

“Stephen and the Seven”

Acts 2:42–47; Acts 6:1–7

It isn't simply that there were more than the Twelve, it is that more than twelve were and are needed.

After Jesus' Ascension to the Father, many more disciples than just the Twelve gathered in Jerusalem as Jesus had instructed them, perhaps

100 or more. They were to wait and they did. For what they weren't sure, but they waited. Until some weeks later, during the festival of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit arrived with great power—and nothing was ever again the same. These disciples settled into their new life in Christ, learning to live together, praying and sharing the Good News.

Problems emerge

Before too long though, problems begin to emerge in this community of believers. We shouldn't be surprised; Jesus has still yet to return. Until he does, we live “between the times,” when God's victory over sin and death has been won, but we still await the marriage of heaven and earth. Gordon Fee, a prominent New Testament scholar, analogized this to D-Day in WWII. Once 200,000 Allied troops were successfully landed in Normandy, the war was won. There would be much fighting and dying to go . . . but the war was won. Perhaps it is a bit like a Major League Baseball team that clinches its division title with ten games still to play. They've won, but the baseball contests go on, some lost, some won until, finally, the trophy can be lifted.

So, yes, problems emerge in this community of faithful disciples. That says nothing about their faith, only that they, like we, still have to deal with a sinful heart. For example, a man and his wife lie to the apostles . . . to God! . . . falsely claiming that they had turned over all the proceeds from a property sale. They hadn't and when confronted, they both dropped dead.

Now, a more significant problem has emerged that threatens the community's unity, which is comprised of both Greek-speaking disciples (referred to as the “Hellenists” in most translations) and Aramaic-speaking disciples (the “Hebrews”). In other words, there were disciples even then who were originally from elsewhere in the Roman Empire. As we all know, desiring unity and living unity are not the same. The Greekspeaking widows believe that their needs are not being met for the sake of the Aramaicspeaking widows. The nature of the problem is well laid-out by N.T. Wright:

The problem came to a head over the treatment of widows. This shows that already in the early church the question of ‘living as a single family’ had clear negative as well as positive implications: normally, widows would be taken care of among their own blood-relations, but those family ties appear to have been cut when people joined the new movement. As in some parts of the world to this day, baptism meant saying goodbye to an existing family as well as being welcomed into a new one. And the new one therefore had to take on the obligations of the old. That, by the way, is why we find regulations being drawn up about such things in 1 Timothy 5:3–16. Some have speculated that the problem was exacerbated, in the case of the early church, because many Jewish couples would come from far and wide in the Jewish ‘Diaspora’ (the dispersion of Jews all around the known world) to live in and around Jerusalem in old age so that, eventually, they could be buried in the vicinity. The husband might then die, leaving a disproportionate number of widows from different geographical origins all in the neighborhood of Jerusalem.



Whatever we think about that, the distinction in verse 1 between ‘Hellenists’ and ‘Hebrews’ is probably one of those things with a variety of elements mixed together. Nobody had planned for a complex and intricate welfare system. It had been invented on the hoof, when there were other things (such as persecution by the authorities) to think about. It would be surprising if such a system could proceed without difficulties. And in a complex society such as that in Jerusalem, which was both a deeply traditional culture, very conscious of its historic and religious significance, and a cosmopolitan mixture of Jews from all over the world, it is not surprising that people would be eyeing one another to see if this or that group appeared to be taking advantage.¹

With the food distribution system having broken down, the apostles realize that they are going to need some reorganization of structure and duties. Who will do what and how in order to see that the needs of all are effectively and justly met? Because there are believers in the community from around the empire, we should see this brief story not merely about the community looking after itself, but, rather, as a concrete expression of our Christ-given mission to the world.

So, “the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples” (6:2a NRSV). Robert Wall explains:

The first step in resolving this internal conflict is to bring together all those involved and include them as parties to a remedy. The implied subtext of this account in Acts is that all are members of a cohesive congregation whose regular experience is serving God together with “one heart and soul” (see 4:32). There is the presumption of solidarity—of shared faith and abiding friendship—that provides the groundwork for this meeting. The “community of disciples” convened are the most mature representatives of the parties involved. This is not a “town hall” meeting that gives voice to any and every grievance. Instead, the Twelve solicit a representative assembly of members who have registered the crisis and have their collective finger on the pulse of the problem at issue.²

They outlined the problem and asked *all the disciples* to select seven men, to whom the apostles would delegate the food distribution (*diakonein*) and assuredly other responsibilities. The community would select the seven, but the apostles set forth two criteria. They must well-respected and it must be clear to all that the men have been endowed by the Holy Spirit with exceptional wisdom. Seven men were chosen; their names are listed in Acts 6:5. In front of the community, the apostles prayed over the seven and laid their hands on them, which denoted a sharing of the apostles’ authoritative power. The apostles were ensuring that as they delegated responsibility, they also gave these men authority. The apostles would continue to serve (*diakonia*) but would now focus on prayer and the proclamation of the Gospel.

One of the seven, Stephen, figures larger than the others in the story of the early church. For, after the delegation of authority to the seven, Stephen was arrested, tried, and stoned to death, making him the first martyr (from the Greek word for “witness”) in the Christian faith. His service to Christ and the church in life and in death became an important legacy to the movement (Acts 11:19, 22:20).

And so the believers went forth . . . the community grew. Even temple priests heard God’s call. And the “greatest upset” in human history proceeded. Upset? A few years ago the Atlantic magazine asked leaders from a variety of backgrounds to name the greatest upset in history. Cass Sunstein, a prominent legal scholar and regulatory czar, wrote:

The rise of Christianity. Two-thousand-fifteen years ago (give or take), Jesus Christ was crucified. Whether or not you think that he was the son of God, no oddsmaker would have predicted that today the faith of billions would bear his name.

Indeed. Indeed. There is no greater evidence of the truth we proclaim than the existence of Christianity two millennia after those first disciples.

¹ Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (p. 98). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

² Robert W. Wall, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 1994–2004, 10, 114.

The call to serve

As those seven men were chosen to lead the community of disciples in service, so we are all called to serve and to lead. Jesus calls us to be “servants of all” (Mark 9:35). Paul reminds us that we proclaim Jesus as Lord and are to be servants for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor 4:5). But what does this service really look like? Isn’t it pretty easy for our service to become self-righteous rather than true service of God? In *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster helps us to see what self-righteous service looks like so we can better grasp the meaning of true service.

Self-righteous service comes from human effort; true service comes out of our relationship with Jesus. Self-righteous service is concerned with the “big” project or “big” deal; true service doesn’t discriminate among the opportunities to serve. Self-righteous service requires external rewards; true service needs only God’s approval. Foster suggests that self-righteous service is focused only on the results, while true service “delights” in the service. Self-righteous service is affected by our whims and moods; true service carries on whether we feel like it or not. Self-righteous service can fracture a community as people strive for control and recognition; true service is selfless and heals a community.

A Servant’s Service

Though we are 2,000 years removed from the first communities of Christians, our challenges are not really so different. When the apostles were overwhelmed by their duties, they enlisted others, like Stephen, to help out, serving the young Christian church. Paul taught the churches he founded that God gives us all gifts to use in our service to God. Some are helpers, some are teachers, some are preachers, some are leaders, some are given gifts of knowledge, or wisdom, or mercy, or giving. The point is that we are all to serve.

When we join the United Methodist Church we promise to “uphold it with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service, and our witness.” This is a practical expression of our commitment to be servants of God and to do his work. The question is not whether we will serve, but only how. We might serve by teaching a children’s Sunday School class, or singing in the choir, or helping a nursing home resident with weekly shopping, or answering the church phones on a Sunday morning, or serving as a mentor with A Village of Warriors, or building a handicapped ramp for a neighbor, or helping out in in Costa Rica . . . there is no end to the opportunities, for there is no end to the needs. Make no mistake; God wants more from us than simply an hour or two on Sunday mornings. We, the people of God, are called to lives of joyful service to God and others.