

Sermon File # 895

Scripture Text: Acts 6:1-7

Sermon Title: *Servant Leaders*

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At International Baptist Church, Brussels, Belgium

On Sunday morning 13 April 2008

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Servant Leaders

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Acts 6:1-7, as we continue our journey through *The Acts of the Apostles*, or, as we might prefer to title this account, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus through His Spirit-filled Church*.

We have noted how this earliest church set an amazing precedent for the church throughout the ages, with its being a model of unity, love, generosity and empowered praying and bold witnessing that resulted in phenomenal growth. We also have seen how that Satan sought to disrupt this growth through threats and persecution from the religious authorities and also how the devil entered the heart of church members, whose pride and deception threatened the church's unity and spiritual integrity. We noted last Sunday how the church's apostles stood strong under overt persecution and even rejoiced to be considered worthy to suffer for Jesus.

Today we note another threat that rises up against the church. This time it is once again from the most dangerous direction—inside the church membership. There has been a time lapse between chapters 5 and 6 (John Polhill suggests the events of chapter 6 came as long as 5 years after the church-launching Day of Pentecost. See page 178, *Acts: an Exegetical and Theological Exposition of*

Holy Scripture (NAC). The problem we see is one caused by unintended negligence that resulted in some ill will between ethnic groups within the church. I want us particularly to note how the leadership of the church, the apostles, addressed this problem and found God's solution through adding more servant leaders to the church.

Follow as I read **Acts 6:1-7**.

I never ceased to be amazed at the way God honors the timing behind the preaching of his Word, and certainly I can take not credit for myself or project myself as a genius at planning, when I lay out my sermon plans in three-month (quarterly) segments. Fortuitously, or rather, providentially, when we are preparing to present new deacons and are in the process of seeking team members and leaders to fill the many responsibilities in the church's ministries, we come to this timely passage of Scripture in *Acts*. The work that God is doing and is leading us to join him in doing here at IBC calls for servant leaders, in all facets of ministry. Our Scripture text tells how God used a problem in this earliest church to seek out additional servant leaders.

Some have referred to our text as the establishment of the ministry of deacon, which is a statement that assumes too much. The Greek word "service" (*diakonia*) is used in our text, but refers to the ministry task needing to be done and also to the service of the apostles. We have to wait until Paul's letters to see an established office of deacon (1Timothy 3:8-13). In actuality, the ones in leadership of the church at this time were the apostles, who were eyewitnesses of Jesus during his earthly ministry and of his resurrection (*Acts* 1:21f). They had a unique authority and ministry that served to launch the church and its missionary enterprise, a ministry that would cease after their death. Perhaps the closest office to that became established most similar to the one that is begun in our text is the ministry of elder, known also as presbyter or bishop (See footnotes to our text in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, 1994).

Scripture gives us very little instruction about the details of church offices. What seems of greater concern in Scripture and which should be of greater concern to us is that we follow the principles of spiritual service and leadership and not be too concerned about looking for exact organizational guidelines, which simply are not there. What we find in our text today applies to the entire church and for the need we have for servant leaders in every aspect of our church's life and ministry. The elders have distributed to you a bulletin insert that gives an overview of the ministries of our church. Almost every one of these ministry areas, represented by a box on the chart, has a need for more servant leaders. We are now in the process of selecting deacons to oversee those areas of ministry, who in turn will look for team leaders and team members to serve in these various areas of worship, outreach, administration, education and

fellowship. We welcome your input and also invite you to volunteer as we join in seeking servant leaders in IBC Brussels.

From our text we will note that servant leaders in the church...

➤ **Are essential**

The work of the church and the Kingdom of God is done through human beings. It's a testimony to God's grace that he would use us and to his power that he can indeed use us in his kingdom work. In fact, servant leaders are *essential*...

- *For the fellowship of the church*

The need for more servant leaders arose when a problem in the church's fellowship began to surface. We have noted from earlier summary passages about the amazing love and unity of this earliest church and how they cared for one another and how no one had any needs that were unmet (2:42ff; 4:32ff). The devil was not about to leave this wonderful fellowship and unity unchallenged, and so a problem arose concerning the neglect of the widows in the Grecian Jewish part of this multicultural and diverse church (verse 1).

Elderly Grecian Jews had moved to Jerusalem from the many lands of the Diaspora, wishing to be buried in the Holy City. And widows were financially dependent on the support of the church (We see the financial dependence of first century widows also in Paul's instructions in 1Timothy 5:3ff). These Grecian Jews were just as Jewish as the Hebraic Jews, but had been influenced by the Greek culture, spoke only the Greek language, and tended to be more liberal about temple regulations than the more conservative Hebraic Jews. And the Grecian Jews who were converted to Christ, though added to the fellowship of the church, tended to form their own subculture within the church. Not knowing Aramaic or Hebrew, they perhaps worshiped in the Greek language and may have formed their own house churches, much like our German, Dutch, French and English-speaking home groups, Alpha classes and Bible studies here at IBC. In other words, there was diversity in the unity of this church, respecting cultural differences and allowing subgroups to fellowship, share and pray in their own heart languages (See Polhill, above citation, page 179).

Inadvertently, the apostles had failed to evenly distribute funds to all of the church's widows, neglecting the Grecian ones (This oversight is easily understood, in light of the language and cultural differences. See Polhill, page 180, above citation). Because of this oversight, the Grecian Christians began to complain about this perceived neglect, perhaps even thinking there was prejudice against their widows. Our text says literally, "there was a murmuring of the Hellenists," (verse 1). This murmuring, notes one, is "an unpleasant word" and is the same word used in the LXX (Greek) translation of the Old Testament,

when the Israelites murmured against Moses during stressful times (Exodus 16:7; Numbers 14:27, and page 226, Ajjith Fernando, *Acts: The NIV Application Commentary*).

Seeing the threat to the church's unity and fellowship, the apostles took immediate action. They called a meeting of "all the disciples," which we can assume to be a church members' meeting. From their immediate and decisive action we can see how highly they regarded the fellowship of the church which was threatened by this oversight and misunderstanding. And we do well to follow this example by resolving to not allow any issue that might threaten our church unity and fellowship to go unresolved. Our unity and fellowship was the main concern in the High Priestly Prayer of Jesus in John 17:20ff) and is one of the primary concerns in Paul's writings (as we see in passages like Ephesians 4:3 and Philippians 4:2).

The action of the apostles was to seek out servant leaders who would take care of this ministry need, which also was essential...

- *For the functioning of the church*

In that church members' meeting, the apostles noted that it would not have been right for them to neglect their ministry of the Word of God and prayer (verses 2 and 4). John Stott says that this church problem was the devil's cleverest attack yet: "Having failed to overcome the church either by persecution or corruption, he now tried distraction. If he could preoccupy the apostles with social administration, which was essential but not their calling, they would neglect their God-given responsibilities to pray and to preach, and so to leave the church without any defense against false doctrine" (page 120, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts*).

The apostles were intent on the church's...

- ✓ Maintaining its priorities

The apostles clearly understood that they had a charge to lead the church through prayer, preaching and teaching. The apostles, as we have noted, had a unique leadership role that was essential until the establishment of the full canon of Scripture, which essentially replaced their apostolic authority. As Polhill writes, modern pastors should not use these verses as a way to dismiss our responsibility to share in some of the administrative tasks of the church. The apostles, unlike us, had a unique role that could not be replaced or distracted by administrative duties (page 180, above citation). We pastors today, as Paul admonished Timothy, must "discharge all the duties" of our ministry, including administration, we must assume (2 Timothy 4:5).

But we do recognize that the ministries of prayer, preaching and teaching are priorities that must be safeguarded and supported at all costs. There is no hierarchy of church leadership, in the first century or in the church today. Apostles had a unique calling and authority. And today we realize how God calls and gifts some for leadership and equipping ministries, but that does not mean that a particular gift or office makes one spiritually superior to anyone else. All people and all places of ministry in God's church, the Body of Christ, are equally important, a point Paul made very clear (1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Ephesians 4:11ff). What we see in our text is the church setting apart men to do a particular task, and these men performed the task but also participated, as in the case of Stephen and Philip, in the church's priority task of preaching. Servant leaders are important to me and to the church in enabling us to maintain our priorities. And I hasten to add that there is no hierarchy of office in God's church. Every part of the body is essential. And what someone does on a ministry team and in any detail of service, whether in fellowship, worship, outreach, education or administration, is a vital part in the overall support of and functioning of the church and its ability to maintain its priorities.

All of us elders are called to and charged with the ministries of prayer, teaching and preaching. And we are in the process of calling forth workers who will assist us in our ministries by taking over some of the tasks that are distracting us from these church ministry priorities—prayer, preaching and teaching. As elders we have been given charge to oversee the spiritual life of the church. We are indeed spending more time in prayer, and are anxious to spend more time together in prayer for the church and also to be able to care for more of our people through the ministry of visitation and giving spiritual direction.

For us to be able to invest this time is for your benefit. One scholar remarked that there is another side to the desire of pastors to have spiritually minded men in positions of leadership, just as we see in the qualifications of these servant leaders in verses 3 & 5. Said he: "While Christian ministers wish such qualities were more characteristic of their own boards and councils, it is only fair to say that boards and councils often wish their ministers were more given 'to prayer and the ministry of the word'" (Richard N Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, volume 9, page 331).

As Henry Blackaby says, "The pastor...must be preeminently a man given to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). He must take the people to Christ through prayer and the ministry of the Word. God's people must not only know about Christ; they must also be experientially connected to Him. Like a branch and the vine, the people must be attached to Christ. Like the sheep to their shepherd, the people must know and follow their Lord. Like the body to the head, they must function together. This is the great task of the pastor, helping the people walk in a vital union with the Lord (page 120, Henry and Melvin Blackaby, *A God-Centered Church: Experiencing God Together*).

As your pastor/elder, I realize my calling and responsibility to be devoted to the careful study and diligent preparation of sermons and also the need for prayer, personal worship and growth in personal holiness. I'm challenged greatly by the statement of Robert Murray McCheyne, the Scottish pastor who died at age 29 yet made such an impact on the evangelical world. Said he: "My people's greatest need is my personal holiness" (cited by Fernando, above citation, page 232).

Servant leaders are vitally important in helping us work as a team in maintaining the church's priorities of the ministry of the Word and prayer. But also servant leaders are important for...

✓ Encouraging participation

This particular administrative need, which needed to be addressed by the apostles and the church, resulted in drawing into vital spiritual leadership men whom we had never heard from before. Especially we note that Stephen and Philip became involved in this specific ministry to widows yet their ministry branched out into preaching, martyrdom and the evangelistic expansion of the church.

I pray that today, even if it's for the first time, you will decide to become a part of the church's ministry. You are indeed being asked to be a servant leader and the reason God has added you to this church is for you to participate in his work at IBC. Our elders have been teaching in our adult Sunday School class the book by Henry and Melvin Blackaby, *A God-Centered Church: Experiencing God Together*. And the point made very clearly is that every member of the church is essential for the church to carry out its mission. When anyone is added to the church we must ask the question, "What is God's purpose in bringing that person to us?" (See above citation, pages 209ff). And then we must encourage participation.

This means that servant leaders...

➤ **Are enlisted**

The apostles responded to this potentially church-splitting problem by turning to the greater church assembly. The church was pleased to accept responsibility and did so by setting apart seven men, who by their names were evidently Grecian Jews themselves and thus could relate to their own ethnically Greek fellow believers. It is the better part of wisdom to seek servants who can relate to the various socio-culturally diverse groups within the church in ways that are culturally sensitive and appropriate.

Note that these servant leaders, who took responsibility for handing this matter, were enlisted...

- *By the church*

Servant leaders are those who are known by the church and have gained the confidence of the church. We don't know the mechanics of how these seven men were selected out of a church membership of thousands, but obviously they had distinguished themselves with service to the church as men of integrity and faithfulness.

And we also here at IBC are looking to the entire church for you to join with us in enlisting servant leaders to carry out the ministries of elders, deacons, team leaders and members. We have considered and will continue to seriously consider the names you place before the elders as we seek to fill these ministry needs. We are a congregational church by participation, but let it be said that we are a people under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, who is the head of our church.

The process of selecting these servant leaders was not a popularity contest. Instead, the church sought out those who met the criteria set forth by the apostles...

- *As those who are qualified*

Notice that the servant leaders being sought in this earliest church were to be men who were filled with the Holy Spirit. This is interesting in light of the fact that the task to be done, the one that necessitated this ministry, was basically an administrative task. Yet for this work of making certain the Grecian widows received their fair portion of support, the first criterion was to be Spirit-filled.

I have seen, alas, how many churches look to the business leaders in the church to fill the church's administrative positions, such as the church finance committee. Sometimes these men or women think the church should be run like the bank for which they work and these leaders take no thought for the church's mission priority or for the way God works in his church beyond the categories of secular business principles. I have come out of church finance committee meetings (in former pastorates where I have served) feeling like I had been through a major battle with men and women who take no thought for biblical principles, have no commitment to the church's mission, and have no sense of dependence on the leadership of the Holy Spirit. And such tough-minded business people usually regard opinions expressed by the pastor and or members who want to seek God's will in a matter as being hopelessly naïve about business matters.

It certainly is helpful to have people serving on the church's finance and other teams who know good business practices and principles, but it is even more

important that they be people who are spiritually minded, and Spirit-filled people who seek to know the mind of Christ in every decision and who are filled with love and respect for the people of the church and who have zeal for its mission. To be filled with the Spirit is realize your absolute dependence on the Spirit, pray in the Spirit at all times and to allow the Holy Spirit to control all of your life (Ephesians 5:18; 6:18). A truly Spirit- filled servant leader is not one who seeks to exert influence and control over others or the church. Rather, she or he is one who lives in the Spirit of the crucified Savior, who walks in the way of the cross of self-denial and serves in the spirit of humble submission. A Spirit-filled Christian is one who is being made whole in Christ and does not seek self-esteem by power over and control of others. The Spirit-filled believer finds joy, completeness and self-acceptance in knowing that he or she is dearly loved by the heavenly Father.

The church chose these men and then the church presented them to the apostles, who in turn prayed and laid their hands on them. The laying on of hands was not the formal ritual that is often known today as ordination. As we have seen, it certainly was not ordination to an office in the church. The laying on of hands was an expression of the conveying of spiritual power for a particular task and assignment. What in effect the church was doing was saying that these men are being given an assignment that depends on the Spirit and the power of God and we seek his blessings to give them success (See Polhill, above citation, page 182, and Numbers 27:16-23). This should remind us that whatever task we are given and accept as spiritual leaders, we depend absolutely on the power and the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

So, the priority is Spirit filled people but also God seeks the quality of wisdom. *The Message* paraphrases verse 3 as “full of the Holy Spirit and good sense.” Servant leaders are people who make good judgment and do not overlook the obvious in situations. God expects us to use our minds and some issues are so obvious we don’t have to spend a lot of time and energy in seeking to find the will of God. He gives us good minds and the ability to make sound decisions based on the evidence he places before us.

Later on, when Paul writes his pastoral letters, he gives qualifications for elders and deacons and mentions a lot of qualities that I would classify as “good sense,” such as having a good reputation, a good marriage and family, sober, and honest in his dealings with everyone (1 Timothy 3:1ff; Titus 1:6-9).

My dad, who directed Baptist work in the Midwest part of the United States for about 30 years, lamented to me about the pastors in his jurisdiction who made foolish choices that often brought damage to their lives, families and churches. He said to me, “Son, it takes a lot of spirituality to make up for just a little lack of common sense!” And in some cases, there was no adequate compensation for a lack of common sense and void of good judgment.

Servant leaders are enlisted...

- *As those who are willing*

I find it interesting that there is nothing said about these men who were chosen having to take a long time to deliberate over the decision to serve with this rather inglorious assignment. In fact, the evidence seems to indicate that they were simply enlisted and immediately acquiesced to the church's appointment. They were willing to serve where needed and as needed. This particular assignment was ministry-based and seemed administrative in nature. Yet, at least with Stephen and Philip, their involvement as spiritual leaders took them beyond administration. They were deeply involved in the ministry of witness, evangelism and missions.

Spiritual leaders are those who say, "I am willing to serve wherever needed. Of course, the church should help people discover, use and develop their spiritual gifts. But those who do so the best are the ones whose gifts are discovered and often developed as a result of their willingness to serve in any place and way needed by the church. Godly spiritual leaders take on the servant attitude and follow the model of Jesus, the Supreme Servant, who did what it took to save us (Philippians 2:5-8).

And our text shows us also that servant leaders...

➤ **Are effective**

Our text gives us a picture of a church delivered from the brink of deep trouble and a possible split within its fellowship. Not only were they spared deep trouble, they were actually strengthened as a result of the selection of godly, wise servant leaders. The reason the church was spared a dreadful outcome was the work of these newly appointed servant leaders...

- *In solving the problem*

These men obviously got to work immediately in seeing that the needs of the Grecian widows were met. They took care of the widows in their ethnic group and took responsibility for those closest to them socially, culturally and perhaps also spiritually. The troubled waters were calmed by the way these godly servant leaders addressed and worked to resolve this issue.

I'm grateful for the many people in IBC who accept responsibility for solving the problems and meeting the needs of the church. And these servant-hearted and minded people work behind the scenes in ways that perhaps no one ever notices. But they are the kind of people who, upon seeing a need, go to work to resolve the problem or issue and meet whatever need that they see. It's easy to

complain and to talk about problems in the church but quite another thing to work to solve the problem. We noted how that because of the problem in the church the people began to murmur and complain. Servant leaders are not murmurers but are problem solvers.

And note how the solving of this ministry and administrative problem resulted...

- *In spreading the Word*

Servant leaders in the church not only solve specific problems, but their ministry, attitude and service results in the spread of the gospel (verse 7). Luke uses organic terminology for the growth of the Word of God, perhaps thinking about how Jesus described the spread of the gospel through the seed of the Word finding the good soil of receptive hearts (Luke 8:1-15. See Darrell L Bock, *Acts: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, page 264).

The Word of God spread and the church continued to experience great growth no doubt because the church's witness to the community remained strong. The church indeed was known as a people who loved and cared for one another, especially those, like the widows, who had serious material needs. In fact, this is how, said Jesus, that the world would know we are his disciples, by our love for one another (John 13:35).

Although the problem that necessitated this call for servant leaders was an administrative one, these servant leaders were involved in sharing in the church's priority—evangelism. They were not specialists who refused to do anything beyond their so-called "job description." Rather, they were concerned about and committed to the church's mission within the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8). As these men took care of the poor widows, they also shared the gospel with outsiders, such as the "large number of priests" who became obedient to the faith (verse 7). (I Howard Marshall notes that an estimated 18,000 priests and Levites were serving in Jerusalem at this time. See page 128, *Acts: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*).

These priests perhaps included those who were at the forefront of Jesus' arrest, trial and condemnation to his crucifixion. Church Father John Chrysostom notes that the conversion of this large number of priests indicates the powerful working of God's Spirit in this earliest church:

"See how great is the mercy of God," he notes, that "chief priests, who shouted, 'He saved others, and cannot save himself,' it was from the ranks of these that many priests 'were obedient to the faith'" (page 71, *New Testament volume V, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*).

And I believe that IBC will see the mighty, converting power of the Holy Spirit through our life and witness as God raises up servant leaders, who minister to

the body and relate the message of Christ to the unlikely converts of the expatriate community and also to this secular, post-Christian country, which has long been considered closed to the good news of Jesus. Although God uses servant leaders, we cannot for one minute think that the Word will spread and the lost will be converted through our wisdom, good organization or hard work. Servant leaders depend absolutely on the grace and power of God.

Conclusion:

I believe that God is calling servant leaders to come forward here at IBC and declare your willingness to serve. Perhaps you have a passion to see certain things go forward and ministries become reality. Perhaps you have spiritual gifts that you believe God is calling you to use to help build up the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12f).

All of us who know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior need to realize our role as spiritual leader in our home and sphere of influence, whether in the workplace, community or classroom. Each is to follow the example of Jesus, the Supreme Servant (John 13:1-17; Philippians 2:5-8). To be a servant leader requires first of all that we are following Jesus as Lord in the way of the cross. This means that we are constantly dying to self and seeking for Christ to live in us as we follow the cruciform pattern of his life. This is the Spirit-filled life of true wisdom which alone qualifies us for servant ministry and leadership within the body of Christ.

Perhaps the way God is calling you to respond to his Word is through your willingness to serve and to express your willingness to one of us elders. It may be that you are already serving in a ministry and simply need to recommit to serving with greater zeal for the kingdom and love to Christ. It may also be that Jesus is calling you to be a servant leader in your marriage, your home, and in every arena of your life and circle of relationships. Whether or not you have an elected position in our church, you are *essential* to IBC and God's work in this place, when he *elects* you by his grace and makes you an *effective* part of the growth of his kingdom and glory.

The truth is, God is calling us today to be his servant leaders, for the growth and good of his church and the glory of his name.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What are some situations in the church today that can be occasions for church members to murmur and complain against the church's leadership?
2. In what ways are godly and wise servant leaders important to strengthen the fellowship and unity of the church?
3. Why are servant leaders important for the church's ability to carry out its mission and perform its ministries?
4. Do you agree that every member of the church and his or her ministry is equally important to the functioning of the church? Why or why not?
5. What do you think are the most important qualifications for being a servant leader?
6. How would you describe the wisdom or "good sense" that is required for a servant leader (verse 3)?
7. What do you think is the connection between the way the church solved its problem with the neglected Grecian widows and the continuing growth of the church through conversions (verse 7)? What do you think is needed in our church to strengthen our fellowship and mission?

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