

Serving Tables and Preaching the Word (1)

Acts 6:2-7

(NOTE: this scripture can be interpreted in two totally opposite ways. What follows is the interpretation consistent with that given in the sermon “A Company of One Heart and Soul”)

- I. (The first part of this sermon would be a condensation of the content of “A Company...”)
- II. The crucial question is: What did the apostles do about the tension between the Hellenists and the Hebrews? The author of Acts gives no direct answer. However, if the verses following the mention of the problem in Acts 6:1 are any indication, the response of the apostles is a telling one. We read that the apostles summoned the body of the disciples and told them: “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.” We see that they chose others to serve the tables. And we see that the problem between the two groups of disciples was not solved.
- III. From Acts chapter 4 it is clear that when the apostles took very seriously the task of material distribution, there was peace and prosperity in the church. It then would be a great problem that the apostles’ response to the tension was to leave off serving tables, no matter how commendable is the task of preaching the word. Preaching the word is fine, but it seems that the apostles neglected the foundation for that preaching: serving, putting themselves in the most humble position. (This point can be expanded upon.)
- IV. (Expand on the point of how “truth” (preaching) must exist on the basis of “love” (social service – serving tables). And that neither can develop without the other. This is the basic point of the notion of give and take of vitality elements and spirit elements.)
- V. The apostles started out on the right: putting themselves into the lowest position; following the example of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. But then perhaps they became too proud, and got enamored of their own preaching positions. Lesson: a warning to preachers not to neglect social service, to realize that being a company of

one heart and one soul does not come simply through preaching, no matter how good it is.

- VI. The result of the apostles' decision was that the faction of the church they represented – the Hebrew, the Judaistic faction – gradually diminished. They became attached to the Judaic laws, and eventually insisted that Gentiles become Jews before they could become Christians. The Hellenistic faction, led by Paul, was more tolerant of Gentiles, and did not insist on strict obedience to the Jewish laws of Christians. The original apostles by and large passed out of the stage of history, with the Jewish-Christian “Ebionite” group leaving the dispensational mainstream.
- VII. This split of Jewish-Christian and Gentile-Christian was actually a great tragedy, for it isolated the large body of Jews from adopting Christianity. This split is somewhat analogous to the conservative/liberal split in America today. The conservative side, the Jewish-Christians, wanted to maintain the old ways. They exalted the law and customs, they focused on the sanctity of the nation, race, and family tradition. They did not like new ideas, new religions, or intermixing the “pure” tradition with other cultures. They did not want pluralism. The liberal side, the Gentile-Christians, expanded Christianity outside of the Jewish tradition, race, and national identity. They adapted this Jewish movement to the larger culture. Thus Christianity could survive and be successful in the world, and could reach out with an appeal transcending race, nation, culture, and former religious practice. (You can provide analogies and lessons from this for today.) Many historians feel, for example, that although Christianity could expand, it became polluted by Greek philosophy and Roman imperialism. Many Protestants feel that the moral, religious standards of the church declined from the first generation on. Whether or not we agree on this, we can agree that it is a tragedy that Judaism and Christianity went separate ways from this time. Hebraist and Hellenic Jews could not comfortably unite in the early church. Perhaps one important event in that historical development was the apostles' deeming their time for preaching too precious to leave them time to serve tables.