

Bible Text: Acts 6:1-7; 1 Timothy 3
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Acts 6, beginning at verse 1, page 1,700.

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.

The word of the Lord. [Thanks be to God.]

May we pray.

Help me, Lord, to be clear and concise and compelling yet also tender and winsome and convincing so that at the end of this service and of our congregational meeting, we may be committed to doing your will. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The first thing I want you to notice in this lesson that we've just read is this was a church full of controversy. I never will forget the first time I came to Trinity Presbyterian Church in Texarkana. It was back in January of 2011, and it was because your church was immersed in controversy. I happened to be the full-time pastor back then of Grace Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, LA and I held a voluntary position in Presbytery, I was Chairman of the Ministerial Committee. So, it was my responsibility to

bring a team here on a Saturday to try to deal with your controversy and here I am again.

When I go to Presbytery meetings, I'm always looking for somebody for you because I believe you need a pastor who has boots on the ground. I am for a variety of circumstances unable to be that person. Now don't worry, I haven't found anyone yet, necessarily, and I love coming here. For me, it is the greatest privilege in the world to come here and to be your part-time, temporary pastor.

In this time, I have come to love all of you very tenderly and with emotion, and Sandy and I pray for you all virtually every day by name because we love you and we feel your needs very profoundly and identify with you. But I see the need for this church to have a boots on the ground pastor. Well, I'm going to propose that this church today approve an idea that will give you at least two pastors, if not three or four or five, because as we analyze this passage of scripture, we discover that the solution to the division of the church in Jerusalem was having multiple pastors and other people who did the business work of the church.

So, you notice this, what was this controversy? It was the Grecian Jews complaining against the Hebraic Jews. What do we mean? They're all Jews, all of them are Jews, they all belong to the Jewish ethnicity, but there were at least two styles of being Jews in the first century, there were those who were very strict, the Hebraic Jews, and there were those who were somewhat liberal, the Grecian Jews. Were I a Jew in the first century, I would be a liberal Jew. I would not want to have to separate the plates in my kitchen that had had cheese on them from those that had had meat served on them. Do you understand that's part of traditional Judaism? When my son-in-law and I were in Jerusalem back in 2000, we discovered that we could never get a cheeseburger. A cheeseburger is an abomination to Hebraic Jews because you're mixing meat and milk products. And you see, Orthodox Judaism took certain prohibitions in the Old Testament, and they said, "Well, if this is wrong, well, then this is wrong. And if this is wrong, then this is wrong." So while you don't boil a goat, a little baby goat in his mother's milk, that was Moses' prohibition, they added to it all kinds of things like no cheeseburgers.

So anyhow, so you're dealing with people who strictly followed not simply the Old Testament law, but they followed the fence around the law, what Jesus referred to as the traditions of the elders. The tradition of the elders. So anyhow, notice that this division was real and notice that the complaint of

the liberal Jewish Christians, they were all Christians and they're all Jews, but the complaint of the liberal Christian Jews was a legitimate complaint. Their people in need were being neglected and that illustrates a profound truth: any potential for division, guess what, the evil one is there to exploit it and to rip things from one end to the other. Just think about reactions to COVID. Wow, reactions to COVID. I've never seen in the history of the Christian church while I've been alive such rancorous contentious divisions as occurred during COVID. Seriously. It's amazing. And so all I'm saying is that Satan is alive, the devil is alive, the devil is still thriving and the devil will exploit any potential for strife, conflict and division.

And what happens when there's division? Just this morning in my English Bible reading, I read Psalm 133 about how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters delight to dwell in unity and there God commands his blessing. When there's division in a church, make no mistake about it, prayer goes out the window. It does. When you're mad with your spouse, can you pray effectively with him or her? You have to deal with your business first with the Lord. Do you know that Peter, who was a married man, explained that. He said, "Husbands, don't be embittered against your wife lest your prayers be hindered." And I'm going to tell you, America is in such chaos right now that we need unhindered prayers. Unhindered prayers. If there's hindrance to prayers, God help us, it's all over for the United States because things are going to get worse without earnest, Holy Spirit inspired, Jesus seeking praying.

What's the greatest need of Trinity Presbyterian Church? It's earnest, united praying. Since I work for Presbytery part-time, I always have an address to give on the floor of Presbytery and I stressed how important this is. You would not believe the troubles in our churches that I'm responsible for over the things that have happened in the wake of COVID. You know, people are not going to go back to the levels of attendance that they did before this thing. And I remember the little Baptist church near our home that when we're not completely exhausted, we will attend on Sunday night. The pastor has on his marquee "Normal isn't coming back but Jesus is."

So, looking at this, there was a real problem, real division, real strife based on facts not suppositions, and notice the solution, verse 2, "So the Twelve," and if we analyze the use of that throughout the New Testament, you discover that "the Twelve" functioned as elders. Peter said in 1 Peter 5:1, "the elders among you, I as your fellow elder," and he gave admonitions.

“So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, ‘It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word.’”

What is an elder? An elder is a minister of the word. When I sign a marriage license, I list there what I am. They have specific categories. I’m a minister of the gospel. I’m not a minister of the physical needs of people but a minister of the gospel. And so, what is an elder? An elder is a pastor. I want you to understand that and I want to say it as clearly and dogmatically as I possibly can. An elder is a pastor.

What do pastors do? Pastors study the Bible and pastors pray—we’ll see that in a moment as we read through. He says, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.” What that meant is the physical needs of the congregation needed to be delegated to other people. Then he goes on further and he says in verse 4, “[we] will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

Now I want you to know that all Presbyterian churches once had both elders and deacons. Why did they do that? Because that’s what the Bible teaches. Now I want to tell you there was a movement, and I describe myself of saying I would be a liberal Jew were I living in the first century, but I want to tell you that the denomination that eventually evolved decided to get rid of deacons. What happened when they got rid of deacons?

They demoted all of the elders to functioning like deacons. What’s the job of an elder? It’s to be a pastor. A pastor. Elders’ jobs are to study the Bible and to be able to explain and apply the Bible and to refute false doctrine as they visit in your homes, and they pray together. Notice the function of an elder is to pray, to pray together, and to study the Bible together so they form biblical understanding of things,

And so, they end up selecting seven people. By the way, the first name mentioned there is Stephen and Stephen is the first Christian martyr. He died for the faith. I want you to understand the office of deacon is a spiritual office. It is an office that’s responsible to oversee the financial and physical needs of this congregation. I’m going to say it again. It isn’t the job of the elders to oversee the financial and physical needs of this congregation.

What happens when elders take that on themselves? They don’t function as elders anymore; they function as deacons. Elders are not a board on a corporation to make decisions. They’re not like when I was on the board of the Boy Scouts, or when I was on the board of the Rotary Club, sitting and making decisions. That’s not the function of the elders.

The function of the elders is to be pastors. Pastors. Pastors. That means to go in your home to pray with you in your needs and to gather together as elders, as pastors interceding for the needs of the church. And when you do away with deacons, you really do away with elders and you simply reduce them to a board of trustees. That is wicked! Wicked! Wicked! Wicked!

You say, “Bob, you seem really excited.” I am. I am. You should have seen my presentation at Presbytery in Lake Jackson, TX Friday afternoon because I stressed something: The thing that’s missing in our churches, why pastors are burning out, why they end up in adultery, drunkenness, drug use, financial problems, and stealing, and all these other things is because they’re not supported in prayer.

Why don’t we pray? Do you know why? I did a lot of meditation as we left our home on Wednesday to travel and visit people in Texas. The biggest single reason is this: we’ve got it too easy. We’ve got it too easy.

Why do I need to pray when I’ve got a refrigerator? Why do I need to pray when I can go to H-E-B (but not in Texarkana)? Why do I need to pray when I have insurance? When I have doctors like Dr. Reep? Why do I need to pray?

We live in the most unbelieving century in the history of Christianity. Century, I said. Century, I said. Go back to World War I which led to the destruction of Christianity in Europe. Go back to World War I and think about all of the wicked things that our soldiers brought back to America returning from World War I, and you discover something that you can plot. Church after church after church quit having real prayer meetings.

You go to a place like Uganda. Sandy and I sat with our friends, and he does a ministry there. When people are in a third world country, they see the importance of prayer because they know they’re not going to get what they need without earnest believing prayer.

But we really don’t believe in America much anymore. We tend to have replaced Bible Christianity with what I’m going to call a kind of moralistic deism. What is moralistic deism?

Moralistic deism is the idea that God doesn’t really intervene directly in human affairs. In deism, God created the world, he set all the laws in motion, and then he sat back, kind of like a clock-maker who made a good clock, wound it up, set it ticking, making sure that the pendulum would never stop swinging and he went away.

What is the religion of the American church? It is moralistic deism. We don't really believe.

You know, the thing that struck me in my very good friend who's been in my home, and I've been in his home, Robbie Hamd—Robbie is from the Druze, not Druids, the Druze, and Sandy and I were in his and Joyce's home in Beirut, Lebanon and worshiped with the Hamds.

He told a story during his presentation as he preached for us on Friday night. He deals with all of these refugees who've come to Lebanon from all over the world, including especially Syria, and there was a woman who was a refugee from Iran, and she was deeply burdened and she came.

"I need help! I need help! I need a job! I need a place to live! I'm in trouble! Please pray for me to have this." And Robbie's response, being a good Presbyterian, a good moralistic deist, saw the need but he said, "That ain't gonna happen."

What? He said that in his sermon. "That ain't gonna happen." He went back and came back to America as the Hamds traveled back and forth between the United States and Beirut and when he got back, he discovered that one of the women, one of the women in his organization had prayed in the name of Jesus for these needs to be met, and lo and behold, they were, step by step.

And what happened is that eventually her husband came with her to meet Robbie, and he was angry because he was a Muslim and his wife was coming here and learning about the Lord Jesus Christ in a practical way.

And he's getting angry and speaking to Robbie in a very angry way, "What are you doing?"

And do you know what his wife did, and can you imagine a woman doing this in Islam? Do you know that Christianity elevated the role of women? It did. The rest of the world put women down, including Judaism, and especially Islam. Do you know in Islam a woman's vote is worth one-half of a man's? And do you know what she did?

She punched him in the side with her elbow and she said, "Listen to me, when I was here without food, without work, without a place to live, this man made sure that I had all those things." Now he didn't really do it, the Lord is the one that did it, but the Lord used the believing prayers of a faithful woman of God working under Robbie in his ministry. And that husband began to turn to Christ.

Let me tell you, one of the men I embraced Friday was a man who was a convert to Christianity from Iran.

Do you realize the opportunity right here, right now here in Texarkana for this church? Do you want to see this church grow? I do. Do you know how it can grow?

Go out and reach Muslim neighbors and invite them to come to church, invite them to have a meal with you. "Well, they might hurt me."

No, they won't. No, they won't, not at this time, not in this place. Now if you did that in Saudi Arabia, you might end up with your head being separated from your body, but not in the United States.

We are in the golden opportunity of world missions right now and Robbie's basic theme was, "Get up. Go, but go in faith. Believe God."

So here is the church and the elders of the church were neglecting praying together and studying the Bible together, because they were taking on the financial responsibilities of the church which is not the duty of elders at all.

If elders take on the work of deacons, the elders will simply be like the board of a Rotary Club. Seriously. This church needs pastors, not just one. And I've been looking because I know you need boots on the ground, and I only parachute in here behind enemy lines on weekends.

So, I want you to look with me at a couple of passages of scripture. First, while you're there, turn over to Romans 16 and verse 1. Romans 16:1 and what do you read there? Romans 16:1, this is what he says, page 1,768,

"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church in Cenchrea." That's what the word is. She was a deacon in the church of Cenchrea.

And then I want you to turn with me, if you would, to Acts 14:23, turning back to the left. Acts 14:23 and let's see what we have here and that's on page 1,718. He's just warned them that they're going to go into troublesome times. America has only just begun troublesome times. And he warns them about that and then in verse 23, page 1,718,

"Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust."

What do we understand? Every local church is to have elders, plural. No one-man rule in the church of God ever since the Lord Jesus ascended into heaven. It's always more than one elder.

But now let's turn, if we would, from there over to Philippians 1. What do we read there? Philippians 1, we see the final outworking of biblical church government. Philippians 1:1 and you'll find that on page 1,825.

“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi.”

Who were the saints? You're looking at one. I'm looking at a whole bunch. You're all saints. Saints aren't particularly holy people. Saints mess up. Saints get in trouble. Saints fail you. Saints will disappoint you. But saints are those who've been called out of the world to be united to Jesus Christ. If you've been united to Jesus Christ, you're a saint. A saint. A saint. A saint.

Now notice what else he says, “together with the overseers and deacons.” Now here's the church in Philippi. What did it have? It had overseers. The word that's translated “overseers,” if you look down below, traditionally “bishops.”

I want to tell you something and we'll see this proven in the next passage that we go to, conclusively: all elders are bishops, and all bishops are elders. There's no difference in an elder and a bishop.

Well, where did we get the idea of bishops and then others underneath them like a single bishop over a large city overseeing all these other pastors?

Where did that come from? The devil. You say, “You sound very dogmatic.” That's because I'm a Presbyterian minister, and Presbyterian ministers are dogmatic because we believe the Bible is the infallible word of God, and it tells us how to do the business of the church.

All elders are bishops, and all bishops are elders, and we'll prove that by going now to Titus 1. If you'll turn to the right, we'll go to Titus 1 and notice the instructions of St. Paul in Titus 1 and verse 5. Titus 1:5, page 1,857.

“The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished.”

The reason that God sent the former Chairman of the Ministerial Committee of the Presbytery of the Central South—we're now the Gulf South—was because he wanted me to come and straighten out the things that are messed up in this church.

You say, “Bob, I can't believe you're saying that. You sound like you're getting ready to leave.” Well, maybe, but I can't leave until things are straightened out.

How do you straighten things out? Well, he tells them exactly—and I don't plan on leaving. I love coming here. It is my delight to be here every Sunday morning and worship with you all because I love you, and I've come to grow in my love for each and every one of you. So how does he engage in straightening out the church in Crete? "What was left unfinished,"

1) "appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer"—that is the Greek word "ἐπίσκοπος, episkopos." We get the word "Episcopalian" from that. So, the word "elder, πρεσβύτερος, presbuteros," we get the word "Presbyterian" from that, and the word translated here "overseer" is the word "bishop." And so, he's saying, "Since a bishop is entrusted with God's work."

Now to clarify that further, turn back with me, if you would, to the left to 1 Timothy 3 and we begin in verse 1 on page 1,847. Again, what am I saying? I'm saying this church needs multiple pastors, that is, men and women who will pray together regularly, not just once a month but regularly. Why did the early church meet together and pray? Because they were in desperate trouble. They were in a time when Christians were going to be executed just like St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who was a deacon. And they prayed because they believed.

What's wrong with the American church? What's wrong with many ministers that I deal with on a regular basis?

They don't really believe. They don't really believe. Oh, they believe the Bible. They say, "Well, oh yeah, I believe the Bible is true. I believe it's the word of God, and I try to follow it."

But when they begin to pray, Satan has seduced them into the modern worldview of secularism. What's secularism? It's both literal and practical atheism.

When you pray, do you expect an answer? I can tell you that when I was a young minister, I did not. I remember when I was studying for my evening sermon because I had three sermons to deliver each week. I was studying for my evening sermon on a Sunday afternoon, and I came across a quote in a commentary, and it talked about when people pray, they have to believe that God is going to do for them what they're asking him to do.

Do you know what I said to myself? "I don't believe that." And I woke up like out of a fog, what did I just think? "I don't believe that." And it

convicted me so terribly that I began to pray for God to give me the faith to believe that when I asked, I would receive. And do you know what began to happen? I began to receive. I put out a paper about all the answers to prayer that Sandy and I have received, so many hundreds of, not hundreds of thousands but so many tens of thousands of dollars we've received when we were desperate and cried out to God. Healing again and again and again. I'm believing God to heal my hip.

You see, the modern American church doesn't believe even when we say, "We're Bible-believing Christians."

We don't really believe because if we really believed, we would gather together and earnestly beseech the throne of grace for God to rain down his healing on America and on our own church, and on our own bodies, and on our own finances, and in all our relationships.

But because the American church stopped believing roughly at the end of World War I, and then at the end of World War II, the American church set out to build churches but not faith.

If you study the history of Christianity after World War II, we had an explosion of church planting but not bringing people in an earnest, believing, trusting in God, faith that moves mountains.

He says in chapter 3, verse 1,

"Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer," you see there traditionally "bishop" also in verse 2, "He desires a noble task. Now the (bishop) "the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife."

What does that mean? Well, in the first century church people sometimes had more than one wife.

Can you imagine two different women asking you to fix leaky faucets? I remember traveling on a bus in Jordan sitting next to a Muslim man and he said this to me, he said, "You know," he said, "my wife got really lazy until I got another wife, and she had competition, and she started to really act right."

Do you think God approves of polygamy? No. But God always takes people where they are, and that's when I arrived over three years ago to become your interim, part-time pastor. I take you where you are. I don't come in here to try to say, "Well, we're going to do this. We're going to do that." What

am I doing this morning? I'm appealing to your conscience by the Holy Spirit to make this church become what it's called to be.

"The husband of but one wife." You see, you could have more than one wife and be a member in good standing of a Christian congregation, but you could not be an officer in that church. "Temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable," opening your home to strangers, "able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money."

Do you know what the worst thing I see about American Christianity is? Big-time celebrity preachers who are obviously hungry for money.

I appreciate you all paying me \$150 a Sunday, but do you know what? I'd come anyhow because I've got a call on my life to be an elder, to be a bishop, to be a pastor. You turn on TV, and that's what you think when you watch the big-time money.

"He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect."

I'm going to make a comment there. Is that absolutely true in every case? No, but I can tell you this, on the morning of January 1, 1989, I called an emergency meeting of the elders of my congregation in Alexandria, and I said, "I am willing to resign as your pastor because I no longer meet one of the basic criteria of being an elder."

And do you know what they did? They wisely responded by giving me help, and that help saved my family. You see, I had one of my children living in gross disobedience to God. That doesn't mean that you can't be an elder if you've got a child in gross disobedience to God, but it means you need to be open and honest and say, "Sisters and brothers, I need help!" The failure to be transparent is a cancer in the church of God.

And so, he goes on down, and I want you to go to verse 8,

"Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain."

Why? Because the deacons handle the money. The deacons handle the money. I'll say it again: the deacons handle the money. It's not the elders' job, it's the deacons' job.

You say, "Well, you're putting all of this on us today." Yeah, I just want you to think about it, and I want you to fulfill the promise you made when you

joined the Presbyterian church, and what's that? You promised to study, or to pursue, the purity and the peace of the church.

What's the purity of the church? If this church were poor, I mean were pure, this church isn't poor, this church is richer than it thinks it is.

If this church were pure, totally pure, I'd be looking at something Sandy saw when she was walking around Lake Jackson yesterday morning early, the back of a pick-up truck with skeletons in the back holding musical instruments. It was obviously a Halloween stunt.

There are no completely pure churches on earth, and so what is your job? Your job is to try to help as a member, Trinity Evangelical Presbyterian Church to be purer.

But notice you've got a second thing, it's the balancing act, and without this, churches just go cattywampus, they go crazy, they have splits.

If you ever used to ride a motorcycle through the backwoods of Louisiana, as Sandy and I did when we used to have one, you'd discover that there's the X Baptist Church, and two miles down the road is the Y Baptist Church, and five miles down the road is the Whynot Baptist Church.

What happens in a Baptist church? I'm not talking about a modern Baptist church where it's ruled from the Executive Director of the Association on down by craftiness, I'm talking about what happens in a small rural church.

The smaller the church, the more likely it is to be pregnant with dissension, and what happens to a small church pregnant with dissension? People get in a fight,

"Well, this is mine! These are my responsibilities, and I don't want you in here doing this!"

And people start fighting over this and over that, and it isn't long before the famous words are said, "I'm outta here."

And then we form a new Baptist church a short buggy ride away that's the reaction to the first Baptist church and now it's become the worst Baptist church.

And what I'm saying is you, if you're a member of this church, you vowed a vow to God to pursue two contradictory things: the purity of the church and the peace of the church.

What am I attempting to do this morning? I'm attempting, as peacefully as I know how, even though I preach (I had a friend of mine who responded to

my admonition yesterday at Presbytery actually on Friday, by saying, “Bob, you were raised in South Carolina.” And I said, I wrote him, and I said, “Mike, my model in preaching is the black Baptist church.”

Do you want me to tell you why? People don’t sleep in black Baptist churches, and I guarantee you I’ve never had people sleep very long in my preaching, and I’ve been preaching since 1965.)

So, my goal is to stir you to be more biblical, to take the church where it is, and to try to take it where it should be, but to do it by maintaining the unity and peace of the church.

One of the ways I do that is on my own nickel taking people out to eat (and sometimes they reciprocate and I’m always grateful.). But I wanted to know you. I wanted to know you. I want to be in your homes. I wanted to see how you react with each other. And as I’ve been with you, my love for you has grown more and more and more.

And I remember one statement that was said when we had called an associate pastor to my congregation, and he was being examined on the floor of Presbytery, and one of the pastors said to this man, “Do you love people?”

You know, the church doesn’t need elders who are really smart; they need elders who really love people, and really love Jesus, and want to be better than they are. I really love you. I know that if this church can become purer, it’ll be a better church, and that’s my passion for you.

May we pray.

Lord, we pray that you would bless Trinity Evangelical Presbyterian Church, that you would give us to proceed to be more biblical, to renounce the evil practices of the denomination that we were forced to leave, and to try to conform more and more and more to being the church that is described and prescribed in the New Testament. Forgive us of our sins. Grant, O Lord, that whatever we do, we do in the unity of the Holy Spirit through prayer, through loving each other and trusting each other. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Outline and Link:

Acts 6:1 describes division in a church, a division rooted in cultural differences.

The solution was to create a new office, the office of deacon.

Just as “The Twelve” are the beginning of the office of elder (1 Peter 5:1), so “The Seven” are the model of the office of deacon.

Scripture makes it plain that these two offices should exist in each local congregation (Philippians 1:1), and Romans 16:1 points to Phoebe being a deaconess of the congregation at Cenchrea.

Scripture knows nothing of one-man rule: Each local congregation was to have at least two elders (Acts 14:23).

Paul left Titus in Crete to put things in order, and this involved appointing elders over every local church. As Titus 1:3, 5 make clear, All Elders are Bishops, and all Bishops are Elders.

When we look at Acts 6:2, 4, we see that the work of elders or bishops is identical to what we call a pastor. When I sign a marriage license, I sign it as a Minister of the Gospel. This is confirmed in 1 Timothy 3:1-15 and Acts 20:17, 28.

We also see in Acts 6:2-4 that the work of deacons is handling the “business” side of the church, making sure that people’s physical needs are met.

The result was a vibrant, unified church that expanded by evangelism and witnessed the conversion of many Jewish priests (Acts 6:7).

<https://www.rbvincent.com/BibleStudies/onechurch.htm>