



## “All Hands on Deck”

Acts 6:1–7; Romans 16:1–16 (NRSV)

**There are times when all hands are needed. Now is that time**

I’m sure that when Christians attempt to read through Paul’s letter to the Romans from the beginning to the end, they are pretty relieved when they get to chapter 16. After all the difficult sections and passages in the letter, it is a relief to see that Paul is wrapping things up and sending his regards. After all, these are just the names of people who are now long dead. Right? In fact, they are far more than that. This is a window into the early church. Glance through the long list of people that Paul names. You are looking at the church in action.

Phoebe has come from Paul, who is probably writing from Corinth, and is carrying his letter to the believers in Rome, many of whom Paul knows, though to our knowledge he had never been to Rome. Perhaps Paul has simply heard about them. Some, like Prisca and Aquila, have returned to Rome after being expelled in AD 49.<sup>1</sup> Paul has come to know them on his journeys around the eastern end of the Mediterranean. However he came to know these names – this is a picture of the church in action. These were all real people who chose to put their trust in Jesus—often at pain of estrangement,

exile, and worse. And here’s the thing, these men and women are as much our brothers and sisters in Christ as the folks at Royal Oak Presbyterian and Marion Baptist Churches. The body of Christ transcends the limitations of time and death.

### DAILY DISTRIBUTION OF FOOD

Jewish practice provided a means to distribute food to the poor. One means was to distribute weekly funds to poor residents in order for them to purchase food. This was called *quppah*, so named after “the box” that was used to collect the funds. A daily distribution of food was provided for non-residents and was called *tamhuy*, named after the “tray” on which foodstuffs were placed for distribution (Jeremias, 130–32). It appears that the Christian community was imitating the *tamhuy* with its “daily distribution.” But does this mean that the widows were not considered “residents”? And one may ask, “Why did Christian Jews have to set up their own means of caring for the poor?” One can only speculate whether the neglect of “the widows” by the larger Jerusalem community might indicate that the Hellenistic Christian community was viewed by the residents of Jerusalem as a distinct enough group that it did not “qualify” for either the *quppah* or *tamhuy*.

Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969);  
Gerd Ludemann, *Early Christianity according to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

In this series, we’ve taken a peek inside the life of the first Christian community. We’ve seen them share their lives together – eating meals in fellowship, praying, learning from the apostles, and more. We’ve seen them reach outward as they have strived to be their Lord’s hands and feet, enacting the kingdom of God. The Good News is proclaimed. A man is healed. Property is sold and money pooled to ensure that all have what they need. Even the threat of arrest and punishment has not deterred them; they have prayed for boldness.

### Problems emerge

Before too long though, problems begin to emerge in this community of believers. We shouldn’t be surprised. Jesus has yet to return. Until he does, we live “between the times” when God’s victory over sin and death has been won, but there is still a lot of work to do before that victory is fully realized in the marriage of heaven and earth. Gordon Fee, a prominent New Testament scholar, compared this to D-Day in WWII. Once 200,000 Allied troops were successfully landed in Normandy, the war was won. There would be much fighting and dying to go . . . but the war was won. Perhaps it is a bit like a Major League Baseball team that clinches its division title with ten games still to play. They’ve won, but the baseball contests go on, some lost, some won until, finally, the trophy can be lifted.

So, yes, problems emerge in this community of faithful believers. That says nothing about their faith, only that they, like we, still have to deal with a sinful heart. For example, a man and his wife lie to the apostles—to God!—falsely claiming that they had turned over all the proceeds from a property sale. They hadn’t and when confronted, they both dropped dead.

Now, a more significant problem has emerged that threatens the community’s unity, which is comprised of both Greek-speaking disciples (referred to as the “Hellenists” in most translations) and Aramaic-speaking disciples (the “Hebrews”). In other words, there were disciples even then

who were originally from elsewhere in the Roman Empire. As we all know, desiring unity and living unity are not the same. The Greek speaking widows believe that their needs are not being met for the sake of the Aramaic speaking widows. The nature of the problem is well laid-out by N.T. Wright:

The problem came to a head over the treatment of widows. This shows that already in the early church the question of ‘living as a single family’ had clear negative as well as positive implications: normally, widows would be taken care of among their own blood-relations, but those family ties appear to have been cut when people joined the new movement. As in some parts of the world to this day, baptism meant saying goodbye to an existing family as well as being welcomed into a new one. And the new one therefore had to take on the

<sup>1</sup> The Roman biographer, Suetonius, tells us that in AD 49, the emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews from Rome after disturbances caused by “Chrestus.” Gentile followers of Jesus would have been swept up in that as well. That is how Prisca and Aquila end up in Corinth, where they meet Paul.

obligations of the old. That, by the way, is why we find regulations being drawn up about such things in 1 Timothy 5:3–16. Some have speculated that the problem was exacerbated, in the case of the early church, because many Jewish couples would come from far and wide in the Jewish ‘Diaspora’ (the dispersion of Jews all around the known world) to live in and around Jerusalem in old age so that, eventually, they could be buried in the vicinity. The husband might then die, leaving a disproportionate number of widows from different geographical origins all in the neighborhood of Jerusalem.

Whatever we think about that, the distinction in verse one between ‘Hellenists’ and ‘Hebrews’ is probably one of those things with a variety of elements mixed together. Nobody had planned for a complex and intricate welfare system. It had been invented on the hoof, when there were other things (such as persecution by the authorities) to think about. It would be surprising if such a system could proceed without difficulties. And in a complex society such as that in Jerusalem, which was both a deeply traditional culture, very conscious of its historic and religious significance, and a cosmopolitan mixture of Jews from all over the world, it is not surprising that people would be eyeing one another to see if this or that group appeared to be taking advantage.<sup>2</sup>

With the food distribution system having broken down, the apostles realize that they are going to need some reorganization of structure and duties. Who will do what and how in order to see that the needs of all are effectively and justly met? Because there are believers in the community from around the empire, we should see this brief story not merely about the community looking after itself, but as a concrete expression of our Christ-given mission to the world.

So the apostles called a meeting of all the believers in Jerusalem. They outlined the problem and asked the community to select seven men, to whom the apostles would delegate the food distribution (*diakonein*) and assuredly other responsibilities. The community would select the seven, but the apostles set forth two criteria. They must be well-respected and it must be clear to all that the men have been endowed by the Holy Spirit with exceptional wisdom. Seven men were chosen; their names are listed in verse five. In front of the community, the apostles prayed over the seven and laid their hands on them, which denoted a sharing of the apostles’ authoritative power. The apostles were ensuring that as they delegated responsibility, they also gave these men authority. The apostles would continue to serve (*diakonia*) but would now focus on prayer and the proclamation of the Gospel.

And they went forth . . . the community grew. Even temple priests heard God’s call. And the “greatest upset” in human history proceeded. Upset? A few years ago the Atlantic magazine asked leaders from a variety of backgrounds to name the greatest upset in history. Cass Sunstein, a prominent legal scholar and regulatory czar, wrote:

The rise of Christianity. Two thousand years ago (give or take), Jesus Christ was crucified. Whether or not you think that he was the son of God, no odds maker would have predicted that today the faith of billions would bear his name.

Indeed...Indeed! There is no greater evidence of the truth we proclaim than the existence of Christianity two millennia after those first disciples.

### ***The call to serve***

As those seven men were chosen to lead the community in service, so we are all called to serve and to lead. Jesus calls us to be “servants of all” (Mark 9:35). Paul reminds us that we proclaim Jesus as Lord and are to be servants for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor 4:5). But what does this service really look like? Isn’t it pretty easy for our service to become self-righteous rather than true service of God? In *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster helps us to see what self-righteous service looks like so we can better grasp the meaning of true service.

Self-righteous service comes from human effort; true service comes out of our relationship with Jesus. Self-righteous service is concerned with the “big” project or “big” deal; true service doesn’t discriminate among the opportunities to serve. Self-righteous service requires external rewards; true service needs only God’s approval. Foster suggests that self-righteous service is focused only on the results, while true service “delights” in the service. Self-righteous service is affected by our whims and moods; true service carries on whether we feel like it or not. Self-righteous service can fracture a community as people strive for control and recognition; true service is selfless and heals a community.

### ***A Servant’s Service***

Though we are 2,000 years removed from the first communities of Christians, our challenges are not really so different. When the apostles were overwhelmed by their duties, they enlisted others, like Stephen, to help out, serving the young Christian church. Paul taught the churches he founded that God gives us all gifts to use in our service to God. Some are helpers, some are teachers, some are preachers, some are leaders, some are given gifts of knowledge, or wisdom, or mercy, or giving. The point is that we are all to serve.

When we join the United Methodist Church we promise to “uphold it with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.” This is a practical expression of our commitment to be servants of God and to do his work. The question is not whether we will serve, but only how. We might serve by teaching a children’s Sunday School class, or singing in the choir, or helping a shut-in with weekly shopping, or answering the church phones on a Sunday morning, or serving in the Food Pantry, or building a handicapped ramp for a neighbor, or helping out after school or with Nurture this summer . . . there is no end to the opportunities, for there is no end to the need. Make no mistake; God wants more from us than simply an hour or two on Sunday mornings. Donald Whitney says it well, “Disciplined service to God is work, hard and costly labor sometimes, but it will endure for all eternity.”<sup>3</sup> We, the people of God, are called to lives of joyful service to God and others.

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<sup>2</sup> Wright, T. (2008). *Acts for Everyone, Part 1: Chapters 1-12* (p. 98). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

<sup>3</sup> Whitney, Donald. 1991. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs: NavPress. p. 121