

ORGANIZATION IN THE CHURCH - *Deacons (6:1-7)*

Satan is frustrated. He attacked the church from without (chapter 4) ~~with~~ and greater boldness resulted. Then he tried within with increased power on the part of the believers resulting (chapter 5). Again he used the sanhedrin ~~to~~ in attempting another external blow but the disciples not only continued to preach but to do so ~~at~~ the very of their persecution (chapter 5). And so, like ~~some~~ ^{one} who is now frantic to stop this fast-growing Christian community, Satan again seeks to cause disturbances within the group. Increase in the size of the group also brought increase in ~~the~~ his opportunities to cause dissension. The problem was solved by adjusting the organization to the growing needs.

I. THE NEED (6:1-2, 4)

Today we look to the Red Cross, Community Chest, Social Security, etc. to take care of ~~needs~~ the same kind of needs for which the early church assumed the responsibility among its own group. In the church at Jerusalem there were many widows (cf. 1 Tim. 5) and two parties. The two parties were both Jewish and this was not a quarrel between Jews and Gentiles. On the one hand there were the Palestinian Jews--those who lived in Palestine and largely in Jerusalem, spoke Hebrew, and observed all the customs of Judaism. On the other hand there were the Jews who were of foreign origin who observed Judaism but who spoke Greek and had been influenced by Greek culture. It was this latter group who charged that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of relief to them. Whether or not there was genuine neglect is undetermined; however, it is easy to see how the Palestinian Jews who predominated might have preferred their own widows and how the minority group of Hellenists might have exaggerated the neglect of theirs. ~~Nevertheless~~ Be that as it may, the charge was made, and the widows, therefore, are part of the reason ~~why~~ organization was needed.

Coupled with that, however, was the burden of work that had fallen on the apostles. Hence a proposal is made by them concerning this matter. It was that they organize. This was not because the serving of tables is less important than the ministry of the Word, for the apostles themselves had been doing both. But the time had come that they had to recognize a distinction of gifts in order that they might serve not as superior or inferior to one another but as complementing one another. Two orders now appear within the church--those who serve the Word and those who serve tables. It is quite right to call this part of the record the choosing of the first deacons; nevertheless, we must qualify that by saying that this is the choosing of those who would deacon tables. You see, the word that is translated deacon is also translated serve and minister in this passage (vs. 2 and 4). Therefore, the apostles themselves were deacons according to the meaning of the word. However, modern usage of the official title deacon usually limits it to those who serve in business matters (cf. 1 Tim. 3:8-13). The apostles could not do everything, and they rightly understood that their chief responsibility was in prayer and the ministry of the word (vs. 4). This is the right kind of will power ("we will give ourselves") and rightly ordered--(prayer first, and ministry second. These two factors, then, the widows and the work of the apostles, made the organization necessary.

II. THE NORM (6:3)

Wisely the Holy Spirit does not give us the exact details of how this first organization was set up. What men consider important today as to the norm for church organization is not included in this account. We mean, of course, such things as the kind of election, etc. What men have neglected today in their quarrels over church organization is recorded carefully and in detail in this verse. We refer to the qualifications for this service.

These ~~five~~ qualifications comprise the norm for organization in this particular area of the church's work.

A. Male

The first qualification in this instance was that those chosen be men. The word used is not the person but the specific word which means males. In this case the deacons were to be men. The only occurrence of the word deaconness is in Rom. 16:1 where it is more likely not used in a technical sense as designating an office. Nonetheless, the early church may have had deaconesses as the need arose. Whether or not Phoebe was one is undetermined. This first qualification, then, need not be so binding and abiding as the following four.

B. Christian

The men were to be from "among you." No outsiders were to have a part in the government of the church; and no church today has any business bringing on its boards any who are not definitely Christian.

C. Reputable

They were to be men "of honest report." Public testimony must certify their sterling character. Obviously this meant that they had to bear a good testimony in order that it might be attested to. Acceptance by the outside world is always a qualification for church governors (cf. 1 Tim. 3:7; 5:10; Titus 1:6).

D. Spiritual

Since all church work is spiritual, the leaders must be men full of the Spirit. This is the normal, not the abnormal of the Christian experience. The early church was filled with the Holy Spirit to witness for the Lord (Acts 1:8; 2:4; 4:8, 13, 31, 33; 5:32; 9:11-20). The early church expected their workers to be filled with the Spirit (Acts 6:3, 5; 11:24). The early church cooperated with the Spirit (Acts 5:32; 13:2-4; 15:28). The early church was governed, that is, controlled in its testimony, by the Holy Spirit. (Acts

13:2-4; 16:6-10). This, then is clearly the norm in the early church.

E. Wise

Finally, they must have wisdom. No doubt this includes natural common sense but always in the control of the Holy Spirit. The running of a church is no job for the unqualified.

III. THE NATURE (6:5-7)

When the apostles had set forth the qualifications the multitude pleased with the saying chose 7 men. The names of all seven are Greek and although it does not necessarily prove that they were all Hellenists themselves, it does show that they were chosen in the interest of the Hellenists. It is interesting to notice that they did not choose a committee of three Hellenists, three Hebrews, and one neutral member to settle this dispute. What a miracle of grace this settlement was.

In this instance the multitude chose their officers. It seems true that basically the early church was congregational in government, but it was very much guided and directed by those who were recognized leaders (cf. Titus 1:5). So it should be that all should have a part, but under the very definite leadership of those who are living close to the Lord. There is no reason why a spiritually-minded pastor's hands, for instance, should be tied continuously by a membership, the majority of which come out only when a vote is taken.

After the seven deacons were chosen they were set before the apostles and ordained. I do not object to using this word for there is a proper Scriptural ordination. It is simply the identification of ~~others~~ on the part of some in the work of others. The first instance in the Scriptures of the laying on of hands is Leviticus 3:2 where it clearly means identification. It means the same here. The apostles were identifying themselves with the work of the seven deacons by the laying on of hands. In that sense they were ordained.

As the final and glorious result of this new organization souls were saved. God set His approval on the division of labor, for the Word of God increased (the apostles now having more time to give to that) and many believed on the Lord. The priests are specially mentioned as believing. One wonders how they were able to live with the rent veil in the temple this long. Had they sewed it up or did it just hang there in two pieces? At any rate they came under the hearing of the Word which was being preached daily on their doorstep and they believed. Would to God all church organization had this direct and definite result.