

Philip's Calling

Instead of approaching the book called Acts as the "Acts of the Apostles" we should see it as



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"The Powerful Acts of the Holy Spirit Through the Early Disciples." Peter is most prominent in Acts 1-12 and Paul in Acts 13-28. But you already know there are many significant individuals in this chronicle of the early church's growth. Philip is one of those significant disciples of Jesus,

appearing four times as God's Spirit blesses him in challenging circumstances.

A key lesson I learned in my earliest days of ministry was to look for those individuals who had influence within a congregation but were not ego-driven, who would be honest with me but not try to manage me, who would keep a confidence and whose earned respect could help solve a problem. Philip is named in Acts 6 as one of the seven deacons (servants) chosen by the Jerusalem congregation to resolve a significant conflict within the church and derive a balanced plan for ministry. This conflict has roots from before the existence of the church. The established Jewish community in Jerusalem had long looked upon those Jews who lived and worked outside Judea as if they were foreigners. Yet, since the Babylonian exile Jews had lived in Gentile lands, thriving and faithfully supporting their synagogues. But the dream of those Greek-speaking Jews was to come home someday, if only to be buried in the land of God's promise.

Consequently, there were many widows and children of those Jewish men who ended up living in Jerusalem with very limited means. The amazing number of converts at Pentecost must have included some of these Jewish women and their children. Where were they to go for help? As followers of Jesus they were no longer welcome in the synagogues. There was no government assistance. Their own relatives may have turned away from them as heretics. They had become part of a large congregation that learned compassion and care for those who suffered. So the tensions of society infiltrated the church because for all our claims to be God's people, we sometimes forget what it means to follow Jesus.

What does a church do when it develops an "us vs. them" atmosphere? Do we choose sides? Do we assign a committee to study

the problem and bring a report? Do we tell everyone to quit fussing and act nice? Or do we face the situation with the guidance of God's Spirit and desire to do what is right? Although Acts does not give us an inspired blueprint for church organization or an established denominational structure, it clearly shows us how to operate as believers committed to acting as God's grace-shaped people. First, they distinguished between the key importance of proclaiming and teaching the Word of God for faith development, contrasted with practicing the ministry of God's love in caring for people. This first step was not made privately by the apostles, but in "a meeting of all the disciples (followers of Christ)" (v. 2). They divided these two areas of ministry as servants of the Word and servants of the tables.

Secondly, they enumerated the qualifications for those who would oversee practical ministries of the church. "They must be well-respected and endowed by the Spirit with exceptional wisdom" (v. 3). There is evidence of wise sensitivity in this process as they chose seven men, all of whose names are Greek! These men are identified with the very people who have been left out. The church has obviously prayed and listened to God in a situation that could have easily driven the church apart and blackened their reputation in Jerusalem. The community (congregation) presented these seven to the apostles, who prayed and laid hands on the seven (v. 6). We interpret this as the origin of the office of deacon. Certainly, the "laying on of hands" signals this is a very significant action. The text does not clarify whether the "laying on of hands" was done solely by the apostles or included the congregation. I have come to believe it was the latter because the congregation was involved from the first and was meant to be involved in the ongoing ministries.

We discover Philip in this remarkable experience of healing a conflict and establishing a primary ministry for the church in the world. He must have already gained a reputation for his deep personal faith, respected for his character and actions led by the Spirit. We will see his faith confirmed in other important experiences as we continue to study. God is adept at shaping the human heart when a person seeks God in life's varied experiences. One tragedy that has appeared many times in churches since the days of Philip has been division and

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Scripture: Acts 6:1-7

prejudice based on culture, race and traditions. I have preached in churches where the old "slave gallery" was obviously visible as a reminder of a time when racial prejudice was acceptable in the past. I have had a church member complain about "those people" attending our church because "they" were our enemies in war or are unwelcome immigrants. Such conflicts are heartbreaking and build a barrier between "us and them" that harms the witness of the church. Philip was part of a Spirit-empowered decision and ministry that tore down the barrier that could have seriously damaged the future of the Jerusalem church and its witness.

Like those early believers we can struggle with conflict and decisions. They lived where Jesus had taught, healed, debated with scholars, cleansed the Temple, was arrested, crucified and rose from the grave ... yet they continued to struggle with their own limitations and thinking. All believers live in an imperfect world. But the beauty and power of this story is that they faced conflict and turned it into a ministry that made them stronger. The Holy Spirit can open our eyes to possibilities. Remember, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). When we seek God's leading and cultivate the "fruit of the Spirit" in our thinking and doing, a problem or conflict can become ministry that changes lives.

The outcome of the Jerusalem conflict helps us see that there are solutions when we honestly seek God's help and follow the example of Jesus. In the world there is always conflict. Jesus faced conflict and rejection every day, but he dared show us the way of love and grace. He pushed the limits of religious and social custom when he used a Samaritan as an example of one who serves God, when he healed lepers or when he refused to stone a woman accused of adultery. He went beyond the rigidity and judgmental standards of the religious leaders. Philip understood this and so did the Jerusalem congregation when they sought God's leading and confronted their problem. Out of that conflict emerged a disciple named Philip whose life became an instrument of God's love. Learn from him!

Retired after more than 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.