

**MISSIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS OF
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**CONFLICT RESOLUTION:
THE APOSTOLIC WAY IN ACTS 6**

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Published in www.GlobalMissiology.org October 2013

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Prof. Hesselgrave wrote “the mission commentary on the International Sunday School Lesson” decades ago and now re-edited by Enoch Wan so that the general readership of Global Missiology can be blessed by the timeless truth of the Book of Acts.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is important to remember that these early chapters in the Book of Acts instruct us as to how the Spirit worked in the early church in order to effect growth—both spiritual and organizational, both numerical and geographical. That growth often resulted from facing up to adversity within the church itself as well as adversity outside of it. This is highlighted in Acts 6. Internally, the “daily distribution” among members of diverse backgrounds (especially widows) occasioned misunderstandings that had to be resolved. Externally, the spread of the Word of God occasioned persecution that had to be endured. Note how the Holy Spirit worked corporately through the counsel of the Twelve and individually through the witness of Stephen in ways divinely designed to prosper the church and propel its mission forward.

CRITICAL CRISIS AND HELPFUL SOLUTION

We are prone to think that division in the church is not only deplorable but necessarily destructive of mission. However, dealt with in the right way, division can lead to a larger ministry! Acts 6 makes this clear.

There is something here that is especially important in missionary contexts. Sometimes when converts are forthcoming the emphasis shifts from reaching unbelievers to caring for the

congregation and “waiting on tables.” Notice how the apostles averted this confusion of priorities by the way they handled the dispute between Hebrews and Hellenists.

First, they settled on what we might call a “division of labor.” A clear distinction was made between the apostles and their tasks on the one hand and deacons and their tasks on the other (later on, elders would be chosen as well.) In effect, the apostles capitalized on dissension. They clarified their own calling and work. They also carved out an important work for some of the new converts. That work was different but it was complementary and completely within the capabilities of the believers.

Second, the deacons were chosen in collaboration with the rest of the believers, both Hebrews and Hellenists. The Twelve said, “[You] seek from among you seven men...whom we may appoint over this business” (6:3). In contemporary organizational terminology, the believers put forward seven qualified “nominees” and the apostles “confirmed” or “installed” them. This general procedure was probably followed in many early missionary undertakings (cf. Titus 1:5).

Third, though the work of the deacons was menial, their qualifications were spiritual and ethical. “Seek from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom,” the apostles said (6:3). Overseas as well as at home, there is a temptation to identify certain “abilities” or “competencies”; classify them as “gifts”; and choose church officers on that basis. That is a mistake anywhere, but especially on the mission field and especially when money or material goods are involved.

As far as Stephen and his martyrdom are concerned, we may be prone to think that persecution, suffering and martyrdom are deterrents to mission and to the growth and expansion of the church. The early missionaries thought otherwise. When they were beaten and charged not to speak in the name of Christ, they rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for his name” and proceeded accordingly (Acts 5:40).

FURTHER READING

For contemporary illustrations of this kind of dedication, see *The Costly Call: Book 2* by Caner and Pruitt (Kregel).