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Balla Péter:

Dealing with Tensions in the Early Church: The Example of Acts 6,1–7¹

Abstract

Ecclesiology has to include every aspect of the life of the church; thus it has to discuss also the way tension is dealt with in the church. Acts 6,1–7 can be studied from this perspective. This paper is based on the thesis of Martin Hengel that the Hellenists in the passage are Christians of Jewish origin whose main language was Greek. Acts 6 is not seen as a pointer to two separated – or even opposing – groups in early Christianity. Gerd Theissen's thesis is presented that the seven men in Acts 6 are elected as local leaders for the Jerusalem church. On the basis of these works and some further commentaries, five points are advanced that we can learn for our ecclesiology from the example of the first Christians: 1. Luke does not paint an ideal picture: he narrates that there were tensions in the early church. In this case, it was the growth of the early congregation that led to this tension: some people were neglected. 2. The early church wanted to care for one another, so when they failed to do so, they did not push aside this problem but they dealt with it in the fellowship of the congregation. 3. The Twelve played a leading role, but they gave freedom for the others as well. 4. There were three main elements of appointing ministers: the leaders should be led by the Spirit of God; other people should bear good testimony about them; wisdom is needed even in the matters of food distribution. 5. The problem of the widows was not solved on the surface level, but on a higher level: the structure of the congregation was clarified. To sum up, Acts 6,1–7 is not about enmity and contradiction in the early church; rather, it is a good example how to solve tensions.

Keywords: early church, tension, Twelve, disciples, appointing.

One aspect of ecclesiology is the way tension is dealt with in the church. The first longer section of the Acts of the Apostles portrays the first period of the early church: the congregation in Jerusalem. It is useful also for the present life of the church to study the example of the first Christians. In this concrete case in Acts 6,1–7, in the life of the first Christian community, *“the solution of a problem leads to the expansion of the church”* (as C. K. Barrett has put it, 1994, 303). In this paper we look at one little scene in the life of the early church as it is narrated in the first section of Acts 6. It has become the focus of some recent research, so we can also use it as a theme that allows some insight into recent scholarship in New Testament studies.

The passage of Acts 6,1–7 has been studied carefully by Martin Hengel in a long essay in 1975. One of his main theses is that the Hellenists in the passage are Christians of

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Jewish origin whose main language was Greek. This thesis has been widely followed ever since. For example, in their recent commentaries on Acts, Ben Witherington (1998, 242) and Dormeyer and Galindo (2003, 101) agree with this view. Hengel and Witherington also summarize other views on the meaning of the term “Hellenists” in Acts 6, and they argue against those views in a convincing way.

It is important to see that in contrast to earlier scholarship, Acts 6 is not seen by more recent scholars as a pointer to two separated – or even opposing – groups in early Christianity. Already Hengel prepared the first steps to refute the thesis of F. C. Baur concerning a theological conflict between “Hellenists” and “Hebrews” in the early church, but Gerd Theissen has even more convincingly shown that Acts 6 is not evidence for two diverging or competing groups. Theissen (in an article for a *Festschrift* in honour of Martin Hengel in 1996, see esp. p. 328) argues that the seven men in Acts 6 are elected as local leaders for the Jerusalem church, whereas the Twelve are primarily seen as the leaders for the whole nation, – that is why the Twelve travel widely and they do not spend much time in Jerusalem (Paul can meet only a few of them when he later goes up to Jerusalem, as narrated in Gal 1–2). In a recent commentary, Wilfried Eckey (2000, 148) agrees with this thesis of Gerd Theissen.

Ben Witherington affirms against Baur and others that (1998, 242): “there is nothing in Acts 6 that suggests a significant ‘doctrinal rift’ between these two groups of Christians...” (i.e. between the “Hebrews” and the “Hellenists”). Howard Marshall also affirms that the two groups were in close contact with one another (1980, 125).

In the following, I shall summarize some points that we can learn for our ecclesiology from the example of the first Christians. When doing so, I shall not only draw on the literature mentioned above, but advance some of my own views as well. I mention briefly that in the literature some would argue that Luke used sources, and he also changed them. Some would emphasize that he also added his own material (see e.g. Roloff 1988, 107–108; Pesch 1986, 226). In this paper I do not address the issue of the historical reliability of Acts. After a long period of critical scepticism we can see in our days a growing number of scholars who take the present text of Acts as a reliable source for our knowledge of the early church (see e.g. the series *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, edited by Bruce Winter). In my paper, I also approach the text with this working hypothesis: that in it Luke has preserved traditions of the early church which can allow us an insight into how they dealt with tension.

First, it is important to see that Luke does not paint an ideal picture: he narrates that there were tensions in the early church. He already mentioned one such tension in chapter 5 (the episode of Ananias and Sapphira), and he reports a certain murmuring in chapter 6 (v. 1). The growth of the early congregation leads to this tension, because there were so many new members that some of the widows of the Greek speaking members were neglected in the daily distribution of food. It is possible, even likely, that these widows were Jews who settled home to the Holy Land in a later phase of their life, and they were probably not poor, however, when the congregation cared for their elderly, they wanted to have an equal share (see e.g. Theissen’s arguments in this regard, 1996, 329–330). The growth

of the church is a joy, but it can lead to some people being neglected – and such a problem has to be dealt with. We should observe that when the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews, this was not done in secret, but in an open and public way. The problem was brought to the surface.

Secondly, the early church wanted to care for one another, so when they failed to do so, they did not push aside this problem but they dealt with it in the fellowship of the congregation. The Twelve summoned the congregation (v. 2), in order to discuss the matter. No one, not even the widows, were of lower value. In the body of Christ, every member was needed (see also 1 Cor 12). However, equal value did not mean that everyone had to carry out the same ministry. The Twelve said: “*It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.*” Barrett emphasizes that we should not think that this story is the origin of the order of the deacons (1994, 304), because the Greek noun, *diakonos*, does not occur in the passage, but only the verbal form of it (“to serve”). However, some differentiation of the ministry began, because the Apostles’ main ministry was to preach. It is likely that up to this point they looked after the ministry around the table as well (see Acts 4:35 – and Marshall 1980, 125), and this ministry was not of a lower value. Yet they had to give a priority to preaching – this was their special calling. The differentiation did not mean that the seven men did not preach, but only served in caring for the poor: we can see later in Acts that Stephen and Philip also proclaimed the word of God. Barrett calls them “*Evangelisten*” and “*Armenpfleger*”, that is, evangelists and those caring for the poor (1994, 306). They were the first two in the list of the seven, and their leading role also included the preaching of the word. It is interesting to note that while most commentators hold that Philip the evangelist is not the same as Philip, the apostle (see e.g. Marshall 1980, 127), Gerd Theissen raises the possibility that Philip may be a real connecting point between the seven and the Twelve, i.e. the Philip of Acts 6 may also be an apostle of Jesus (1996, 331–332). Whether or not this strong connection between the two groups may be provided by the person of Philip, their ministry did have some overlap. The difference lays in emphasis: one group had the primary task of preaching, and the other had the primary task of daily provision for the poor, but both groups may have carried out the other task as well, when need has arisen.

Thirdly, the Twelve played a leading role, but they gave freedom for the others as well. Although it was the Twelve who summoned the congregation, but they told the Hellenists to elect the seven men (v. 3). After the congregation elected them, they set them before the Apostles (v. 6). Although Barrett argues that the Greek grammar would require that the whole congregation is the subject of the laying on of hands (1994, 315), it is more likely that the Apostles were carrying out this act of ordination (so Marshall 1980, 127, and many others). Marshall (*ibid.*) argues that the rite of laying on of hands “*indicated a conferring of authority, and the accompanying prayer was for the power of the Spirit to fill the recipients (cf. Dt. 34:9).*”

Fourthly, it is helpful to observe the three main elements of appointing ministers (see e.g. Barrett 1994, 304). To quote it but briefly from the text of Acts (6,3): “*pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom*”. It is important that

the leaders should be led by the Spirit of God, but that other people should bear good testimony about them, too. Wisdom is needed even in the matters of food distribution – this is a further pointer to the importance of each and every ministry in the church. In this context, it is worth pointing out that even the ministry of the word of God is referred to with the Greek word *diakonia* in v. 4.

Finally, it is interesting to observe that on the surface of the narrative the widows are mentioned only at the beginning of the episode, so it may seem that their question was not answered at the end at all. However, we may see this from another perspective as well. We might argue that the problem was solved on a higher level: the structure of the congregation was clarified. Leaders were elected and they in turn probably dealt with the concrete matter. In other words, this concrete dealing with a tension can also imply that every matter is important in the congregation, even the caring for the widows, but it can also involve providing a solution on a higher level, namely by providing for the order of the whole congregation.

To sum up, we do not have to see in Acts 6,1–7 a text about two distinct Christian worshipping communities in Jerusalem. This text is not about enmity and contradiction in the early church. It is true that the “Hellenists” and the “Hebrews” may have had different theological emphases as regards the temple – this may be inferred from the rest of chapter six and from Stephen’s speech in chapter seven. Theissen may be right when he speaks of different theological streams in the early church (1996, 340). This would require a study of the texts following upon our passage in Acts 6,1–7. However, Theissen affirms that our texts do not speak about any “split” (*Spaltung*, 1996, 340). On the other hand, this passage is a warning that even a growing church has to face tensions. If the church can solve these tensions under the rule of the Spirit of God, then further blessing and growth can follow – as it was the case in the early church in Jerusalem: they continued to grow, according to the final verse of this passage (v. 7): “And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.”

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