During the first few years of college, I worked for a farm that was owned and operated by a family that I grew up going to church with. We lived in a heavily agricultural area, yet it was amazing how many people still didn’t understand what farmers actually did.

This family that operated a farm of about 8,000 acres would regularly get comments along the lines of, “What do you do for the rest of the year when you aren’t planting or harvesting?” People assumed that the only time they were working was when they saw the tractors and combines out in the field for a few weeks in the Spring, and a few weeks in the Fall.

If you have ever worked or lived on a farm for any amount of time, then you know that farming is a year-round job. You could easily work 16 hours a day, every day of the year, and still have more to do.

The same kind of misconception happens to ministers all the time. Unless you have done it before yourself, you would probably be surprised how much time it really takes to write good, quality lessons and sermons.

Bill Hybels, who has been the lead pastor of Willow Creek Community Church for the last 42 years, said that it takes him a minimum of 20 hours a week to put together an acceptable message. Yet people regularly assume that ministers only spend a couple of hours preparing, and that the rest of their time is fair game for other things.

The Apostles faced the same issue. As many great things as we read about the early church in the book of Acts, it was not perfect. They had conflicts in the early church as well, because even then, the church was made up of people. Our text for today is about how they dealt with one of those problems.

People came to them with a complaint that they wanted the Apostles to fix. But the Apostles realized that if they stepped into the role people were asking of them, it would take away from the time they needed to do what God had called them to.

**Acts 6:1 ESV — 1** Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

Sometimes people assume that Luke is talking about Gentiles when he talks about the Hellenists. The context here, though, shows us that’s not the case. At this point in the early church, they hadn’t really started to reach out to the Gentiles yet. This was still a group of believers who lived in and around Jerusalem, and was made up entirely of Jews who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah.

The difference between the Hellenists and the Hebrews here was not their faith, it was not doctrinal. These were all people of Jewish faith who had come to believe in the Gospel of Jesus. The difference here was a cultural one that goes all the way back to what is called the Diaspora.

When the Assyrians attacked and conquered the northern nation of Israel in 722 BC, they scattered the conquered people throughout the world. Many of those people held onto their faith, and generations later, you had people all over the world who had been born in Jewish families, but raised in a Hellenistic culture. Paul was actually born to one of those families, who lived in Tarsus.

The end result of this was that there were folks in Jerusalem who grew up in Jewish families, but also grew up in that Hellenistic culture. That was in contrast to those who had grown up in Jewish families in Israel itself. The Hellenists were people who spoke Koine Greek, the common trade language of the world and what the New Testament was written in. The Hebrews native language was Hebrew or more likely Aramaic.

These folks all believed the same things, they had all grown up following Jewish practices, they had all heard and believed the Gospel of Jesus, and they were all a part of this community of believers in the early church. The only differences between these two groups of people was their cultural background and language, but that was enough to cause a conflict here.

What Luke writes here tells that it was a common practice of the early church to distribute food on a daily basis to those in need, and widows were certainly on that list. But whether it was because they spoke another language, or because they had no family of their own left, somehow these Greek speaking widows were being left out, or overlooked is a good translation of the word here as well.

**Acts 6:2 ESV — 2** And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

Notice that this wasn’t a secret meeting called in a locked room. The Apostles summoned the entire number of the disciples, because this was a problem in the unity of the church. The same thing is true anytime there is a problem or an issue in the church.

We have been studying the book Biblical Eldership on Sunday mornings for a while now, and one of the key points that it makes is that according to Scripture, there is no special class within the church. There is no hierarchy of leadership that somehow make the leaders more important than someone else. The pastor, the elders, and the other leaders of the church are on the same level of importance and matter just as much as the person who walked through the door for the first time.

We strive to make that true of our leadership here at Agape Christian Church, and that’s how the Apostles functioned as well. Because this issue was one that faced the whole group of disciples, not just the leaders. And even though this was a problem, it wasn’t just up to the leaders to solve.

Many people view leaders as the people who should handle everything, make all the decisions, and do all the work. That is, until they disagree with a decision that’s made. It may be okay to run a business like that, but not a church. A church is not just an organization of people, we are the bride of Christ, and we are part of a family.

Peter tells us we are all a part of a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2.9). That means that not only does everyone here matter just as much as anyone else. It also means that we all have a responsibility to do the ministry of the church.

People sometimes think that paid ministers should do all the work of ministry, because they are paid to do so. And while people like Rod and I are paid to do ministry we cannot and should not do all the ministry of the church.

First of all, there is far too much to be done for one or even two people to do everything that needs to be done. Secondly, if we did take that on, we would be allowing this church to become an unhealthy one, because God designed each one of us to serve in the church. I thank God every day that he brought me and my family to a church where people understand that a minister cannot do everything, and that the ministry of the church is the responsibility of every member that belongs to it.

Our elders recognize that, and from everything I can discern, you all recognize that, too. That’s a big blessing for Rod and I, because it means that we can focus on the most important parts of our job, which is exactly what the Apostles did as well.

The word the Apostles use to talk about serving tables is the word διακονέω (diakoneo), which means to serve. This is where we get our word for deacon, one who serves the church.

But I don’t want you to think the Apostles were trying to get out of serving, as if this were just some menial task they didn’t want to do, because they also use that same word διακονια later on as well when they talk about devoting themselves to the ministry of the word. That word, ministry, is that word διακονια. The Apostles were not trying to get out of serving, but they knew they needed to serve in a different way.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with serving tables, and there is nothing wrong with a minister or an elder serving tables. When your leaders jump in and do things that aren’t in their job description, like serving tables, mopping floors, washing dishes, or cleaning toilets, it teaches you how to serve.

One of the experiences I remember most about the pastor of the church I grew up at was when he showed up when we were replacing the roof of our house. It was one of the few times I saw him without a shirt and tie on. He was not a construction guy at all, so he and I were the gophers for the rest of the crew. He didn’t know how to hang shingles, but he was climbing ladders all day long with bundles of shingles over his shoulder.

That is servant leadership. When a leader teaches how to serve by simply serving himself. But we also recognized that wasn’t his primary ministry, that wasn’t what God had called him to do full time. His job was to preach and teach the word of God, not put shingles on. There were other people gifted and skilled to do the things like that, but very few were gifted to do what he did in the ministry of the church. To this day, he is one of the most gifted preachers I know.

The Apostles recognized that their job in the life of the church was not to serve tables. There were plenty of other people who could do that, but there was no one else who could preach the word of God the way the Apostles did. These were their instructions:

**Acts 6:3–4 ESV — 3** Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. **4** But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

The Apostles knew that others could do this task of serving the Greek widows, but they also knew they had to be very careful about who they chose. They wanted men who were of good repute, full of the Spirit, and full of wisdom for this job.

The Greek word for being of good repute is μαρτυρέω (martyreo), which means to be a witness, or affirm and support. The Apostles were looking for people who were good witnesses for the Gospel, men who lived out their faith in a way that everyone could see it.

The Apostles also told them to choose men who were full of the Spirt, and full of wisdom. The word used here is πλήρης (pleres) which means to be completely full, to be lacking in nothing. They wanted to have people who were both completely full of the Holy Spirit, and not lacking in wisdom at all.

A person who is full of the Holy Spirit is allowing the Spirit to lead them in all they do. They make their decisions based on where the Holy Spirit leads. They exhibit the fruit of the Spirit that Paul talks about in Galatians 5, and they use their spiritual gifts to build up and encourage the body of Christ.

This is the same idea that we saw when the Apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. That’s the only reason they could do the things they did that day The same thing is said of Stephen, Barnabas, John the Baptist, and Jesus himself. It was important that the men who would take on leadership positions in the church have that characteristic as well.

The wisdom that Luke speaks of here is the word σοφία (sophia) which speaks of the ability to discern the right thing to do when a choice must be made. That wisdom could be someone’s natural abilities and experiences coming to bear on the leadership decisions, or in this case, it could be wisdom inspired by the Holy Spirit in men who were completely full of the Holy Spirit.

You might be asking yourself why it was necessary for these men to be of such high quality and character for something as simple as serving tables. They had to be of high character because even when they were just serving tables, they were leaders in the church. They weren’t Apostles, they weren’t teaching, at least not yet, but they were still leaders.

The thing about leaders is that no matter how awful they are, no matter how selfish or off base they might be, people follow their leaders. That’s true of presidents, that’s true of teachers and coaches, that’s true of pastors and elders, and it’s even true of those who do something as simple as serving tables in a gathering of believers.

These men had to be of high character because people would see their example, and they would follow them, not just in serving tables, but in how they lived their lives, and how they lived out their faith. Notice there was nothing said about selecting people who had skills in waiting on tables. These men might not have been the most skilled table servers. But they weren’t chosen because of their abilities. They were chosen because of their character.

If you serve in any capacity in the church, whether you are a musician up on stage, teaching kids downstairs, or literally serving tables, your character and integrity are just as important, if not more so, than the work you do.

Because whether you know it or not, you are a leader. You are setting an example to the people who see you serve, they see how you treat people, they see how you react when something goes wrong, they see how you live out your faith in Jesus. And they will follow your example. Don’t ever think that just because you serve behind the scenes that you are invisible, or that people aren’t watching you, because they are, and they will follow your lead.

An important part of that character is being devoted to the right things. We saw in Acts 2 that a big part of the success of the church was due to the fact that they devoted themselves to the right things. The church as a whole had devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to celebrating the Lord’s supper together, and to prayer.

That’s what the church as a whole looked like, but this is what their leadership looked like. They were devoted to the things that were most essential for the success and health of the church, prayer and the ministry of the Word. It had a major effect on the people of the church as well. They followed their leaders in being devoted to the things that would grow the church and make it what God intended it to be.

 When other things take away from the leaders’ ability to focus on what has to be most important, the whole church suffers for it. We are very blessed to be in a church where not only our staff, but our elders take this seriously as well. That sets the tone for our church, and it shows in the life of the body that gathers here each week. The same thing cannot be said of many churches whose leaders have allowed themselves to become sidetracked from what is most important.

The Apostles knew that well, and they not only put it into practice, but they guarded their time to make sure they could continue to focus on those things.

**Acts 6:5 ESV — 5** And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

Stephen is the first man mentioned here. He is called a man full of the Holy Spirit, same word as before, and also full of faith. Remember, that word full here means lacking in nothing, so Stephen’s faith was so strong that it lacked nothing. We’ll see that put to the test in our Scripture for next week.

Philip is the only other one in this group that we really know much about. In Acts 8, he heads out into Samaria as one of the first of the disciples to start spreading the Gospel to those outside of Jerusalem itself. He shows up again in Acts 21 as well.

The other guys in this group, we really don’t know much about. What we do know is that all of these men have Greek names. That means that they are very likely believers that had been born to Jewish families outside of Jerusalem, just like the widows they were to care for. The reason we can say that with some confidence is that only one of these men, Nicolaus, is called a proselyte, which means he didn’t come from a Jewish family, but converted to Judaism later on. But he’s the only one who is called that, so the rest of these men likely grew up in Jewish families outside of Jerusalem.

They chose men who could relate to and understand the Greek widows they were appointed to serve. They were suited to serve in that role because of their heritage, but especially because of their character and integrity in their faith.

**Acts 6:6 ESV — 6** These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

This is exactly what we do with the men who we confirm and install as elders. Our leaders lay hands on them and pray over them. This is not some official ordination ceremony, but it is what we see in Scripture almost every time someone is appointed to a certain ministry. The Apostles and early church took this seriously, and so do we.

This was a conflict that could have divided the early church. That didn’t happen because the Apostles were wise and discerning in how they handled this dispute. They made sure that they were not the only ones involved in ministry, but that the people of the church were involved in ministering to one another as well.

They made sure they stayed devoted and committed to doing the things that mattered most, and left other things to other people who were just as capable as they were of serving tables. And the ministry of the church was blessed by it, because they leaders were focused on what they needed to do, and the people of the church were serving the church.

**Acts 6:7 ESV — 7** And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Now, it’s easy to just sit back and listen for a while on Sunday morning, and walk out the door to do absolutely nothing with what you’ve just heard about. What is much more challenging is to take what you hear, and let it change your life, let it change your priorities, and let it change the way you serve.

This is one of the clearest pictures we have in Scripture of the way that we should serve in the church, and we ought to be emulating that. Just like the early church, the ministry of Agape Christian Church cannot fall on the shoulders of just a few people.

If you are a follower of Jesus, and you have made him Lord and Christ in your life, then you have the Holy Spirit within you, and you have spiritual gifts. Each one of us also has talents and abilities that we can put to use as well. God has given each one of us those spiritual gifts, and talents and abilities to be able to build and serve his Kingdom. The question is not can you be useful to God’s Kingdom, it’s where should you be serving with your unique set of gifts and abilities?

A few weeks ago, we had our last gathering to talk about how we can be more externally focused in our ministry here at Agape. Ron led that session, and he had us put our spiritual gifts, our talents and abilities, and our resources on post-it notes. When we had done that, we put them all on the whiteboard down in the fellowship center. There were only 15 or 20 of us there, but we covered the whiteboard and the wall all around it with post-it notes of things that just a handful of us had to offer to serve our church and our community for the glory of God. Imagine what all of us could offer together.

God has given us an incredible mix of gifts, talents, and resources, and he expects us to use them all for his glory. That means that we have an incredible opportunity to serve both our church and our community with the things God has given us, we just have to be willing to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and use those things to serve.

In your bulletin today is an insert that we would like you all to pray about, and to fill out. There is a list there of spiritual gifts you might have, special abilities you might have that others don’t, or resources you might have available to use to serve others. We want you to tell us what you all are capable of, and how you are willing to serve so when a need comes up, we know who can fill that need.

Our vision for this is not just how you can be involved in serving here at the church, within these walls, but how you can serve the Kingdom of God. This year we are focusing on making sure that our ministry here at Agape becomes more external than it has been. Thom Rainer, who studies church health, and has written several books on the subject says, “Stated simply, the most common factor in declining churches is an inward focus.”

That’s why we’re making sure that’s not the case at Agape Christian Church. God did not bring us together here just so we can enjoy each other’s company and have a good time. He brought us together as a church family so that we could be a beacon of the Gospel of Jesus to the world around us. If we are focused inwardly, we might enjoy each other, but we would be failing the mission God has given to us as a body of Christ, and God is not glorified through that.

We were made to be the hands and feet of Jesus, to use our gifts and our abilities to grow the Kingdom of God. That means serving inside these walls, but it also means making sure we are using the gifts and abilities God has given us to serve outside of our church as well, to serve our community as well as our church.

When the world around us sees us being the hands and feet of Jesus, serving people who need it most, I believe that just like the church in Jerusalem, we will see the Word of God continue to increase, and we will see the number of disciples of Jesus multiply greatly.

Right now we’re going to take a few moments to fill those sheets out if you haven’t already, and then as we pass the offering trays, go ahead and put those in there as well.