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Deacons on a Mission— The Pivotal Place of Acts 6

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Abstract: The seven deacons of Acts 6 are commonly understood as having been appointed only to serve the poor. This superficial reading of the text misses their important and pivotal mission—to evangelize and incorporate the Hellenists, a culturally distinct people group. A closer study of the Seven reveals that the church in Antioch followed their model in launching Paul’s mission to evangelize the Gentiles, preparing Jewish believers to receive “foreigners” and incorporating Hellenists as full members of the body of Jesus Christ. They become the point men by whom the Church began to make disciples of “all *ethnos*.” The commissioning of the Seven is the root from which many succeeding missions, principles of ministry, practices and leaders grew.

The Extraordinary Story of the Seven

Many people believe that Stephen, Philip, and the other deacons of Acts 6 were appointed only to serve the poor and were not permitted to do the more significant spiritual ministry of apostles such as evangelizing, preaching, and baptizing. This view misses the pivotal and foundational ministry of the Seven.

We need to begin with the broad context in order to understand their importance. What does the Acts of the *Apostles* tell us about the twelve apostles? After chapter 1, in which Matthias is chosen, the Acts of the *Apostles* tells us almost nothing about eleven of the twelve apostles. Luke devotes just 14 (Greek) words to James the brother of John, “He killed James the brother of John with the sword, and when he



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saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also” (Acts 12:2). This serves primarily to introduce Peter’s work. Luke mentions John only in passing, noting that he was with Peter in the temple when a lame man was healed, and also in Samaria. By contrast, Luke devotes three entire chapters, six, seven, and eight, to the seven deacons. This makes little sense if they had only a minor task to serve the poor.

Conflict, Not Cuisine

The story of the Seven begins with conflict in Acts 6:1–6:

A complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. The twelve summoned the whole number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.” What they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen. . . . These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them (ESV).

Many readers mentally trim the account to just a few words, namely, “neglect widows in the distribution,” reducing it to a story of uneven food service.

But the opening two words of the account highlight the center of the event, “complaining arose” (Greek, *egeneto goggusmos*). The thrust of the story is the conflict and prejudice festering beneath the surface. A few paragraphs before, Luke says, “They were all in one accord” (5:12). Now the Rolls Royce of unity whistling down harmony highway hammers headlong into a wall of discord. There are two sides, and everyone knows which side they’re on. The “Greeks” and “*their* widows” are one faction, marked by language and culture, even though most are Jews by birth.

The thrust of the story is the conflict and prejudice.

Two Factions, Two Cultures

The Greek word, *Hellenist*, normally refers those who use the language, regardless of ethnicity. (This article and most translations use “Greeks,” “Hellenists,” and “Grecian Jews” in this way). Greek-speaking Jews were influenced by their Gentile neighbors, resulting in a culturally different kind of Jew and often in a more liberal observance of the Mosaic Law and the oral law (rulings of rabbis). This was similar to the difference between “Westernized, Conservative (or Reform)” Jews and “Hebrew, Orthodox” Jews today.

The Greeks felt that they were victims of the prejudice of the Hebrew-speaking Jews, who were in charge of the distribution and favored their own people. Prejudice would likely be more pronounced against Greek proselytes (such as Nicolas, Acts 6:5) who were not genealogically Hebrew.

The other faction was the Hebrews and *their* widows who spoke Hebrew or Aramaic. The Hebrews held the power, distributing to Greeks and Hebrews as they wished.

The Greeks felt oppressed, grumbling and complaining that their widows were neglected. The Greek word for complain, *gongizo*, is used in noun and verb forms eight times in the New Testament. It can be very serious, as when unbelieving Jews grumbled about Jesus' claim that He is the bread from heaven, then rejected and killed Him (Jn 6:41, 43, 61).

While many translations use the word "because," the better translation is probably "grumbling *that* their widows were overlooked." The Greek word *hoti* here introduces indirect speech. Greeks grumbled *that* widows were overlooked, leaving open the possibility that widows were not overlooked, only that they thought so. Other examples of *hoti* indicating indirect speech include Acts 2:13; John 18:14; John 18:37; John 20:9; John 20:18; John 21:23.

If this was just a problem of unequal distribution, the apostles needed only to order the soup kitchen to use the same measure for everyone. But they knew that the real problem was disunity, not food. The difference in language made it all the harder to deal with conflict and build understanding and relationships.

Just before I arrived at my first pastorate, the church had had a quarrel and a block of people had left the church. One faction wanted to use Aid Association for Lutherans napkins and the other insisted on Lutheran Brotherhood napkins. Every church leader knows of conflicts over trivial issues. The apostles knew, as we do, that factions find reasons to fight, whether real or imagined, substantive or petty.

The apostles assigned the Seven a hard problem: to settle the conflict, pacify grumblers, and integrate Greeks into the Hebrew Church. This is why they needed to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3).

An Astonishing Answer to Cultural Conflict

But the apostles and the Church in Jerusalem went even farther. They addressed the problem in an astonishing way which, in other circumstances, might well have caused grumbling among the Hebrews. They publicly transferred power to Greeks in the center of the Hebrew Church in the most Hebrew city in the world. The Twelve let the whole gathering elect their own leaders who became junior partners to the apostles—and they chose all men with *Greek names*. Ten of the twelve apostles had Hebrew names, while all seven deacons had Greek names. The twelve apostles

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fulfilled the covenant to the twelve tribes of Israel. There were seven deacons, the number of completion, by itself symbolic, because the Hebrew Church was completed by addition of Greek-speaking Jews. The apostles delegated the whole duty, or office (*xreias*) to the Greeks, giving them control. The deacons were established as ministers of the church just as Christ established the apostles. The apostles publicly sanctioned the deacons' ministry by laying on hands, just as the eleven did the new apostle, Matthias.

The fact that the apostles appointed leaders who were *elected by the people* stands in stark contrast from the precedent set by Jesus Christ, who independently appointed the Twelve and the Seventy.

The apostles were emphatic about transferring ministry and authority to Greeks. But this move was needed because the apostles had a grand but difficult goal in mind: To welcome Greeks into the Hebrew Church and unify the two into one new man. They may not have realized the lengths to which the Seven would carry out this mandate, and how successful they would be, because the second-generation Church was mostly Greek.

The Seven were apparently bilingual (as were Paul and Barnabas), because Stephen was able to debate with those of the Greek-speaking synagogue and defend himself when on trial by the Hebrew Sanhedrin (Acts 6:9–7:56).

The Seven were either cross-cultural workers (culturally Hebraic but effectively serving in Hellenistic circles) or indigenous workers who were Hellenistic Jews themselves. In either case, they were likely better suited to work among the Hellenists than were the apostles, who appear to have all been Hebraic Jews (but probably competent at speaking Greek at that time or thereafter, since several of them wrote epistles in Greek and worked in Gentile lands).

The Seven Did the Unexpected

From the beginning, the story of the Seven took a surprising turn as seen from our ecclesiastical perspective. The Seven were chosen from among the Jerusalem congregation to address the problem of disunity in that congregation. Yet none of the stories of their ministry took place within that congregation, and none were about serving the poor, as the circumstances in the Jerusalem Church may lead us to expect.

If the Seven had been tasked only to serve the poor, one would expect stories like Jesus feeding the five thousand, Dorcas making blankets, Judas giving to the poor, and Paul collecting money for famine relief. Yet, in three full chapters, there is not a single story of their helping the poor, either inside or outside their church.

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Why? I maintain that the Seven apparently understood their task as a mission to reach and incorporate all Hellenists. They saw themselves more as being sent out than called in. Taking initiative to go beyond the initial mandate of assimilating existing Greek disciples into one congregation, they evangelized and baptized Greeks, bringing many more into the church at large.

Stories of Stephen and Philip

Every story of Stephen and Philip focuses on reaching out beyond the Hebrews.

Stephen quickly left the soup kitchen behind to preach and debate with Greeks in the synagogue of the Freedmen. We know this was a Greek synagogue because of the Theodotus inscription (now in the Jerusalem Rockefeller Museum), written in Greek by a Greek so that its members could read it. One reason the Sanhedrin was angry at Stephen may have been that they were afraid that Jesus' disciples would convert many in the Hellenistic synagogues, just as they had won over thousands of diaspora Jews on the day of Pentecost.

Every story of Stephen and Philip focuses on reaching out beyond the Hebrews.

After Stephen was killed, the believers in the Jerusalem were scattered. Philip also left the food line and went out preaching and baptizing Hellenists. He baptized an Ethiopian official on the road to Gaza, then went to another Greek area to baptize Samaritans. He preached through Azotus (formerly one of the Philistine "Five Cities" along the coast; this Greek name replaced the former Semitic name, Ashdod) and settled in the most Greek of all cities in Israel, Caesarea (Acts 8:26–40).

This contrasts from Jesus Christ, who said He was sent to "the lost sheep of Israel" (Mt 15:24) in the synagogues of Galilee and who sent the Twelve to Israel rather than to Gentiles and Samaritans (Mt 10:2). While Jesus ministered to Greeks who came to Him, Philip went to areas in which Jesus and the Twelve spent little or no time.

The stories make clear that the Seven did not serve only to help the poor or even to bring reconciliation to the Jerusalem. They show that the Seven assisted the apostles in converting and integrating Hellenists into the Church.

Pattern for Cross-Cultural Accommodation

The Book of Acts established patterns, or templates, for the Church, such as baptizing in the name of Jesus and ordaining elders. Acts 6 provides a model for missions, a template for ministry, and a pattern for cross-cultural accommodation.

Luke offers the Seven as a model for how to *assimilate Greeks* because this problem plagued the Church for decades.

The apostles laid out basic qualifications for servants of the Word, but let the congregation choose them. This approach allowed believers of the other (Greek) culture to choose leaders from among themselves who could best serve them. If the Greek-speakers

were in the majority, the apostles may have expected that the Church would elect Hellenists who would be different from the apostles in culture but not in faith.

Cross-cultural accommodation can be seen throughout the New Testament. In fact it would become more radical when the growing number of Gentiles showed that “to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18 ESV). The Jerusalem council ruled that new Gentile believers did not have to be circumcised or keep the Mosaic Law (Acts 15:1–31). Paul allowed believers to eat food sacrificed to idols but urged they refrain if it disturbed the conscience and Jewish sensitivities of others (1 Cor 8:1–13). Church leaders in Jerusalem did not compel Titus to be circumcised (Gal 2:3). Paul openly criticized Peter when he refrained from eating with Gentile believers in Galatia (Gal 2:11–16).

However, this accommodation was resisted by believers “of the circumcision group” (as well as by Jews), who Paul said attacked the liberty they had in Christ (Gal 2:4–13; cf. Acts 15:1).

The problem of integrating Hellenists into the Hebrew Church was finally left behind when Gentile believers greatly outnumbered Jewish believers and the apostles were replaced by the second generation of leaders who were mostly Gentiles, like Timothy and Titus. (Another factor was the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, which removed the Hebraic place of worship which Jewish Christians still honored.)

Model for Missions

Those who left Jerusalem because of the persecution of Stephen went to Gentile lands and evangelized both Grecian Jews and Gentiles (Acts 8:1; 9:2; 10:24; 11:19–26). It does not appear that they left Jerusalem intending to be missionaries. But they would have seen themselves as carrying on the mission the apostles gave to the Seven, not as doing something new and unknown.

They, their Greek converts, and the Holy Spirit sent out Saul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1–4) with an explicit commission to preach the Gospel to Hellenized Jews and Gentiles in Cyprus and Asia Minor, following the model of the apostles who had sent

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the Seven for this purpose. They laid hands on them, in part because they heard of this practice from those who had seen the apostles lay hands on Matthias and the Seven.

Saul always began his mission in a new place with a visit to the Greek-speaking Jews in a synagogue of the diaspora (Acts 13:5, 14; 14:1, 17:1–2, etc.), just as Stephen preached Christ to those of the Greek-speaking synagogue in Jerusalem (Acts 6:9). This is one reason he was able to begin congregations so quickly. When Stephen and Philip preached to Hellenized Jews in Judea and Samaria, they established the model for reaching Hellenized Jews in the Diaspora.

Saul always began his mission in a new place with a visit to the Greek-speaking Jews . . . just as Stephen [did].

Paul personally witnessed part of Stephen's work (Acts 7:58) and may have been strongly influenced by the leaders in Antioch who knew the Seven and perhaps witnessed their commissioning and ministry about ten years before. Paul commissioned deacons in other places (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8–13) but had no need to explain this practice in his epistles because he was following the well-known model of the Seven. Paul stayed with Philip when he got off the boat in Caesarea harbor (Acts 21:8). He likely met Philip years before at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), where they probably both spoke in favor of welcoming Gentiles and Hellenists into the church.

Priests and rabbis had expected Hellenized Jews of the Diaspora to come to Jerusalem for teaching. Now those who proclaimed the Messiah were going to them.

Template for Multiplying Ministers

When the apostles set apart the Seven for ministry, they showed the importance and a method of *multiplying ministers* who could both strengthen believers in congregations and extend the Gospel into different ethnic groups and new places. Their Master set a precedent for this when He sent out the Seventy.

They chose and sent out workers who fit spiritual and character qualifications rather than those who had skills, education, or social status. While the Church today emphasizes someone's occupying an office, the New Testament focuses on fulfilling a mission.

They found leaders mainly among the new converts and within new congregations, from which Paul recruited most of his co-workers, such as Aristarchus and Titus. Saul, a Hellenized Jew who was raised in Tarsus but trained in rabbinic Judaism, passed the torch of leadership to Timothy, a Hellenized Jew, just as the Hebrew apostles did to the Hellenized Seven. Timothy learned Torah from his

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Jewish mother (2 Tim 1:5) and yet was uncircumcised because of his Greek father (Acts 16:1–3).

Leaders were appointed by the new churches (as had the Seven) and received and on-the-job training there, and were not required to be approved, overseen, or trained by the Twelve Apostles. This decentralized approach enabled the Church to rapidly multiply and train new ministers.

The Church multiplied ministers by electing and training workers by and from among themselves. The Church brought in leadership from other areas when rapid growth of the church exceeded the ability of qualified leaders available to meet their needs. Barnabas was sent by the apostles to Antioch to teach new converts, and he brought Paul in to help.

The church multiplied ministers by electing and training workers by and from among themselves.

Leaders then naturally reflected the diversity of the church they served in or for. The New Testament text implies the variety of backgrounds, highlighting their Hellenistic nature. The Seven were apparently Hellenistic Jews. Nicolas, one of the Seven, was a proselyte and so had followed a longer faith journey from Gentile religion to Judaism to Christianity. He was from Antioch and may have helped the church take root there, either by serving there himself or through his relationships with people there.

Leaders at Antioch included Joseph Barnabas. Although the church at Jerusalem sent him to Antioch as their representative, he was actually a native of Cyprus (Acts 11:22–26; 4:36), to which he returned at least twice to preach (Acts 13:4; 15:39). Lucius was from Cyrene (Acts 13:1; modern Libya), as was Simon who carried Jesus’ cross. Saul was a Roman citizen, yet was also formerly a legalistic Pharisee and persecutor, who once embodied everything that Christ said was wrong with Judaism.

Simeon, called Niger (Latin for “black”), was apparently of black African ethnicity. Manaen had high social status and education in Greco-Roman society, having been brought up with Herod the tetrarch. He may also have been one of Luke’s sources for events inside his friend’s court such as Herodias’ dance, the beheading of John the Baptist, Herod’s fear that Jesus was the Baptist risen from the dead, and the trial of Jesus.

Jesus Christ commanded His people to make disciples of all *ethnos*, which brings diverse people into the Church, while maintaining unity of faith—two goals which are constantly in tension. This required wisdom and effort and was hindered by their former beliefs and religious practices. When the Twelve appointed the Seven

from among the Hellenistic congregation, they emphasized the importance of both missions and building and maintaining unity, as well as methods for achieving it.

Paul's epistles show constant attention to maintaining unity, based on the theology he describes in Ephesians 2: Jesus Christ created one new man in His body out of two, the Jew and the Gentile. While disunity is a natural result of sin, Paul's theology especially addresses disharmony due to cultural, linguistic, and ethnic differences.

Summary

Acts 6–8 show that the Seven were commissioned to win and assimilate Greeks, a culturally distinct people group, into the Hebrew-dominated Church, not to serve the poor. The deacons assisted and expanded the ministry of the apostles by preaching, evangelizing, baptizing, leading, and maintaining unity. They provided a model for missions, a pattern for cross-cultural accommodation, and a template for multiplying ministers for the Early Church and for us today.

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