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SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

(For March 12)
CHURCH ORGANIZATION AND LEADERSHIP
Golden Text.—Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.
—2 Tim. 2:15
The Lesson as a Whole

Approach to the Lesson

It is a well-known fact that the Greek word ekklesia, translated "church" in our English Bibles, means, literally a select, or called-out company. The same word is rendered "assembly" in Acts 19:41. This, of course, referred to the group gathered together by Demetrius in the uproar which he incited against Paul. In Acts 7:38 Stephen speaks of the congregation of Israel as "the church in the wilderness." The general use of the word, however, throughout the New Testament is a designation of the Christian company, either as a whole or locally. The "church, which is his body" (Eph. 1:22, 23) includes all believers from Pentecost until the Lord's return for His own (1 Thess. 4:13-18). In this sense it is never used in the plural, but the same word is used to designate local groups of Christians, as "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2); "the seven churches which are in Asia" Rev. 1:4; "the churches of God . . . in Judaea" (1 Thess. 2:14). To the church as a whole the edification of all (Eph. 4:11, 12). These gifted men may be found in various local companies or may be ministering in the regions beyond. They are directly responsible to the Lord Himself, who may place them in the churches as He sees fit.

The New Testament also recognizes divinely appointed officers in the churches, such as elders (also called bishops) and deacons (1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1). We do not have any specific instructions as to how these official ministers should be selected or inducted into office, but it is evident that in beginning they were chosen by apostolic direction and that they were men characterized by spirituality and administrative ability, who were able to guide the affairs of the church. The elders or bishops seem to have had oversight in spiritual things, while the special responsibilities of the deacons concerned temporal affairs. The seven men chosen to administer the daily distribution of food to the needy were all deacons; that is, they were appointed to be servants of the church.

The Historical Setting
The Book of Acts covers the first generation, or about thirty years, of the history of the church. During this time the Gospel was carried by the apostles and others throughout the entire known world (Col. 1:6, 23). During that short period Christian churches were established in all the principal cities of the Roman Empire. Many of these were large and flourishing and were ministered to by gifted preachers and teachers (Acts 13:1). The elders and deacons were elected in order that the service of God, both in spiritual and temporal things, might be carried on in an orderly way. They thus became patterns for other churches to follow throughout the coming centuries. The Epistles of Paul give special instruction in these matters.

Verse by Verse
Acts 6:1.—"There arose a murmuring." If Satan cannot intimidate Christians and destroy churches by persecution from without, he will seek to arouse dissension within. It was thus that he wrought in the Jerusalem church by arousing suspicion and jealousy on the part of converted Jews of the dispersion against those who were born in Judaea.
Verse 2.—"It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables." When God calls men to the Gospel ministry, it is not fitting that they should give their time to regulating the temporal affairs of the church. Too frequently this principle is overlooked today and ministers of Christ are loaded down with innumerable duties which impair their efficiency as teachers and preachers of the Word of God.

Verse 3.—"Look ye out . . . seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business." The business referred to was that of ministering to the needy, and it is instructive to notice the apostle's direction that those who were to attend to these matters should not only be men of wisdom, but also of consistent lives and full of the Spirit of God. In selecting deacons today these qualifications should always be kept in view.

Verse 4.—"Prayer, and . . . the ministry of the word." These are the preeminent responsibilities of those who have been called of God to the high and holy office of the Christian ministry. Note that prayer is given the priority, for a prayerless ministry will be a fruitless one, no matter how eloquent or Scriptural public addresses may be.

Verse 5.—"The saying pleased the whole multitude." The apostle's suggestion met with the immediate approval of the whole church, and seven men were appointed to attend to these matters. It is noticeable that all of the seven selected bore Greek names, which would seem to imply that they were alienists; that is, Jews born outside the land of Palestine.

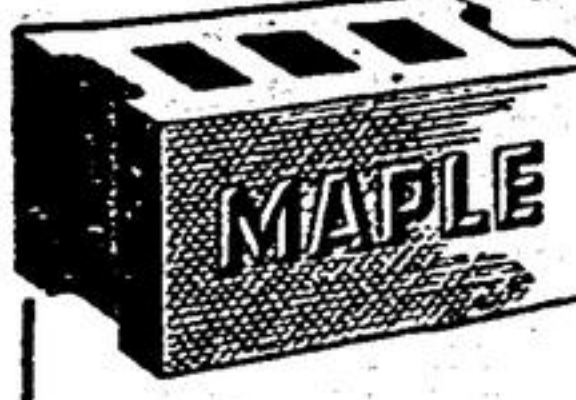
Verse 6.—"When they had prayed, they laid their hands on them." The seven were formally dedicated to their special work by prayer and the laying on of the apostles' hands.

Thus a serious crisis had been met in wisdom and grace in order that the work of God might go on unhindered.
Acts 20:17.—"He . . . called the elders of the church." We have had the work of deacons brought before us. Now we read of the elders of Ephesus, who were summoned to meet Paul at Miletus. These were the spiritual leaders and were appointed in due time in every church (Titus 1:5).
Verse 18.—"Ye know . . . after what manner I have been with you." We often say, "Example is better than precept," and here Paul cites the character of his own ministry (Acts 20:19-21) in order to impress upon these elders the true nature of spiritual leadership.

Verse 28.—"The Holy Ghost hath made you overseers." The word rendered "overseers" is elsewhere translated "bishop" (1 Tim. 3:1, 2). This makes it clear that elders and bishops were one and the same in the early church. They were responsible to feed the flock of God, even as the Lord had commissioned Peter (John 21:15-17) and he, in turn, instructed others (1 Pet. 5:1-4).
1 Cor. 12:27.—"Ye are the body of Christ and members in particular." This embraces both the corporate and individual responsibilities of all believers. In the power of one Spirit they have all been baptized into the body of Christ and should thus be under the direct control of their glorified Head of Heaven. Each separate member has his own place in the body to function for the good of all.

Verse 28.—"God hath set some in the church." All the various spiritual gifts here mentioned are given by God as He sees fit. Some of these sign-gifts may no longer be necessary, since we have the completed Word of God to guide us. In the beginning they were given in order to authenticate the message of the Gospel. The gifts mentioned in Ephesians 4:11 are to continue as long as the church is here on earth.

The Heart of the Lesson
It should ever be borne in mind that the Church of God is a divinely equipped organism, not a humanly devised organization. The body of Christ is united to its Head by the Holy Spirit, who is the true vicar of Christ on earth. This office has never been deputed to any man. The Holy



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Spirit guides through the Scriptures, which are the revealed will of God. While in local churches there must of necessity be latitude for the use of sanctified common sense, the closer the Word is adhered to, the greater will be the blessing. In His love for His church Christ has, by the Spirit, given all needful gifts for His efficiency and edification. He has also indicated His will that men of recognized probity and godliness should be raised up in these local churches to guide in both spiritual and temporal affairs. These men should be selected with great care, after earnest prayer for divine guidance. Unspiritual leadership has often been the cause of grievous failure and dissension. Worldly minded church officials cannot be expected to be help-

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