

18. The Church Experienced the Importance of Priorities

In our last topic, we saw that we want to prepare our physical and spiritual children for opposition and even persecution. We saw that when we are faithful to speak about the death and resurrection of Christ that there will certainly be those who will oppose us. We also saw that it is a privilege to suffer for Christ because He died for us. In our topic today, we are going to see that the church continued to grow and it became necessary for the apostles to set priorities for their own lives. The apostles provide an example of how to show our children how to set priorities in their lives as well.

Acts 6:1 says, “Now in those days, when *the number of* the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.” The Lord was doing some exciting things in the church and the number of the disciples was multiplying. It is possible that by this time the number of believers had grown to somewhere between 15,000 and 25,000 as the church had been in existence between six and seven years by the time we come to chapter six. The church began and 3,000 new believers were added on the Day of Pentecost. Then, Acts 2:47 says that “the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” Acts 4:4 says that the number of men by that time was about 5,000. Since the word used here means *to increase or multiply*, we see that the church had continued to grow.

However, we also see that growth caused the church to face a problem. There arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists. The Hebrews were the Jews who lived in the land of Palestine including the areas of Judea and Galilee. The Hellenists were the Jews who were scattered in other parts of the world. They were called Hellenists because they had absorbed part of the Greek language and culture. These changes in language and culture caused the Jews living in Palestine to feel that the Greek speaking Jews were not being totally faithful to the Jewish culture.

The problem that the church faced was the fact that the Greek-speaking Jews felt that their widows were being neglected when food was distributed to the widows. We see that the church had taken the responsibility to provide for the needy widows because the other Jews would not provide for the needs of the widows who were following Christ. The church felt that it was their responsibility to provide for the needs of these widows.

The word translated “complaint” means *to be unhappy and grumble secretly*. In Philippians 2:14-16, we read, “Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain.” We live in a world that does a lot of complaining. However, the apostles realized that followers of Christ should be lights to the world and that would not happen if the believers were complaining.

As a result, Acts 6:2-4 says, “Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of *good* reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom

we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” The twelve recognized that there was a problem that needed to be solved or there would soon be conflict in the church. As a result, they realized that they needed to do two things. They needed to solve the problem; and at the same time, they needed to set priorities for themselves.

When the twelve had called together the followers of Christ, they explained the fact that they understood that there was a problem because of the complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists. At the same time, the twelve also realized that they should not be the ones to try to solve the problem because God had a different ministry for them as the apostles of Christ. As a result, the twelve suggested a solution to the problem. They suggested that the believers look for seven men to meet the needs of widows that were Hellenists. The word translated “business” is used forty-nine times in the New Testament and it is almost always translated “need”. Acts 2:44-45 says, “Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.” Here, we see that the early church shared what they had to meet the physical needs of others. The twelve suggested that Jews that were Hellenists would be the ones who would be most effective at recognizing and meeting the needs of those widows that were Hellenists.

We see that the twelve gave three basic qualifications for the men who would carry out this ministry to the widows. First, they were to be men of good reputation. The word translated “of good reputation” means *to give witness or testimony* and is usually translated by one of those words. Here, we see that the seven men were to have a good testimony among the other believers. Second, they were to be men that were full of the Holy Spirit. Galatians 5:16 says, “I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.” Men who were walking in the Spirit would not be tempted to misuse their ministry for self-gain. Third, they were to be men that were full of wisdom. These were to be men that walked in godly wisdom like the wisdom described in James 3:17. That verse says, “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.” Men with godly wisdom would serve without partiality.

The twelve said that they would devote their lives to two things: prayer and the ministry of the Word. Here, we see that the twelve recognized the things that were their two highest priorities. First, they were to devote themselves to prayer. The word translated “devote” means *to continue to do something constantly*. In the New Testament, it is used most often to talk about faithful prayer. Acts 1:14 says, “These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.” Colossians 4:2 says, “Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving.” The greatest weakness in many churches today is a lack of continuing in prayer by the leaders. Second, they were to devote themselves to the ministry of the Word. Acts 2:42 says, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” Effective church leaders understand these key priorities and devote their lives to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

Acts 6:5-7 goes on to say, “And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.” The seven men that were chosen all had Greek names so they all may have been Greek-speaking Jews except Nicolas. We read that he was a proselyte from Antioch. A proselyte was a Gentile who accepted the Old Testament teaching about God and followed the Jewish law. Those who received circumcision were called proselytes of righteousness and they promised to keep the whole Mosaic Law.

Once the people had chosen the seven, we see that the seven came and stood in front of the apostles. Then, the apostles prayed and laid their hands on them. Later, Acts 13:3 says, “Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent *them* away.” In both passages, we see that the laying on of hands was a way that the leaders showed their recognition that God had called these individuals to this particular ministry and that they had the support and encouragement of the rest of the leaders.

We see that the recognition of additional leaders in the church brought blessing to the church in three ways. First, we see that it made it possible for the Word of God to be able to continue to spread to more people. Second, we see that the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. This caused the opposition to grow even stronger against the church and led to more persecution. In fact, the persecution became so great that many of the Christians were forced to flee from Jerusalem. However, that only spread the Gospel further. Acts 8:4 says, “Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.” As a result, Acts 9:31 says, “Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.” Persecution did not stop the church but instead caused churches to multiply throughout the region.

Third, we see that a great number of priests were obedient to the faith. During the time of the New Testament, it is estimated that there were about twenty-two thousand Jewish priests. These were the men who were the descendants of Aaron. The priests were scattered throughout the land and would come to serve in the temple for about two weeks at a time. Here, we see that many of these priests were placing their faith in Christ because they recognized that He was the Promised One that had been promised in the Old Testament. As we will see in future topics, this only stirred up the anger of the chief priests.

However, we see that the fact the church chose more leaders caused the church to experience blessing in three ways. We want to help our physical and spiritual children understand the way that the Lord used the new leaders to bless the early church. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children understand the importance of priorities.