

Acts of Service

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

3rd in a four-part series

November 17, 2019

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Acts 2:42–47 (NRSV)

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Acts 6:1–7 (CEB)

About that time, while the number of disciples continued to increase, a complaint arose. Greek-speaking disciples accused the Aramaic-speaking disciples because their widows were being overlooked in the daily food service. ²The Twelve called a meeting of all the disciples and said, "It isn't right for us to set aside proclamation of God's word in order to serve tables. ³Brothers and sisters, carefully choose seven well-respected men from among you. They must be well-respected and endowed by the Spirit with exceptional wisdom. We will put them in charge of this concern. ⁴As for us, we will devote ourselves to prayer and the service of proclaiming the word." ⁵This proposal pleased the entire community. They selected **Stephen**, a man endowed by the Holy Spirit with exceptional faith, **Philip**, **Prochorus**, **Nicanor**, **Timon**, **Parmenas**, and **Nicolaus** from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶The community presented these seven to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷God's word continued to grow. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased significantly. Even a large group of priests embraced the faith.

The church was and is still built through countless acts of service.

In the opening chapters of Acts, Luke gives us several glimpses inside the life of the first Christian community. The community had been born on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit arrived, empowering them all to embrace the new lives given them by Christ. We see them sharing their lives together – eating meals in fellowship, praying, learning from the apostles, and more. We see them reaching outward as they strive to be their Lord's hands and feet, enacting the kingdom of God. The Good News is proclaimed. A man is healed. Property is sold and money pooled to ensure that all have what they need. Even the threat of arrest and punishment has not deterred them; they pray for boldness.

Problems emerge

Before too long though, problems begin to emerge in this community of believers. We shouldn't be surprised; Jesus has still yet to return. Until he does, we live "between the times," when God's victory over sin and death has been won, but we still await the marriage of heaven and earth. Gordon Fee, a prominent New Testament scholar, analogized this to D-Day in WWII. Once 200,000 Allied troops were successfully landed in Normandy, the war was won. There would be much fighting and dying to go . . . but the war was won. Perhaps it is a bit like an MLB team that clinches its division title with ten games still to play. They've won, but the baseball contests go on, some lost, some won until, finally, the trophy can be lifted.

So, yes, problems emerge in this community of faithful believers. That says nothing about their faith, only that they, like we, still have to deal with a sinful heart. For

example, a man and his wife lie to the apostles . . . to God! . . . falsely claiming that they had turned over all the proceeds from a property sale. They hadn't and when confronted, they both dropped dead.

Now, a more significant problem has emerged that threatens the community's unity, which is comprised of both Greek-speaking disciples (referred to as the "Hellenists" in most translations) and Aramaic-speaking disciples (the "Hebrews"). In other words, there were disciples even then who were originally from elsewhere in the Roman Empire. As we all know, desiring unity and living unity are not the same. The Greek-speaking widows believe that their needs are not being met for the sake of the Aramaic-speaking widows. The nature of the problem is well laid-out by N.T. Wright:

The problem came to a head over the treatment of widows. This shows that already in the early church the question of 'living as a single family' had clear negative as well as positive implications: normally, widows would be taken care of among their own blood-relations, but those family ties appear to have been cut when people joined the new movement. As in some parts of the world to this day,

Daily Distribution of Food¹

Jewish practice provided a means to distribute food to the poor. One means was to distribute weekly funds to poor residents in order for them to purchase food. This was called *quppah*, so named after "the box" that was used to collect the funds. A daily distribution of food was provided for non-residents and was called *tamhuy*, named after the "tray" on which foodstuffs were placed for distribution (Jeremias, 130–32). It appears that the Christian community was imitating the *tamhuy* with its "daily distribution." But does this mean that the widows were not considered "residents"? And one may ask, "Why did Christian Jews have to set up their own means of caring for the poor?" One can only speculate whether the neglect of "the widows" by the larger Jerusalem community might indicate that the Hellenistic Christian community was viewed by the residents of Jerusalem as a distinct enough group that it did not "qualify" for either the *quppah* or *tamhuy*.

1. from Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969); Gerd Lüdemann, *Early Christianity according to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

baptism meant saying goodbye to an existing family as well as being welcomed into a new one. And the new one therefore had to take on the obligations of the old. That, by the way, is why we find regulations being drawn up about such things in 1 Timothy 5:3–16. Some have speculated that the problem was exacerbated, in the case of the early church, because many Jewish couples would come from far and wide in the Jewish 'Diaspora' (the dispersion of Jews all around the known world) to live in and around Jerusalem in old age so that, eventually, they could be buried in the vicinity. The husband might then die, leaving a disproportionate number of widows from different geographical origins all in the neighborhood of Jerusalem.

Whatever we think about that, the distinction in verse 1 between 'Hellenists' and 'Hebrews' is probably one of those things with a variety of elements mixed together. Nobody had planned for a complex and intricate welfare system. It had been invented on the hoof, when there were other things (such as persecution by the authorities) to think about. It would be surprising if such a system could proceed without difficulties. And in a complex society such as that in Jerusalem, which was both a deeply traditional culture, very conscious of its historic and religious significance, and a cosmopolitan mixture of Jews from all over the world, it is not surprising that people would be eyeing one another to see if this or that group appeared to be taking advantage.¹

With the food distribution system having broken down, the apostles realize that they are going to need some reorganization of structure and duties. Who will do what and

¹ Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (p. 98). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

how in order to see that the needs of all are effectively and justly met? Because there are believers in the community from around the empire, we should see this brief story not merely about the community looking after itself, but, rather, as a concrete expression of our Christ-given mission to the world.

So the apostles called a meeting of all the believers in Jerusalem. They outlined the problem and asked the community to select seven men, to whom the apostles would delegate the food distribution (*diakonein*) and assuredly other responsibilities. The community would select the seven, but the apostles set forth two criteria. They must be well-respected and it must be clear to all that the men have been endowed by the Holy Spirit with exceptional wisdom. Seven men were chosen; their names are listed in verse five above. In front of the community, the apostles prayed over the seven and laid their hands on them, which denoted a sharing of the apostles' authoritative power. The apostles were ensuring that as they delegated responsibility, they also gave these men authority. The apostles would continue to serve (*diakonia*) but would now focus on prayer and the proclamation of the Gospel.

One of the seven, Stephen, figures larger than the others in the story of the early church. For, after the delegation of authority to the seven, Stephen was arrested, tried, and stoned to death, making him the first martyr (from the Greek word for "witness") in the Christian faith. His service to Christ and the church in life and in death became an important legacy to the movement (Acts 11:19, 22:20).

And so the believers went forth . . . the community grew. Even temple priests heard God's call. And the "greatest upset" in human history proceeded. Upset? A few years ago the *Atlantic* magazine asked leaders from a variety of backgrounds to name the greatest upset in history. Cass Sunstein, a prominent legal scholar and regulatory czar, wrote:

The rise of Christianity. Two thousand fifteen years ago (give or take), Jesus Christ was crucified. Whether or not you think that he was the son of God, no oddsmaker would have predicted that today the faith of billions would bear his name.

Indeed. Indeed. There is no greater evidence of the truth we proclaim than the existence of Christianity two millennia after those first disciples.

The call to serve

As those seven men were chosen to lead the community in service, so we are all called to serve and to lead. Jesus calls us to be "servants of all" (Mark 9:35). Paul reminds us that we proclaim Jesus as Lord and are to be servants for Jesus' sake (2 Cor 4:5). But what does this service really look like? Isn't it pretty easy for our service to become self-righteous rather than true service of God? In *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster helps us to see what self-righteous service looks like so we can better grasp the meaning of true service.

Self-righteous service comes from human effort; true service comes out of our relationship with Jesus. Self-righteous service is concerned with the "big" project or "big" deal; true service doesn't discriminate among the opportunities to serve. Self-righteous service requires external rewards; true service needs only God's approval. Foster suggests that self-righteous service is focused only on the results, while true service "delights" in the service. Self-righteous service is affected by our whims and moods; true service carries on whether we feel like it or not. Self-righteous service can fracture a community as people strive for control and recognition; true service is selfless and heals a community.

A Servant's Service

Though we are 2,000 years removed from the first communities of Christians, our challenges are not really so different. When the apostles were overwhelmed by their duties, they enlisted others, like Stephen, to help out, serving the young Christian

church. Paul taught the churches he founded that God gives us all gifts to use in our service to God. Some are helpers, some are teachers, some are preachers, some are leaders, some are given gifts of knowledge, or wisdom, or mercy, or giving. The point is that we are all to serve.

When we join the Methodist Church we promise to “uphold it with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service.” This is a practical expression of our commitment to be servants of God and to do his work. The question is not whether we will serve, but only how. We might serve by teaching a children’s Sunday School class, or singing in the choir, or helping a nursing home resident with weekly shopping, or answering the church phones on a Sunday morning, or serving in Seven Loaves, or building a handicapped ramp for a nearby senior center, or helping out in Joseph’s Coat or Project Hope or in Costa Rica . . . there is no end to the opportunities, for there is no end to the needs. Make no mistake; God wants more from us than simply an hour or two on Sunday mornings. We, the people of God, are called to lives of joyful service to God and others.

Daily Bible Readings

More on acts of service

Monday, Joshua 24:14-28 The renewal of the covenant and the people’s promise to serve God

Tuesday, Malachi 3:13-18 Israel is reminded that the righteous serve God.

Wednesday, Matthew 20:20-28 Service as greatness

Thursday, John 13:1-20 Jesus washes the feet of the disciples at the last supper.

Friday, Romans 16:1-16 A long list of Christians who are serving the home churches in Rome

Saturday, Ephesians 4:1-16 Paul appeals for unity and the use of our God-given gifts in the body of Christ.

Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

A study of the book of Revelation

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Paul’s letter to the Romans

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, “Scott Engle.”

Scott’s 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *Stories from the Apocrypha*

Video of each week’s class is posted here: vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy