

Acts 6: The "Ministry" Of The Seven

Armin J. Panning

We live at a time in the church's history when the terms "minister" and "ministry" have come to be used very loosely. Any and every ancillary service connected to the operation of a church or religious group is being lumped under the general category of "ministry," sometimes to the point of absurdity. The person in charge of counting the collection is a "minister of finance" and dusting and vacuuming the church building fall under the "ministry of sanitation." The "minister of transportation" addresses problems in the parking lot. And the list goes on.

Although these are needed and useful services, the proliferation of "ministries" has a trivializing effect if these areas of service are equated with the divine office of the public ministry of the Word which Christ has given to his church.

Resisting the trivializing effect of multiplying ministries dare not blind us to the fact, however, that while the holy office of the public ministry has been given by Christ to the church, no one form for that ministry has been mandated in Scripture. In Christian liberty the church is free to determine its forms. It may set up new offices to which it formally calls people and assign to them specific areas of service, i.e., "ministry," which are supportive of but not directly engaged in the preaching and teaching of the Word. Acts 6 seems to give us one such example.

To be sure, the account in Acts 6 is very helpful in what it tells us, but it is also decidedly intriguing and a bit frustrating in what it does not tell us and in the details that it omits. One thing is certain: Acts 6 reflects changing conditions in Jerusalem.

Changing Conditions

As a matter of fact, the whole book of Acts documents changing conditions in the early Christian church. Almost every outline suggested for the book reflects this. There is, for example, the simple two-part division which looks at Peter's Jewish ministry in and around Jerusalem (1-12) as distinguished from Paul's worldwide outreach primarily to Gentiles (13-28).

Luke himself suggests some subdivisions in these two major parts. He speaks of activity in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (1:8). If we add Luke's periodic progress reports, such as "the Lord added to their number daily" (2:47) and "the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly" (6:7), then we see clearly that Luke's goal is to show us the career of the church from humble beginnings in Jerusalem at Pentecost to its being defended before the world in the capital city of Rome.

There can be no doubt that Acts 6 talks about some growing pains in the life of the expanding Christian church, but the matter is adjusted amicably by the creation of a new office.

Luke tells us:

Ἐν δὲ ταῖς ἡμέραις ταύταις πληθυνόντων τῶν μαθητῶν ἐγένετο γογγυσμὸς τῶν Ἑλληνιστῶν πρὸς τοὺς Ἑβραίους, ὅτι παρεθεωροῦντο ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ τῇ καθημερινῇ αἱ χήραι αὐτῶν. (v 1).

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against those of the Aramaic-speaking community because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

It will be helpful to keep in mind that much of the life of the early Christian church reflects practices believers had become accustomed to during centuries of living under the synagogue system. In Judaism the synagogue was not just their worship center, but also the school, the library, the social center and community

hall, occasionally a motel for a beleaguered traveler, and regularly the soup kitchen for poor and needy local residents.

Charitable Concerns

A deep concern for the poor, which was typical of the synagogue, reflected itself also in the Christian community. We are told, "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had....There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet. And it was distributed to everyone as he had need" (Acts 4:32,34-35).

Note that the money was put at the apostles' feet and they apparently became the administrators of it. With the expansion spoken of in chapter 6, equitable distribution of charitable resources became difficult. Unfortunate oversights happened. Eventually members from among the Greek-speaking Jewish believers lodged a formal complaint that the Aramaic-speaking Christian community was benefiting at the expense of the Greek-speaking widows in the daily *διακονία*, generally translated "distribution of food."

The Greek word *διακονία* literally means "service" or "ministration." It can be used in the general sense of "help" or "aid" given, but it often takes the sense of serving food or waiting on tables. Recall, for example, that Martha was "distracted by all the preparations (*διακονία*) that had to be made" (Luke 10:40).

Regardless of their specific activity in the operation, the apostles were heavily involved in this ministry (*διακονία*). Hence, the complaint was ultimately against them, and they determined to address it as a legitimate grievance.

προσκαλεσάμενοι δὲ οἱ δώδεκα τὸ πλῆθος τῶν μαθητῶν εἶπαν, Οὐκ ἀρεστόν ἐστιν ἡμᾶς καταλείψαντας τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ διακονεῖν τραπέζαις. (v 2).

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables."

Since the key concept for us at this moment is the term "ministry," it may be useful to provide a literal, even wooden, translation of Peter's words. He says, "It is not pleasing that we, having left behind the word of God, keep on serving (*διακονεῖν*) at tables."

Note that the word for "serving" or "ministering" is connected to the relief work. That Peter also considers serving people with God's Word as "ministry" and "service" is abundantly clear from verse 4, where under the new proposal he says, "We will continue to give our attention to prayer and the ministry (*διακονία*) of the word."

Congregational Involvement

Peter, as spokesman for the Twelve, who no doubt had discussed the matter among themselves, makes a proposal to all the "disciples." The latter are the believers, the congregation, viewed in their relationship to Christ, whose *μαθηταί* ("learners") they are. The term disciple, incidentally, does not continue to be used as the standard term for Christians. Paul will be referring to believers as "brothers" and "saints." The point here is: Peter is addressing the congregation and turning the matter over to them.

The disciples are given the suggestion:

ἐπισκέψασθε δέ, ἀδελφοί, ἄνδρας ἐξ ὑμῶν μαρτυρουμένους ἑπτά, πλήρεις πνεύματος καὶ σοφίας, οὓς καταστήσομεν ἐπὶ τῆς χρείας ταύτης, 4 ἡμεῖς δὲ τῇ προσευχῇ καὶ τῇ διακονίᾳ τοῦ λόγου προσκαρτερήσομεν. (vv 3,4).

"Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

In choosing the verb ἐπισκεψασθε Peter is using a verb that includes the idea of "seeing" or "observing." It is as if he were saying, "Look around to find" or "Seek out for yourself" men with these qualifications. And then he proceeds to list four requirements:

- A. They are to be "men from among you," that is, men from the ranks of the congregation—"laymen" we would say today.
- B. These men are to be μαρτυρουμένους, "well-spoken of" by those who know them—the same verb, incidentally, that Luke will later use to describe young Timothy (Acts 16:2).
- C. They are to be seven in number—the exact significance is difficult to determine, though seven was always regarded as a holy number.
- D. They are to be "full of the Spirit and wisdom." A task that challenged the apostles and got them into trouble with a major segment of the Christian community is not going to be handled adequately by incompetent or unspiritual people. Hence a rich measure of spiritual wisdom will be required in men who fill these positions.

Note that the congregation is to do the selecting. Peter refers to the men to be chosen simply as ones "whom we will establish (literally: set down—καταστήσομεν) for this need." There is no first person plural pronoun to lend emphasis to the apostolic activity envisioned here. It is not as though Peter were saying, "You can pick the men, but we're going to screen them and retain veto power." The translators of the NIV seem to have caught the sense nicely when they have Peter saying simply, "We will turn this responsibility over to them."

The emphatic first person plural pronoun, missing in verse 3, is, however, prominent as the first word of verse 4. The flow of thought therefore is: The charitable work will be your responsibility, but we on our part will give attention to prayer and the ministry (διακονία) of the Word. The proposed new office is indeed to be a "ministry," but it is not a ministry of the Word. That will be retained by the apostles.

καὶ ἤρεσεν ὁ λόγος ἐνώπιον παντὸς τοῦ πλήθους καὶ ἐξελέξαντο Στέφανον, ἄνδρα πλήρης πίστεως καὶ πνεύματος ἁγίου, καὶ Φίλιππον καὶ Πρόχορον καὶ Νικάνορα καὶ Τίμωνα καὶ Παρμενᾶν καὶ Νικόλαον προσήλυτον Ἀντιοχείᾳ, (v 5)

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

Stephen and Philip are mentioned first because of the prominent roles they will be playing as Luke continues his account of the growing and expanding Christian church. That Stephen is credited with being "a

man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" does not imply that the other six were not. That quality was, after all, one of the four qualifications stipulated for the new office.

The intriguing word in the verse is the verb "they chose" (ἐξελεξαντο). Like the verb in Peter's original proposal (ἐπισκεψασθε), it tells us nothing of the manner of selecting. Was it by voice vote? By a show of hands? By lot, like Matthias? We simply don't know. But whatever the method, the Seven unquestionably were formally called to a public office that put them in charge of doing charitable ministry on behalf of the congregation which designated them for this task.

After the congregation had made its choice, arrived at by whatever method, "they presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them (οὓς ἔστησαν ἔνωπιον τῶν ἀποστόλων, καὶ προσευξάμενοι ἐπέθηκαν αὐτοῖς τὰς χεῖρας, (v 6).

What is the significance of laying hands on the Seven? The matter has been somewhat debated over the years. There is a school of thought which maintains that this was their "ordination" into the public ministry. Ordination, of course, is not commanded in Scripture. It is a rite that has developed in the church and has traditionally been limited to ministers of the Word.

The Seven, however, as noted above, were not called to be ministers of the Word. Rather they were to relieve the apostles of the time-consuming administration of the church's charitable program so that the apostles could devote themselves more fully to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

Indeed, in a previous Quarterly article John Brug makes a strong case for saying that 1 Timothy 4:14 (Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you) "appears to be the only passage in the New Testament which makes an unambiguous connection between laying on of hands and ordination" (WLQ, Vol. 92:4, p 268).

So the question remains: What is the significance of laying hands on the Seven? There are twenty-four instances of laying on of hands recorded in the New Testament. The bulk of these occur in connection with healings. That category accounts for fifteen of the twenty-four—sixteen if one includes Ananias' laying hands on the blinded persecutor Paul. The remaining instances fall largely into the category of conferring spiritual gifts (e.g. Acts 8:17 Samaritans; Acts 19:6 Ephesians; 2 Timothy 1:6) or transferring responsibility. It is this latter which seems best to fit the situation described in Acts 6. The apostles are simply implementing what Peter originally suggested to the congregation when he said, "Brothers, choose seven men...[and] we will turn this responsibility over to them." Perhaps the activity described here matches most closely what we today generally refer to as "installation" or "induction" into an office.

Deacons?

But what was the office for which the Seven accepted responsibility, or into which they were "installed"? It is tempting to go with the standard nomenclature and call them "deacons." Note however that they are never specifically called *διάκονοι*. That term attaches to their assignment only by implication, owing to the fact that they were called to help *ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ τῇ καθημερινῇ* ("with the daily ministration").

The Seven dare not blithely be equated with the deacons who appear later in the church's hierarchy. In fact, it is likely that the specific assignment of the Seven was not of very long duration at all.

Although we don't know the exact timeframe, directly after recording for us the account of the installation of the Seven, Luke moves on to tell us of the opposition engendered against Stephen for his fearless testimony about Christ.

Does this report of Stephen's testimony overturn our previous conclusion that Stephen was called to be an administrator of the relief program and not a minister of the Word? Not necessarily. Note that there is nothing which says that Stephen operated as a publicly-called proclaimer of the Word when he challenged the members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen. His might well have been personal testimony that escalated to the intensity which Luke reports.

Following Luther's lead, Lenski says of Stephen (and the same could be extended to Philip, who is later referred to as an evangelist), "The congregation had made him a deacon; the Lord made something far greater out of him....The latter had nothing to do with his work as a deacon" (*Interpretation of Acts*, p 249).

Stephen's work as a "deacon" obviously was curtailed by the opposition that led to his martyrdom. But the whole relief program that occasioned the appointment of the Seven may shortly have come to an end as well. Luke reports, "On that day [of Stephen's martyrdom] a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria" (8:1). Those are conditions that would make it impossible to continue a formal relief program in Jerusalem. That the church would be able to carry it out in the wider geographical areas of Judea and Samaria under persecution circumstances seems unlikely.

Conclusion

The appointment of the Seven in Acts 6 may well have been an isolated episode in the expansion of the church, Luke's theme in Acts. It cannot be proven that there is a direct continuation of their office into the hierarchical structure which eventually came to include "deacons."

The Seven were, however, formally chosen by the church to serve in a new office which the congregation in Christian liberty created. While it was a form of public ministry in that it was representative work given to the Seven by the congregation, the Seven were not "ministers of the Word." That was retained by the apostles.

The status of the Seven then seems to be parallel to that of some elders who did not have the assignment of working with the Word. Such a situation is implied when Paul instructs Timothy, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17). Apparently there were some elders who did not work directly with proclaiming the Word, but they are nonetheless to be held in honor.

Just as in the apostolic age there were forms of public ministry that required greater and lesser involvement with the Word, so a similar situation obtains in our churches today. There are a host of important tasks that need to be done in any congregation and in the synod at large. We need to be grateful for every faithful worker who serves in one of these supportive offices. But as we hold these workers in honor, let us also be careful not to confuse the situation by equating their supportive ministries with the primary ministry of preaching and teaching the Word.