



When the Church Learns to be the Church: *A Study Based on Acts 6:1-7*¹

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Jesus gave his most explicit and direct teaching about what the disciples were expected to do, just once—on the mountainside, just before he ascended into heaven. Finally, then, the disciples were clear about what was expected of them and what Jesus had meant when he mentioned earlier, “I will build my church”(Matthew 16:18).

Matthew 28:19 “Therefore, **go and make disciples** of all nations, **baptizing them** in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and **teaching them to obey** everything I have commanded you.” The two processes which describe disciple-making are baptizing (marking God’s people) and teaching to *obedience*, not just teaching *information*, but bringing people toward *obedience to all things*. A very large order!

Acts 1:8 “. . . and you will be my witnesses in **Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**” The sequence of outreach from where the disciples were then residing is apparent. The hazard of jumping too far too fast always works against effectiveness in evangelistic outreach. Missionaries, especially, should be experienced in one stage after another.

The importance of coping with culture is evident in Jesus travels with his disciples. Throughout the *Acts* it is also emphasized. Early in Acts the reasons for the first large-scale hindrance in the church are described as the failure of the people of God to guard against narrowness, bigotry, and prejudice—all very human traits.

Acts 6: **We have a problem . . . It is not right for us to be distracted from worship . . . by prejudice.** Luke provides a vital piece of information: the seven men chosen (deliberately) had Greco-Roman names. Thus we know that the majority decided that they would need the help, insight, and leadership of the minority if the problem of discrimination and neglect was to be solved. Today in many places the church looks like the global equivalent of the original Jerusalem tension (Acts 6). Here are some descriptions of what is happening in the church in many places:

1. The church of Jesus Christ is emerging from scattered isolation as small units of like-culture persons.
2. Donald McGavran’s teachings about the *Homogeneous Unit Principle* (“HUP”) are mis-applied. The so-called “principle” may have value *descriptively*, but surely if it is interpreted and applied *prescriptively* it keeps the church weak.
3. Where churches are already planted one of the greatest needs is to recognize and solve the culture-based tensions that distract the church.
4. Willingness to trust and listen to the minorities in within the church is a great need in almost every situation.

¹ Ted Ward. When the Church Learns to be the Church: A Study Based on Acts 6: 1-7. Prepared for discussions at China Evangelical Divinity School/Evangel College Chapel. Hong Kong, June 1998

The ultimate good toward which churches should be moving is not simply inter-ethnic harmony, but that the people of each congregation should find their unity in Christ, rather than in their historic cultural roots.

Gal. 3:26-28: “. . . for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Christian Education and the Church

Evangel College

To make disciples . . . baptizing and teaching them to obey. . . . (Matthew 28:19)

“Therefore, **go and make disciples** of all nations, **baptizing them** in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and **teaching them to obey** everything I have commanded you.” The two processes which describe disciple-making are baptizing (marking God’s people) and teaching to *obedience*, not just teaching *information*, but bringing people toward *obedience to all things*. These are the rightful concerns of Christian education.

First, we should clear up some basic misunderstandings about Christian education: **Christian education is not . . .** a division of church work for children, a way to give women in the church something useful to do, something to do with children while adults worship. Instead, we need to think of Christian education in this way: **Christian education is . . .** lifelong encouragement of the learning of obedience to Christ, an inseparable part of the whole ministry of the gospel, a worthy ministry in which all the people of God can participate, many as leaders and teachers. The church that has an effective Christian Education ministry is likely to have the following characteristics:

In this church these things are generally true . . .

- The people of God are learning, developing, and maturing as Christians.
- The people of God are helping each other in Christian development.
- The pastor is involved in important supportive ways, but is not the “whole show.”
- The pastor’s task is to share leadership and to build up the competencies of the whole body of Christ—*through others!*
- The worship, sermons, teaching in classes, and social experiences within the church are all harmonized and important related parts of the whole church life.

In this church certain things are generally avoided . . .

- Dividing people into arbitrary groups for too many different things in such a way as to isolate older from younger, men from women, newer from more experienced and thus to work against a sense of unity in the body of Christ.
- Passive participation—especially too much time listening with no opportunities for discussion, experiencing together, and practical ministry activity.
- Assuming that certain people, either because of age or of spiritual maturity, are no longer learners.
- Dividing Christian education into a kind of school experience that is separated from worship and pastoral ministry.