

INTRODUCTION

Someone once said “Christians become very unchristian when they get organised.” That remark crystallises one side of a long running debate over church polity. Some would reject the idea of any form of formal organisation within the church, they oppose structure they prefer to follow the Spirit or at least that’s what they say.

Along with this thinking goes the rejection of any form of membership within the church. However such a view I believe goes against the very nature of God who is not the God of disorder but of peace (1 Corinthians 14:33). In reality all of creation has order and structure and we as human beings could not live on this earth without order and structure within our families and society.

Likewise the church is to be a reflection of the character of God and therefore there must be order and peace and that often entails a certain amount of structure and organisation.

Other people try to structure the church like a business and have such a rigid framework that it hinders the work of the church rather than helping it. Such churches have job descriptions and organisational charts and committees and sub committees and so on. It seems that everything is so well organised that there is no place for change or for spontaneity. Of course I have given you two extremes and there are a whole hosts of views in-between those extremes about how churches should function and organise.

The church is an organism yet just as living organisms require structure and organisation to function so does the church. The early church set the example of a living interdependent organism. Their unity and power gave them a testimony that swept across Jerusalem. Many people came to faith in Christ. As we have seen no amount of persecution from the religious leaders could stop the growth of the early church.

The believers loved one another and this was demonstrated in sharing their material goods with one another and this had a profound impact within the community for as we saw last time even unbelievers held the church in high regard (5:13).

However this explosive growth of the early church meant that a greater measure of organisation was needed than before if the church was to function in an orderly and peaceful way. The church already had some organisation as we have seen with the distribution of goods etc. but now there is further need of organisation.

Now in this chapter the church is facing its first serious organisational crisis. A potential divisive problem had arisen within the church and to solve it would involve further organisation. This probably illustrates an important principle. Biblical church organisation always responds to needs and to what the Spirit is doing in the church.

Organisation is never an end in itself but it is only a means to facilitate what the Lord is doing in his church. Well lets look at how and the why the church organised itself.

1. THE REASON FOR THIS ORGANISATION (vs. 1-2 & 4).

The reason why further organisation was needed was that the church was growing (v 1) and as a result another problem arose. This problem was related to the fact that the church was growing rapidly. Just how large the church had become is not known. In 4:4 the figure was 5000 but that only counted the men. To that figure you have to add women and children and those who were converted since that time. Someone has estimated that there could have been as many as 20,000

in the church at Jerusalem but how they come up with this figure I am not sure. One thing is sure there were many believers more than 5000 and therefore it is no surprise that some problems arose. We also need to remember that the early church did not have the means of communication that we have today.

Therefore the leadership and administrative needs of this large church would have been enormous. Merely to have been able to help so many people spiritually would have been a tremendous task but to also help meet their physical needs was a very daunting task.

Not only did the size of the church create problems but also the speed of its growth meant that the church did not have much time to adjust or to implement new organisation strategies. The result was that the apostles could no longer handle the entire load of caring for this church. They needed help and that required more organisation and structure within the church.

There was another reason why the church would need further structure. The church had almost fulfilled the first part of the Lord's four part charge to them (Acts 1:8). They had saturated Jerusalem with the gospel message (5:28) and have even begun to reach out to the surrounding region (5:16). Now the church was poised to reach out even further into Samaria and then into the Gentile world. To do that successfully would require further planning and structuring of the existing church.

Now in a congregation of this size it was inevitable that someone's needs would be overlooked. It comes as no surprise to learn that a complaint was made by the Grecian Jews against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food (v 1).

Now here is an issue that Satan could use with devastating effect against the church unless it was dealt with and that involved better organisation. Here is a situation that Satan could exploit in order to harm the church and the apostles were aware of this, which is why they did not try and ignore the problem, but tried to resolve it.

Satan continues to work like this today he seeks to use problems within churches and seeks to blow them out of proportion and cause dissension within God's church. He knows that a church racked by internal conflict is a church, which is focused on self and therefore not proclaiming the church to the lost world. He also knows that a church full of strife is a church whose testimony is damaged and tainted. This is why the Apostles felt it necessary to act and to organise the church more effectively.

Every good leader will seek to deal with internal disputes and differences because if we bury our heads in the sand Satan will exploit such tensions for his benefit and to bring dishonour upon the church and more importantly upon Jesus Christ the Head of the church.

The Grecian Jews were those who were dispersed from their own land and where now living in Jerusalem. They spoke Greek and as a result they used the Septuagint instead of the Hebrew Scriptures. While they remained loyal to Judaism they had absorbed much of the Greek culture so that they not only spoke Greek but thought like Greeks.

That made them suspect to the Hebraic Jews who spoke Aramaic and were Jewish in culture and thinking. This meant that there was a natural hostility between these two groups and it seems some of this racial and cultural hostility carried over into the church. It seems that the Grecian Jews were a minority in the church, which helps explain why their needs were overlooked.

As often happens matters came to a head over a seemingly insignificant issue. The Grecian Jews complained that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. Now care for

widows was traditional in Jewish society (Deuteronomy 14:29) and Paul later told the church that it was their responsibility to care for the vulnerable in the church (1 Timothy 5:3-6).

Now given the natural dichotomy between the Grecian and Hebraic Jews this issue could easily have split the church. Certainly the fact that the Grecian Jews spoke of “their widows” seems to indicate that they felt this neglect was deliberate.

Now their complaint eventually came to the attention of the Apostles. They recognised that the Grecian Jews had a case so they gathered all the church together in order to seek a solution to the problem. Now although the Apostles recognised the problem they did not have time to handle it themselves. Their main task was to preach the word of God and to pray and therefore it was not desirable for them to neglect their calling in order to deal with this practical problem concerning food distribution. To get involved with distributing food would take them away from what they were called to do which was to pray and to minister God’s word. The apostles knew their priority was praying preaching teaching and studying God’s word. They were determined not to let anything distract them from their task.

It is not that this matter was unimportant to them or that this task of distribution of food was below them but it simply wasn’t their calling. They were called to something else something of supreme importance and nothing was going to distract them from their task. They told the church in effect to handle this distribution of food and they will preach God’s word and pray for the church.

Now many Pastors and Elders in the church today have left the emphasis on prayer and the word of God to become involved in the administrative details of the church. They get involved in so many things that others could easily do that they have very little time left for what they are suppose to be doing which is to study and teach God’s word and to pray.

Yet the main reason why God gives Pastors and Elders to churches is to equip the church so that the church are able to do works of service (Ephesians 4:12). Elders and Pastors are to teach and preach and help people understand the Bible so that the people are better equipped to get on with serving God within the church. We all have tasks and gifts but the tasks of the apostles and indeed of Elders and Pastors today are to pray and to study and to preach.

Therefore a large portion of their time must be given to those things, for those are the things that we are called to do.

There are many important things in church life and many needs which Elders and Pastors could give their time and energy too. But none of them should replace the ministry of God’s word and prayer. None of the other things that need to be done in the church should ever replace the importance of preaching God’s word and prayer.

This of course means that if that is the priority of Elders and Pastors then many of the other things that need to be done in the church should be done by others and not left to the leadership of the church. We all have different gifts and callings and if we all play our part in the life of the church then the important work of ministering God’s word and prayer can be left to the Elders.

Of course prayer and ministry of the word are inseparably linked. A pastor or an Elder’s sermon preparation must be saturated in prayer otherwise his sermons will be superficial and dry. He must pray constantly that his people will apply the truths that he teaches to their own hearts. The Elder must pray that he would be pure and that God will be able to use him to teach and preach to those that He places in front of him.

All the great preachers throughout church history have been men who were devoted to prayer. They constantly prayed for God to use them and to use his word to save sinners and to strengthen the church.

Of course prayer and ministering God's word is hard work. It demands total commitment; it demands everything that a man has to give. No sermon just appears from nowhere every sermon that is God honouring will have been prayed over and worked on for hours. There is no excuse for laziness when it comes to this matter of prayer and the ministry of the word of God.

There is simply no substitute for hard work and for discipline, it takes time and effort and determination not to be distracted to fulfil the calling of an Elder or Pastor. This commitment and determination is seen in Paul (Acts 20:18-21), he was prepared to put up with anything and endure anything in order to be able to minister God's word to others. He was totally committed to this task and anyone who is not totally committed to this important task should not be doing it.

2. THE REQUIREMENTS OF THIS ORGANISATION (v 3)

While the apostles had to remain faithful to their priorities the problem of distribution of food still had to be dealt with. That important ministry needed organisation and oversight and therefore others would have to be found to do this job. So the apostles commanded the believers to choose seven men from within the church. The word translated "choose" is from a Greek word that means to oversee or to supervise.

The church was to look for seven men to whom this work could be handed over too. But who are the church to look for in order to fulfil this role. What type of person should they be? We are given very clear guidelines here First they must be men this is because this is a leadership responsibility and therefore leadership in the church is for men.

Of course women had vital roles to fill in the church (Titus 2:3-5) and God used many women to accomplish his great purposes but God's design for the church is that men assume leadership roles.

Another requirement is that they are to be from within the church "among you." This of course means that they are to be believers but it also means that leadership in churches should be developed from within their own ranks. We should be looking to develop future leaders of this church from the existing and future membership.

We need at least one deacon and we could do with another Elder in our church and the only place we are going to find such people is from among us. We need as a church to give time and effort to develop leadership among us and that means being patient with those that have such gifts but need to have them developed and tuned.

These men were to be known to be full of the Spirit. That surely means that they have proven themselves to be Spirit filled people. They have demonstrated that they have submitted to His control of their lives. That they are being led by the Spirit rather than by their own selfish dictates. These men must be full of wisdom, which again means they must have proven themselves to be wise in all their dealings.

To be wise in the biblical sense of the word means that they know how to apply God's word in given situations. They are practical men who apply God's word in their own lives and the lives of their family.

But we must deal with a question that always arises when we deal with this passage. Are these seven men the first official deacons of the church? They seem to do what Deacons are called to do and the word used to describe what they were to do "wait on tables" is a Greek word from

which we get the word deacon? However I think it is unnecessary to call them Deacons at this stage of the early church.

Of the seven named here only Stephen and Philip appear elsewhere in Scripture and they are never referred to as Deacons. While the book of Acts refers to Elders there is no mention of the office of Deacon which I think would be strange if this is the first appointment of Deacons in the church.

Of course there are important principles in this passage for the appointment of Deacons within the church but I do not think you can say that this was the first appointment of Deacons in the church. That seems to come much later. I think it is best to see these seven men, as the church's response to a temporary crisis and it is important to remember that the term "deacon" is consistently used throughout the New Testament in a general non-specific way for any act of service.

3. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ORGANISATION (vs. 5-6)

The apostle's plan found approval with the church and seven men were appointed to this important ministry. All seven have Greek names, which suggests that they were all Grecian Jews and if that is the case then it is a demonstration of the loving unity of the church. Since it was the Grecian Jews who felt they were being left out, the church decided to appoint seven from among that group in order to rectify the situation.

As a result a split was avoided. Stephen is the first man mentioned probably because he was to play an important role in the spread of the gospel beyond Jerusalem. It was because of his martyrdom that the church was forced out of Jerusalem through persecution (Acts 8:1).

Philip is the next one mentioned again probably because he plays a prominent role in taking the gospel to the Samaritans and further afield. (Acts 8). Of the remaining five men mentioned here we know nothing for sure about them apart from their names. But the lesson is that although some Christians are very well known because of the ministry that God calls them too, many others just get on with serving God without anyone really knowing them apart from those within their church and of course God.

Although little is known about most of these men they played a crucial role in the history of the early church. Because without their ministry either the apostles would have been distracted from their ministry to do something they were not called to do or else a split would most likely have occurred in the church. Both of these results would have been a disaster for the early church.

4. THE RESULT OF THIS ORGANISATION (v 7)

As already noted the organisation of the church freed the apostles to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. Therefore the word of God spread and the number of believers increased. The apostles were able to continue to do what they were called to do. When God's word is spread then it always accomplishes the purpose for which it was sent and in this case many were converted, in fact the growth of the church was rapid. Amazingly the word of God was particularly fruitful among the priests, these priests ministered in the temple but God took his word and enabled these priests to obey it and turn to the Saviour. But the main application here is that good organisation within God's church enables God's word to go forth.

Our entire organisation must enhance the proclamation of the gospel for when the gospel is proclaimed then we can expect God to use his word to add many to his church. The top priority of every church is to be organised in such a way that God's word is prominent in the life of the

church, the promotion of God's word must always be helped and never hindered by the organisation within a church.

Good organisation in the early church enables the apostles to do what they were called to do, it helped to meet the needs of those in the church and of course a well-organised church can be a powerful witness to our lost world.

Amen