

3. Developing Structure to Meet Needs

In our last two topics, we saw how the early church developed structure to help new Christians grow. Today, we will see how the church began to develop structure to minister to believers with needs. In Acts 2:44-45, we read, “Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.” Here, we see that the early Christians began to meet the needs of other believers very quickly.

The church at Jerusalem had started with Jews from every nation, who happened to be in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. Acts 2:5 says, “And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven.” Those Jews had come for the Feast of Pentecost, and then, most of them planned to return home soon after. As a result, they probably did not bring enough money to make it possible for them to stay several additional months or years. Some of those visitors, from other nations, were among those who became believers. That caused the other new believers to see an immediate need. They wanted to help these new believers stay longer, so they could learn more about Christ and how He transforms lives.

The Jews gathered at Jerusalem each year for three feasts. Jews who lived in distant lands would save their money for many years so they would be able to go, at least once in their lives, for the Passover and the Feast of Pentecost. Those who came long distances would usually stay for both feasts since they were only seven weeks apart. As a result, the Christians who lived in Jerusalem, and the surrounding area, began to sell their possessions and goods so they could help provide food for the new believers from other areas. Some of those people were probably invited to stay with other believers for a period of time. This met one immediate need.

A second need developed as the church continued to grow. That was the need of the widows. The church began to help provide food for the needy older believing widows. People who knew the widows helped distribute this food. That need was also met as people even began to sell property to help provide needs. In Acts 4:34-37, we read, “Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.”

However, the day came when there was a need for more organization to continue to minister to all of the widows. Among those from other lands who were becoming believers, some would become widows as their husbands died while they were at Jerusalem. That meant those were widows who had no family in Jerusalem. Acts 6:1 tells how those widows were affected, “Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.” The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jew who came from other countries. Since they did not have families in Jerusalem, those Greek-speaking widows were neglected when the food was distributed because they had no family members in Jerusalem.

As a result, the apostles realized that, as the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, they had to delegate the responsibility for distributing food to the Hellenist widows to someone else. As a result, Acts 6:2-6 says, “Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.” The apostles kept their priorities straight and delegated this responsibility to others.

Since these other men were going to be handling money, the apostles gave three qualifications for the men who would have this responsibility delegated to them. Some believe these were the first deacons. They were to be men of good reputation. They were to be full of the Holy Spirit. They were to be full of wisdom. One of the interesting things to notice, since they were going to be meeting the needs of the Greek-speaking widows, is the fact that all seven of these names are Greek names. This is a key expansion in the leadership team of the church at Jerusalem. The church leadership team became multicultural. The church at Jerusalem now had leaders who had grown up among Gentile cultures, as well as among those who had grown up among other Jews.

In Acts 8, the church in Jerusalem began to experience great persecution. Acts 8:1 says, “Now Saul was consenting to his death. At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” Then, Acts 8:4 adds, “Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.” A key to notice here is that, although the apostles remained in Jerusalem, all of the other believers knew how to share the Gospel with others as they were scattered. Then, in the rest of chapters 8 and 9, we see that the apostles began to go to other areas to help other churches get established. This meant a need for more structure, both in the church in Jerusalem, as well as in the churches being established.

Although the instructions about how the structure developed are not given in these chapters of Acts, we see that the structure was being developed. Acts 11:30 says, “This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.” We see that the gift from the church at Antioch, to the church at Jerusalem, was given to the elders. This meant that the church at Jerusalem was now led by elders, rather than the apostles. As the apostles spent more and more of their time in other areas, elders had been appointed to lead the church at Jerusalem and in the other churches that were established throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria.

According to Acts 1:21-22, apostles were eyewitness of the resurrection of Christ, “Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.” Since this group of leaders was part of the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20), it was necessary to develop elders from within every

church to become the team of men that provided spiritual leadership for each local church.

As Paul traveled to Gentile cities, to spread the Gospel, he also made certain that a basic structure was developed to lead the churches. Acts 13:52 says, “And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” We see that Paul developed many disciples (small group Bible study leaders) in every city. Paul and Barnabas left those Bible study leaders to provide leadership to the Bible study groups but did not organize them as churches at this time. Acts 14:21 says, “And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch.”

Then, in Acts 14:22-23, we read, “Strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.’ So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” By the time Paul and Barnabas returned to those cities a few months later, some of those Bible study leaders had grown and matured, and Paul and Barnabas were able to organize churches, with their own elders to lead them, in each of the cities. Later, as those churches developed, they could add any additional structure they needed.

In Titus 1:5, we see that Paul did not remain in Crete long enough to organize the churches in each city. As a result, Paul left Titus in Crete to develop the disciples, help them mature, and then equip them to become elders to lead the churches in each city. Titus 1:5 says, “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you.” Paul knew that, as the disciples matured, some would meet the qualifications to be elders and lead the churches. Paul expected this to happen in every city. If we are being obedient to the commands given to us in the New Testament, we should see the same thing happen today.

Once a group of people in any area become Christians, a top priority of the spiritual leaders is to help those people grow and become disciples (small group Bible study leaders). In our last topic, we saw that Paul, Silas, and Timothy provided the love as of a nursing mother, the example of a godly father, and shared the teachings of Christ, so those new Christians would be able to walk in a way pleasing to God as they became disciples. Now, in our topic today, we have seen the early church leaders showed these small group leaders, by example, how to continue to mature and become the leadership teams of local churches. May the Lord richly bless you as you help others come to Christ, become disciples (small group Bible study leaders), and then, show them how to become godly leaders who are equipped to become part of the leadership team of a local church.