



THE BLAZING CENTER QUALIFIES

BY PAUL ROBINSON

TEXT:

Acts 6:1-15

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Among so many amazing things we know about the Holy Spirit, we know from Acts 6:1-15 that the Blazing Center qualifies for service. The church in Jerusalem was still in its infancy, but they were growing and adding disciples daily.

Yet the power of the movement was threatened by a conflict that arose between the Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews over the daily distribution of food. The Hellenists, or Jews who spoke Greek and who had adopted elements of Greek culture, believe their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food—in contrast to the Hebrew widows who spoke Aramaic.

This wasn't a resource problem because the believers had decided to pool their resources. According to Acts 4:34, "There were no needy persons among them." They likely had enough food—the conflict was around how resources were being allocated. They were in the middle of a problem based on a lack of equity. Equity means everyone has equal opportunities because resources are allocated based on the degree of access. People with greater wealth, education, status, and power have easier access to societal rewards, but others have less access or in some cases, no access. This is a reality Jews were familiar with.

The Torah commands that accommodations be made for widows and other vulnerable people in society. Landowners were instructed to leave the edges of their fields unplowed so that poor people could have enough food to survive (Leviticus 19:9-10). Several Old Testament prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Malachi lifted up concerns for the poor and decried the marginalization of widows and orphans (Isaiah 1:17, 23; 10:1; Jeremiah 5:28; 7:6; 22:3; Malachi 3:5).

The early church was also experiencing challenges related to cultural differences:

- They were all Jewish disciples and lovers of Jesus.
- They were pooling their resources.
- They were doing life together in community, but they were not all the same.

They were experiencing challenges related to differences that made a difference.

There are a ton of things that excite me about this early community of faith:

1. They were wrestling with what it meant to take care the most vulnerable in their midst. The church today must also be wrestling with this challenge. Who are the most vulnerable among us, and how are we responding to them? Like the early church, our prayers and responses should be led by the Holy Spirit, who is the Blazing Center of our mission.



2. When faced with cultural conflict, they didn't ignore the problem or demonize those who expressed concern. As people of faith, we've got to learn to listen for "helpful insights" that are sometimes hidden in a critique. My mother used to say that in life you've got to learn to "eat the fruit and spit out the seeds." I'm still learning!
3. The apostles proposed a plan of action that included the whole community. Let's be honest: It's difficult to make big decisions with a bunch of folks. The "disciples" in our text were the whole community of believers. What likely happened is that the apostles conferred among themselves, prayed, and felt led to propose a solution to the larger community. The apostles were themselves full of the Holy Spirit and handpicked by Jesus (save one, Matthais, who was chosen to replace Judas). Their solution included allowing the community to pick its own leaders, who as it turns out were all men with Greek names.

We could learn a lot from this early church. No one likes it when someone makes a decision that impacts them without their involvement. Our ministry solutions should be grounded and informed by the communities that will be impacted by those decisions. Anything less is ministry malpractice.

We see that the apostles, as positional leaders, were qualified by the Holy Spirit, but the larger community of disciples were also qualified to contribute to a solution that was designed to bring not only equity but also shalom. Shalom is a peace that comes when everything is complete and whole. The purpose of justice in Hebrew society was to restore and sustain shalom. The shalom of this community had been broken, but the community came up with a decision that would help restore it. Shalom should be our word. We must seek ways to restore and sustain shalom in our own communities.

The proposal from the apostles to choose seven men

"pleased the whole group." We recognize that this society was a patriarchal one, where women often had very different experiences than men. Unfortunately, our society still suffers in some respects from disparate treatment of women as compared to men. We've got to do better. One way we can do better is making sure we don't keep just selecting men to serve in leadership. If our leadership teams include women when opportunities arise for service, women will also be chosen. Moreover, the ECC is a church committed to the multiethnic mosaic and as such should reflect this value in our decision-making and leadership—not unlike the vision of Revelation 7:9.

Getting the right people on your team is a critical step for effective leadership. The vision was cast by the apostles and enthusiastically endorsed by the people, but it would not work without choosing the right people to fill the job. The job description that the apostles designed was not like any I have ever seen, even for ministry positions. They listed three requirements for this important function: men of good report, full of the Holy Spirit, and full of wisdom.

1. **Pick people with a good report.** These leaders would be handling large sums of money, taking care of vulnerable people, as well as everyone else. Your reputation in the community matters. Integrity matters as a foundation for godly service.
2. **Pick people who are full of the Holy Spirit.** How do we measure this? The Scriptures say that we are known by the fruit we bear. Examine the fruit. (See Galatians 5:16-25; 1 Corinthians 13; Acts 1:8.) The Holy Spirit equips us with dynamite power to witness, to evangelize, to share the good news!
3. **Pick people full of wisdom.** Wisdom is the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment. Wisdom is born over time, through good seasons and bad, ups and downs, and in the biblical sense a reliance on God. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10).



It's ironic to me that there was no mention of customer service skills, experience in food service, or even purchasing when the church chose those early leaders. It seems that the skills specific to the task were those they would learn on the job. They were qualified because the Holy Spirit made them qualified. Their integrity, Spirit-filled life and wise leadership made them perfect for the job.

At the church where I grew up there was a missionary by the name of Frances Bynum. She wasn't a missionary in the way Covenanters understand missionaries. She didn't spend time spreading the gospel in a foreign land and serving indigenous people. But in my tradition, there were women called by God and sanctioned by the church to bring the good news of Christ to neighborhoods and new church plants, often led by other women called missionaries. They didn't have big budgets, but they had big hearts and a passion for lost souls. Missionary Bynum developed quite a reputation for preaching, teaching, and being led by the Spirit.

One day an aspiring young missionary asked Missionary Bynum how she became so "anointed." In other words, how did you become so "filled by the Spirit of God" as evidenced by your service? As the story goes, Missionary Bynum turned to the young woman and said, "My anointing came from working in the kitchen serving the saints meals." Sometimes the most thankless jobs in ministry are places and spaces where God breaks you and molds you into what he wants you to be. It is in this holy crucible that we learn to trust God and love our neighbors as ourselves. We can't afford to look down on any ministry opportunity that God affords. Early in the planting of Grace Outreach Covenant Church, I learned the importance of doing everything unto the Lord and not unto humans.

Make sure you walk with Integrity. Stay in communion with God, practice living the fruit of the Spirit, and ask God for wisdom.

It's safe to assume that the leaders the early church

selected had all these basic qualifications, but Stephen, who would later go on to be martyred, was also Full of Faith. We know that "faith comes by hearing" and it is clear from the sermon Stephen preached before he died that he knew the word. You might say that Stephen and Phillip were overqualified for the job. They could do the job as described, but clearly the Holy Spirit, who does the qualifying, was preparing them and opening doors for them to make an even greater impact on the kingdom. What is God preparing you for? Your big break may begin with a small opening. Make the most of it!

It's not clear how or when it happened, but God began to open doors for Stephen and under the power of God he "performed great wonders and signs among the people." When persecution came to the church, he preached the sermon of his life. At his stoning, a young Saul was present, and we know God had a different plan for his life too. Phillip would go on to proclaim Jesus in the city of Samaria, cast out unclean spirits, and heal many people. He led the Ethiopian man to Christ, and some theologians argue that it was this man who helped to bring the gospel to Africa.

Leverage all that you can in this life to bolster your education, skills, and experience, but never forget that it is the Holy Spirit, the Blazing Center of our mission that qualifies for service.