of Nicolaitans, but we should be aware that the attempt has been wholly unsuccessful!

Discipleship

Application

Encouragement in the leading of church meetings

We should be able to receive encouragement from this passage. Some think that this passage is significant because it introduces the office of deacon, but should we not rather be encouraged by the incisive work the Holy Spirit in guiding the whole church? Here, the church meeting is not a chore, it is a natural consequence of the Holy Spirit helping God's people deal with a problem in a creative way. The issue before the church affected everyone, so all gathered and were on hand to hear the leaders speak. Everyone, therefore, had a hand in the eventual solution and could appreciate that this was the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the whole church. Indeed, no specific solution was agreed to the grievances of Greek speaking community, but people seem to have had confidence not so much in people and leaders, but in the Holy Spirit who was guiding them. Together, they were led to trust that seven good men, with the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, were God's means to deal with the problems that had arisen.

Incidentally, we tend to say today that size is a problem, in so far as a large group of people is best led by a small, representative group of elected leaders. But this is not God's way. The Holy Spirit is capable of moving through a large group of people to gain a common mind. Outsiders may criticise this by saying that people are easily led along by the crowd; but if the one leading of the crowd is the Holy Spirit, then I, for one, want to be in the crowd!

Appointing leaders

This passage is not the first in which we read of the disciples, now the apostles, making a selection of someone to high 'office' within the church. In the first chapter of Acts, we read of the election of Matthias to be one of the twelve replacing Judas Iscariot. There, the method used was that of casting lots, but here, the method used is an examination of the spiritual qualities of those who might do the task. We can only conclude that the method of choosing is not as important as reliance on the Holy Spirit.

Neither is the 'laying on of hands' done every time a leader is appointed. We will find that throughout Acts, although the laying on of hands features regularly, it is not used slavishly, as if there was a dictat from the church at Jerusalem saying that this should always be done when a leader is appointed, whether an elder or a deacon. Each time, the emphasis must be on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who does things differently on each occasion because the circumstances of each important decision are different.

I do not suggest that the church is wrong to require the laying on of hands for election to high office in the church. Rather, I suggest that having this as a 'rule' means that we are not as free to hear the Holy Spirit as we might imagine. Moreover, instead of insisting that the laying on of hands is used exclusively when appointing elders or deacons, should we not be ready to lay hands on all who are set aside by the church for any form of leadership or defined task? The Holy Spirit does not fall into line with earthly hierarchy!

Questions for groups

1. What does this passage say to us about leadership in the church, try to answer this question not by stating the obvious, but by seeing how we can apply the same principles today
2. How should God's people treat the poor, and how can we help people best within the church and also beyond its boundaries?
3. What place does the laying on of hands have in your church?

Discipleship challenges

- *What does this passage say to you about leadership in the church, and how can you apply this to yourself?*
- *If the church is an institution, how can this change to make it more responsive to the working of the Spirit? Think carefully about how the Holy Spirit works in the church, and what you can do to make sure that if the Holy Spirit were to work through you, it would be noticed and accepted within the church.*

Final Prayer

Thank You Lord God for the growth of Your Word throughout the centuries. Continue to inspire Your people every day by the greatness of Your work so that we grow in faith and in our trust of Your eternal plan. May we always have confidence in You, and may we live each day in faith that You have the whole world in Your hands as the governor of all things and the director of our ways. All glory be to You, Lord God, AMEN!
