

# Followers of the Way

Ministry of the Word, Ministry of the Table

Steve Campbell, 05-06-22

## Acts 6:1-7

Christianity is largest of world religions, some 2.4 billion adherents. How many denominations? Estimated at 41,000 according to Christian Valour website. That's an awful lot when you consider it all started with one Church.

Before Jesus ascended to heaven he told his disciples to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the promised Holy Spirit. The promise was fulfilled at Pentecost, 3,000 were saved and the Church was born. In Acts 2:42-47 Luke gives us a snapshot of what that Church was like:

'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer... All the believers were together and had everything in common... They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.'

The Lord was at work, but when He is moving so is the devil! The enemy had tried hard to stop the Church through persecution, with the arrest, trial and flogging of the apostles; then through internal corruption with Ananias and Sapphira. But these tactics had not worked, as the Church continued to grow. So the devil tried another strategy – divide and conquer.

Those who do not belong to the Church regard all who come under the 'Christian' banner as one. As I mentioned there are approximately 41,000 denominations, some with minor differences in belief, but others with doctrines so unorthodox we wouldn't even call them Christian.

But Judaism was not a monolithic religion either; they had several sects, some of which we read about in the Bible.

- Sadducees – priestly cast
- Pharisees – separated ones
- Zealots – militants
- Essenes – ascetics, Dead Sea Scrolls

The early Church in Jerusalem consisted exclusively of Jews but from the various sects within Judaism; including, as we read in Acts 6, Hellenistic as well as Hebraic Jews. A problem arose, not due to differences of belief, but through neglect of a practical duty.

The oldest church in Belfast, built 1783, is 1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian Church, tucked away in Rosemary Street in the heart of the city. Its original oak pulpit once had the honour of John Wesley preaching from it. Just seven years later a second congregation built a Church behind the first, then in 1831 a third Church was built two doors from the first. It would be encouraging to say this happened because the Presbyterian population was growing and needed more accommodation. The truth is it came about because of congregational splits and differences of opinion.

Division in the Church is never good. 'By schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed'. This problem had the potential to cause a major rift within the Jerusalem Church, the word translated 'complained' is actually 'grumbled', the same word used of the Israelites grumbling against Moses and the LORD in the wilderness v.1 READ

'In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained (or grumbled) against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.'

*Hebraic* Jews were native-born Judeans whose mother tongue was Aramaic, and whose Scriptures and culture were Hebrew. *Hellenistic* Jews were those born and raised in the Diaspora, Greek was their language and culture, and they even used the Greek translation of the Scriptures, the Septuagint, as they didn't understand the Hebrew language.

Many Jewish men in the Diaspora had a hope to die and be buried in Jerusalem, which left their widows in a precarious situation. Many had come to faith in Christ so the Church took on the responsibility for feeding those in need. The Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in the food distribution, not necessarily deliberately, but simply because the task had become too large and unwieldy for the 12 apostles to handle. With godly wisdom the apostles, rather than impose a solution upon the Church, called all the members together and asked them to choose seven men from among them to take on this responsibility. This is believed to be the origin of the diaconate in the Church; although the Seven are not given this title, the verb used to 'wait on tables' is *diakonio*, to serve or minister, the same word used by the apostles for the ministry of the word.

So when they said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables' they were not implying that practical tasks were beneath them or in any way inferior, it was simply a matter of calling. The apostles were called *primarily* to the ministry of the word and prayer, while the deacons to the ministry of the table.

Note the qualification required of those to be deacons v.3 'choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.' As JB Philips renders it they are to be 'both practical and spiritually minded'.

The seven chosen were Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, all Greek names and presumably from the Hellenistic group. The choice was made from within the congregation, so all were satisfied; and the apostles commissioned them for the task through prayer and laying on of hands, thus passing on authority and responsibility to these men.

So the apostles were freed up to pursue their primary calling to ministry of the word and prayer, while the deacons took up their calling of looking after the practical needs of the Church.

Of course these callings are not mutually exclusive: the apostles were given the example and command by Jesus to wash one another's feet; and Stephen proved himself to be an excellent orator while Philip was an outstanding evangelist.

But this wise, godly solution by the apostles averted a potential damaging split within the Church and provided the foundation for good Church organisation.

The results are clearly seen in v.7

'So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.'

All Churches have their own particular organisational system but most include the twin callings of Ministry of the Word, fulfilled by pastors, ministers, priests/presbyters or elders, and Ministry of the Table exercised by deacons or a similar office bearers.

Although the Anglican system follows the threefold ministry of Bishop, Priest and Deacon, in reality the diaconate is merely a stepping stone to becoming an ordained priest. The role of deacon is fulfilled by the PCC in the CofE and by the Select Vestry in the CofI. They are responsible for the three Fs – Fabric, Finance and Furnishings.

The Presbyterian system is governed by elders, or presbyters, hence the name, who look after the spiritual needs of the congregation. They have a teaching elder, the Minister, and ruling elders but no deacons, at least not in the Irish Church, though they do have deaconesses. The role of deacon is taken up by the committee members who, along with the elders, have responsibility for the practical running of the Church.

Other Churches, such as the Baptist, have an obvious distinction between elders and deacons, and a clear demarcation of their roles.

In the Church, as in any walk of life, we tend to place certain roles into a hierarchy:-

1. Pastors, evangelists, missionaries
2. Sunday School teachers, Home Group leaders, musicians

Caretakers, cleaners etc.

Someone called by God to be a preacher should not think of themselves more highly than they ought, nor should anyone else think of them that way. Don't put anyone on a pedestal – it's too easy to knock them off! It is God, through Jesus Christ, who calls each of us to serve Him, whether it's to the ministry of the word, or to the ministry of the table. We cannot or should not boast, because it's all of Him.

Charles Price, when principal of Capernwray, was asked to speak to a Christian College in America, but before he addressed the faculty and student body he was asked if he would say a few words to the ancillary staff: cooks, maintenance, cleaners, etc. He was shown into a dark basement room where there was gathered a group of sorry looking people, eyes fixed on the ground, shoulders drooped.

He began by asking, 'Do you feel undervalued in this college because you don't hold an academic position? Let me tell you your role here is as important as any professor's.' Their eyes started to lift.

'Who could function on an empty stomach?' He continued, 'Who wants to teach a lesson in a dirty classroom? How can a coach train a team on a field full of weeds? You have been called by God to provide the means by which these students are taught.' Afterwards, Charles said, those people left the room with their heads held high! Through a problem that may have resulted in a split in Jerusalem, the Church was given the opportunity to serve the Lord and each other, discerning His calling on their lives and being offered both the ministry of the word and the ministry of the table.

Because of this functional solution the apostles and deacons were released to fulfil their major calling and the Church grew, and has continued to grow throughout the generations.

We are all called to follow and serve the Lord Jesus Christ and are also gifted to fulfil that calling. We are all ministers, whether through the ministry of the word or ministry of the table.

Have you discerned what your calling is?