

Apostolic Priorities (Acts 6:1-7)^a

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Acts 6:1-7¹

- Acts 6:1 - *Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.*
- Acts 6:2 - *Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.*
- Acts 6:3 - *"Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;*
- Acts 6:4 - *"but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."*
- Acts 6:5 - *And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch,*
- Acts 6:6 - *whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.*
- Acts 6:7 - *Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.*

Preliminary Comments

1. **Who were the "Hellenists"?**
2. **The beginning of what will become the governmental structure of the Church, according to the New Testament: elders, deacons, congregation**
3. **Biblical definition of a true widow (to be provided for by the Church) - see 1 Timothy 5**

Apostolic Priorities

1. **Acts 6:2 - *Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables."***
 - A. **"leave the word of God"**
 - I. **leave is from καταλείπω [kataleipō], meaning to "leave behind, abandon, neglect, lose concern for"**
 - B. **Acts 6:4 - . . . we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word**

- I. “ministry” of the word = **διακονία** [*diakonia*]
 - II. Elders are “deacons” (servants) too - but they are serving with a focus on God’s Word
 - III. “give ourselves continually to” = **προσκαρτερέω** [*proskartereō*], to stay close at hand, to associate closely with, to persevere in, to keep on with devotion, to serve personally with faithfulness
 - a. Paul wrote to Timothy, *And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also* (2Ti. 2:2).
- C. The Apostles, acting in what would come to be the role of Elders, desired to do works of service, but . . .
- I. Time limitations would force them to choose between two good things: prayer and service of the Word vs. physical acts of service—helping oversee the needs of the widows.
 - II. They would have to choose between that which was good and that which was best.
 - III. In reality, they were choosing between “two dimensions” of relationship: horizontal and vertical.

2. Two dimensions of relationship

- A. Man-to-Man (and woman)
- B. We can view Biblical Christianity as a cross with a vertical beam and a horizontal beam.
- C. Christianity is out of balance when either direction is neglected
- D. Without the horizontal (man-to-man) relationship, Christianity tends toward monasticism, often combined with elements of mysticism. It moves away from engaging the culture and loses its evangelistic purpose
- E. Without the vertical (man-to-God) relationship, Christianity becomes just another philosophy promoting love for fellow man through social projects and involvements, also losing its evangelistic purpose
- F. Just as with a cross, *the horizontal beam depends upon the vertical beam*

for support! Without the vertical beam, the horizontal beam falls to the ground.

3. What did Jesus say about these two relational dimensions?

- A. In Matthew [22:36-40](#), a lawyer asks Jesus a question: *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”* Jesus said to him, *“You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”*
- B. Jesus identified a single, “first and great commandment,” based upon Deuteronomy [6:5](#)
- I. This is the vertical dimension: the relationship between man-and-God: *You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.*
 - II. Interestingly, this “first and great commandment” makes *no mention* of one’s obligation to fellow man!
- C. The lawyer had asked Jesus to identify a single “great commandment” but, as was often the case, Jesus responded with more than what He was asked: He outlined two commandments. Why?
- I. The second commandment is based on Leviticus [19:18](#).
 - II. Jesus indicated that both commandments were needed in order to capture the heart of the teachings within the Law and Prophets (e.g., the entire known Scriptures at that time).
 - III. The Law and the Prophets, the teachings of the Old Testament, *depend upon both* dimensions of relationship. To focus exclusively upon one of the dimensions without the other is to omit important teaching from God’s Word—to fall short of how God intends believers to walk as worshippers and witnesses in the world.
- D. Not equal
- I. Jesus referred to one command as first and the other as second: notice He did not say they were both of equal importance!
 - II. This same relative priority is evident within the ten commandments (Ex. [20](#)).

a. Vertical dimension of relationship (man-to-God)

- i. #1, God Alone (Ex. 20:2-3)
- ii. #2, Representation of God (Ex. 20:4-6)
- iii. #3, Name of God (Ex. 20:7)
- iv. #4, Sabbath to God (Ex. 20:8-11)

b. Horizontal dimension of relationship (man-to-man) : parents, neighbor, fellow-man

- i. #5, Honor Mother and Father, (Ex. 20:12)
- ii. #6, Murder, (Ex. 20:13)
- iii. #7, Adultery, (Ex. 20:14)
- iv. #8, Steal, (Ex. 20:15)
- v. #9, False Witness, (Ex. 20:16)
- vi. #10, Covet, (Ex. 20:17)

III. The first commandment, said Jesus, was of greater importance: it is the Christian's top priority!

IV. Jesus said the foundation of correct living for believers is our relationship, first and foremost, with God.

V. Only then, when that foundation is in established an maintained, are we to look horizontally: to ministry and evangelization involving fellow man.

VI. Today's passage in Acts demonstrates that the Apostles understood and maintained this priority.

- a. **As leaders within the body of Christ, they placed a clear priority on their service in prayer and the Word above personal involvement meeting the practical needs of the widows.**
- b. **Yet they also found a way to fulfill the practical ministry needs to the widows—even if they themselves were not directly involved.**

E. What have we learned so far?

I. The entire teaching of the Scriptures can be summarized by two commands involving others:

- a. **A vertical dimension concerning our relationship with God**
- b. **A horizontal dimension concerning our relationship with fellow-man**

- II. If either command, and its associated relational dimension, is neglected, the result is no longer true Christianity as intended by God
- III. Even so, our primary focus must be on our ministry to God, rather than to man
- IV. Christian living is about relationship, it is not a lone-ranger pursuit!

4. When the lesser command eclipses the greater command

A. Although both relational dimensions are mandatory for biblical Christianity to remain true to God's intentions, recognizing and maintaining their relative priority is crucial!

B. What happens when a church, or Christianity as a whole, emphasizes the second command over the first command?

- I. The horizontal relationship with fellow-man is allowed to eclipse the vertical relationship with God.
- II. Our Christian witness and practice then falls under the condemnation which Jesus gave the church at Ephesus, one of the seven churches of Asia:

a. Revelation **2:1-4** - *To the angel of the church of Ephesus write, 'These things says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand, who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands: I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars; and you have persevered and have patience, and have labored for My name's sake and have not become weary. Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love.*

C. What causes churches, ministries and entire denominations to elevate their horizontal relationship with fellow-man over their vertical relationship with God?

I. Physicality: we can see others, we can't see God Who is Spirit

a. We can directly see the result of our ministry to fellow-man—especially the appreciation we may receive as a result.

b. The response of people to our “good works” feeds our pride.

- c. **Social works are accepted by and promoted by nearly all belief systems, regardless of significant differences in beliefs about God.**

II. Religion vs. relationship: confusing the relationship between faith and works (Jas. [2:14-18](#))

- a. **The NT indicates that our good works spring from our born-again relationship with God (Jas. [2:14-18](#)).**
- b. **Faith precedes Christian works and provides the “engine” motivating those works**
 - i. Ephesians [2:8-10](#) - *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.*
 - ii. First, salvation through faith, then we walk in works.
- c. **The attraction to works: a ministry which elevates works involving fellow-man over relationship with God will often be seen as “good religion” by the world.**
- d. **The emphasis on works will be misunderstood as the *means* by which one gains God’s approval and ultimately wins acceptance into heaven.**
- e. **This, in turn, confirms unbelievers in their self-righteousness and becomes a stumbling block to their salvation, inhibiting or obscuring the true message of the gospel.**

III. Seeking the approval of men

- a. **When we elevate the horizontal relationship above the vertical, we will suppress that which is unpopular—downplaying hard, but essential truths concerning God.**
- b. **The message of our inadequacy and lost condition before God is unpleasant and unpopular, not to mention the only way of salvation via the cross.³**
- c. **Accommodation of diverse views, rather than confrontation with narrow truths, will characterize our ministry.**

The radicals of the 1960s have grown up and are now running the culture, and as a result, the Bible's exclusive and

authoritative message is openly detested. Shocked that their fellow citizens are labeling them unloving and intolerant, and naively hoping to regain the cultural acceptance of a generation past, many evangelicals are hitching their wagon to the rising star of social involvement. Social action is safe. It avoids the scandal of the gospel. It allows churches to be active *and* to be accepted by the world.⁴

d. We become “friends” of the world, thereby identifying with the enemies of God

i. James 4:4 - *Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*

e. When our relational priorities are according to the NT and we maintain the vertical relationship above the horizontal, Jesus said we should expect scorn and persecution:

i. John 15:19-20 - *If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. . . .*

5. Examples where social concerns (the horizontal relationship) have eclipsed pleasing God (the vertical relationship)

I. Missions

a. Focusing upon social justice and social action rather than personal evangelization.

Evangelical missions in Africa is changing. Or more accurately, it has changed. In the past, the bulk of the theologically conservative missionaries in Africa came to do church planting and leadership training. No longer. Today many of the new missionaries being sent are focused on social relief, with the church tacked on as a theological addendum. By all appearances there has been a mega-shift in evangelical missions away from church planting and leadership training toward social justice or social action. . . . the West is currently sending primarily two kinds of missionaries to Africa: first, missionaries who are unprepared to truly help the African church—wonderful, compassionate, college-age girls who have come to do orphan care; and second, missionaries who are underprepared to help the African church—enthusiastic men or couples who are eager to lead mercy projects, but whose lack of theological training and ministry experience means that they can offer little help of real significance to the African church. The work they do is emotionally rewarding for the missionaries and for the

churches that send them. However, fewer and fewer of the kinds of missionaries who will make a long-term difference in Africa—Bible translators, church planters, and leadership trainers—are being sent.⁵

b. World Vision

In 1950, Dr Bob Pierce, an American evangelist and war correspondent during the Korean War, founded World Vision to provide emergency care for war orphans in Korea. More than 60 years later, Child Sponsorship has evolved into a child - focused development programme, enabling communities to participate in their own transformation to bring about lasting and sustainable change.⁶

World Vision is not an evangelical organisation and believes nobody should be coerced or manipulated into converting to Christianity.⁷

c. World Vision's recent flip-flop concerning acceptance of homosexual marriage.

II. The homosexual agenda

- a. **Perverting God's design for marriage and the family**
- b. **Denial of clearly-defined sexual sin**
- c. **Elevating love/acceptance over truth**
- d. **Following after the culture rather than confronting it with God's truth**

III. The feminist agenda

- a. **Denying God's intentional created distinctions between man and woman**
- b. **Denying the distinct and complementarian roles of man and woman**
- c. **Following after the culture rather than confronting it with God's truth**

IV. The green agenda - the perversion and hijacking of Biblical teaching concerning dominion

- a. **Embracing evolution as God's mechanism for creation: man is merely a more highly-evolved animal with responsibility to watch over the less-evolved animals**

b. The primary concern is the destruction of the earth because of environmental insensitivity⁹

- i. But Scripture indicates the land is truly defiled by unrighteous behavior and personal sin. For example, by the murdering of millions of innocent children at the hands of abortion on demand.¹⁰

c. Concern for the temporal salvation of the earth rather than the eternal salvation of individuals from hell (a literal hell is often denied).

“I consider the first Earth Day in 1970 my second birthday.” . . . I reflected on my experience of that important day, “James Dator, then a political scientist with the University of Hawaii, spoke on campus about the future of the environment and the challenges facing us in the coming decade. It was easily the most disturbing presentation I had ever heard. It had never occurred to me that the future might be radically different from the present. This was the beginning of a process in which I was, quite literally, born again. The more I struggled with the issues Dator raised about sustainability and the growing inequality in society, the more his message became a call. These concerns have been the center of my life and ministry ever since. . . . As followers of Jesus Christ, we need to remind ourselves that the creator God has not lost control. Scripture’s promise is that in Christ all things will be made whole, including God’s good creation. Once we reconnect to a confident hope that God intends to restore creation instead of destroy it, we confront the question of how we can become more fully a part of this process of restoration. . . . Certainly a call to create simpler, more sustainable lives is part of it, but followers of Jesus aren’t called to just do a simpler version of the American dream. We are called to reimagine it and reinvent it. Considering the broad spectrum of churches in North America, this will be a huge challenge. Unless we help these sincere believers examine some of their fundamental life assumptions, we will never be able to persuade most of them to make the changes that will be necessary. . . . many of these good people not only contribute to our huge and growing carbon footprint, but participate in an extravagant expenditure of time and money on self-interested activities that could otherwise be invested in God’s quiet conspiracy to transform our world.¹¹

- i. Notice the characteristic unwillingness to take Scriptural teaching concerning apostasy and a coming tribulation at face value.¹³

d. Following after the culture rather than confronting it with God’s truth

V. Departure

a. All-too-common theme: abandonment and even reversal of the

founder's core beliefs and priorities.

- b. **Martin Luther (Lutheranism), John Knox (Presbyterianism), . . . Jesus!**
- c. **Departure from plain teachings of the faith = *apostasy***

Application

1. **The primary responsibility of elders within the Body of Christ is prayer and the service of God's Word.**
2. **Why? Because a proper understanding and of the meaning and priorities of Scripture is absolutely essential for the survival of true Christianity.**
3. **Without a solid doctrinal emphasis, the Church loses its foundation and devolves into "just another do-gooder social institution."**
4. **Having lost its Christian distinctives, it no longer preaches the Word of Life: salvation of the individual through the cross.**
5. **This is the means by which God has established for transforming humanity: not through good works in and of themselves.**
6. **When the elders of a church leave God's Word to wait on tables—become more concerned with social work in the community than the preservation and teaching of doctrine—it is only a matter of time before that church joins the prevailing cultural ebb-tide drifting downstream toward apostasy.**
7. **Luke 18:8 - . . . *when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?***

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Endnotes:

1. **NKJV, Acts 5:12-42**
2. **Ref-0164, Volume 15 Number 1 (Spring 2004), Donald E. Green, "The Folly of the Cross," 59-69, 68**

3. "Modern executions provide no comparison, because they occur behind penitentiary walls, away from public scrutiny. Consequently, a crucified Savior does not sting today's ears as it did in the first century. . . . On a broader scale, this verse shows the church of Jesus Christ that it must return to cultural confrontation with its gospel preaching instead of pursuing cultural accommodation. "Christ crucified" was not a "seeker-friendly" message in the first century. It was an absurd obscenity to Gentiles and a scandalous oxymoron to Jews. The gospel guaranteed offense. The modern church would do well to reflect on that example. Its efforts to remove the offense of the cross flatly contradict the apostolic pattern."²
4. Ref-0164, Vol. 25 No. 1 (Spring 2004), Joel James and Brian Biedebach, *Regaining Our Focus: A Response to the Social Action Trend in Evangelical Missions*, pp. 29-50, 40
5. Ref-0164, Vol. 25 No. 1 (Spring 2014), Joel James and Brian Biedebach, *Regaining Our Focus: A Response to the Social Action Trend in Evangelical Missions*, pp. 29-50, 29-30
6. WVNZ, 10
7. WVNZ, 15
8. KERR, Graham Kerr, *An Invitation from Graham Kerr*, [<http://msainfo.us/2013/06/05/an-invitation-from-graham-kerr/>] accessed 20140809
9. "[Christians should] be a creative part in our return to the resilience that our Creator God has sown into the very fabric of both the earth and all that is still alive . . . [by becoming involved in] forward looking (visionary) planning for humankind to care for God's good creation and each other, until He comes."⁸
10. Concerning land defiled by the spilling of blood: Gen. 4:10; Num. 35:33; Deu. 21:7; Ps. 106:38; Eze. 36:17; Heb. 12:24; Rev. 11:18.
11. SINE, 1
12. Ref-0181, Volume 8 Number 90 (August 2011), Thomas Ice, *Drowning in Apostasy*, 4
13. "The following is a list of the seven major passages that deal with the last days for the church: 1Ti. 4:1-3; 2Ti. 3:1-5; 2Ti. 4:3-4; Jas. 5:1-8; 2Pe. 2; 2Pe. 3:3-6; Jude 1:1-25. Every one of these passages emphasizes over and over again that the great characteristic of the final time of the church will be that of apostasy. The New Testament pictures the condition within the professing church at the end of the age by a system of denials. (1) Denial of God (Luke 17:26; 2Ti. 3:4-5); (2) Denial of Christ (1Jn. 2:18; 1Jn. 4:3; 2Pe. 2:6); (3) Denial of Christ's return (2Pe. 3:3-4); (4) Denial of the Faith (1Ti. 4:1-2; Jude 1:3) (5) Denial of sound doctrine (2Ti. 4:3-4); (6) Denial of the separated life (2Ti. 3:1-7); (6) Denial of Christian liberty (1Ti. 4:3-4); (7) Denial of morals (2Ti. 3:1-8, 2Ti. 3:13; Jude 1:18); (8) Denial of Authority (2Ti. 3:17)."¹²

Sources:

- NKJV** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- Ref-0164** Richard L. Mayhue, ed., *The Master's Seminary Journal* (Sun Valley, CA: Master's Seminary). [www.mastersem.edu].
- Ref-0181** Tim LaHaye, *Pre-Trib Perspectives* (Dallas, TX: Pre-Trib Research Center, n.d.). [www.pre-trib.org].
- SINE** Tom Sine, *Since that first Earth Day April 22, 1970 how are you caring for God's good creation?*, April 30, 2013 [<http://msainfo.us/2013/04/30/since-that-first-earth-day-april-22-1970-how-are-you-caring-for-gods-good-creation/>] accessed 20140809.
- WVNZ** *World Vision New Zealand Toolkit*, <https://www.worldvision.org.nz/media/50555/toolkit.pdf> accessed 20140809.

Links Mentioned Above

- a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/20_Acts_6_1-7/index.htm.
- b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.
- d - See <https://www.worldvision.org.nz/media/50555/toolkit.pdf>.