Acts 6:1-7, No. 15
"Preparing for the Long Haul"
November 29, 2015
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We have said already more than once that, given all the wonderful stories Luke had to choose from in writing his narrative, what he did choose to include he must have considered to be particularly important. His readers needed to know *this* if they were to appreciate how the Lord was advancing the gospel, what role Christians were playing in that advancement, and how the life of the church took shape in those earliest years. We have before us this morning another of those representative events, a development crucial to a proper understanding of what the church is to be and do.

Text Comment

v.1 Both of these groups were Jews, the Hellenists were Greek-speakers who had perhaps in some cases come back to Jerusalem from the Jewish diaspora but in all cases were more Greek than Hebrew in their personal and family culture. They would have attended synagogues in which Greek was spoken rather than Aramaic. The Hebrews or Hebraic Jews in most cases had been born and raised in the Holy Land and spoke Aramaic as their native tongue, but in all cases were more Semitic in their culture. In some way the system of relief was set up in a way that gave the Hebraic poor an advantage over the Hellenists' poor. We have already read about how generous the early Christians were and how careful to take care of the poor, but now a problem surfaced with respect to that very generosity. It was felt some were receiving more generosity than others and apparently, however unintentionally, there was some truth to this.

v.2 Some people make much of the fact that the word "deacon" is not found in this paragraph. Fact is no one may have thought to call these men *deacons* this early in the development of the office, though the term is used later for the church officer by the Apostle Paul. But while "deacon" does not appear, the verb "to serve" here in v. 2 is the Greek verb *diakonein,* from which we get the word *deacon*. The word "distribution" in v. 1 is a form of the same word. This word group reoccurs in Paul's description of the qualifications for deacons in 1 Tim. 3. Fact is, if this is not the origin of the office of deacon, nothing would be said anywhere in the New Testament about where this office came from or what it was for. Unlike that of elder, the office of deacon has no OT counterpart or antecedent.

v.3 As before with the election of Judas' replacement among the Twelve, the congregation is asked to fill offices by popular election. It is from a few texts like these in the New Testament that Presbyterian churches, among others, have derived their principle of the congregation's right to elect her own officers.

But as elsewhere the congregation is told what sort of men to choose. The description given in v. 3 amounts to spiritual maturity or godliness. The work was to be put into the hands of devout men with spiritual experience. By the way, the word *men* in the phrase

"pick out…seven men" is the word for the male human being, not the more generic word "man" that often refers to women as well. And, accordingly, all seven chosen were men.

v.4 There is an article before "prayer" in the Greek text. They will devote themselves to "*the* prayer," that is, the public worship of the church. The teaching or preaching of the Word and the superintendence of public worship are the historic responsibilities of Israel's priesthood. The apostles were taking over those duties in the new epoch.

v.5 It is said of Stephen that he was a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, but that is clearly intended to be understood as a description of all of these men. The point is that the apostles told them to choose such men and the church did what she was told.

One of these seven men, Nicolaus, wasn't even an ethnic Jew; he was a convert to the new faith from a Gentile background. Since he is identified in this way we assume the other six men were born Jews. To give leadership to a proselyte meant that the circumstances of one's birth and ethnicity meant little compared to the godliness of his life.

v.6 Election by the people, ordination by the presbytery is Presbyterian Church government!

v.7 This the first of the subscriptions that divide the book of Acts into sections. That is, the dividing markers come *at the end* of sections, rather than at the beginning. There will be five more, making six chapters or sections in the book as a whole. Some scholars have suggested - but there's no way to prove this - that each section covers about five years. In each of these summary statements we learn either that the church was growing as new converts were added to the number or that the word was being faithfully preached.

John Stott, in his fine commentary on Acts, proposes that the Devil attempted to destroy the church in the earliest days of the new epoch with three distinct strategies. First he attempted to kill it by force, fomenting opposition to the Christian movement in the government which then persecuted the church, throwing its leaders into jail. He will continue to employ this strategy throughout Acts, indeed, we will have the first narrative of Christian martyrdom in the very next chapter. But as Tertullian famously put it in the early 3rd century:

> "Kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust…. The more you mow us down, the more we grow; the seed is the blood of Christians." [*Apology*, 50]

Or as Anglican Bishop Festo Kivengere said in February 1979, on the second anniversary of the martyrdom of Archbishop Janani Luwum of Uganda: "Without bleeding the church fails to bless." [In Stott, 119]

Second, the Devil sought to undermine the Christians' *esprit de corps* and the moral reputation of the first Christians by insinuating corruption into the community, creating a reputation for falsehood and hypocrisy among the Christians. People who claim to have discovered the truth but who lie themselves are unlikely to be taken seriously. As you remember, Peter actually acknowledged Satan's role in tempting Ananias and Sapphira to lie about the gift they had given

to the church. This internal corruption is what has most weakened the gospel's advance through the world through the ages. But the summary judgment of Ananias and Sapphira, at the time, prevented others from imitating their crime and instead cast a spell of holy fear over the entire community.

And now, says John Stott, he tried a third approach. He sought to weaken the church's terrific expansive drive by distraction. This Stott says, may have been the cleverest of the three. "If he could preoccupy the apostles with social administration, which though essential was not their calling, they would neglect their God-given responsibilities" to preach and to lead the church in worship and so leave the church weakened, its evangelism less powerful, and defenseless against attacks of other kinds. [120]

The first verse reminds us of the thrilling circumstances of the time: the church was continuing to grow rapidly, the gospel was on the march, there was no telling what conquests would next be made. And suddenly there was a murmur abroad in the church, perhaps for the first time some Christians found something wrong in what was being done. Money given so generously was not being distributed fairly. Certainly the uneven distribution of food was not deliberate, but some Christians noticed a disparity. This is the *kind of thing* that happens very often, that will always happen in a community of human beings. Someone doesn't appreciate the consequences of a particular course of action. And someone complained. The danger of bitterness and division in the body of Christ was suddenly very real.

As soon as the apostles realized they had a problem on their hands, they summoned the believers (probably not all the believers but the leaders) to a meeting – where they met no one knows – and proposed a solution. They could not handle this work without neglecting the work they had been called to do, so they proposed that the work be committed to other men competent to do it wisely and well. The Christians – Hellenistic and Hebraic alike – welcomed the suggestion and did what they were asked, choosing seven good men to supervise the work of administering food to the poor. Thus the problem was solved and the church continued to care for its poor to everyone's satisfaction and to attend to the ministry of the gospel for the sake of the unsaved, and the result of that was still further growth, perhaps a new surge of converts and many among the priests, the community that might have been thought to be most resistant to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now, obviously I could treat this text as the origin of the office of *deacon* in the Christian church, as I believe it to be. That the church has a ministry of charity and of provision for those in need is a matter of supreme importance. So important is this ministry, indeed, that a new office was created to oversee it and to ensure that the Christians' generosity was put to the very best use in the lives of those who were in need. Your deacons here are doing a great work of this kind, but they will tell you that they are always looking to do more and to do it better. That is how men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom will always think about the ministry they have been given.

But this morning I want to consider this text in a somewhat larger way, as a picture – as it certainly is – of the spirit of Christians when they are living, as these Christians were, in a day of spiritual power. It is an observation often made that in times of the Holy Spirit's power, when

the gospel is advancing forcefully, when the Spirit is mightily at work drawing sinners to Christ, Christians themselves, both brand new Christians and those who have been Christians for a long time, find it more natural to live godly lives. In times of spiritual renewal and revival Christians are, as we might put it nowadays, at the top of their game. I remember one man writing of his experience during a revival in Scotland in the middle of the 19th century that he and his comrades were like "men walking on ice," so careful were they not to do anything that might offend the Lord or cause him to withdraw his blessing or to bring to an end such a time of great joy and spiritual power.

Well, if we think of this episode in early church history *in these terms* we can draw from it some lessons about what the Christian life ought always to be like, how Christians ought always to treat one another, or how the church ought always to address her problems and conduct her affairs. It is not always the case, alas, but *it ought to be*! In other words, *this* is the way we ought, you and I and all Christians ought to deal with disagreements among us and solve problems that arise in our life together. We can't prevent problems from appearing, but we can certainly handle them better than they are often handled! No church split here, no permanent division, no lasting envy or jealousy or sense of offense. No distraction from a great work. A solution was embraced by everyone and the church quickly moved on in highly effective ministry, among its own and among the unbelieving people around her.

I. The first thing to notice here is a community of Christians concerned to get things right!

You can almost see the wheels turning in the minds of the apostles when they realized – someone must have reported the problem to them – something needed to be done to improve the church's charitable service of her poorer members. In those days a widow, unless she was wealthy, had no means of support and would, in the nature of the case, have to rely on the generosity of others. And the church accepted that responsibility without reservation

So there was no question that the provision needed to continue. That was never discussed. The only question was how to do it in a better, more efficient, and fairer way. It's interesting to imagine the discussion that may have ensued, one apostle proposing this and another that as they sought some way to solve the problem. And someone eventually proposed handing the responsibility over to other good men and letting them arrange the ministry in the best way. Probably as soon as it was suggested the rest of them realized that this was the way forward.

So they proposed it to the congregation explaining why they could not undertake a ministry this time-consuming themselves. And here is where this episode gets particularly illuminating. *The Christians apparently just wanted to get it right.* No one was concerned to protect his or her own turf. They wanted to do right by their poor and they did not want that ministry in any way to undermine the gospel work of preaching and teaching and worship that was having such amazing effect upon the population of Jerusalem and Judea. So when the proposal was made to them, they were pleased: pleased that such a wise proposal had been made and pleased that it was obvious that the apostles wanted the problem solved in the best possible way and as soon as possible. So they did as they had been asked and chose the best men they could find and, as we are wont to say, the rest is history. Well-ordered Christian churches still have deacons today and provision for those in need continues to pour out of them.

That is how you get it right! Everyone caring to get it right and happy to support a proposal that holds promise of a lasting solution. No endless arguments about how the proposal might be tweaked in this way or that; no amendments; no substitute motions, just enthusiasm to solve the problem and welcoming a solid plan to do so. If only Christian churches approached all their problems with that same determination to fix the problem in the wisest way; if only all the believers cared about *that* and nothing else! But when everyone's eye is on the glory of God, the honor of Christ, the salvation of the lost, the faithfulness of the church, and the welfare of the poor, the church will have that concern to get things right and will literally be able to move mountains.

II. The second thing to notice is their confidence in one another.

I mentioned that the term *diakonia* occurs in v. 1. It is the Greek word translated distribution. It ordinarily means "ministry" or "service." The KJV translated it "ministration," and the NASB "serving." But what is interesting for our purpose is that *the same word is used in v. 4* in the phrase "the *ministry* of the word." The apostles had their ministry; these new officers would have their ministry. There is nothing here that at all resembles the protection of one's own privilege or authority. The work was being divided up among able men and other Christians were being granted authority to assume new leadership roles in the church.

We might well expect that the apostles, wanting to be sure that everything was done properly, would want to keep this ministry of service and the provision of food under their own control. It would have been, I would think, a natural instinct. But instead they are the ones to suggest that it be given to others to oversee. Remember, in the final analysis, we're talking about money here, indeed, a great deal of money. Nothing tempts us to want control like money.

But the apostles had their priorities straight. Theirs was a ministry that could not be given to anyone else, at least not yet. They were the principal teachers and preachers of the faith in this early period because they alone had the knowledge necessary to explain the person and work of Jesus Christ to others. That would not remain the case, of course. Indeed, we'll see in the next chapter that other men were being added to the roll of effective teachers and preachers. But conducting worship and preaching and teaching the Word were consuming all of the apostles' time. This ministry serving the poor, essential as it was, would have to be run by others and the clear impression of the text is that that is precisely what happened. The apostles went on with their ministry and the deacons developed theirs.

And that, as you know, will become a hallmark of apostolic Christianity, this principle of ministry being spread out over the entire body. As the Holy Spirit gives gifts, those gifts are to be employed for the sake of Christians and non-Christians alike, and that means that every Christian has something to contribute to the work of the church and the progress of the gospel.

And notice what the requirement was for these men who would oversee this new ministry. It was simply a Christian character and reputation, for that is what is meant by "men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom." "Give us godly men," said the apostles, "and we'll trust them to devise a way of making sure that the poor are cared for in a way that is both generous and

transparently fair." The impression of the text is that the apostles left that ministry in the hands of the seven men and did not continue to look over their shoulders or review every decision that they made. Their whole interest was getting this important work off their desk and on to someone else's, someone who could do it well.

And in a hundred ways that is to be the church's method still today. Disperse the ministry across the body, put leadership in the hands of godly men, and put everyone to work for Christ's sake. Surely those are still our marching orders today.

III. Then, finally, notice the large heart, the spiritual enthusiasm of these early Christians.

It has long been pointed out that all seven of these men chosen for and ordained to this work had Greek names. Now that in and of itself does not prove that all of them belonged to the community of Hellenistic Jewish Christians. Among the Lord's disciples and so among the apostles, Andrew and Philip, for example, some had Greek names even though they were Hebrew men. However whether all these men were of the Hellenistic party or only most of them – and many have thought all of them were – the names demonstrate this: the church was determined that there would be no suspicion of favoritism possible.

If the fear had been that the Hellenistic Jewish Christians were being shortchanged, the church's solution was to put that ministry in the hands of Hellenistic Jewish Christians! In other words, they not only trusted their brothers to do what was right, they obviously thought solving this problem far more important than protecting their rights! Paul, you remember, would rebuke the Christians in Corinth for failing to demonstrate precisely this attitude. Some of them were taking other Christians to court! "Why not rather be wronged," asked Paul, than publicly admit to the world that Christians were just like everyone else, more eager to defend their rights than glorify God! These early Christians cared more for gospel ministry and for harmony among the saints than they cared for ensuring that no one would short change *them*! Or *their* relatives. Or *their* friends.

Now, there can be no doubt that we are to look at what these Christians did, the apostles and the rest of the church, and see in their behavior a model for our own. *We too should be concerned to get problems solved* in the right way in the church; there will always be problems, putting matters right is the key; that is what determines whether the problems will prove to weaken or strengthen the church's ministry and reputation. *We too should show confidence in one another and be happy for others beside ourselves to be given responsibility for important work in the church.* It is the way the church both maximizes God's gifts to her and raises up new generations of effective, able, godly leadership. *And we too should have large hearts, gospel enthusiasm that leads us to care more for the church's ministry, reputation, and success in gospel work than for any personal advantage.*

I was reading the other day a short piece by his grandson about Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great preacher of central London in the middle of the 20th century. He was Welsh by birth and even as a boy began to demonstrate extraordinary intellectual gifts. He became a medical student at the prestigious St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London, part of London University, one of the oldest and best English medical schools when he was just sixteen years of age! It was said in those

days, “You could always tell a Bart’s man and you could not tell him much.” Such was the prestige that came with a Bart’s education. Indeed, later in life Lloyd-Jones regularly turned down honorary doctorates because he felt than anyone who had an MD from Bart’s had the best doctorate there was; any other was superfluous! Though the youngest he was soon recognized as one of the brightest students in the school and at the unusually young age of 21 he became a full doctor of medicine. He also became the chief clinical assistant to Lord Horder, the King’s doctor and one of the most respected physicians in the land.

But simultaneously becoming discouraged by his insider’s view of the unattractive lives of Britain’s social and political elite and converted to faith in Jesus Christ, Lloyd-Jones’ life changed dramatically. At the age of 26 he left behind a highly promising career in medicine to return to the poor coal mining area of southern Wales to become a physician of souls, the pastor of a small church in the small Welsh mining town of Aberavon.

The move was so dramatic, so contrary to expectation, so little like what an up and coming doctor would do, that it made the national press, even though at the time Lloyd-Jones was unknown outside his small circle of acquaintances. Why would a man turn his back on fame and fortune to pastor a small congregation of mostly uneducated people in a forgotten backwater of Great Britain? *Well the reason was that different principles, commitments, and loves were controlling his life.* The gospel had captured his attention and his enthusiasm, serving the church and the people of God seemed to him the important thing he ought to do with his life, and he had the gifts of the ministry of the Word. From such conviction came his worldwide and wonderfully influential ministry. No one knew at the time what would come of his decision, but it was to prove immensely beneficial to thousands upon thousands of believers and unbelievers alike.

Here is the point: we are, you and I, to live according to a very different set of principles, interests, and commitments, so different that our lives ought to be noticeably different from the lives of the people around us. And the result should be, will be that the church does things the world does not do and doesn’t do things the world invariably does do. And in that difference is found the power and the influence of Christian witness. *If we want the word of God to increase and the number of disciples to multiply, nothing is more important than that we imitate these Christians in their selflessness and their eagerness to do all they can to carry the ministry forward, always forward, letting nothing stand in its way!*

The Lord is here calling all of us, you and me, to live as if the gospel of Christ and the honor of God are far and away the most important things in our lives. We are to make our decisions and to regard one another as people should and will who have experienced the saving grace of God and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who value godliness above all things, and who gladly forget ourselves in order to serve others. *That* is what we see in Acts 6 and that is what we all ought always to be striving to ensure may be seen in our own lives and our life together at Faith Presbyterian Church! *That* is what we see here in Acts 6: no one seems to be caring about himself; about the gospel, about the poor, about the glory of God, about the salvation of the lost, yes; but *not* about himself!