

## I. Introduction

Good morning! Because of the Golden Week holidays, quite a few people were travelling the last two weeks, so I want to make sure everyone knows about our special challenge for the year. At the OIC annual General Meeting (AGM) two weeks ago, and again in last week's message, I brought a special challenge to our OIC family. Here it is: *"Let's Fill the Hall for the glory of God!"* The gospel is Good News and we want everyone to know Jesus. We want to glorify God by proclaiming the Name of Jesus throughout Osaka and beyond.

Here is the same challenge with more details and in prayer form: *"My specific prayer is for us to grow in love and outreach so that at 10:00 am on Easter Sunday, March 31st, 2013, this hall will be full of people giving thanks and praising God for the resurrection of our Lord Jesus."* This is a big goal. But, if we join together in prayer and service before the Lord, I think it is very possible. Imagine this hall completely full of people giving thanks to God on Easter Sunday. Imagine the joy of praising God for the resurrection of Jesus shoulder-to-shoulder with many brothers and sisters. Isn't it a wonderful thing to pray for?

Prayer is essential if we want to see this happen, but there are also many things we can do to contribute toward making this goal a reality. The key to useful action is love. In **John 13:34-34**, Jesus told the disciples, **"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."** When the world sees us loving one another, they will want to come and join us in fellowship and they will learn of Jesus and be saved. The goal is to fill the hall. The purpose is to glorify God. The key is love.

In the early church, they loved one another, shared all things and spent time together in fellowship. In our previous message in Acts, the closing verse was **Acts 5:42**, **"Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ."** When I read this I can feel the excitement and love of this community of Christians. Can you feel it also? Here is the Christian life of fellowship, love, and proclamation of the Good News of Jesus.

Let's follow the example of those first Christians, so we can learn to say, *"We are Christians. As followers of Christ Jesus, we love God and the people God has created. Therefore, we spend time with God in prayer; we serve others to show the love of Jesus, and we proclaim Jesus so that the people around us may know His love and be saved."* For some of us, this is not our current lifestyle, but I pray that by the grace of God this will become reality for all of us and also for our family, friends, and neighbors.

Let's move on and get into our Bible passage for today. Let's read Acts 6:1-7.

## II. Scripture Acts 6:1-7 (NIV 1984)

1 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. 2 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. 3 Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." 5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. 7 So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

### III. Teaching

In terms of culture, we can roughly divide the Jews that were in the Roman Empire into three groups. The first group, the Hebraic Jews, were born and raised in Israel and they read the Old Testament in the original Hebrew. The second group, the Grecian Jews, were born and raised as Jews outside of Israel and they read the Old Testament in a Greek translation called the Septuagint. The third group, the converts, were people who were born and raised outside of the Jewish faith, but converted and became Jews. These converts might also be considered as a subgroup within the Greek-speaking Jews since most of them came from outside of Israel and would not know Hebrew.



Sometimes we forget that the Jews were quite active in spreading the Jewish faith to other peoples. As it says in **Acts 15:21**, **“For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.”** As James shows in saying this, the Jewish faith was preached throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. The Grecian Jews and converts came from many nations and peoples. The common factor among them was mostly language, since Greek was spoken widely throughout the Roman Empire.

Now take a look again at **Acts 6:1**, **“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.”** Some time had passed between the end of Acts 5 and the beginning of Acts 6; Luke hints at this by saying, “in those days.” During the time that had passed the cultural and language differences between the Grecian and Hebraic Jews had led to some tension and possibly some discrimination, resulting in a complaint. Even in the early church, we see that Christians are still human, and problems will come.

Here at OIC also, we are all human and problems come up from time to time, often because of cultural and language differences. But we need to guard our hearts and relationships and focus always on loving one another. If we make loving one another a priority, we will avoid many problems and we will also find good solutions to the problems that do come.

In today’s passage, the church selected seven men to take charge of the daily distribution of food as a solution to the problem. **Acts 6:5b** gives us their names, **“They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.”** It is not obvious to us, but the early readers of Acts would have noticed immediately that all of these names are Greek names. In other words, with the agreement of the whole congregation, Grecian Jews were appointed to take charge of the distribution of the food so that there would be no possibility of the Grecian widows being neglected. Also, it is specifically noted that one convert to Judaism was included in the group, as well, probably to make sure that the converts were represented as a group. It was a good solution to a difficult problem.

Many Bible scholars consider these seven men as the first deacons of the church. Deacons participated in preaching and teaching, as we will see later in Acts, but the primary ministry of the deacons was in taking care of the physical needs of the church. In the New Testament, the ministry of deacons is mentioned in many places and church history shows that this was established as a regular office of the church. The New Testament also shows that women served as deacons; so there were deaconesses as well as deacons. For example, **Romans 16:1** tells us, **“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant[a] of the church in Cenchrea.”** This translation (NIV1984) says, “servant,” but there is a footnote [a] which says, “deaconess.”



A deacon is basically a servant of the church, so servant is not a bad translation, but we want to make sure that we realize that the Bible clearly records that both men and women served as deacons. Some translations make this completely clear, for example, the Revised standard Version (RSV) in English and the Shinkaiyaku in Japanese. Romans 16:1 in the RSV says, **“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a**

## deaconess of the church at Cenchre-ae.”

Let's take a few minutes to notice how the seven men were selected for this service. In **Acts 6:2** it says, “So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, **“It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.”** The apostles gathered all of the disciples together. In other words, to address the problem, they began by holding a general meeting of the whole church. Then in **Acts 6:3-4** it says, **“Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”** Who chose the seven men? The apostles did not choose the seven men; they asked the whole church to choose seven men from among the congregation.

**Acts 6:5-6, “This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.”** The apostles asked the congregation to choose seven men. The congregation selected the men. And then the apostles confirmed the choice by laying hands on the men and praying for them. Looking at this process, it is clear that the apostles had authority over the process. But it is also clear that the apostles encouraged the congregation as a whole to take a central role in deciding how to deal with the problem that had come up.

At our Annual General Meeting (AGM) two weeks ago, our OIC congregation chose the new Church Council members for the coming year. Next week, we will ask the new Council members to come up on stage so that we can introduce them and pray for them. It is wonderful to see that there is a real continuity between how we chose the Council and how the seven men here in Acts 6 were chosen. But there are some differences also. For example, here at OIC, we select people for one year terms, but in Acts the selections are permanent.

Later on in Acts, as the church expands beyond Jerusalem and local congregation are formed that are not under the direct supervision of the apostles, we will see that the early church had elders as well as deacons. The elders and deacons had somewhat different ministry roles. The elders focused more on teaching, preaching, and prayer, like the apostles before them. On the other hand, the deacons focused more on practical ministry, like the seven men chosen here. As we continue through Acts, we will try to learn from the early church and see whether we should make any changes in how things are done at OIC. If any significant changes are made, in accordance with our church constitution, the changes would have to be approved at a general meeting of the church. So it is possible that we will consider some changes, but nothing will be done suddenly. Proper procedures will be followed.

**Acts 6:7, “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”** The immediate problem was solved. The leadership responsibilities were shared more widely. The apostles, and the elders after them, focused their time and energy on prayer, on teaching the Word, and on preaching the Good News of Jesus. The seven men, and all of the deacons and deaconesses after them, focused on making sure the practical ministry was done well and the property of the church was managed responsibly. Both ministries are essential and both are very important. But they are different and they reflect different gifts and callings. However, the different ministry roles are not exclusive. As we will see next week, at least one member of the seven also engaged in preaching and teaching. And I am sure the apostles continued to serve in physical ministries when time permitted, but prayer and the Word were their first priorities.

## IV. Conclusion

When problems are addressed and solved, the way is open for the church to grow. Satan, the enemy of God and the church, tries to disrupt the church with temptations, distractions, false teaching, and other evil strategies. But through prayer, the wisdom of the Word, and the power of the Holy Spirit, we can defeat the plans of the evil one. In Acts 6:7, it tells us that the church was growing rapidly and that there were even many Jewish priests coming to faith. This is



remarkable, because these are the priests who were responsible for the old sacrificial system at the temple. In embracing Christ, they would soon be giving up their role at the temple, because Christ Jesus made the final and perfect sacrifice on the cross.

Let's close with the words of Isaiah the prophet, these words remind us all of how our Lord Jesus has paid for our sins on the cross. **(Isaiah 53:5-69) "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."**

Let's pray.

V. Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father,

We praise Your Holy Name and give thanks for the wonders of Your grace and mercy. Your power and wisdom are beyond all human understanding. Your glory is eternal and unchanging. Your love is unending and perfect. Lord God Almighty, You demonstrated Your grace and proved Your love at the cross of Christ Jesus. Help us to remember this always. Teach us to trust in You and walk by Your Holy Spirit. Give us wisdom and strength for each day. We praise Your Holy Name and give thanks for Your wonderful love and grace. In Jesus' precious Name I pray, amen.