



June 14, 2018

Second in a six-part scriptural exploration of Presbytery Leadership

### **New Testament Reading**

**Acts 6:1-7**

During this time, as the disciples were increasing in numbers by leaps and bounds, hard feelings developed among the Greek-speaking believers--"Hellenists"--toward the Hebrew-speaking believers because their widows were being discriminated against in the daily food lines. So, the Twelve called a meeting of the disciples. They said, "It wouldn't be right for us to abandon our responsibilities for preaching and teaching the Word of God to help with the care of the poor. So, friends, choose seven people from among you whom everyone trusts, people full of the Holy Spirit and good sense, and we'll assign them this task. Meanwhile, we'll stick to our assigned tasks of prayer and speaking God's Word."

The congregation thought this was a great idea. They went ahead and chose--

Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolas, a convert from Antioch. Then they presented them to the apostles. Praying, the apostles laid on hands and commissioned them for their task.

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(Second in a Series on Paul, the first Presbytery Leader)

From the very beginning we see the Church community organizing and structuring its life with the division of labor and clarity about boundaries, responsibilities and authority. It is remarkable to me that certain Presbyterians appeal to the Holy Spirit as if it defies regulation, organization and structure. They appeal to a Spirit that erases boundaries, opposes order and might embrace every warm, fuzzy feeling of faith. Here, however, we see that the first thing the church does when the Holy Spirit comes is exercise discipline and create new structural accommodations focused on a renewed sense of God's mission. Spirit and order go hand in hand.

Also from the beginning we see this tension between the Jewish believers and the Greek speaking believers. Already we are seeing intercultural tensions as Paul brings new converts from the Greek speaking God-fearers who understand their faith experience from an entirely different perspective than the Petrites. Also, we see the first mistake of the early church. Rather than incorporating Greek speaking Christians and Jewish background Christians around the same tasks, they allow a culturally based division of labor. The Jewish believers will keep the upper hand with teaching and prayer. The Greek speaking believers will tend to the widows and the poor. Everybody thought the world was coming to an end soon. The Petrites felt secure in their salvation as Jews, the chosen people. Their response to the coming end was to quit their jobs, sell everything they had, pool the resources and await the end. Matthew with his story about the rich man needing to sell everything: Matthew was a Petrine. Mark, Luke and John are all with Paul's perspective. Paul advocated for the moral observances of the law, but not so much the ritual observances. Also keep your job because the signs of the end (which he is pulling straight out of Daniel) are not yet manifest. The Jewish Christians held that Jesus was possessed by the Spirit at Baptism and relinquished that spirit at Calvary. Jesus shared in the spirit

more like Elijah did and then Elisha, who got a double portion when it left Elijah. The incarnation then was temporary. The resurrected Jesus was more like a ghost. In contrast, John and Luke have the disciples touching and poking Jesus's resurrected body. Incarnation was ontological. Incarnation was from the very beginning, *a la* John.

The Pauline Gentiles did not have "chosenness" working in their favor. Their entry into the faith was not circumcision, but baptism. And before, with, or after baptism they were looking for some evidence of the Holy Spirit. Again, Paul has a broader view than the Petrites who seized upon glossolalia and healing power as evidence of the spirit. Paul expands that list to include teaching, generosity, exhortation, gentleness, humility as spiritual manifestations superior to speaking in tongues.

Clearly from the New Testament we see that the Paulines won the day. Paul's letters comprise 2/3 of the text. While Luke and Paul are working to mend the rifts in the early church, eventually the divisions became more pronounced. The hard-core followers of James and the Jerusalem Church had sufficient leverage, that they contributed to Paul's imprisonment, and perhaps his death.

So, we see the opportunity to incorporate Jew and Greek into common work was lost to the tendency to just cavort with likeminded people. We see that the Spirit occasions Order, it does challenge what is vitally important and asks us again to revisit the essential mission of the church, but then discerning that, to put systems in order that further that mission. The Spirit is all about restraining sin, especially the tribal ideologies which regard one group as superior to another.

And we get the setup for Stephen, the heroic Greek Christian martyr. Who could be against this guy? Here we see Luke framing the Greek Christians as faithful unto death, Timothy who gives up foreskin to heal the rift in the church. We can see who the good guys are and who the bad guys are in this story. But the author needs to be subtle. We must give the errant room to come around, we need to tell stories of conversion: the conversion of Peter to Paul's openness and accommodation of Gentiles, to Barnabas who eventually, by the end of the story, came around to travel with Paul again. And Paul, who was always working to increase his relational capital to become ever more persuasive.

Here we have Paul, the Presbytery leader, fielding different opinions and commitments, connecting with his audience, reframing long-held commitments for a new and fresh revelation.

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