

Review

We're examining the earliest beginnings of the church, and discovering what that first generation of believers did when facing various obstacles...

6:1 Hellenized Jews

More and more people were getting saved, becoming Christians. In a short period of time, the number had increased from just over a hundred into the tens of thousands. Needless to say, these new Christians were from all different places, and various walks of life. Many of them had completely different views on politics and society.

One of the most obvious differences was between the Hellenistic Jews and the native Hebrews.

To understand what a Hellenistic Jew is requires a brief history lesson: The Greek word "**hellen**" means "Greek." And back in the days when Antiochus Epiphanes ruled the Grecian Empire, he decided to solidify it through social uniformity by making every person within his realm be "**hellenized**." This meant adopting the culture, language, thought, and styles of classical Greek civilization.

Some of the Jews did conform to this Greek culture, at the urging of a very corrupt high priest at the time. But others rejected this abandonment of their traditional Jewish culture.

Because of their resistance, Antiochus tried to eliminate Judaism altogether, slaughtering tens of thousands of Jews, and committing the abomination of desolation by defiling the temple. (All of these events are covered in the History & Future #16 study.)

So, you can imagine how, even two hundred years later, "real" Jews were embittered against "Hellenized" Jews. But now, we're talking about Christians - Jews from both sides of that conflict who are together in the church as brand new believers. And, as you might expect, some people felt that there was some favoritism going on.

A Complaint

The first major complaint to arise was regarding the church's daily

serving of food. Now, if a church serving food daily seems odd, remember how dedicated to the Word of God these people were. God had made it very clear that His people were to provide for widows and orphans. The church took that very seriously, and established a system to feed older Christian widows who didn't have family members to provide for them, and who were living godly lives (1Tim. 5:3-16).

But like any new system, it wasn't perfect right from the start. And the complaint that arose was that the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked. This wasn't a vindictive discrimination, but just oversight. Somehow the system of distribution hadn't taken some consideration to the Hellenistic widows' circumstances. Maybe it was something as simple as the location of the distribution, the time of day, or the method by which announcements were made.

6:2-4 The Apostles' Decision

The twelve apostles were the guys who had come up with the system, and had been overseeing the work. After all, Christians...

Acts 4:34 ...who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.

This ministry had evolved and outgrown this system (see vs. 1). So, the apostles called a group meeting. They said, "Obviously, the current system has some potholes in it. But we can't stop teaching to serve tables, so it needs to be managed and overseen by others." They told the congregation that seven men were going to oversee this ministry.

The men had to meet some requirements:

- 1) They had to be chosen by the people,
- 2) They had to be from among the believers,
- 3) They had to be men,
- 4) They must have a good reputation,
- 5) They had to be full of the Spirit,
- 6) They had to be full of wisdom, and
- 7) They had to be able to be in charge of task.

Every one of these requirements addressed any complaints that might occur afterwards about this issue.

1) The people themselves would have chosen them, so there'd be no accusations of favoritism, nepotism, etc.

2) The men would be from the church, so they would be Christians.

3) They had to be men. A woman could become a widow and then be open to the accusation of using the system to benefit herself.

4) Having a good reputation would keep more accusations of corruption in check.

5) If the men were Spirit-filled believers, they would be convicted in their hearts if they were tempted to cheat.

6) Wisdom was necessary for coming up with an administrative plan that would benefit both Hellenists and Hebrews alike.

7) None of them would be incompetent.

The Apostles' Devotion

The apostles had seen that as the church grew, it was going to be an impossibility to maintain the teaching ministry as more and more of these administrative responsibilities fell to them. And so, they applied the same thing that Moses had done in the days of the Old Testament: delegating the tasks to godly men (Ex. 18:25-26).

This is the origin of deacons in the church. The word "deacons" is the Greek word "**dee-AK-on-os**," meaning "servants." These guys were appointed for the purpose of multiplying the ministry physically, so that the teachers could pray and teach.

As the church grew, so did the requirements for deacons:

1Tim. 3:8-12 **Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. Deacons must be husbands of one wife, and good managers of**

children and their own households.

Several of these requirements have been interpreted by churches in various ways. We discussed these in greater detail in the study of 1Tim. 3:1-13, and at length in a 10-study series through the requirements of elders in Titus 1:5-8, where many of the essentials are the same.

6:5 They Chose

The apostles said, "This is how it's going to be." And nobody complained - it found approval with the whole congregation. So they chose seven men who met the seven requirements: Stephen, Philip, **PROKH-oros, Nik-AN-ore, TEE-mone, Par-men-AS**, and Nicolas.

6:6 Commissioning Them

The congregation brought the seven men to the apostles and said, "These are the ones we've picked." Now, in all likelihood, these were guys that the apostles didn't even know, but the congregation did.

Of course, the apostles could have just said, "Great. Here's your deacon name badges. Now get to work." But, as Paul would say later on,

1Tim. 3:10 These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach.

So, the apostles prayed. God would know the hearts of these men better than anyone in the congregation would. Only after praying did they lay their hands on them, imparting some of their authority to the men for the work. Paul would also tell Timothy,

1Tim. 5:22 Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin.

Saints, this is so important for church leaders to keep in mind: it is very easy to put people in positions of authority too quickly. Before you've walked with them, before their true nature has been revealed through time and testing, you can be fooled.

I have regretted laying hands too quickly, but never too cautiously.

May we learn to be patient in all things. May we have discernment. God, grant us wisdom.