

Problems, Partners, and Potential

Acts 6:1-7

Notes

One time they called a deacons' meeting at the East Fork Church. Uncle Versie Ledbetter was up in years, and he didn't go to many of the deacons' meetings no more because he thought the young folks, them about fifty and sixty, could take care of the church business. But he got word they was fixing to spend some money, and he got Newgene, his grandson, to take him over to the church house in a mule and wagon for the deacons' meeting. The deacons got in a big discussion about buying a chandelier for the church. A man said, "I move, sir, that we buy a chandelier for the church." Another deacon said, "I second the motion." The moderator said, "Is there any discussion?" Uncle Versie Ledbetter said, "Sir, I would like to speak. I want all of you to know that if we gonna buy a chandelier, there ain't nobody in our church got enough education that, when we order it from Sears and Roebuck, they could even spell it." "Then if we ordered the chandelier, when it got here, there's nobody here in our church that knows how to play it." "And what I'm concerned about is we don't need to spend this money on no chandelier as bad as we need lights in the church."

Have you ever had a problem? Ever had a disagreement? With family? With a coworker? In the church?

Ever wanted a church to be healthy, fruitful, and growing?

When problems or conflict arises in a church it provides the church an opportunity to evaluate itself and examine its ministries.

Problems will come, conflict will happen. Why? Because we are people and people have problems.

But aren't you glad that Jesus knows how to deal with problems like you and me?

This new church in Acts is having problems and the problems are beginning to hinder the ministry.

The new growing church faced a few issues: they were growing, and their growth was expanding beyond the administrative capacity of the 12 apostles.

This growth meant the church had to change its method of doing things if it was going to succeed in its mission.

The church had to take an honest look and address some issues which needed addressing.

Every church will experience problems.

How we handle those problems will determine our health.

A healthy growing church will experience change, will have challenges, and will have servants who take charge and meet the needs of the body of Christ.

Not every piece of conflict should be viewed as negative.

A certain level of conflict is healthy and beneficial for the church.

When conflict arises, it offers a few opportunities:

- An opportunity to practice Christlikeness (humility, kindness, meekness, generosity, etc.)
- An opportunity to evaluate ourselves and our programming
- An opportunity for spiritual growth

In our particular passage the issue was the gospel.

Conflicts, even healthy conflict has a way of taking our eyes off the prize.

The proclamation of the gospel must be a church's chief concern.

A church that is experiencing constant conflict is not in a healthy place and cannot focus on Christ or the ministry of the gospel because they are always putting out fires.

As we look at the church this morning in Acts 6, I want us to find ourselves in this passage.

Is God speaking to us?

Is there conflict in your life that you are either avoiding or not handling in a Christlike manner?

Has conflict or an issue revealed an area of ministry or leadership in which God is calling you to step up?

Let us examine our text this morning and see ourselves in the passage.

Let us see our current context and ask is God teaching us something.

1 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, 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. 2 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. 3 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. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 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. 6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. 7 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.

The first 5 Chapters of Acts presents Christianity and its new church primarily and exclusively ministering to Jews. The new Christians had not lost their Jewish roots. They still engaged in temple activities, sacrifices, and other rituals.

Chapters 6-8 are transitional in Luke's story as they show Christianity breaking the bounds of Judaism and taking the first real step to reach Samaria and beyond.

This new growth involved controversy, resistance, and some hard lessons along the way

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Chapter 6 is about 5 years removed from Pentecost in Chapter 2, so it is around the early to mid 30s.

The Hellenistic Jews were Greek speaking Jews from outside of Jerusalem. They had Greek customs that were different from the Jews in Jerusalem. They had their own language and synagogues. They tended to associate with those who shared language and culture.

There was no distancing in the Christian community, but what was happening, for one reason or another, these Hellenists widows were being overlooked in the daily charity.

In Jewish society widows were held in high esteem, but the Hellenist widows had nothing.

The administration of the charity was in the hands of the apostles.

The apostles were in charge of the teaching and preaching and also the ministering to the body through pastoral care.

This incident reveals an important truth to us.

Strong leadership does not guarantee the absence of problems.

The apostles, specifically Peter and John were strong leaders who were capable of great things.

But even under their watch problems popped up.

Were they doing something wrong? Were they sinning? Were they intentionally avoiding these widows in need?

They were not doing anything wrong, sinning, or intentionally avoiding these women.

The apostles and the early church ran into a fairly common problem of a growing church.

A church may have strong capable leaders, but a growing church will experience problems because growth causes things to be done differently than they were in the past.

They learned an important life principle of growth. What got you here won't get you there.

If we are going to grow as a church, we never change the message, but the method has to be fluid and flexible in order to reach each new generation.

Some of us may think this sounds silly or stupid as pandering to the needs of a different generation.

But doesn't Jesus do this? Jesus meets us right where we are and meets our needs through the gospel.

I can take you to a dozen churches that are closed this morning and have shut their doors and the gospel is no longer present in their community because they left.

Did they shut down for lack of gospel witness? Most of them did not. Many of them shut down because they wanted church to be like it was in the 50s or 60s and they refused to change methods to reach the next generation.

A pastor once made a great statement, "If all the Millennials would just turn into Boomers our churches would be fine."

We must be willing to reach a current generation with methods that connect them to the gospel, the majority of them, having no religious affiliation right where they are in life.

Who doesn't want to reach their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren for the Lord?

I know it's frustrating dealing with the next generation. My kids do a dozen things a day that drive me crazy. Why? Because that is not the way I was taught to do it; it's not how I behaved as a kid; it's not how I prefer it to be.

But you know what? It's not about me. It's about Jesus and connecting my kids to an abundant eternal life through him.

We must be willing as a church to recognize issues we are having and when needed, change the method of operation in order to best equip the church, engage the community, and exalt Christ.

We also see that growth is not an excuse for needs in the church to go unmet. These apostles listened to legitimate complaints and then did something about it.

This is important: they did not minimize the need, they didn't simply dismiss the need, and they did not discredit the people complaining. They listened to the criticism and then saw it as an opportunity to address an unmet need.

The Jews had a daily and weekly dole for the resident body of believers. Every Friday enough food was given for 14 meals. The daily food was for non-residents and transients and was delivered from house to house. This is what the Greek speaking widows were being overlooked in.

The church, from its very beginnings experienced issues and problems-why? Because the church had people.

Problems are not always bad, but many times they are potential for the church to evaluate itself and come out even healthier on the other side of the problem.

The early church did not give up and just throw their hands up at the problem, they sought to address the problem

²So 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."

To solve the problem the apostles gathered all the disciples; the whole church. They wanted the whole church involved in the process.

To oversee the distribution of the food would take away from their ministry of studying, teaching, and preaching the word.

Notice, the primary concern for the apostles and subsequently for the church was the proclaiming and teaching of the Word.

We must never lose focus that the Word is both our foundation and our primary goal.

When the church steps away from the ministry and supremacy of teaching and preaching the Word of God, she quickly ceases to be a church in any New Testament sense.

So many times, in the life of a church personalities, community ministries, tradition, or conflict becomes the central focus.

If a personality is the central focus of the church, then that individual or group is trying to take the place of Christ as the central focus, it's all about them.

If a ministry, as good and effective as it may be, becomes the central focus then once the church connects with the community, there is nothing to bring them to, there is no Jesus to connect them with.

If tradition is what the church is focused on, she will never move past the "good ole days" and she will fail to experience what Christ has for her today.

If conflict is the central focus of the church, idolatry of self has taken center stage and Christ has taken a backseat to the desires of the people.

The church in Acts 6 needed good strong servants to step up and take a lead in the ministry of the church in order to serve the church.

Our church is no different. If we don't have strong servant leaders, in every area, and even new areas we don't know about yet, our church cannot function effectively for the glory of God.

Many times, when changes are made in the church, the changes are made to prepare for the harvest.

When we move staff around, bring on new pastors, change ministry areas, or ask people to serve in different areas, it is not done for the current ministry, but we are trying to prepare the church for future ministry.

What did they do? They came up with a solution so that the ministry of the gospel was front and center

If we as a church, or any church, allow a single issue, or a combination of issues to take away from the church's preaching and teaching of the gospel or the ministry of the gospel within its community, that church will soon experience a downward spiral because they have allowed an issue to become more important than the gospel.

The treasure box is not as important as the treasure.

May we care more about Christ and promoting Christ than anything else.

Let us not become sidetracked with "stuff" and lose sight of what is most valuable.

With everything we do, with every issue or problem we encounter, we must ask ourselves, is this getting in the way of the ministry of the gospel?

And for personal application, we can ask the same question of our life. Is this issue, person, relationship, job, or path getting in the way of the ministry of the gospel in my life?

³ 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. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Here, the apostles offer a solution and with this solution we see several important points.

- 7 men of character were chosen
- Their task was to focus on serving the church and serving alone
- The apostles focused on administering the word and prayer

The solution was for seven men to be chosen from among the church.

Now, these men are not called deacons here, although this passage is viewed as the church choosing the first deacons, this passage does continue to show us the need for servants to step up to serve.

Notice, the apostles did not select the seven men. The church chose the men.

The system had broken down within their own group, so the church actually chose seven Hellenistic Jews to minister to the Hellenistic widows. Select the people most acquainted with the situation to fix it.

Notice the two qualifications to be an effective servant:

- Full of the Spirit
 - Manifested a degree of allowing the Spirit to work in them
- Wisdom
 - Men who had knowhow to do the job

Now the apostles were able to go about doing their job of devoting themselves to prayer and the word.

If I can pause here for a moment and speak on the role of deacons.

We see here the valuable service faithful deacons offer the body of Christ.

The deacons assist the pastors in serving the church, in reaching the body, in caring for the flock.

Deacons are God-called men, who are recognized by the church to serve the church.

Faithful, spirit-filled men who are willing to humble themselves and put the needs of the body ahead of themselves are invaluable to the church and shine for the glory of God.

The development of deacons into the power brokers of the church has been a failure of the leadership of the church, in which men who were called to serve were put into a position of major decision making in which was never biblically intended to take place.

When that takes place, in such churches, deacons usurp their role as servant and in doing so they surrender and forfeit the blessings associated with humble service.

We are so very blessed here by our deacons. I am encouraged by our deacons.

I know they pray for the church. I know they seek to grow in wisdom and the Spirit through time in the word and prayer.

I know they are here to assist in any way that is needed.

I know that you can call on anyone of our deacons and they will be overjoyed to help you.

Why? Because you as a church chose wise and Spirit-filled men to serve this wonderful body.

The apostles found a way to meet the needs of the body and solve the problem without sacrificing the top priority.

It takes creative thinking, willingness to flex, courage to delegate, and the wisdom to risk failure.

The church, from its very inception has needed servants to step up and serve.

While this passage serves as a platform for deacon ministry, it also practically shows us the necessity and blessing of having a church that is a serving church.

The church needs, we need, Spirit-filled men and women who have godly wisdom to step up and serve. Without you serving, giving, praying, and growing in Christ, the church cannot have a gospel ministry which is effective and fruitful.

Are you serving in the church? Have you asked God to show you where you can serve?

Maybe you don't know where to serve. That's ok. Jump into a spot and see if it is for you. If it's not, that's ok, jump into another one.

The days are gone when 20% of the people do 80% of the work of the church.

Our church, this church, this family will be a family in which every member, every part of our family has an area of service, is engaged in the gospel ministry. Why? Because we are all called to serve the Lord through the body of Christ.

Every member serves because we are not McDonald's. We are not here to be served, but to serve an awesome God who has graciously saved us and desires that we share his glory with the world so they may experience his salvation as well.

⁵The 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. ⁶And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. ⁷The 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.

So, they chose 7 men from among the body to serve.

Notice what happened to the church when they focused on the gospel ministry in word and deed- the church continued to grow, so much so that even many of the priests who ministered in the temple became Christians.

This passage demonstrates for us the need for humility and a willingness to serve.

The apostles had to have humility to say, “We can’t do it all. We need help.”

The church had to have humility to say, “There is an issue and we want to fix it and not sweep it under the rug.”

The servants chosen had to have humility to say, “We will commit ourselves to serving others.”

And when this mutual humility and focus on the gospel took place the church experienced blessing and grew.

When we place others ahead of ourselves and focus on the gospel, we will experience the outpouring of the Spirit of God on our lives.

What about you? Is there any area of service God has called you to that you have not answered?

Is there something in your life you are giving more attention to than the Word?

The word will grow when it is faithfully proclaimed and falls on fertile soil.

As a healthy body we have lots of potential for growth as well as change. Learning to humble ourselves and meet the legitimate needs of one another will determine if we remain healthy and continue to grow.

Learning to address issues in a humble, healthy, and head-on way follows a biblical model for a healthy growing church.

We will do well to see problems as potential to partner with one another for the progress and proclamation of the gospel.

God is giving us a great and gracious opportunity in our family to equip the church and engage our community.

Just like the Jerusalem church, our family, as it experiences growth, will experience problems. But these problems bring with them the potential to effectively minister to our community and to a new generation of individuals.

Take-Aways From the Text

1. Every church will experience problems
2. How we handle those problems will determine our health
3. A healthy growing church will experience change, will have challenges, and will have servants who take charge and meet the needs of the body of Christ
4. The proclamation of the gospel must be a church’s chief concern