

## **ACTS 6.1-8: LEADERSHIP THEN AND NOW**

*Preached Sunday 11 June 2006*

On the political scene leadership is a very real issue.

- To the great relief of traditional Labour party supporters, Tony Blair has agreed to stand down before the next election – but will Gordon Brown deliver the goods in the same way?
- The Tory party has yet another leader – but will David Cameron be able to win over the younger electors, who for so long have despised the Tories?
- Or what about the Lib-Dems? Can Mingus Campbell do better than Charles Kennedy, or are the Lib-Dems always doomed to be the third party?

Leadership is key. And what is true of political parties, is also true of the church. Yes, of course, the Lord is the head of the church, thank God. The church's destiny at the end of the day is in God's hands. But leaders can quench the Spirit – leaders can become stumbling blocks to the purposes of God.

For this reason the forthcoming deacons' election on Wed 21 June is important.

It is important that we have the right men and women in place – what's more, it is important that we, the church, have a right understanding of their role.

With this in mind, I want to preach on the theme of 'Leadership then and now' in the light of Acts 6 and see what we can learn from the story of how the church in Jerusalem set about appointing leaders.

### **1. A SITUATION REQUIRING LEADERSHIP**

The context of this leadership election was that the church at Jerusalem was growing at a massive rate –

- Before Pentecost Luke tells us that the church in Jerusalem, admittedly then at an embryonic stage, numbered 120 believers (Acts 1.15).
- But on the Day of Pentecost a further 3000 people were baptized and were added to the church (2.41). Wow, what a growth rate!
- Amazingly, the growth continued. In Acts 4.4 we read that “**many who heard the message believed; and the number of men grew to about 5000**” – presumably there were at least as many women if not more, so perhaps we are to imagine a church of over 10,000.
- And still the Jerusalem church grew. Acts 5.14: “**More and more people were added to the group – a crowd (*plethos*: multitude!) of men and women who believed in the Lord**”. It seems that by this stage nobody could keep an accurate count of the numbers involved.

Not surprisingly this phenomenal church growth produced its own problems.

Indeed, that was not unique to Jerusalem. Growth always brings problems – those of you who have kids only have to look at your own families to see that is true.

Teenagers are so much more difficult to handle than toddlers.

Precisely because growth brings problems, statistics show that many, if not most pastors, don't want to lead a growing church. Growth causes too much hassle.

I remember visiting a church in Australia where the recently retired senior pastor said to me: *“I’m glad that the church never grew while I was its pastor. Growth would only have destroyed the great fellowship we enjoyed”*.

I can’t believe Peter and the other apostles having that attitude.

They had a great zeal for the Gospel. They longed to see people coming to faith.

In the words of Peter to the Jewish Sanhedrin: **“Salvation is to be found through Jesus alone; in all the world there is no one else whom God has given who can save us”** (4.12).

And as a result, through their preaching and through the witness of the church as a whole, literally 1000s came to faith. But with the growth came problems.

At this point we arrive at the situation described by Luke in Acts 6: **“Some time later, as the number of disciples kept growing, there was a quarrel between the Greek-speaking Jews and the native Jews. The Greek-speaking Jews claimed that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of funds”** (6.1).

Yes, the honey-moon stage of the church’s life was over – people were quarrelling.

Literally, the Greek-speaking Jews **“complained”** (NRSV) against the native Jews.

The Greek word Luke uses is wonderfully onomatopoeic: *goggusmos*.....

There was a real murmuring and a muttering.

Incidentally, here we have a reminder that problems, quarrels, & complaints, are part of any church’s staple diet. There has never been church free of conflict.

True, most churches, thank God, are not in perpetual conflict: but wherever 2 or 3 are gathered together in Jesus’ name, there is bound to be conflict from time to time.

In that respect, church life is a bit like married life. Disagreement is bound to arise from time to time. This comes as a shock to starry-eyed young couples, who fall in love & think they will never have an argument, but happen it does. It can also come as a shock to young Christians who respond to Christ’s love and join his church, and think that all will be sweetness & light, and then discover that even the best of churches can have their disagreements from time to time - yes even a church like that in Jerusalem, which Luke in Acts 4.32 describes as **“one in mind and heart”**.

In the case of the Jerusalem church the conflict was over the care of two groups of older people in the church – **“the Greek-speaking Jews & the native Jews”**:

i.e. over those who had lived all their life in Palestine and were now spending their retirement years in Jerusalem, and Greek-speaking Jews who had lived most of their life outside Palestine, but had now come to retire in Jerusalem.

Incidentally, Jerusalem like Hove & Eastbourne was a favourite retirement spot – not because Jerusalem was by the sea-side, (which of course it wasn’t!) but because Jews believed that it was there that the resurrection of the dead would take place.

Jerusalem therefore had a disproportionate number of elderly folk - not surprisingly this was reflected in the make-up of the church.

The situation was complicated by the fact that there was no welfare state – no state pensions, whatever the retirement age!

It was left to the religious authorities to care for those in need.

- The Jewish authorities, for instance, gave out every Friday a sum of money to the poor, which was supposed to cover the cost of 14 meals.

- Precisely what help the church sought to give their widows is not clear.. The GNB implies that there were regular cash benefits available - but Luke does not actually specify what exactly was distributed. It is more likely that there were benefits in kind. It is probable that the early church organised the equivalent of soup kitchens which they called agape-meals, i.e. love-meals.

Unfortunately, the church's arrangements were not working out – the Greek-speaking Jews felt that their widows were being discriminated against and so they began to complain.

This then was the situation which cried out for leadership.

## 2. GOOD LEADERSHIP INITIATES

The apostles could have turned a blind eye to the difficulties within the church. They could have simply devoted themselves to preaching and to praying, and let the rest of the church just muddle through. But as it was, they saw themselves as having a responsibility for the life of the church, as also for the lives of the individual members of the church. And so they took the initiative in resolving the situation. To be precise, they analysed the problem, and then brought on board others to help deal with the problem.

Yes, right from the very beginning the early church had leaders who took responsibility for the church's welfare.

The apostles were more than preachers – they were leaders.

Without their leadership the church might well not have survived.

Churches continue to need leaders – they need leaders who will take the initiative not just in resolving problems, but in anticipating problems before they arise.

Churches need leaders who develop appropriate strategies to enable their churches to continue to grow and develop, and in this way be effective mission units in the service of Christ.

Unfortunately there have been times when Baptists have been suspicious of leadership. *'It's the church meeting they say, which makes the decisions. The task of the deacons and ministers is to simply carry out the decisions of the church meeting'*.

It is, of course, true that the church meeting makes decisions, but it is not true that the deacons & ministers simply carry out the decisions of the church meeting.

The church meeting in calling ministers and in electing deacons is in the first place appointing men and women to be their leaders.

So here in Acts 6 it is not the church, but the apostles who grasp the nettle, advance a solution, and gain the church's support. Good leadership initiates.

A little later on, when there is a massive problem with regard to whether Gentiles needed to become Jews in order to become Christians, i.e. whether or not Gentile Christians needed to be circumcised, it was the apostles who took the initiative.

Yes, in a Baptist church leaders are ultimately accountable to the church meeting. But that is a safety device. Once leaders are appointed, the church meeting's first duty is to encourage their leaders to lead!

A Baptist church may be congregationally governed, but – if it wants to be true to Scripture – it needs to be leadership-led.

### 3. GOOD LEADERSHIP FUNCTIONS IN DIFFERENT FORMS

When drafting this sermon, I wrote: “leadership operates at different levels”. However, unfortunately the term “levels” can suggest the notion of hierarchy, whereas functionality is the issue. I.e. there are different types or forms of leadership.

The apostles had a very specific role: their chief task was to be witnesses of the resurrection. They were preachers & teachers – but the church needed more than preachers & teachers, it needed managers.

In particular, it needed managers to deal with the financial and pastoral issues arising from the needs of the Greek-speaking widows.

So the apostles proposed that a board of management be elected.

**“It is not right for us to neglect the preaching of God’s word in order to handle finances. So then, brothers and sisters, choose seven men among you who are known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom” (6.2,3).**

According to the GNB only two qualifications were necessary, viz spirituality and practical skills. However most translations suggest that an appropriate life-style was important too: *“Select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task”* (NRSV)

1. In the first place they had to be **“men of good standing”** (NRSV), “men of good repute” (REB), “men whom everyone trusts” (Peterson). The actual Greek word comes from the word for a witness: *‘martouroumenos’* – i.e. men whose lives bore witness to their faith.
2. Secondly, they had to be **“men full of the Spirit”**. What does this mean? According to JB Phillips it means men who are “spiritually minded”; according to another commentator, men of “mature faith” (Robinson & Wall). However, in the context of the Acts of the Apostles, people who were filled with the Spirit were people who spoke freely about Jesus (2.4; 4.8, 31). That’s a significant qualification for leadership!
3. Thirdly, they had to be **“men of wisdom”** – this is more than simply being people of “good sense” as Peterson suggests; in this context ‘wisdom’ surely refers to organisational talent. Its not enough for deacons to be spiritually-minded – they must also be gifted in dealing with people and with structures.
4. Ideally, there is a fourth qualification. Like Stephen, members of the board of management need to be men **“full of faith”** (v5) – the faith in mind is not saving faith (that would be true of any church member) but faith that dreams, faith that dares, faith that believes with God all things are possible

[In the words of one commentator: “Moral, spiritual, practical – these should be the hallmarks of all who sit on church boards. Only with such leadership will the real work of the church be done” (Larkin)]

With a membership of over 10,000, of whom perhaps 500, or maybe many more, were widows, you might have thought that a fairly sizeable management team might have been required.

But no: the apostles proposed that the board be limited to “**seven men**”. Why? The number may be of some significance – e.g. the Jewish historian Josephus tells us he appointed seven judges in each city in Galilee during his days as an authority figure there. We have no real idea why the figure of seven was chosen.

One thing for sure, in terms of a board of management, 7 is a good number. For once a board exceeds 12, decision-making becomes much more time-consuming. E.g.

- in a team of 7, at any given time 30 different relationships are involved;
- in a team of 12, 110 different relationships are involved,
- while in a team of 20, some 380 different relationships are taking place.

The larger the team the more complex relationships become.

David Cormack, a former head of Training and Organisation Development at Shell International, with the question of team size in mind, wrote: “*‘Two’s company, three’s a team, and more than fifteen’s a crowd’. The optimum size (however) appears to be seven*” (Team Spirit 20).

Clearly the apostles knew something about modern management theory when they proposed that seven men be elected!

But to return to my more general point: good leadership functions in different forms. Hence in our church we have two types of leaders: ministers/pastors; and deacons.

- On the one hand we have ministers/pastors. As the senior pastor of this church, I see my role as leading the church, spearheading the mission and ministry of the church – inevitably this involves a degree of management, but management must not squeeze out my primary call to preach & teach the Word of God.
- On the other hand, we have deacons – deacons who as leaders are called to be involved in the practical management and caring of the life of our church.

Both types of leadership are vital.

#### **4. GOOD LEADERSHIP INVOLVES THE CHURCH**

Although leaders lead, in a church setting they should not try to control all the power of the entire process. Instead they should involve the church.

So Luke tells us that in Jerusalem “**The 12 apostles called the whole group of believers together and said... ‘Brothers and sisters, choose seven men among you and we will put them in charge of this matter’**” (6.3).

Precisely how a group of 10,000 people set about this task we have no idea.

I can’t imagine there being nomination forms with proposers and seconders. But clearly in one way or another names emerged.

Furthermore, these names were then scrutinised. For the word “choose” (*episkeptomai*) comes from a word-family that is used to indicate critical and prudent judgments: this sort of decision is made only after careful deliberation. Clearly a good deal of discussion, perhaps at an informal level, must have gone on. I would like to think that between now and our deacons election a good deal of discussion is going on about the people who have been nominated. Currently Dorothy Aristides, John Durrant, Derek Latimer, David Spurling & Amanda Wilson have allowed their names to go forward. Are they the kind of men & women we need? Do they have the moral, spiritual and practical gifts required?

What is fascinating is that the seven eventually chosen were not at all representative of the church. Their names clearly indicate that all seven men came from the Greek-speaking Jewish section of the church, i.e. that came from that section of the church that felt it had been hard-done by. It has been suggested that this is the first example of affirmative action – “*Those with political power generally repressed complaining minorities; here the apostles hand the whole system over to the offended minority*” (Keener, quoted by Haenchen)

How often did leadership of the early church involve its members in this way? I find it difficult to believe that with numbers as large as this they had monthly church meetings. However, it is clear that when there were major issues before the church, the church meeting was involved in the decision-making.

[So, e.g. at the great Council of Jerusalem which debated the issue of circumcision, Luke tells us that the church was involved long with the apostles and the elders in deciding that Gentiles need not be circumcised in order to be Christians (Acts 15.22). True, James and Peter took the lead – but the church owned the decision].

What was true then, should remain true now.

The running of the church can be delegated to others – but issues of major importance relating to the mission and ministry of the church require church participation.

Baptist churches may be staff-led, but if they to retain their Baptist identity then they also need to be congregationally-governed. Hence when it comes to the calling of ministers or the election of deacons, then the church should be involved.

Let me be more specific & more personal: if you are a church member, then you too should be involved. You should be involved, for instance, at the deacons’ election on Wednesday 21 June. You should be there, playing your part. For this is an important event – we are electing leaders whose leadership will undoubtedly affect the life of the church for the next three years.

## **5. GOOD LEADERSHIP PRODUCES FURTHER GROWTH**

Finally, and very briefly, note what happened immediately after the right leadership structures were put in place. “And so the word of God continued to spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem grew larger and larger” (Acts 6.7). In the words of one commentator: “The church returns to its normal condition: growth”.

Yes, good leadership produces further growth. May that be true of our church too!

I'm conscious that so far I've been speaking to church members. To those of you who so far have not committed yourself to membership of this church, then let me say two further things:

1. If you have already begun to go the way of Jesus, then why not join our church. In spite of my having said that problems are inevitable wherever two or three gather together in Jesus' name, this is not true of our church – or at least not at the moment. Yes, we have a wart. But it's a great church which under God I believe is going places. Come and be part of our growing church
2. If you have yet to begin to go the way of Jesus, then let me ask you, why not? The fact is that Jesus died for you that you might be forgiven – he rose for you, that you might share in a life that is stronger than death itself. There is nothing more wonderful than knowing one's sins forgiven and that one's future is secure. **“What shall we do?”** the people asked Peter on the day of Pentecost? **“Turn away from your sins – be baptised – receive the Spirit”**. And Luke goes on to say: **“Many believed and were baptised and about 3000 people were added to the church”** Wouldn't it be great if even after a dry sermon on leadership somebody were to put their trust in the Lord Jesus!