

## MINISTERING

Acts 6:1-15

Human beings are typically social creatures. Most of us live out our lives in groups, and these groups can have significant impact on our thoughts, feelings, and actions. What do you think would be the main considerations or questions most people would have if they were trying to decide their level of involvement in a group to which they already belong? Or perhaps the question might be related to becoming newly associated with a particular group of other people? Possible answers might range a broad gamut such as

What is in it for me?

Can this help me grow as a person?

What is this going to cost me?

What will this do to other areas of my life?

How will my involvement help improve the group?

Let's look at some of the everyday situations in the early church and see how these were handled by those first-century Christians.

### Opportunity Knocks – 6:1-4

<sup>1</sup> Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. <sup>2</sup> And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Acts 6:1-4 (ESV)

It is rather difficult to know and appreciate what is involved in the daily routines of people in different cultures of today's world and it is even harder if we try to go back in time two thousand years. The dynamics of what was happening in a group of Jews who were followers of Jesus Christ are sketchy, at best.

Not all Jews in the early church were the same. Some were born in Judea and spoke Aramaic (similar to Hebrew) on a routine basis and had a fair grasp of the Greek language. Others were born in different parts of the world and had moved to Jerusalem but they were not very conversant with Aramaic but spoke the language of the area where they were born and they could also converse in Greek. The Jews who were born and reared in these other countries probably tended to have a Greek world view and values that were different from the Jews who had grown up in the more traditional Hebrew culture. These differences created opportunities for problems and assumptions of prejudicial motives if there were any perceived inequities of how people were treated. There are subgroups within the larger group that we think of as the church.

We know from previous accounts that people who were able to help gave to the church things that others needed. Apparently, those in the church who did not have jobs or family to help them have the basic necessities of life would be given food, money, clothing, or whatever they need to meet their daily needs. Of immediate concern were meeting the needs of widows who needed help on a daily basis.

We are not told if there was a distribution center where things were available or how this assistance was carried out in a practical manner. We sort of imagine that they had something like a community center or church building; however, that is just speculation. Was this daily ministration something that was carried out in one of the Temple areas? Apparently, no one was

in charge of this effort, and some of the needs were not being met. We don't know if this neglect was deliberate or just happened. Some of those being neglected apparently thought it was deliberate. It was likely that many of the Hellenistic Jews were not as well known as the locals were and may have been overlooked.

When we come to God through the way Jesus made for us, we are given a new nature. Our minds, however, are still in tune with the ways of the old nature. The transformation process is just that: it is a process and takes time. In the meantime, we may behave in a less than "Christian" ideal way in our interactions with each other. We still have prejudices and greed and the attendant problems these create.

The church leaders did not preach a sermon and exhort the members to be mature and act maturely toward each other. Mature behavior is not something we do through will power. It comes from maturity and maturity comes from a time of growth in the Lord. Our growth in the Lord is a result of taking up our cross daily and following Jesus. All this takes time.

In the face of the reality of the situation that just telling people to "do what is right" does not get the job done, the leadership instituted a means for the church to function effectively with a division of responsibilities for various duties.

This situation is somewhat similar to the situation with which Moses had to deal when he was leading the Israelite from Egypt to the Promised Land. He did not have time to address all the issues that arose. He followed the good advice of his father-in-law and organized the people under appointed leaders. The apostles followed a similar strategy of having seven men assigned to the physical and financial issues of the church while they concentrated on the spiritual ministry of the word and prayer.

### Influence Expands – 6:5-7

<sup>5</sup> And what they said pleased the whole gathering, 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 Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. <sup>7</sup> And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. Acts 6:5-7 (ESV)

The choice of people to take on the responsibility for handling the administration of resources that provided for physical needs of the church was left to the congregation. However, there were well-defined requirements set by the apostles so that their choices were limited to those who had a good reputation and those who were filled with the Spirit of God and demonstrated wisdom. This was not to be simply a popularity choice but was to be based on proven ability and a proper relationship with God. If a person is left to make decisions based on his own leadership, then even something as simple as distributing food can cause problems in dealing with a large group of people.

Some translations use words that would suggest that the responsibilities that were being assigned were similar to a waiter in a restaurant. The term that is translated in verse one as "daily serving of food" in the NAS is the same word that in verse four is translated as "ministry" of the word. This Greek word is diakonia from which we derive the English word deacon. Both the apostles and the "seven" were ministering to the church. One group was concentrating on spiritual matters and the other group on physical and financial matters.

Another thing that would cause us to think of food as the main physical need is the use of the word "table" in verse two. A better picture of what was meant here would be that of a distribution counter or a desk from which the administrator worked as he ministered by both receiving and distributing things as the church members shared with one another.

Even today Pastors can find themselves with too little time to be in prayer and studying the word because they are caught up in the daily operation of the churches to which they minister. According to Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, those in ministry functions such as prophets, apostles, teachers and pastors that we tend to think of as more "spiritual" are to be equipping others in the church to do the "work of ministry" to help build up the body of Christ. Many people think that the paid ministerial staff in a church are the ones who are to do the ministry of the church. Here Paul tells us that the work of ministry is to be done by the saints who have been equipped by those we typically call the "staff." Could we then conclude that if saints (ordinary Christians) are to do the work of ministry that every Christian is a minister and has a calling to be about the work of the Kingdom of God?

While it is true that "in love we are to serve one another," the work of ministry in the church is a way in which we serve God as we minister to the church body. We typically use terminology such as we are "serving the church" as opposed to seeing that what we are called to do is to "minister to the church." The expected actions of a servant or slave are to be responsive to what he or she is told to do. That is a good vertical response if we are listening to God and His word for our direction. However, when we add in the horizontal response of interacting with others in carrying out what God has given us to do, then we should be taking initiative and being creative and proactive in ministering to the body. If we simply see ourselves as "servants," then we will tend to be reactive to whatever comes up. This will lead to a situation of trying to please everybody and this will lead to inconsistency and confusion. This can happen in a church environment and we have probably heard people who have accepted a ministry role say something to the effect, "Well, I just do what I am told."

Another facet that influences how well those who do the work of ministry in the church is the name we use to describe those who have such responsibilities. What do we call ourselves and others to are unpaid ministers in the church? Volunteers! Just think of what that term implies. If we see ourselves as "volunteers" rather than those who are "called by God" to carry out a specific function in the body of Christ, then our thinking might be guided by selfish rather than selfless interests. If we say that we are serving God by ministering to His church and then take on various tasks or jobs with a mind set of being a volunteer so that we can quit or change jobs or not be accountable, then we are simply serving ourselves.

In the case of the seven men chosen by the church to take on the ministry of dealing with the physical provisions and needs of the church, there is no indication that they were asked if they would agree (or volunteer) to do what they were "called" to do.

Since the complaint arose from the Hellenistic Jews, it was helpful that the entire group chose men who were of a Hellenistic background to carry out this ministry function. All, except Nicolas, were of Israelite ancestry. Nicolas was a convert to Judaism before he became a disciple of Christ. Since the Hebraic Jews were in the majority, it was a gracious move on the part of the Hebraic Jews to help choose men who would not be suspected of showing partiality in these administrative matters.

In matters of disagreement, someone must take a first step in showing trust of the other persons if relationships are to be restored. This works best when the more powerful (because of position, physical strength, intellect, or numbers) initiates the trust relationship.

The commissioning or ordination by laying on of hands was a carry over from the Hebrew culture. Such a ceremony has taken on a more-or-less symbolic gesture that makes a declaration to the people that those thus ordained are supported by the present leadership. Based on the Biblical record, "laying on of hands" was a foundational doctrine along with such

significant concepts as repentance, faith, baptisms, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. Laying on of hands was used in connection with healing the sick, seeking the power of the Holy Spirit, imparting spiritual gifts, sending out apostles, and ordination of leaders in a local church. It certainly appears that these followers of Christ thought it was much more than just symbolism.

As the church grew, other people began to investigate what was happening in a more serious way. Those who knew the Old Testament scriptures best (priests) could see the fulfillment of the prophecies in the life of Christ and what was happening with those who followed Him. The evidence was and is still convincing for all who will simply (and honestly) examine the evidence.

### Opposition Surfaces – 6:8-15

<sup>8</sup> And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” <sup>12</sup> And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, <sup>13</sup> and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, <sup>14</sup> for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” <sup>15</sup> And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. Acts 6:8–15 (ESV)

In addition to the duties of the deacons in attending to the physical needs of the church, Stephen and others had spiritual ministries also. When we impact the world for Christ, opposition will arise. If no one is opposing what we are doing, then we might well wonder if we are doing anything worthwhile that will make a difference in the world for the Kingdom of God.

We see in these verses that in addition to the quality prerequisites of having a good reputation, being full of the Spirit and having wisdom that Stephen was full of grace and power. The KJV reads “faith and power.” This difference stems from the fact that many of the newer translations of the Bible have used older Greek manuscripts than those available to those who did the work in the 1600s. The word grace is related the Greek word “charis” which is the term used by Paul in his discussion of the Gifts of the Spirit in his letter to the church at Corinth. We could legitimately say that Stephen exercised the Spirit Gift of “miracles.” It is also evident that he was empowered with at least two other gifts – the “word of wisdom” and the “word of knowledge.” These Spiritual Gifts were functioning through him to such an extent that those who opposed him were unable to defend their own positions by reasonable arguments.

It is very likely that Saul of Tarsus (a city located in Cilicia) was among those who opposed what Stephen was doing and what he was teaching and preaching. It is logical to think that the power-filled work and testimony of Stephen and his selflessness in his response to the persecution that followed had a significant impact on Saul. All of us should be inspired to selflessness as we read about those who have been faithful to God in the past and especially those who exhibit selfless behavior today in the work of the kingdom of God.