
Acts 6:2-15:

Planned Action Brings Results

by C. Bruce White

“And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.’ And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

“And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

“And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. And yet they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly induced men to say, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.’ And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and dragged him away, and brought him before the Council. And they put forward false witnesses who said, ‘This man incessantly speaks against this holy place, and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.’ And fixing their gaze on him, all who were

sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel” (6:2-15).

Church growth elements stand out in this passage. These verses imply that planned action brings results.

I. APPOINTED WORKERS

The first element is appointing workers. An old adage says, “Everybody’s business is nobody’s business.” Nothing has hindered the work of the church more than the idea behind the statement, “Somebody will do it.” Many are content to say, “Let George take care of it.”

A problem arose in the church over the needs of the Grecian widows. The apostles did not say, “Somebody will recognize the need and get the job done.” Rather, they said, “But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task” (6:3). The apostles, as the leaders of the church at this time, recognized their responsibility to appoint men to do certain tasks. If the job was going to be done, someone would have to do it. Several factors are involved in this process.

Training

Training is necessary before men can be appointed. The apostles did not just say, “We will just get some men to do the job.” Instead, they said, “Select from among you men of good repu-

tation, full of the Spirit and wisdom." It was necessary that the men selected would be the type who could do the job. Men must prepare themselves for work in the kingdom.

It is also necessary for church leaders to be aware of the talent and abilities resident in the congregation in order that the right people can be placed over the tasks. This is the situation in this passage. After they had chosen the men and set a plan in action to use those men, the Bible says, "And the statement found approval with the whole congregation" (6:5). The apostles said, "We need men who have the talent to get the job done, and we will appoint them to do the task." This pleased the whole multitude.

Planning

A program needs to be planned for it to succeed. Notice the responsibility was shared—"whom we may put in charge of this task" (6:3). The apostles were not going to do the work themselves. They gave the seven the responsibility to do it. With the appointment of these men went also the authority to do the job. This is where our planned programs often fail. A discussion a few years ago at a lectureship program on leadership roles in the church focused on the questions: What is the office of an elder? What is the office of a deacon? What is a preacher to do? This discussion found that one office was practically useless in the church today. They could not find anything for deacons to do! The reason was that in most cases elders were doing the deacons' work. Thus, deacons have nothing to do. Often, when elders appoint deacons to certain jobs, they do not give them sufficient authority, finances, or responsibility to get the job done. These men in Acts 6 were appointed over the business. They were over it. It would be their job, and they would have all the responsibility and authority needed to get it done.

Prayer

These verses say prayer is necessary for the success of any program. The apostles say, "But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (6:4). Luke says in verse 6, "And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them." They shared their responsibility with them. The apostles prayed about this matter at least twice.

Our problem is we think success in the kingdom of God is directly proportionate to the amount of physical energy invested by a certain person or group in the church. Suppose some work were going on at the church building and somebody asked, "Where are the elders?" Someone else replies, "Why, they are praying." What would be the response of most people? Many would say, "That's an easy out, isn't it? Old Harold didn't want to get his hands dirty. Therefore, he went into the office to pray. Why doesn't he get out here and help?" We fail to understand that the greatest power, the greatest potential for succeeding in the kingdom of God is our prayers.

Several years ago, a certain man's name continually came up in church conversations about conversion. "Oh, I wish we could convert him," someone would say. "I wish we could do something to win him to Christ," another would say. Everybody made a commitment to talk with him about being baptized. One night in an elder's and deacon's meeting it was suggested, "Brethren, let's set aside whatever we planned to do tonight and spend our entire evening in prayer for him." About three weeks later the man's mother called about a sermon that had been preached. After some discussion she wanted to obey the gospel. She was seventy-eight years old. The night she came forward to be baptized, that gentleman rose out of his seat and came down the aisle to be baptized into Christ. More may have been done in one night of praying than all those people had done in months of talking to him. There is power in prayer. The church will be better off when its leadership spends more time in prayer than it does in physical activity.

When deacons are doing their work, members are out doing jobs that need to be done, and elders are in their offices in fervent, constant prayer, the church is right. That is why the apostles gave these men the authority to do the work. In effect they said, "Now that we've given the job to you, we are going to pray about it." A planned program, one in which the leadership is doing what it ought to do and the members are doing what they ought to do, brings results.

II. ACCELERATED GROWTH

The next element is accelerated growth. Verse 7 says, "And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to

increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith." When peace was restored to the church, the work of evangelism began again. After men were appointed to do the job that needed to be done, order was restored to the church again, and they resumed their evangelistic thrust. In verse 1 we found the disciples multiplying. The Grecian problem arose. They got on it and solved it, and six verses later they are back to multiplying again.

This fact says that the growth of the church is dependent upon the entire body functioning together as a unit. Of course, that is not new, is it? That is exactly what Paul said to the church in 1 Corinthians 12. The church is like a human body. The human body has different members to perform different functions. The body works in harmony when every member is doing what it is appointed to do. The result is a unified, active body. Paul says that is the way the church ought to be. A member of the body does not say, "Since I'm not an ear, I'm not going to provide for the body my talent for vision." The ear does not say, "I'm not an eye and I can't see, so I'm not going to provide the hearing for the body." How would you like to see a 175-pound ear coming toward you? That is kind of what Paul is saying. The body of Christ is not to be one member. When the body is functioning properly, it is a unit. So is the church. When the elders are "eldering," the deacons are "deaconing," the preachers are preaching, and the members are "membering," the body works together as the organization God intended. It is a marvelous thing for God in the community.

When the Jerusalem congregation got everything together again, it even turned the head of the religious community: "And a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith."

There is no greater way to represent the church of our Lord to our religious friends in our towns and cities than by having a congregation united in love. If we can show them what the church is by our lives, the truth will be much more readily received. When the work was organized and planned, there were results.

III. AGITATED ENEMIES

The text points out another result of the work of the kingdom of God: aggravated enemies. The

devil is content as long as we are. As long as we do not make any ripples in the community or affect evil outside the four walls of the building, the devil is content. Do you think it bothers the devil, for example, that in a community of forty or fifty thousand, five hundred Christians gather together on Sunday morning? He is content as long as we are.

Surveys have shown that we are likely the most ignorant American generation of the exact Word of God. People know the Word of God when they are under persecution. When the devil was trying to destroy the Bible through agents burning Bibles and banning them from homes, men were committing the Bible in its entirety to memory. The devil apparently figured out that this was not the way to get it done and set another plan in order. He lets everyone have a Bible just as long as it is not read. Bibles are so plentiful that if you want to, you can get one free. If you have little money, you can buy an entire copy for a quarter. Most people have three, four, five, or maybe a dozen. It has been translated into the major languages of the world. But we are the most biblically ignorant generation in a long, long time. The devil is content. "Give them all the Bibles they want," he must be thinking, "just as long as they do not read it or pay any attention to what it says."

As long as we are sitting around and doing nothing, our enemies are not going to be agitated. But the gospel stirs animosity. Preaching the plain, pure truth of God stirs up the people. When the Jerusalem church became evangelistic again, there arose from the synagogues certain men, Libertines, who began to attack them. But, according to verse 10, they were not able to resist the wisdom and Spirit by which Stephen spoke. Those who oppose the truth have no grounds for their dispute. If this is truth, it will stand, not because of who believes it or stands for it, but because it is truth. If it is not truth, we ought to lay it aside and find the truth.

Stephen had the truth. These men were not able to stand or dispute what he had to say. We see the classic secondary approach of debate presented. When one's case will not stand on its own, one has to attack the opponent. When an opponent cannot get across his message or destroy his position, he will attack you. This is what they did. They were unable to resist his

speech. They, therefore, induced men to say they had heard him speak blasphemy against Moses and God. They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes and brought him before the council. They set up false witnesses against him.

Notice that when one preaches the truth and lives by the truth, personality attacks fail. They could not get at Stephen that way.

Finally, they chose the devil's last out—to just lie about it. They determined to tell all kinds of falsehoods about Christians—what they believe, what they preach, what they say. There are always people who want to believe gossip.

Now we come to the greatest of all promises and blessings of God. Jesus gave it to His disciples just before His ascension: "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." In verse 15 even those sitting in judgment on

Stephen looked on him and saw his face as if it were the face of an angel. God does not desert His people. God is going to be there through it all. You may stand alone. You may stand in persecution. You may stand in falsehood, ridicule, mockery, and even death for the cause of Christ. But God is going to be there. Stephen's demeanor and action demonstrated that the Spirit was in him.

CONCLUSION

This passage includes a planned program of work for the kingdom of God. Members of the body of Christ are functioning as they should, and the result is accelerated growth. Growth causes the agitation of enemies. But when Christians are working, loving, and living as they should. God is in the midst of them, giving them His strength, help, and blessing.

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