

April 21, 2024
As You Are Going: Called to Serve
Acts 6:1-7
Vernon Advent Christian Church

[Intro]

We have been learning about the exciting days of the early church throughout the first few chapters of Acts that describe its rapid growth in a short amount of time. In Acts 1 we find the original group of 120 disciples in the upper room in obedience to the command of Jesus to remain in Jerusalem. After the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost in Acts 2, and the preaching of the Gospel, another 3,000 were added in just one day. Another 2,000 were added after God healed the lame man through Peter and John and the preaching of God's word in Acts 3.

And then, the church underwent persecution. The religious leaders commanded the disciples to stop preaching about Jesus. And when they could do no more than simply "forbid" them from preaching Jesus, the believers gathered together and prayed for boldness to keep on preaching. And God, in response, poured out his Holy Spirit upon them, "and they spoke the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31). And from that point on, Luke could only refer to the number of believers as "the multitude of those who believed" because there were too many to count.

Up until this point the attacks on the church had come from the outside in the form of direct opposition and persecution. When this failed, Satan, the great enemy of the Church, tried to corrupt the church from within. In Ch. 5, we read about a man and his wife, Ananias and Sapphira, who plotted together to lie to the Holy Spirit, and pretended to make a large offering to the church that they really didn't make. And God caused them both to fall over dead right in the midst of the church! Luke tells us that "great fear came upon all who heard of these things," but instead of the church being torn apart, we're told in the very next verse that, "more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women."

Now that that strategy had failed, Satan next hopes to divide and conquer the Church by raising one group of Christians against another. We can say that with Acts 5 and 6, the good old days were over for the early Christians. They were not only dealing with internal corruption, but now as we will see today, they had to deal with disputes and potential divisions as well. They had to figure out how to work together despite the differences among them. And this has been going on in the Church ever since. But how they dealt with the issue found in today's passage, gives us insight as to how we should respond in such situations. If you are able, please stand as I read the Word of God today. [Read Passage]

The first thing we find in Acts 6:1 was that a new need arose in the Church. And it arose in the form of a complaint. The passage begins by saying, "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews." It's important for us to remember that the church was overwhelmed by the number of new believers. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the Church, again, had grown to number multiple thousands in just a short amount of time as seen in vs. 1, which states again that, "...the disciples were increasing in number." But this rapid growth caused changes, and the changes brought problems. Nobody likes change, but sometimes change is necessary and we have to work through the issues that come with it as we see in our passage today.

Now, what was the "complaint?" We're told at the end of vs. 1 that, "a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution." So the complaint was that Hellenists widows were being neglected. Who were the Hellenists? These first Christians, who were all Jewish by heritage, are here divided into two groups. There were those who had remained in Judea, near Jerusalem, who used the Hebrew language, and who were appropriately called "Hebrews." The other group consisted of those who were scattered among the Gentiles, who spoke the Greek language, and who used the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint. These were called "Hellenists," from a word meaning "Greek" or "Greek-speaking" used to describe those who adopted Greek culture and ideas. And a longstanding conflict arose between the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebraic Jews similar to that of the Jews and Samaritans though not on racial lines but cultural. To oversimplify, as David Guzik puts it in his commentary, "the Hebrews tended to regard Hellenists as unspiritual compromisers with Greek culture, and Hellenists regarded Hebrews as holier-than-thou traditionalists. There was already a natural suspicion between the two groups, and Satan tried to take advantage of that standing suspicion." It's important to remember that these were all followers of Jesus. But sadly, the conflict between the two groups did not automatically go away when they became Christians, as the complaint concerning food distribution to the widows of the two groups show.

What was the daily distribution that is mentioned here? Luke tells us earlier in Acts 4 that everyone no longer considered what they possessed to be their own; but if anyone among them lacked anything or had needs, they sold their property and presented the proceeds to the apostles to be distributed to meet those needs (4:32-35). And, it seems, that among those in need were both Jewish and Hellenistic widows. Whether it was intentional or not as the text doesn't say, the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked, or at the very least, not receiving what they needed. And as the Church grew, the problem grew as there were more and more people to care for. These types of issues come up in the church all the time. Slightings, whether real or imagined, have the potential to divided a church and Satan loves nothing more than when that happens. We need to guard against such potential divisions by following the example of the apostles.

We read, starting in vs. 2, that after hearing the complaint, the apostles took action. They took action by setting priorities within the ministry of the Church. (Read vs. 2-4) The phrase "it is not right" isn't meant to suggest that the apostles thought that it was somehow beneath them to do the physical work of feeding the widows. The phrase actually means, "It is not reasonable" or "it wouldn't make sense" for us to give the time to this tremendous task of providing for these widows. It wasn't that they weren't willing to. The problem was what they would have to give up in order to do it, that is, the time required to teach and preach from the word of God.

The underlying point here of the apostles is that the preaching of God's word must be the priority of the Church and everything else flows out of that! Those who are called by the Lord with the responsibility of handling God's word need to give it their full attention. The Apostle Paul told a young pastor, and his protégé, Timothy in 1 Tim. 4:13-16,

"Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers."

This isn't a pastors way of saying, "Do what I tell you to do, while I sit back and do nothing." Not at all. The point is there is far too much to be done in the ministry of a church for it all to fall on the pastor alone. We all have been called to serve the mission and we all have a part in it.

Here, we see that a practical need arose in the church. And what could be a more practical need than that of feeding the widows? But even then, the apostles said that it would not be right, it would not be reasonable, for them to neglect the preaching of God's word in order to, also, handle the many other tasks of the Church. But this didn't mean that the widows should be neglected either! Instead, it meant that others needed to step in and cooperate in the ministry by taking care of the new situation brought about by the preaching of the word! And this is the mission of the Church. Preaching the Gospel and serving.

And so, the apostles said, "...pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty." If it's true that the preaching of the word is the priority of the church and it's effectiveness is dependent upon the faithful and accurate preaching of God's word, then there's no other way around it. Other people have to do the other stuff so that those tasked with the preaching of God's word can give themselves fully to it. That way, everyone is involved in the mission of the Gospel and the building of Christ's kingdom!

I think it's interesting that the apostles didn't just say, "Just find somebody. Anybody can do it!" Instead, they treated the task as what it truly was, a ministry for the Lord. And they gave specific instructions that whoever was chosen for this ministry needed to be spiritually qualified. They weren't to ask just anybody off the streets to help meet this need. They needed to be "from among you," meaning they needed to be a fellow believer. They needed to have a "good reputation" both inside and outside the Church. They also needed to be "full of the Holy Spirit," that is, controlled and empowered by Him in an evidential way. And they needed to be characterized by "wisdom." Every ministry in the church, even the serving of tables, as it's referred to here, needs to be led by those who operate with wisdom. How often do churches, especially small churches, just fill up positions within their churches with warm bodies out of necessity instead of going by the criteria that is already laid out in scripture. I think we would avoid a lot of the quarrels and division if we followed God's commands in scripture in regards to who can serve in leadership positions in the church. And we have a pretty strict criteria laid out for us here.

So, the apostles turned the task of finding these men over to the Church; and so, next, we find that the servants were selected (vv. 5-6). Luke goes on to tell us, "And the saying pleased the whole multitude." The believers didn't receive this as if the apostles considered the serving of tables beneath them. Rather, they received it as truly the right thing to do. And it kept the apostles free to fulfill their crucial work in the word and in prayer. And so, they selected qualified men for the task.

And we're given the list of the seven outstanding men that the church selected: "They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them."

It's interesting that the seven men all had Greek names, indicating that they were probably Hellenists themselves. The people, and the apostles, showed a compassion to the Hellenists by appointing men from among their group to take care of the widows' distribution. Whether this neglect was perceived, a simple oversight, or had a real animosity behind it, it didn't matter. They made the wise choice to have men from the offended group of people to meet

this need to show how serious they were about unity and to make sure the ministry moved forward. And you might recognize a couple of these names as they have gone down in scriptural history as truly outstanding men. Stephen who we will learn more about in a few weeks in Chs. 6-7 and Phillip the “Evangelist” when we get to Ch. 8.

And this all leads us to the result of the wise actions of the apostles, the Church continued to grow (v. 7). Luke tells us, “...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.” Because others had stepped up to serve, it allowed the apostles to continue to preach and teach and, with everything working together, the Church grew. Many churches have been split over situations like the one that the early church faced in our text today. But through the work of the Spirit, it was handled wisely, and not only was the need successfully met, but the cause of the gospel was advanced, and the church grew, and many, even from among the priest in the temple, became believers! Isn’t that amazing! God allowed a need in the church to occur, and He used that need to cause the church to grow. May this be said of our Church. That we observe the needs of our people and community and we work together to meet the needs as they arise, and that through the preaching of the Gospel, God would cause our Church to grow in the ways that we read about here in the book of Acts.

With this in mind, I want to point out a few principles that we can take from our passage as we finish up today. First, we saw that a need arose in the church as a result of all the changes that were going on around them. Our ministry should always be focused on meeting our people's needs through our service to Christ. Sometimes, a ministry begins by meeting needs that were legitimate at one point in the church’s history. But, as sometimes happens, those ministries become “traditions,” and then the “traditions” remain long after the need isn’t relevant anymore. And we continue to put a lot of resources and effort into keeping these traditions going. Sometimes a church has a ministry that is attempting to reach needs that are thirty to forty years out of date. Honestly, I don’t have any particular ministry in mind for us, but we need to keep this in mind and continue to ask ourselves this question of everything that we do, “Are we doing this because it's something we have always done? Or is it still meeting a spiritual need of our people?” If we stay focused on the things that never change, the Word of God and the Gospel, and remain flexible on the things that are always changing, the Holy Spirit can lead us as we are going on mission.

Second, we saw that, when this need arose, wise action was taken. The leaders remained faithful to the things that they were called to do, and did so by carefully delegating ministry over to the people of God. Our church's ministry should be seen as the privilege and responsibility of every believer in the church. We are all called to serve. 1 Cor. 12:27 says, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” If everyone one of us seeks to faithfully do what God has gifted us to do, then that sets all of us free to serve the church better.

And finally, we saw that the Church grew as a result of the church's ministry to meet the needs of its people. Everything we do here as a Church must have a great commission focus. That’s the reason behind our theme this year. We need to realize that everything we do as believers, whether inside these walls or outside of them, must be done with the mindset of Christ and aimed toward spreading the good news of the Gospel kingdom of God. Everything we do needs to have, as its ultimate purpose, the passion to win people to Jesus and help them grow as his followers.

We need to be focused on meeting each other’s needs in Christ through our service to Christ. We need to recognize the church’s ministry is the responsibility of every believer and that

every believer is called to serve. And, everything we do must have a great commission focus with the passion to win people to Jesus. We are all called to serve. We all have a part to play. As you are going, let's be a Church on mission. Let's pray.

Benediction – “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Amen.