

Trouble . . . Again!

Acts 6:1-7

Introduction

I invite your attention to the book of Acts, chapter 6, where we continue with our series through the biography of the world's first church.

We have already read in chapter 2, verse 41, that three thousand believed and created the first assembly of the church. In verse 47, we learned that more and more people were being added daily. Someone evidently, was keeping record of each person who joined the growing assembly. By chapter 4, verse 4, we read that there are exactly five thousand men on the roll. Then, in chapter 5, verse 14, we discover that the number has multiplied. Now, in chapter 6, verse 7, we learn that the number has multiplied greatly.

The believers are meeting regularly in the temple. With its stone structure, the huge corridors and canopies made a wonderful meeting place as the believers now, no doubt, spilled onto the porticos and porches.

Can you imagine the irritation of the Sanhedrin, as they recognize that no matter what they try to do to stop this movement, it keeps growing? And, the temple has become congested. They cannot even get into their offices without interrupting prayer sessions; they cannot go about their sacrifices without hearing the preaching of the cross echo along the corridors.

For now, at least for most of chapter 6, the hands of the Sanhedrin are tied. However, we are about to discover that the church has the power to destroy itself.

Ageless Truths About Growing Churches

While the church has faced persecution bravely, and corruption purely, it now comes face to face with the first recorded episode of dissension, disagreement, and disunity. Notice verse 1a of Acts, chapter 6.

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose . . .

Stop at this point. Not only are those words insightful, they are encouraging. And, they provide the first of several ageless principles for the church of Jesus Christ. Let me give them to you.

Vibrant, effective, growing churches are not immune to problems.

1. Vibrant, effective, growing churches are not immune to problems.

This church is not even six months old and already there is a problem. There is a complaint in the church. The Greek word for "complaint" can be translated, "muttering, murmuring". People are talking about it in the parking lot; it is the topic of conversation over dinner; telephone calls are being made, "Have you heard about the problem? . . . Well, let me tell you about it, you know, so you can add it to your prayer list."

Now, do not misunderstand, the complaint they had was serious and it was legitimate. I will describe it in a moment.

If anybody says, "We need to go back to first century church," they typically mean, "Let's get back to when the church was small enough for everybody to know everybody and when everything was peachy keen."

May I remind you that this church of some twenty thousand people that was crammed into the temple square for celebration and filtering into hundreds of homes during the week for fellowship and continued study, was too large for hardly anyone to know anyone. In addition to that, their leaders had already had two scrapes with the law and now had criminal records. And, the church assembly had already witnessed the death of two hypocrites in the middle of a service. Now, a huge section of the body is disgruntled and hurt.

I believe the more appropriate attitude is that this church was exciting, courageous, vibrant, and growing, and it had its own unique share of growing pains, just like any growing church has. Strong leadership and a committed membership do not guarantee the absence of problems.

Now let us take a look at the complaint, in verse 1b.

. . . a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.

This was a serious problem that had to be addressed. It was serious for a number reasons. While it may seem a small thing to us to provide a remedy, the problem went much deeper. William Barclay sets the stage for us in this context. He wrote,

In the synagogue there was a routine custom. Two collectors went round the market and the private houses every Friday morning and made a collection for the needy partly in money and partly in goods. Later in the day this was distributed. It is clear that the Christian church had taken over this same custom.

Now let me explain the problem. There were two kinds of Jews in the early church. Your text names them as Hellenistic Jews and Hebrew or Palestinian Jews. Let me describe them, so you will understand the volatility of the problem.

The Hebrew or Palestinian Jews were descendants of the faithful Jews who left Babylon under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. They endured the difficulties of rebuilding Jerusalem to a greater glory. They were committed to the Hebrew scriptures and spoke Hebrew and Aramaic. The Hellenistic Jews descended from Jews who had chosen, for whatever

reason, to live outside the land of Palestine. They were still Jews, but they spoke Greek and absorbed some of the Greek culture into their lifestyle. According to Hebrew writings, "The Hellenists were frequently categorized as second class Israelites. They were considered tainted by the Greek world."

Now, at Passover, Hellenistic Jews had traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover to Pentecost. They were among the many Jews from other nations, you may remember, who heard the gospel in their own language as the apostles spoke in languages previously unlearned by them. Many of them came to faith in Christ and were among the three thousand who believed and were baptized.

Now, in the early months, these Hellenistic Jews decided to stay in Jerusalem. They wanted to be part and parcel of this phenomenal new work of God. However, centuries of prejudice did not get automatically erased just because these people became Christians.

This issue had the potential of splitting the church and destroying its testimony. David Jeremiah writes,

Trouble in the church always travels faster than triumph. And discord is a disgrace to any church. It is a terrible witness that the church of Jesus Christ, which is supposed to have the power to change the world, cannot even solve its own problems and maintain its own unity.

Unity can be achieved in spite of diversity

2. By God's grace and wisdom among the apostles, the church averts a problem in a way that gives a second ageless principle that unity can be achieved in spite of diversity.

By the way, as you know, we still have that challenge today!! Let me discuss some of the prejudices.

One of the first prejudices is racial. When I was in Japan, I was told by our missionaries there of the animosity between the Chinese and the Japanese. In our country, the racial divide is between black and white.

The church should model love between blacks, whites, yellows, reds, and browns, but it often mirrors the world's standoffishness. I have said it before, in relation to the race issue, and I will say it again, if you are white and you have a problem with a black man

sitting next to you, or an oriental, or a mixture you are not quite sure of but are pretty sure is not of Euro-Caucasian lineage, I want you to know, “They can stay – and you can leave.” In fact, we need your seat. All in favor, say, “Amen.”

Let me move on to more subtle prejudices. The “Amen,” might not be so loud.

What about the unspoken snobbery between the white collar worker and the blue collar; the rich and the not so rich? What about in the parking lot where there is the Mercedes Benz owner versus the much more spiritually discerning Ford pickup owner? You guys who own the pickup trucks should not look down on those other people – they simply do not know any better! And how about those of you who buy your clothes from Hudson Belk when they are not even on sale? You may be sitting next to someone who is wearing old or “run of the mill” stuff that does not have the name of its creator engraved on the outside. Their shoes are not made by Gucci or Goose or whatever. And, you do not take the time to introduce yourself – they are of no advantage to you, so why bother?

James wrote to churches that had actually worked out a special plan for the ushers that if a man comes in wearing really nice clothes to seat him in the front row, which were considered to be the good seats (and makes me wonder if they were really Baptists), but if a man comes in wearing ragged stuff to seat him in the back, tell him to keep quiet, and suggest that he leave before the benediction so nobody will know he comes to that church. James wrote, in chapter 2, verse 9a,

. . . if you show partiality you are committing sin . . .

It can be an incredible testimony to the unbelievers in Wake County, as it was in Jerusalem, when prejudice is not allowed a place in the church. People who see a church like that are not persuaded by it, they are attracted to it!

Priorities must be maintained in spite of pressure

3. The third ageless principle is that priorities must be maintained in spite of pressure.

Let us look further in Acts, chapter 6, at verse 2, which will give us this third principle for the church.

So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable

for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.

Continue to verses 3 and 4.

Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

Please note that the point of these verses is not that there is something less spiritual about serving tables. This had nothing to do with the pre-eminence of ministry, it had everything to do with the priority of ministry.

In this third principle, I use the word pressure cautiously because I believe that pressure would have been there for the apostles to do something themselves about the problem. In fact, I believe that their natural response might have been to distribute the food themselves.

One commentary paints the scenario this way:

Peter responds, “Well, if we all wake up earlier and go to bed later, I think we can do it.”

John pipes in, “Yea, and if we skip lunch and work on Saturday. . .”

James concludes, “If we do all the above, I think we can add the widow’s ministry to our plate.”

Isn’t it natural for most people to try to solve a problem themselves? But, as the church grew, and the needs grew, the leaders of this church recognized their inability to do it all.

I was struck with the application of that truth in our own church. In the past, if someone who attended Colonial was hospitalized, I visited them. Now, that ministry is given to many care givers, including our deacons. In fact, the only visits I try to personally make to the hospital now, are for very serious, life-threatening problems. Because of that, as a matter of fact, I am no longer a welcome sight in the hospital! I visited a man in our church a few months ago, who was about to undergo surgery. I walked into his room and he looked at me and said, “Oh no, not you – it must be bad.”

In the church in Jerusalem, as in any growing church, the priorities of ministry must be defined and

followed. For the apostles, it was the ministry of the word and prayer.

Ministry positions should be based upon character instead of experience

4. A fourth ageless principle for the church is that ministry positions should be based upon character instead of experience.

Look at verse 5 of Acts, chapter 6.

The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.

They were to select seven men of good reputation, full of spirit and wisdom, according to verse 3. That word “select” means, “to inspect or examine”. They were not asking for the first seven volunteers. It would take deep character and the dominating control of the Holy Spirit to serve people; to be an errand runner for God; to give to others without perhaps, receiving anything in return this side of heaven.

Can you imagine what their servant leadership meant to Greek born widows? They were simply hungry, neglected, and lonely. This was much more than money and food; it was care and compassion; it was ministry.

James wrote, in chapter 1, verse 27a,

Pure religion and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows . . .

So the question is not, “How much experience do you possess?” but, “How much of you does the Holy Spirit possess?”

I had lunch this past week with one of the men in our church who travels around the country speaking at seminars and conferences. He is in a different church nearly every month. He told me the story of a church on the west coast that had a need for someone to reach out to the singles in their fellowship. A man who was a plumber by trade, simply began inviting singles over to his home for Sunday lunch. He and his wife did not have much, but they shared what they had. He also possessed the gift of teaching, and soon began a Sunday school class for singles. It grew to several hundred singles, to the point the church board decided they needed to hire a full time Singles Pastor. They

decided they needed a seminary graduate – and so they let the plumber go and hired someone with a degree.

It is a common problem. How many churches need a treasurer and so, they look for a CPA – only to discover that what they really needed was not someone with financial experience, but someone with faith and wisdom? The ministry is not a matter of credentials; it is a matter of character.

Maturity as a body is revealed by delegating ministry instead of dominating ministers

5. A fifth ageless principle for the church is that maturity as a body is revealed by delegating ministry instead of dominating ministers.

Look at verse 6 of Acts, chapter 6.

And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

The laying of hands signified delegation and authority.

Who will do the ministry? Seven godly men with Greek names.

Sometimes effective leaders like these apostles are not revealed in what they accomplish as much as in what they relinquish. In fact, Ephesians, chapter 4, verses 11 and 12, tell us that those in pastoral leadership are to equip the saints to do the work of the ministry.

Think about what this meant in the situation in Acts, chapter 6. The apostles could be accused of not being available; of not having compassion. What were they going to do all day – stay in a room and study and pray? “C’mon.” Yet, that was their answer!

How would you have felt about this if it was your widowed sister? What if it was your own widowed mother? “You mean the apostles aren’t going to get involved??”

No matter how simplistic their response was to the people; no matter what the criticism might be as a result, they said, “Our priorities are prayer and preaching. *However*, since it is a priority of the church to care for its needy, we will see to it that the responsibility and authority is delegated to others.”

How do we as a church, measure up? How do we model this as a Body?

Over the years we have had people come up and say, “You know, Colonial is in real need of the following ministry . . . we’re missing it in this area.”

My response, and the response of the entire pastoral staff, is usually something like, “I couldn’t agree more with you that Colonial needs that aspect of ministry. We really are missing it. In fact, since God gave you the insight to see the potential of that ministry, I think He must have had you in mind to organize it!”

The answer is usually, “Well, um, I uh . . .”.

What a thrill it is however, to have someone respond with, “I’ll do it.”

Effective ministry can maintain its mission in spite of challenge and change

6. The sixth ageless principle for the church is that effective ministry can maintain its mission in spite of challenge and change.

Notice verse 7 of Acts, chapter 6.

The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

Isn’t that great! The problem became the prelude to new potential.

Application

Now, let us ask ourselves a question or two. We have discovered the attacks of Satan against the early church. Has it ever occurred to you that he does the same thing to individual members of the church?

Forms of Satan’s attacks

1. What are some of the forms of Satan’s attacks?
 - One form of attack is persecution. Do you remain courageous and committed?
 - Another form is the temptation toward hypocrisy and corruption – having hidden secrets; being deceptive, becoming self-centered.
 - There is also the ploy called dissension, or better yet, distraction.

Listen to what one author wrote about distraction,

The Devil’s third attack was the cleverest of the three. Having failed to overcome the church by either persecution or corruption, he now tried distraction. If he could preoccupy the apostles with social administration, which though essential was not their calling, they would neglect their God given responsibilities to pray and to preach, and so leave the church without any defense against false doctrine.

The question is, “What is it in your life that distracts you to the point that you lose sight of God’s goals and you may become vulnerable to defeat?”

A distraction may not be something sinful, it may simply be something that sidetracks you. It may be a relationship that weakens your walk with God, rather than encourages it. Perhaps it is an activity; such as, a wasted evening in front of the television. It may be something in your life that is not necessarily revolting, but it does not refresh or revitalize either. It may be something good that absorbs your time, when all the while, God has something better in mind.

Forms of defense against Satan’s attacks

2. What are some of the forms of defense against Satan’s attacks? What do you do when Satan’s attacks become personal?

You should do the same thing the apostles did!

- Restate your priorities and stick with them. Perhaps this afternoon you need to write a few of them on paper – in ink!
- Refuse to cherish anything or anyone that minimizes your hunger for God.
- Rely upon the Holy Spirit for wisdom as each new day brings fresh opportunity for ministry.

Let me remind you of something that would be easy to miss. Stephen and Philip were both outstanding speakers. In the next chapter of Acts, we will discover Stephen’s first and last sermon. It is a classic. In the following chapter, we will discover Philip preaching in Samaria, and multitudes of people are coming to faith.

If what Stephen and Philip had really wanted was attention, they would have never done what the apostles requested! “Stephen and Philip, serve the needy, hungry, overlooked widows – away from the spotlight; away from public view.”

Even though Stephen and Philip were obviously gifted for speaking and teaching ministries themselves, they said, “We will!”

Are you willing to serve in the shadows? Are you willing to meet the needs of someone else?

Let me close by telling you a true story about a high school student who cared for another student in a simple way, yet with a dramatic result.

Mark was walking home from school one day when he noticed the boy ahead of him had tripped and dropped all of the books he was carrying, along with two sweaters, a baseball bat, a glove and a small tape recorder. Mark knelt down and helped the boy pick up the scattered articles. Since they were going the same way, he volunteered to help carry part of the burden. As they walked, Mark discovered the other student’s name was Bill, that he loved video games, baseball and history. He also discovered that Bill was having a lot of trouble, not only with most of his schoolwork, but at home. They arrived at Bill’s home first and Mark was invited in for a Coke. The time passed quickly as they shared small talk and a few laughs, then Mark went home.

Now, at school, Mark and Bill never passed without hello’s. They even ate lunch together a few times and had other brief contacts over the high school years. Finally, the long awaited senior year came and, three weeks before graduation, Bill asked Mark if they could meet. When they did, Bill reminded him of the day, several years ago, when they had first met. “Did you ever wonder why I was carrying so many things home that day?” asked Bill.

Mark responded, “No, not really . . . why?”

“Well,” Bill said quietly, “I had cleaned out my locker because I didn’t want to leave a mess for anyone else. You see, I had already stored away enough of my mother’s sleeping pills to commit suicide. After we spent some time together talking and laughing, I realized that if I had taken my life, I would have missed that time and so many other times that might follow – it gave me hope. So you see, Mark, when you picked up my stuff that day, you did a lot more – you saved my life.”

A few men in Jerusalem this day, saved the testimony of a church – not to mention the potential of mass defection. The best thing you could have hoped for would be two churches in Jerusalem – one for the Greek born Jews and the other for the Palestinian Jews; First Church of the Hellenists and First Church of the Palestinians.

However, to the horror of Satan’s hosts, some men were willing to recognize the real issue, and others were willing to serve. And, the army of that roaring lion limped back to their underground hideout to lick their wounds.

Satan’s attack was unsuccessful because someone was willing to change; because the church met the challenge of a growing ministry with wisdom. The result was that the word of God spread even further, and even more lives were impacted with the contagious truth and love of this first century church. May we do the same!

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