

“Word and Deed” (Acts 6:1-7)

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Acts 6:1–7 (ESV)

¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.¹

Two years ago, I was in the midst of a search for a new job. I was looking for a church where I could be the senior or lead pastor. And I was also considering the possibility of moving from the west coast back to my home state of Massachusetts. My father knew I was searching, and he told me that the church my family attended in the late 1970s, somewhere on the North Shore, was looking for a pastor. I had very vague memories of going to that church, so I didn't remember what type of church it was. So I decided I would investigate by looking at the church's website. (You can learn a lot about a church by doing that.) On their website, the church had a page devoted to missions. But when I clicked on that page, I was surprised to see it was all about fair trade and microloans. If you don't know what “fair trade” is, it's the principle of making sure workers in developing countries are paid a fair price for their labor. You may notice that some packages of coffee beans have that label—“fair trade”—on them. It means the people who picked those beans are working in fair conditions. And microloans are small loans that are usually given to people in developing countries who want to start a business. So the church was saying that their idea of missions was supporting these practices. There was no mention of evangelism, or telling people the good news of Jesus with the intent of persuading them to repent

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

of their sins and put their faith in Jesus. You might not be surprised to know I didn't apply to that church.

I mention that story because it seems that people view the mission of the church in different ways. If you ask some people, "What is the most important thing that churches offer the world?", some people might say that various churches give food, clothing, and shelter to the poor. Others may say that churches seem to help people with very broken lives get back on their feet. And still others would say that the church exists to proclaim the gospel and make followers of Jesus Christ for the glory of God. What is the right answer? What is the primary purpose or mission of the church?

Today, we're going to look at a short passage in the book of Acts that shows us two of the important functions of the church. We're going to see that the church is supposed to be engaged in the ministry of words and the ministry of deeds. But, really, if you think about it, studying and speaking are deeds—these are important actions that need to be performed. So the division between word and other types of deeds, like feeding the hungry, should be understood as word-centered deeds and acts-of-service deeds. Both are important.

If you're joining us for the first time, we started to study the book of Acts almost two months ago. Acts is a book in the Bible that tells us what happened after Jesus died, rose from the grave, and ascended into heaven. It tells how Christianity grew out of the root of Judaism and spread throughout the Roman Empire. A number of passages show how the message of Christianity was proclaimed in different places by the earliest Christians. But there are some passages that show what happened inside the church, and today's passage is one of them.

Since it's a short passage, I'm going to break it down into parts and explain it, and then I'll explain what this means, first for the church in general, and then specifically for our church.

So Acts 6 begins with this verse: "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution." Christians are called disciples, which means something like a student who is attached to his teacher. Disciples are people who follow Jesus, who are attached to him, and who learn from him. The number of Christians were increasing in Jerusalem, to the point where there were thousands of them (Acts 2:41; 4:4). And as the number of Christians grew, there was a new problem. It seems that there was a daily distribution of some kind, probably of food, for widows. In this time and place, widows were particularly vulnerable.

If they didn't have family to take care of them, they would have to rely on charity. It seems that the Jewish Christians who spoke Aramaic, the ones who are called "Hebrews" here, were taken care of. But the Jewish Christians who spoke only Greek, the so-called "Hellenists," weren't being cared for. These Hellenists were probably Jews who had lived in different parts of the Roman Empire and had moved to Jerusalem later in life in order to end their lives in the so-called Holy City. It was thought that it was better to be buried in the land of Israel. So these Greek-speaking widows probably didn't have any other family in that place, and they would have been particularly vulnerable.

The problem wasn't that there wasn't enough resources. After all, we are told at the end of Acts 4 that, "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (vv. 34-35). It seems that the problem was an administrative one. There needed to be people who helped distribute the resources to these widows.

So the twelve apostles, who are the leaders of the church, come up with a plan. We see this in verses 2-4:

² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

The apostles are the twelve men who had been with Jesus during his ministry and saw him risen from the grave. They realized that they couldn't be distracted from their primary job, which was to preach and to pray. They didn't mean that they were above distributing food or money. After all, Jesus had told them, "let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves" (Luke 22:27). They weren't opposed to serving. But they knew that their job was not to serve meals of food, but meals of God's word. You can't see this in our English translation, but the word that's translated as "distribution" in verse 1 is the same word translated as "ministry" in verse 4. The Greek word is *διακονία*. The disciples also knew they were supposed to pray; in other words, they were supposed to speak to God. And they knew they were supposed to serve God's word; in other words, they were supposed to preach the good news that the Messiah, the anointed King, had come; that he had died for the sins of his people so that they

could be reconciled to God; and that he rose from the grave, showing that he is the Son of God, that his death was an acceptable sacrifice, and that all who attach themselves to Jesus will have a future resurrection. And the apostles were supposed to teach the Bible, explaining how the Old Testament was fulfilled by Jesus, and what that meant for his followers now.

Since the apostles weren't going to devote themselves to taking care of the physical needs of these widows, they told the disciples to find some men who could. They said, "pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom." Their focus is on character. The men who would take care of these widows needed to be trustworthy. They needed to have wisdom in order to know how to distribute resources fairly. And they needed to have evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

So the people choose seven men and the apostles approve their choice. We see this in verses 5 and 6:

⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

The whole congregation liked the apostles' idea, and they selected seven men who were apparently Hellenists themselves, since they all have Greek names. We're going to learn more about the first two men, Stephen and Philip, over the next few weeks. (I think part of the purpose of this passage is to introduce us to them.) We know nothing else about the other five men, except that the last one, Nicolaus, wasn't born into a Jewish family. He converted to Judaism, and then became a Christian, just as the others had. At any rate, the apostles laid their hands on them, which means they approved of these men, they blessed them (cf. Gen. 48:14; Matt. 19:15), and set them apart (cf. Num. 8:10, 14; Acts 13:3; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22).

I don't think there's any accident that after this problem was solved, we see that the church grows again. The apostles were able to devote themselves to preaching and praying, and these seven men were able to take care of the physical needs of the needy. The church was now functioning as it should, and more people were coming to faith in Jesus. We see this in verse 7:

And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

The “word of God” grew. In one of Jesus’ parables, he said that word of God is like a seed that falls on different types of soil. The seed that grows on good soil produces good fruit. Now, the gospel had found good soil, so much so that even priests—Jews who served at the temple—were coming to faith in Jesus.

So, what does this have to do with us? What does this short passage teach us? And what does it have to do with our church?

Let’s first think of how this relates to the church in general. (In other words, the capital-C Church.) The church is where God dwells with his people. It’s described as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:23; 4:12; 5:30; Col. 1:24) and the temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21). The church is where God’s people relate to God, where they meet him and worship him. And if we are going to have a relationship with God, we need to listen to him and speak to him. You can’t really know someone unless you listen to that person. You can’t put a person in a corner and just stare at him or her and get to know her. You have to allow that person to speak. The way that God has chosen to reveal himself is primarily through his word. And when we say “God’s word,” we can mean two things: We can refer to the incarnate Word, Jesus, and we can refer to the written word, the Bible. God has revealed himself most completely in Jesus. Jesus said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). The book of Hebrews says, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb. 1:1-2). Jesus is God’s final word, the way that we know him best.

But we don’t really have access to Jesus apart from God’s written word, the Bible.² If we want to know Jesus, we have to read the Bible. The whole Bible is about Jesus. And we can truly say that when the Bible speaks, God speaks.

So there’s no relationship with God without the Bible. That may seem odd to some people. They may think, “Why do you put so much emphasis on an ancient book?” Well, the Bible may be old, but it’s not just an ordinary book. The Bible has dual authorship. We can say that various people like Moses and David and Paul wrote the Bible. But, ultimately, it was the Holy Spirit working through these people to write exactly what he wanted written (2 Pet. 1:21;

² “[I]t remains impossible to avoid the fact that our only access to Christ and his words is through the content of the Bible.” Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 44.

cf. 2 Sam. 23:2; Luke 1:70; Acts 1:16; Heb. 3:7; 4:7; 8:8; 10:5). God wrote the Bible through select people. If the Bible were merely a human book, something along the lines of Plato or Aristotle or Shakespeare, we could take it or leave it. We could mine it for bits of wisdom and interesting sayings, and leave the rest. But if it's a book that has a divine origin—if it's God word to us—we must pay attention to it. We must pay attention to it because God's word is an extension of himself.³ And since God is the Creator and Ruler of the universe, his word is authoritative. In other words, since God is the ultimate authority, his word demands attention.

Why is God's word an extension of himself? Well, we must consider that God is unlike us. He's omniscient, which means he knows everything. And he never lies (Num. 23:19; 2 Tim. 2:13; Heb. 6:18). That means that God always knows what to say and he always says what's true. That's not true of us. We can often say things that don't come out right. We struggle to find the right words. And sometimes we say things we really don't mean. After all, how many of us were asked, "How are you?" this week. Did you give an honest answer? Our words aren't perfect extensions of us. They don't really express what's going on inside of us. And when we speak about other people or situations in the world, we can be wrong. But that's not true of God.

The other reason why God's word is an extension of himself is that God does things through his word. He created the universe by his word (Ps. 33:6; Heb. 11:3; 2 Pet. 3:5). He makes his covenants through his word (e.g., Gen. 9:9-17; 15:18-20; 17:1-14; Ps. 132:11-12). He rules by his word, issuing commandments to his people.⁴ God brings people to faith in Jesus to be saved through his word (Rom. 10:5-17). We grow in faith and our knowledge of God through his word. When we read the Bible, it has an impact on us. It does something to us. It changes us in some way. God has a purpose for his word, and when we're exposed to God's word, his purposes won't fail. That's why he says in the book of Isaiah. In Isaiah 55:10-11, God says,

¹⁰ "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

³ "It seems that *God's actions, including his verbal actions, are a kind of extension of him*" (ibid., 31, original emphasis).

⁴ In various ways, we see God ruling over Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church through his word.

That's why we read the Bible and study the Bible and explain the Bible in this church. If we want to know God and if we want his word to accomplish his purposes, the Bible needs to be a part of the life of this church.

Are you getting exposure to God's word? If you want to hear from God, you need to read his written word. That may seem odd, but consider this: Some of you know that I met Kathy through an Internet dating website. Since she lived in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, and I lived in Austin, Texas, we couldn't talk on the phone without ringing up expensive phone bills, and this was before the age of Skype. So we wrote back and forth to each other. We wrote emails. And we chatted online through MSN Messenger. We spent a lot of time doing this during the first months of our relationship. If I wanted to hear from Kathy, I had to read her words. If I wanted to know what she was like, what happened in her past, what she was interested in, I had to read her words. If you're not reading God's words, you won't know what he's like. You won't know what he's done in history. You won't know what he expects you to do. And you won't have much of a relationship with him.

Of course, we also need to talk to God. You can't have much of a relationship if it's just one-way communication. So when we pray to God, we're simply talking to him. We acknowledge who he is. We tell him we love him. We confess the things we've done wrong. We thank him for the things he's done for us. And we tell him our concerns. We tell him about the people we love, people we would like to see him bless and help.

So that's why the ministry of the word and the prayer are so important to the church.

Also, the real mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ, who live to glorify God. This really has been God's intent all along. In Genesis 1, God made the first human beings in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-27). That means they were made to reflect who he is in the world he made. That's another of saying they were made to glorify God, just the way Red Sox fans glorify the Sox when they wear blue hats with the red letter B on them. The first humans were made to know and love God and worship him by acting as obedient children. They were supposed to rule the world by coming under his word. And God told the first human beings to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion" over it (Gen. 1:28). That command was later repeated to Noah (Gen. 9:1, 7). God promised Abraham he would multiply his offspring (Gen. 17:2; 22:17). God multiplied the number of Israelites while they were slaves in Egypt (Exod. 1:7, 12, 20), and he gave them his word at Mount Sinai (Exod.

19-24), making a covenant with them. After Jesus rose from the grave, he gave the apostles the “Great Commission.” He said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:18-20). This is the fulfillment of the commandment given to Adam and Eve. Jesus told his disciples to be fruitful and multiply. We can do that because he is subduing the earth and having dominion over it. So when we read, “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly,” we see a continuation of this theme. God is creating his people through his word (see also Acts 12:24; 19:20). This is the primary mission of the church.

The people of the church are also supposed to take care of each other. We are supposed to make sure that people in God’s family have their needs taken care of. This idea is found all over the New Testament. For example, 1 John 3:16-18 says,

¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. ¹⁷ But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? ¹⁸ Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.

In the book of Acts, we see that Christians should help other Christians. We don’t see them trying to help all the poor in every city. But we should also note that God’s concern for the orphans and widows are also all over the whole Bible (Exod. 22:22; Deut. 10:18; 14:29; Ps. 146:9; James 1:27). And if we Christians realize that we were once spiritual orphans who have been adopted by our heavenly Father, we should want to be generous to orphans. When we realize we were spiritually poor, and God was generous to us, we should be generous to the poor around us.

So, what does all of this have to do with our church? Clearly, we want to be a church that focuses on God’s word, for all the reasons I already explained. And we should be a church devoted to prayer. We incorporate prayer in all our worship services and we have a prayer meeting every night at 7 p.m. Prayer and the word of God will always be important parts of this church.

But here’s something else that is very important for our church. What we see in this passage concerning the twelve apostles and these seven men reflects what we see in the two offices of the church. According to the New Testament, there are only two office of the church.

One office is elder, overseer, or shepherd. Another word for shepherd is pastor. These words all relate to the one office. For example, in 1 Peter 5, Peter says that he is an elder, and he is exhorting fellow elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight” (1 Pet. 5:1-2). Paul told Titus to “appoint elders in every town” (Tit. 1:5), and then he said, “For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach,” and so forth (Tit. 1:7). Later in Acts, we’ll see Paul speak to the elders of the church of Ephesus (Acts 20:17). He tells them, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). The point is that the people who preach and teach and oversee and shepherd fill one office in the church. And it’s a word-centered office. [Jesus told Peter to feed his sheep. John 21:15-17.] So Pastors should spend a good amount of time studying the Bible, preparing sermons, teaching people the Bible, and overseeing the church.

In this passage, the apostles are acting as overseers and shepherds. They made the plan to help the Greek-speaking widows. They came up with the plan and the number of men and the qualifications. They approved the men who were chosen. But they gave the church the freedom to choose exactly which men to present as candidates.

The other office in the church is deacon. We’re not told much about deacons at all. Paul writes to the overseers and deacons and the rest of the Christians in the church at Philippi (Phil. 1:1). And Paul tells Timothy the qualifications for deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13). There are other mentions of the Greek word that’s translated as “deacon,” but it’s not clear that they refer to the official office of deacon. So there may be only two mentions of deacons in the Bible, and neither of them really say what deacons do. But a lot of scholars think this passage in Acts is a description of deacons. Though “deacon” (or *διακόνος* in Greek) isn’t used, a related noun, *διακονία*, is found in verse 1 and verse 4. It’s translated as “distribution” and “ministry” in the ESV, so it’s hard to see. And in verse 2, the apostles say that they are too busy to “serve tables.” The verb that’s used is *διακονέω*, which is related to *διακόνος* and *διακονία*. The point is that deacons are supposed to be servants. That’s really what “deacon” means.⁵ Luke probably doesn’t

⁵ “The derivative noun *diakonia* expresses the occupations implied by the vb., and means service, office. The second derived noun *diakonos* denotes the person carrying out the task. Hence, the primary meaning in secular Gk. was a waiter at table, and it is so used later in reference to cultic meals.” K. Hess, “Serve, Deacon, Worship,” ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 3:545.

use the word “deacon” because that official title wasn’t being used at the time these seven men were picked. But this is probably the start of that office.

And I want to point this out because if our church were organized as it should be, we would have a plurality of elders, because that’s what we see in the New Testament churches. In a small church like ours, that might mean a paid elder like myself and a volunteer elder or two. And then we would have a plurality of deacons who don’t serve as overseers or shepherds or decision-makers, but who serve people in practical ways, whether through administrating money or food or perhaps through arranging other practical services, like yard work, repairs on homes, or giving people rides to church. The church’s current constitution and by-laws do not reflect what the Bible says about these two offices, and in the due course of time, that needs to be changed. I believe that if we do church the way God instructs us to in his word, then we should expect to see the word of God increase and the number of disciples multiply.

Much more can be said about these issues, but I want to keep things shorter today. So I will end by saying this: Both the ministry of words and the ministry of deeds are important. We serve the word of God and we serve people in practical ways. Christians should want to meet needs, and the biggest need isn’t that people eat bread. The Bible says “man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4; Luke 4:4). Christians should want to end suffering, but if we’re really committed to that, we want to end eternal suffering. That means we should care about food and clothing and housing and medicine, but we should care more for people’s souls. We should care where they spend eternity. And the truth is that all who put their trust in Jesus are reconciled to God. They are forgiven by God because their sins were judged on the cross where Jesus died. They already possess eternal life. But all who refuse to come under Jesus’ rule, who refuse to repent of their sins and refuse to put their faith in Jesus cut themselves off from God forever. And when that happens, they cut themselves off from the source of life. They cut themselves off from all that is good. And the result is eternal suffering.

We don’t want people to suffer eternally. So we prioritize telling people the word of God, and we pray for lost souls. And we meet more immediate needs in the church as needs arise. We do this because we are servants of our Master, King Jesus.