

Acts 6:1

In those days when the number of the disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews ...

The great Bible translator, William Tyndale, gave us 90% of the Authorised Version

- Which became the standard of English translation of the scriptures for 300 years
- Without any early version to set precedents, Tyndale made thousands of choices
- But sometimes he found translation so difficult he coined a new word
- When Tyndale came to the Hebrew word 'hesed' no English word captured it
- So he invented the lovely English word 'lovingkindness', familiar to all AV readers

A similar problem confronts the translator of Acts 6:1 where NIV says 'complained'

- The Greek word here is *gongysmos*
- The word appears on three other occasions in the New Testament
- John 7:12 tells us that people in the crowd were 'whispering' about Jesus
- Paul tells the Philippians (2:14) to do everything without 'complaining'
- Peter (1 Peter 4:9) says to offer hospitality without 'grumbling'
- It is clearly an unpleasant word, used in the LXX for the 'murmuring' of Israel
- Against Moses in the desert (Exodus 16:7, Numbers 14:27)

A friend of mine, who is at a Methodist Church in the north of England

- Is doing a training course and was trying to complete some written work
- For some reason, my friend misquoted a Greek word
- And made a nonsense word that occasionally I find myself using
- It is the word 'gringleschnarking'
- I use it because it perfectly describes the kind of moaning that people do in church

In the first dozen or so years of being a circuit minister I learned some important lessons

- For example, if someone says they are going to tell you something in Christian love
- Get out of there as soon as possible
- Another example was illustrated by words first used in the Gulf War
- 'shot down by friendly fire' to describe shooting your own personnel
- no one shot by friendly fire said it hurt any the less
- for bereaved families I get the feeling that it probably hurt all the more
- somehow 'moaning', 'complaining', 'murmuring', 'whispering', 'grumbling'
- do not capture what is happening here – the Greek word is *gongysmos*
- wrongly translated 'gringleschnarking' – you just need to catch the feeling

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the
Grecian Jews among them complained ...

(Acts 6:1)

Even the context of this says something

- Luke points out that while the church was growing some people were moaning
- It would have been possible for them simply to approach the leaders
- Perhaps with an observation, better still with a constructive suggestion, but they don't
- instead they moan, complain, whisper, grumble, gringleschnark

I have now been minister of 18 different churches

- my experience in general has been that just when you think something is going well
- there is an outbreak of this negative moaning
- consequently, Acts 6:1ff turns out to be a very significant passage in Acts
- for it could be that the church, though growing, was in danger of splitting

The complaint is about the distribution of food to widows

- the Grecian-Jews have complained against the Hebraic-Jews
- because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food
- but I wonder if that is the tip of a much bigger iceberg
- for it is possible that this grievance was a symptom of a much larger tension

It is by no means clear what the precise distinction between these groups was

- it does not seem to be merely a matter of speaking Greek or Hebrew
- or place of birth
- Paul the Apostle spoke both Greek and Hebrew (more accurately Aramaic)
- And was born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, what we would call Southern Turkey
- And yet he called himself 'a Hebrew of the Hebrews' (Phil 3:5)
- Probably the distinction is between those who could speak Aramaic (Hebraic-Jews)
- And those who could not speak a Semitic language (Grecian-Jews)
- And it seems as if the Hebraic-Jews had a superiority complex
- For Paul sometimes had to defend his Hebrew heritage vigorously (2 Cor 11:22)

In the previous chapter, Luke showed how the problem created by Ananias and Sapphira

- The dangerous deceit that they employed in their question for admiration
- Was dealt with in the New Testament Church
- Now, with this problem, the dispute between two factions in the church
- The church leaders met it immediately and squarely

There is nothing to suggest that there was deliberate discrimination in the church

- It could be that a number of older Grecian-Jews had come to their spiritual home
- To spend their last days and then die in be buried in Jerusalem
- Jews had a long tradition of caring for widows, orphans and aliens
- The apostles made an administrative decision
- That represented a significant leap forward in terms of the structure of the church

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the world of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

(Acts 6:2-3)

It is important to note that it does not say that prayer and the ministry of the Word

- Are more important than the distribution of food to widows
- But it does clearly identify and accept

I UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN WORK (SERVICE)

The theory of the appointment of others to share in the church's work is clear enough

- It is not the apostles were too important to share in the distribution of food
- But it was not fitting that they should neglect their primary calling to do this work
- It was important that this work was done
- It was important they did not do it
- Therefore, it was important to appoint someone else to do it
- These appointments represented a combination of spiritual and material concerns
- The internal responsibilities were divided
- But the early believers saw these as varying aspects of the one total ministry
- They developed a response to the needs of the people
- For the sake of the ongoing proclamation of the word of God
- It is important not to make the distinction between spiritual and practical service
- There is one total ministry, service or work of God
- Proper administration (a word related to ministry) unites the people of God
- Improper administration is often the cause of disunity in a church community
- When important things that need to be done are overlooked
- Unease spreads among those who are affected
- The appointment of the seven acknowledges and remedies this

Not least, because of its origins, the Methodist Church does not give New Testament names

- To many of the roles and functions that need to be fulfilled in the church
- Ministers are sometimes called 'presbyters', a word that also means 'elder'
- And we do have an order of 'deacons', a serving ministry
- Although Luke does not use the title (*diakonos*) 'deacon' to describe the seven here
- The word translated 'distribution' (*diakonia*) v. 1
- And the word translated 'wait on' (*diakoneo*) v. 2 are from the same root
- Though, it also uses the word *diakonia* translated as 'ministry' (of the word) v. 4
- It is nevertheless clear that 'deacon' soon became an office of the church
- For deacons are later described (1 Tim 3:8-9)

I would say that in the Methodist Church those who most nearly fulfil the role of deacons

- Are circuit stewards, church stewards and the treasurer
- And perhaps other appointed to what we often call the 'practical' work
- Church stewards also need some of the qualities of 'elders'
- But let's leave that aside just for a moment

It is interesting to note that the apostles did not impose people on the church

- But shared with the church the task of choosing seven officials
- It's quite possible that seven were chosen
- Because of the Jewish practice of setting up boards of seven men for particular duties
- It has been noted that the seven men appointed all have Greek names
- The suggestion being that they were from the group of Grecian-Jews
- But although we know that Nicolas from Antioch was a Grecian-Jew (Acts 6:5)
- We cannot read too much into the names of the others
- As many Jews in the ancient world had a Jewish, Greek and Roman name

It is important to note that although their main task was administrative service

- A good reputation was important
- These 'deacons' were chosen not simply for their wisdom
- But because they were 'filled with the Spirit'
- When we appoint people to administrative posts in churches
- We also must look for these qualifications
- The Bible does not recognise the common separation between sacred and secular
- If we say that for the 'less-spiritual' jobs we only need 'less-spiritual' people
- We are ignoring the fact that in the body of Christ everything we do is for the Lord
- That, in effect, all service is of a spiritual nature
- And if we appoint unspiritual people
- We cannot really be surprised if unspiritual policies are made and decisions taken
- Ignoring spiritual qualifications gives the wrong impression of the church
- For the key is unity in diversity
- So that as each servant of Christ makes a contribution the body moves forward

The ministers of the word need to be set free by the people to prayer and ministry of the word

- But we must not miss the fact that in the diversity of our work there is unity

The laying on of hands recalls Moses' commissioning of Joshua in Numbers 27:18-23

- Some people find in this the ordination of 'deacons'
- To a parallel ministry of service, as we have in the Methodist and some free churches
- Rather than to a lower order of ministry as in the Anglican order
- But others simply see this as a proper appointment of people to service
- What is interesting is that the ministry of those appointed to practical tasks
- Soon develops in other ways as well for Stephen and Philip soon share as evangelists

This recognises that there is also:

II UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN WITNESS (MISSION)

Faced with an administrative problem the apostles did not shrink from making a decision

- As someone who quite likes policy review documents
- I could observe that they did not have a policy review document
- Their response had an urgency and immediacy that we do not always share
- An issue that threatened the unity of the church was dealt with promptly
- The leaders led the congregation, they shared information and support
- And happily, the administrative change did not reduce the witness of the church

We should not miss what a key step the appointment of seven men to this task was

- The eleven had been appointed by the Lord Jesus himself
- And Luke has carefully described the process by which the twelfth was appointed
- Now the ministry of the church, its work and witness, are moving on
- New structures were needed to ensure that important things were not overlooked
- Some people imply that all we have to do to be faithful in church order
- Is to study the pattern of New Testament ministry and replicate it
- But we must conclude that NT ministry developed according to the church's needs

The appointment of the seven was used to serve different cultural groups

- It probably was not as simple as saying that some spoke Aramaic and others Greek
- I have been privileged to spend time with Methodist people in three other countries
- Germany, Switzerland and the USA – making a specific into a generalisation
- My overall feeling was that I was more united with the Germans and Swiss culturally
- But was more united with the Americans in terms of language
- The cultural outlook between the Grecian and Hebraic Jews was probably different
- As I suggested before, the matter of food for widows was probably a symptom
- The church responded with a particular mission strategy to meet the needs
- Of very different cultural groups
- Sometimes new structures and policies are needed in service and mission

The history of the Salvation Army is a case in point

- As a 13 year old, William Booth started to work in a pawnbrokers shop
- Here he learned about the lives of poor people
- One night, in the local Methodist Church, he made a promise to God
- That he would spend his whole life telling people about God's love
- Eventually he became a Methodist minister
- but later he became a freelance travelling preacher and formed the Christian mission
- developing a ministry to the cold, the hungry and homeless
- many people who listened to his preaching became Christians
- And William Booth wanted to send them to nearby churches
- The trouble was that they were poor and not made to feel welcome
- The poor people got the message and did not go back
- William Booth became General Superintendent of the Christian Mission
- But people often shortened his title to 'General'
- And in time the Christian Mission became known as the Salvation Army

Many Christians say they are committed to evangelism

- But do not want to pay the price of bringing in an evangelistic harvest
- To be biblical is not a matter of going backwards to New Testament offices
- But taking the principle of these methods and applying them to the world today

There are many cultural differences in our society today and we must reach out to all

- Just as the language difference between Greek and Aramaic speakers
- Was just a convenient label for the different cultural groups
- So today there are convenient labels that hide very deep differences
- When anyone over 60 years old was growing up
- All that a child was, in more or less every sense, was a miniature adult
- By the time that anyone under 30 years old was/is growing up
- The world inhabited by under-30s is a completely different world from over-60s
- People in the middle age group can occasionally surface in either group
- To feel equally at home in either or equally at home in neither as the case may be
- Age has always been more than the date on your birth certificate
- Now it is a whole cultural agenda, perhaps reflecting greater diversity
- Than more obvious differences, such as ethnicity, nationality or gender

Luke concludes this section by noting

- The word of God spread
- The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly
- Large numbers of priests became obedient to the faith
- The last point is interesting
- We think that faith is just something you believe
- But Luke says that they became 'obedient to the faith'

We recognised the importance of;

I UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN WORK (the church's service)

II UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN WITNESS (the church's mission)

We may need to have special mission strategies for different cultural groups

- We know that the Jerusalem church had two different language groups
- These might have even been two different cultural groups
- And this could have made a natural division – but the church was not divided

III UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN WORSHIP

Actually, although it begins with 'w', unity and diversity in worship is a bit misleading

- But I use 'worship' in the broadest sense of gathering together as God's people
- The apostles recognised the need for unity and diversity in work
- They recognised the need for unity and diversity in witness
- There must also be unity and diversity in worship

We learned from the experience of the General William Booth and the Salvation Army

- That established Christians are often unwilling to change to welcome converts
- in Britain in the 50s, large sections of the Church failed to accommodate
- Christians from ethnic minorities – something that seems as horrific today
- As the discrimination that would not allow mixed congregations in the USA

Despite the many challenges that the New Testament church faced

- The solution was not to divide and to have separate churches
- Despite the ethnic, social, linguistic, cultural differences, despite sex and age
- There early believers remained as a single church
- The multicultural nature of the New Testament church is worth emulating today
- Matters of formality and informality and taste in music – the 'worship wars'
- Are doing so much to divide the church today – we must not give in

With so much to divide us attention must be given to things that unite us

- In Corinth, Paul strongly condemned the division of churches into interest groups
- With the piercing question, 'Is Christ divided?' (1 Cor 1:13)
- The very source of unity, even in diversity, is the Lordship of the Saviour, Jesus
- I would like us to show our unity in fellowship, even through the places we sit
- For old and young and in-between have so much to learn and give to each other
- In our society, there are not many places where young and old voluntarily associate
- In so doing, we make our worship and our church a sign of the transforming gospel