

Spiritual Organization

Scripture: Acts 6:1–7

Code: 1720

INTRODUCTION

Acts 6:1-7 is foundational for understanding proper church organization.

A. Maintaining a Balance

Some people believe that when Christians get organized, they become unchristian. They point out that New Testament church is an organism: its life is its connection to Christ. But to conclude that the church is an organism and cannot be organized is wrong; to say it is only an organization and shouldn't be a functioning, living entity is wrong. The early church was an organized organism. All organisms that function correctly are organized--they function in an ordered sequence. Paul commanded the Corinthians to "let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). Even our bodies are organized.

In Acts 6 we see the early church as an effective organism in need of better organization. They had greatly influenced the Jewish community in Jerusalem, astounding people with miracles and signs. Multitudes had come to Christ. Believers were sharing their possessions with others in a spirit of love. The church was a beautifully functioning organism. But the Holy Spirit knew it needed better organization, so He used a crisis in chapter 6 to start that process.

B. Assisting the Spirit

Biblical church organization always assists ministries that the Spirit has already begun. In Scripture the church, like an organism, begins to live, move, and develop ministries. Then the church builds a framework around those ministries so they can function smoothly. The early church's evangelism was mushrooming. But they reached a plateau where they needed better structure to evangelize more effectively. Effective organization accommodates God's Spirit so whatever ministry believers want to pursue can be done smoothly and with the greatest benefit.

C. Establishing the Framework

The Jerusalem church already had the seeds of organization. The early chapters of Acts mention several times how many believers there were, implying that someone kept records of the membership (cf., 2:41; 4:4). The early church also had certain times and places to meet for public worship, prayer, and study of the Word (cf., 2:46; 3:1). Acts 2:46 says the believers were "breaking bread from house to house." According to Acts 4:32-35, money and goods were collected and distributed to meet everyone's needs. All those activities require organization and someone to administer them. Organizing programs and schemes and then finding people to do them isn't the responsibility of the church leaders. They should keep teaching the Word, and when people want to start a new ministry, give them a framework to minister in. The organization of the early church was simple: the apostles taught and ruled, and everyone else carried out what they said. As the church grew an organizational crisis arose. But the early church was willing to organize itself as its life and growth demanded. Giving structure to current ministries and eliminating current problems are the essence of organization.

LESSON

Acts 6:1-7 gives us insight into four important considerations at the first recorded organizational meeting of the church.

I. THE REASON FOR SPIRITUAL ORGANIZATION (vv. 1-2, 4)

"In those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not fitting that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. . .but we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."

A. Growth of the Church (v. 1a)

"In those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied."

1. Jewish expansion continues

Although we don't know exactly how large the church had grown, it may well have been between 20 and 30 thousand--that's a large congregation! And the church was only a few months old at this point. They hadn't had time to adjust to their growth, so now we see them faced with the logistical impossibility of ministering effectively to all those people. Someone had to insure that the poor got the food they needed. Someone had to oversee the collection of what the Christians gave and the distribution of it to those who were in need. Another person had to supervise getting the elements for the Lord's Table and figuring how many people to prepare for. Someone else needed to take care of the details of baptism, such as locating an appropriate place. Someone had to make sure the people knew when and where the meetings would be held and to ask someone to teach at that meeting. With all that to oversee the apostles were getting overloaded.

2. Gentile evangelism begins

The apostles had accomplished the first part of the goal Christ gave them when He said, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Acts 5:28 indicates their ministry had permeated Jerusalem. Now they were ready to move out to Judea, Samaria, and the world. Before that began, they needed a framework they could expand on. In the next chapters Luke introduces Paul, whose ministry will be primarily to the Gentiles. So the church was on the threshold of taking the gospel to Gentiles. But only a united church is effective in evangelism. The early church needed more organization.

B. Dissension Among the People (v. 1b-c)

1. Because of Satan's effort

Whenever someone begins to accomplish something for God, Satan intensifies his attempts to stop it. There are three tactics Satan used against the early church and still uses today:

a) Persecution Whether he uses emotional, mental, or physical persecution, he tries to unnerve Christians and to convince them to withdraw from the spiritual battle. Much of the ministry is spent encouraging saints to be bold in communicating Christ. Some saints always linger in the shadows. You urge them to get involved in reaching the world. But Satan causes resistance, and they retreat. Because persecution can be so effective, he continues to use it. However he tried it against the early church, and it didn't work. The church grew faster, and God worked even more miracles, proving Jesus was Messiah. Every time Satan persecuted the church, God overruled.b)

Contamination Satan's second approach was within the church itself. If he can get a believer to sin, he can pollute the Body of Christ. He tried that with Ananias and Sapphira. But God purified the church by killing those two. Their fate motivated other Christians to stay pure, and kept those who were insincere from joining. Satan used sin in the Body to restrain the gospel, but God dealt with the sin, and the gospel spread faster.c) Dissension Satan's third tactic to cripple the church was getting believers to fight each other. When he succeeds, hypocrisy dilutes the church's message, and internal conflict saps its power. Because of petty issues, discontent, gossip, and power struggles among their members, many churches use all their spiritual resources to stop fights rather than fulfill the commission of the Lord. Dissension makes effective evangelism impossible. Satan still uses those same tactics. Yet believers continue to fall prey to him. If a football team had only three plays, it wouldn't be too effective, because its opponent would know what play they were going to run and

prepare to stop it. The church knows what Satan's going to do but still lets him do it. Too often when Satan tries to make us fearful by persecution, we become afraid and muffle our message. When he attempts to pollute the church by tempting us to sin, we all too easily give in. When he works to create dissensions, we get caught up in petty disputes, arguments, and bickering. Satan's attacks can be discouraging. But they also can be an exciting challenge because you can win a victory only if you're in a battle. The struggle allows us to see God demonstrate His power. The church should strive to encourage the persecuted, deal with those who pollute the fellowship by their sin, and help the divisive to love.

2. Because of natural divisions (v. 1b)

"There arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews."

The early church preached the gospel primarily to Israelites. Eventually the apostle Paul would orchestrate the church's first concerted effort to reach Gentiles with the gospel. So the church in Jerusalem consisted primarily of two groups of Israelites: native-born Palestinians, whom Luke calls "Hebrews", and Hellenistic Israelites, who had lived in places such as Asia Minor and North Africa. These are the "Grecians." Some Hellenistic families had lived out of Palestine for three or four generations, but many maintained their Jewish heritage. Some even returned to Jerusalem for the Jewish feasts. Many Hellenistic Jews were saved on the Day of Pentecost. So the church was composed of native Israelites and Jewish people who were born and raised outside the land. Since the Hebrews spoke Aramaic and the Grecians spoke Greek, they broke into groups where they could communicate, thus creating a natural division. In addition, the native Israelites tended to treat the Hellenistic Jews with a degree of contempt, because they felt they weren't true Hebrews. They thought they were disloyal to the land and were polluted by Greek culture.

3. Because of neglected needs (v. 1c)

"Because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration."

The Grecians thought the church was slighting their widows when it dispensed food and money. Perhaps the native Israelites had a tendency to overlook them because there were fewer of them and the language barrier may have made the Grecian widows keep to themselves. So a complaint arose. Caring for widows and the poor has always been a Jewish custom. Commentator William Barclay tells us that in the synagogue there were officials known as receivers of alms. Every Friday morning they went to the marketplace and from house to house to collect an offering. Later that same day the poor and the widows received that offering. Those with temporary shortages received enough to get them through their difficulty. Those who needed regular support received enough for fourteen meals, two meals a day until the following Friday (The Acts of the Apostles [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955], p. 50). It was customary for the Jewish people to care for the poor and the widows in that way. In 1 Timothy 5:3-16 Paul specifically defines such provision as the church's responsibility. Each church should care for the widows of the congregation who don't have enough to live on. That is our wonderful privilege and responsibility, every bit as binding on churches in the present as it was in the past. However, the Grecian widows weren't receiving what the Lord designed for the church to provide, so murmuring began. Because lingual and cultural barriers already divided the two groups, this issue could have driven a wedge between them and spread a black cloud over the beginning of Christianity.

C. The Details of Ministry (v. 2)

"Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not fitting that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables."

The apostles didn't deny that the Grecian widows were being neglected. They saw the problem but knew they would have to leave the Word of God to care for the widows themselves. Their calling was to the preaching of the Word, and they didn't want to neglect that. The Greek word translated "tables" (trapeza) is used to refer to meals and even the tables that the moneychangers used in Matthew 21:12. So it's a broad word, referring to many of the ministries of the early church, such as serving a

meal when the believers gathered to eat, doling out money to the needy for necessities, or collecting funds. The disciples found it impossible to accomplish all those details of ministry. Distributing money and food to the needy and handling the business of the church are good and honorable activities. But God called the disciples to the ministry of the Word, and that needed to be their priority.

How Organized Should the Church Be?

The debate about church organization has reached a zenith in our times. At one end of the spectrum there is the church that resembles a well-organized, well-staffed, efficient corporation. On the other end are those who emphasize small, home Bible studies and the life of the Body. Some Christians believe the church should have no formal organization--that it shouldn't own a building or piece of property, or have any paid staff responsible for particular duties. I heard one such person say that no organization or system can be of God. However, God is the most organized being in the universe! Every dimension of God's world is organized. To say that an organized church can't be of God misconstrues God's nature, which is the pinnacle of organization. The Old Testament records God's covenant with Israel, which is a system from beginning to end.

On the other hand, some people say the church is only an organization. Therefore it must be run like a business. First they develop a complex organizational structure with boards, committees, and subcommittees. Then they ask the Holy Spirit to bless their efforts and operate within that detailed organizational structure. It is equally foolish to ask the Holy Spirit to work without giving Him a structure to operate in. Both extremes are wrong.

The work of the ministry had grown to such proportions that the twelve would have had to neglect the Word of God to accomplish it. Someone needed to oversee the work and mobilize the people to carry it out.

A Crisis Among Pastors

The disciples said, "It is not fitting that we should leave the word of God" (v. 2). Unfortunately many men in the ministry today are busy doing everything but what God said was to be their priority--the ministry of the Word of God. This problem has reached crisis proportions. Pastors, teachers, missionaries, and evangelists are easily distracted from the Word to "serve tables." So congregations languish in spiritual infancy year after year, never having real spiritual food. Often the pastors are wonderful people, but they have been unwittingly pushed into those distractions by a congregation that has unbiblical expectations. The apostles knew why they had been given to the church--to teach the Word of God--and refused to neglect it because other responsibilities demanded their time.

D. The Priorities of the Apostles (v. 4)

"But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."

1. Their clarification

The disciples determined to focus on praying and preaching. The same Greek word (diakonia) is translated "serve" in verse 2 and "ministry" in verse 4. They were saying, "We'll serve the Word; you serve the tables." Ephesians 4:11-12 says that the Lord gave apostles, teaching pastors, and evangelists to the church to perfect the saints so they could do the work of the ministry. Leaders are to bring people to maturity so they can minister. The apostles determined not to let any service take precedence over prayer and the ministry of the Word. That was their priority. One of the church's primary tasks is to teach the Word of God as it should be taught--not presenting platitudes about the Bible, or stories about spiritual fruit, but unfolding the text. However, preaching without prayer is shallow and dry. We must pray constantly for those to whom we preach and for ourselves, that God would make us useful vessels.

2. Their commitment

The Bible teaches that the man God calls to shepherd the flock must give himself wholly to prayer and preaching. Living by those priorities requires total commitment. The phrase "give ourselves continually" stresses the disciples' commitment. Ministering like that demands everything you are; it demands that you saturate yourself with the Word of God. The story is told that once after a great Bible teacher had finished teaching, a young man approached him and said, "I'd give the world to teach the Bible like you do." The teacher replied, "That's exactly what it will cost you."

a) Paul's example of commitmentThe apostle Paul knew about absolute and incessant commitment to the Word. Acts 20:17-20, speaking of Paul, says, "From Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church. And when they were come to him, he said unto them, Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and trials, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews; and how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shown you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house." Acts 28:30-31 indicates that Paul taught the Bible constantly for two years while under house arrest in Rome. Although Paul was immersed in teaching the Word, he had a personable, warm heart that loved people. He had many close personal relationships. Timothy in particular was a special friend of his. Paul reveals his heart when he speaks to Timothy. In 2 Timothy 4:9 Paul says to him, "Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me." In verse 21 he adds, "Do thy diligence to come before winter." With much pathos he says, "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (v. 10). Paul ministered on a personal basis, but his primary commitment to the church was teaching and preaching the Word of God. The disciples' commitment to the Word is a pattern we must imitate in our ministries today. Such commitment will require diligent study even when we don't feel like it. Paul described his compulsion to preach the Word this way: Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16). But our flesh knows such commitment involves pain and self-discipline, and rebels against it. Biblical ministry demands total commitment.

b) Paul's instructions to TimothyPaul told Timothy his ministry was to "command and teach" (1 Tim. 4:11). In verse 13 he says, "Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." That refers to reading the text, explaining the text, and applying the text--a good definition of expository preaching. In verses 14-16 Paul says, "Neglect not the gift that is in thee Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them, that thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself and unto the doctrine." Timothy was to give special attention to two things: himself and his teaching. He needed to have a pure life, or what he said would have no meaning. That's why Paul said, "Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity" (v. 12). Paul summarized the ministerial command in 2 Timothy 4:2: Paul says, "Preach the word."

c) Paul's discussion about salaryMinistering the Word requires such total commitment that those who do so shouldn't be encumbered with earning a separate living. First Corinthians 9:14 says, "Even so hath the Lord ordained that they who preach the gospel should live of the gospel." The context pertains to paying the preacher. Notice verse 11: "If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?" If someone teaches you God's Word, you should care for his material needs. Galatians 6:6 says, "Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches" (NASB). These commands to provide for the needs of those who teach God's Word illustrate how preoccupied the preacher should be with study and preaching. That's why the disciples said, "We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4).

II. THE REQUIREMENTS FOR CHURCH LEADERSHIP (v. 3)

"Wherefore, brethren, look among you for seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business."

In addition to being saved, there are five basic requirements for church leaders.

A. That They Be Men

"Men."

The leaders within the church are to be men. That doesn't imply a lack of spiritual equality (cf., Gal. 3:28). God has used women throughout church history. The New Testament mentions Dorcas (Acts 9:36-39), Lydia (Acts 16:14-15), Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2), Priscilla (Acts 18:2-3, 18, 26; Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19), and the daughters of Philip (Acts 21:8-9). God still uses women. Titus 2:4-5 commands women to instruct younger women to "be sober-minded, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed." Women have great responsibilities and are in many ways the warmth and depth of the church. But God's basic instruction plan of operation in the church is for the men to be in authority.

B. That They Be Church Members

"Among you."

God expects a church to find its leadership from within its own ranks. Often churches become frustrated looking for leadership in other churches. They look nationwide for pastors and assistants to fill a need when they could have--and should have--examined their own membership. In every church where the Bible is accurately taught and its authority obeyed, you can count on God to mature the saints and raise them up to serve within that church. As a good general rule, the leadership of a church should come from within itself.

C. That They Have a Good Reputation

"Of honest report."

The church's leaders must have a good reputation. They should be men whose integrity and reputation is blameless, not only among the church but also in the eyes of the unbelieving world (1 Tim. 3:7).

D. That They Be Spiritual

"Full of the Holy Spirit."

They must be spiritual men. Being filled with the Spirit means being controlled by the Spirit. Church leaders should be men whose lives are not their own, but devoted to the will of God.

E. That They Be Wise

"[Full of] wisdom."

Lastly, the officers of the church must be wise.

Were the Men Selected in Acts 6 Deacons? Although many Christians consider the men in Acts 6 to be the first deacons, there is evidence to the contrary. This chapter is simply recording the beginnings of church leadership. These men were all the organization the church needed at that time. Later Paul divided church leadership into three distinct offices: elders, deacons, and deaconesses (1 Tim. 3). The ministries of Stephen and Philip, two of the men selected in Acts 6, went far beyond that of a deacon. Philip was an evangelist (Acts 8:26; 21:8). Stephen, although never referred to as an evangelist, ministered as an evangelist (Acts 6:8[en]7:60). Their ministries are closer to those of an elder than of a deacon. Neither Acts 6 nor any other passages ever call those men deacons. So God used those seven men to accommodate a specific need in the early church. Perhaps seven were selected because that was apparently the number of persons appointed to transact business publicly in Jewish towns.

III. THE ROSTER OF THOSE SELECTED (v. 5)

"The saying pleased the whole multitude; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte of Antioch."

The apostles' suggestion united the two factions that had begun to form. God accomplished His purpose, and the devil's effort was thwarted. The church ended up being more unified than it was before. If the Grecians' complaint hadn't become known, the two groups might have stayed at odds

with each other. But solving their grievances welded them together.

Luke says, "They chose." I believe the members of a church should select from among them men who are full of the Spirit, wise, and of honest report--men who can lead them. The Jerusalem church selected Stephen, Philip, and five others not mentioned again in Scripture: Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, who was a proselyte from Antioch. It is significant that all seven names are Greek names. The church unanimously chose seven Grecian Jews to lead them! That proves their love for unity. If the same situation arose today in our democratic society, we'd probably choose three Palestinians, three Grecians, and one Gentile proselyte, so both sides could have equal say. But the early church chose seven Grecians to lead them. What Satan tried to sow as discord grew to be wonderful unity. When the Hellenistic Jews saw the humility and concern of the Hebrews, their love and respect for them intensified. Because they were the majority, the Hebrews could have chosen whomever they wanted, but they voted in seven Grecian Israelites. Those seven men began to administrate the church, and the apostles returned to the Word.

IV. THE RESULTS OF SPIRITUAL ORGANIZATION (vv. 6-7)

"Whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. And the word of God increased, and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith."

After the congregation chose the seven, they presented them to the apostles to be commissioned. The laying on of the apostles' hands was simply an expression of the oneness of the whole church with them in their ministry. The leaders were ordained, and the church was organized. Because the apostles had more time and the members had renewed love for each other, "the word of God increased." When the Word increased, "the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly." And a shocking thing happened: many of the priests believed. The ordinary priests, who were looking for their Messiah, found Him in Jesus Christ. The church needs to accommodate what the Spirit of God is doing by providing enough structure to make it effective. That's what the church of Jerusalem did--and look at what happened!

Focusing on the Facts

1. Biblical church organization always _____ ministries that the Spirit has _____.
2. Does Acts 1-5 suggest the Jerusalem church had already started to organize itself? Explain, supporting your explanation with Scripture.
3. What is the essence of organization?
4. Describe the growth of the church in Jerusalem.
5. Explain the three tactics Satan used against the early church.
6. Who are the "Hebrews" in Acts 6:1? Who are the "Grecians"? What was the attitude of the Hebrews toward the Grecians?
7. Explain the Jewish procedure for providing for the poor and the widows.
8. What is the significance of 1 Timothy 5:3-16?
9. What activities of the church can the phrase "serve tables" include?
10. What are some arguments against having no organization within the church? Respond to them biblically.
11. According to Ephesians 4:11-12, what goal should church leaders strive for?
12. What were the priorities of the apostles (Acts 6:4)?
13. Explain the key words of 1 Timothy 4:13. What do those words define?
14. What insight do 1 Corinthians 9:14 and Galatians 6:6 give into the preacher's commitment?
15. List the basic requirements for church ministry.
16. Were the men selected in Acts 6 deacons? Explain.
17. What is significant about the seven men the Jerusalem church chose?

18. Describe the results of spiritual organization (Acts 6:6-7).

Pondering the Principles

1. The events of Acts 6 underscore the importance of meeting the needs of those who are unable to care for themselves. Some Christians, fearing being labeled as liberal or being accused of teaching a social gospel, have completely neglected this vital expression of our faith. Both the Old and New Testaments stress our obligation to use our resources to help others. Read 1 John 3:14-19, and then memorize verses 17-18. Begin this month budgeting a certain amount of money that you can use to help others on a regular basis. Be alert to the needs of people in your church, family, school, workplace, and neighborhood.

2. The apostles knew their priorities: prayer and teaching the Word. Every church leader should share those same priorities. However, this responsibility doesn't stop with leaders--every believer should make the study of God's Word and prayer his priorities. How diligent and faithful are you at both? Have you allowed other responsibilities or activities to crowd out your personal time with the Lord? Have you neglected your relationship with Him? Take time now to ask God to forgive you for neglecting Him. Ask Him to revive your hunger and thirst to know Him and His Word. Decide on a time each day you can commune with Him through prayer and the study of His Word. Determine to be faithful to your decision, regardless of how you feel, and to make it a time of real fellowship with the Lord--not a time of ritual. Starting today, read through Psalm 119 in a modern translation, meditating on it and praying it to God.

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