

Secrets of Church Growth and an Enduring Faith
Acts 6 & 7

Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14-17

Romans 8:12-28

Responsive Isaiah 43: 1-7

Turn with me this morning to Acts chapter 6. Today we are going to be taking the whole chapter and yes..also chapter 7. But I want to go ahead and start this morning by reading chapter 6, starting at verse 1, till the end of the chapter. So in this passage we find that this early church runs into their second issue. The first issue being that of Ananias and Sapphira who lied to the Holy Spirit, seeking their own glorification and was struck dead. Now we see this mention of these Hellenistic Widows who are being over looked in the distribution of goods. It is largely believed that these who were referred to as Hellenistic widows, were Jews from the Diaspora who had spent their lives in Greek speaking nations. For it isn't until chapter 10 that we will see the holy spirit coming upon the Gentiles. Further more there appears to be evidence of this as well in verse 9 where it mentions the Synagogue of the Freedmen, who were from various different locations. These would have been those who were former slaves who have all returned for various reasons. Some scholars speculate that has now free people, they were returning back to the home of their ancestors to retire and live out the rest of their lives in the holy city which would likely create a disproportionate amount of widows among this group of people.

So the issue we are seeing here in our text this morning is two fold. We have the issue that the distribution of aid to those in need has become more then the Apostles can handle themselves, and because of this we are seeing this disconnect among the followers as they are beginning to complain and mummer among themselves. In verse 1 it says, that a complaint arose against the Hebrews by the Hellenists. Some translations say, that there was a murmur among the Hellenists, implying that this was not a direct complaint being brought to the Apostles, but rather it was a growing tension among the people. It is not difficult to see how such tensions may rise among a group of people. In many ways we have the same thing in our own churches, and we definitely have such divisions and tensions in the wider society.

It would seem that there was at least a perception of favoritism going on, the Jews from a foreign land who's primary language would have likely been Greek, hence Luke referring to them as Hellenistic, believed that they were not being treated the same as the Hebrews, likely being seen as foreigners and outsiders. I think, and I will qualify this as my own thoughts, that this was an test of the early church, for as was mentioned already...in the near future we will be reading about Gentiles being added into the fold. If there is already a sort of uprising, and tensions over Jews who had returned from foreign countries, imagine the issue of bringing in the unclean Gentiles into the fellowship of God's chosen people?

I see this event as God allowing for this bout of discontent among the people to serve as baby steps for this young fledgling church in preparation for the induction of gentile believers. Furthermore we see the response of the Apostles here, they did not ridicule, or attempt to silence these widows, but rather sought how they could resolve the issue so that all would be treated equally among the fellowship, yet they also recognized the importance and need to continue the ministry of the word. While maintaining the priority of the gospel ministry that was given to them by Jesus, the apostles sought a ministry of care for the needy. It is interesting in this account here, that it mentions that 7 men were selected from among the multitude to serve in this capacity, yet Luke only focus' on Stephen and Phillip.

And that focus is not upon their service in the distribution of goods among the people, or as some administrative role, but rather we see that they both go and become ministers of the word of God in their own right. So I don't think that we can take this text and use it for any sort of justification for formal roles within the church, this was not the first appointed deacons per say...but rather a group of men chosen by the multitude to serve as the Lord lead to the needs of that fellowship, ministering as God gave opportunity, some to the widows and needy, others to the preaching of the word. In many ways this is what the Christian life is about, as Christians there are times where we are called to fill such various roles. We can be given an opportunity to offer support, prayer, and encouragement to one another, or at times we may be given the opportunity to share the gospel with our friends and family.

The gospel ministry is not reserved solely for preachers and teachers, and neither is the help and support of those in need reserved only for appointed administrators of the church. But is rather things that we should each be doing in our own lives as God gives the opportunity. But that does not mean such roles are not important, or in fact even necessary. We see in the example here in Acts the importance of appointing people to tasks to ensure that all the needs of the body is met. And we also see the importance here that those who are selected for such a task are found to be worthy of those roles. The Apostles when they put out the request for 7 men to aid in the management of the distribution of aid, they did not ask merely for those who were willing, but rather they told the people to find those who were qualified. Verse 3, "therefore brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom whom we may appoint over this business."

We have already seen with Ananias and Sapphira how there could be some among the people who would seek to take advantage for their own profit and gain, or who would seek to enact their own agenda. So it is good when it comes to the various aspects of the corporate ministry, that is the functions of a local church body, to be mindful that those who are put in areas of responsibility are ones who are capable of doing so, respectfully, honestly, with their motive being driven by a love for the fellowship, and not out of selfish, or prideful ambitions. As we all know, there are those who seek such roles within the church as a sense of prestige, as a way of elevating themselves in their pride...but this is does not come from a heart which loves God, but rather out of one who seeks to honor themselves. So it is important to as much as we can discern such, to seek and find those of good reputation who show forth the works of the Holy Spirit, and not just give such responsibilities to those who are willing, but to instead look for those who are qualified.

And we see that God is pleased, and blesses such ministry as it says in verse 7, "Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." The ministry of the church is a dynamic multi-functioning body. And as we can see in our passage this morning the importance of having a group of like minded individuals to facilitate that ministry. As I said earlier, I don't necessarily see this as an argument for church roles such as Pastor, deacon, elder, in any official status but there is an implication that there needs to be a group of overseers within a congregation to help in the ministry. In the case here it was some men to help so that the Apostles could remain focused upon the ministry of the gospel and not be overwhelmed or bogged down in the administrating of aid to the families and windows in need.

The example we are given here in Acts I think sets forth a solid standard for what such a ministry should look like. It would seem far too often churches become too overly focused on one mission, and all their energy is put into the success of that mission. But what we see in the early church here is a dynamic church, that there are many members of the body working to edify and bring up the others, there are some appointed to help and facilitate, and some who are focusing on out reach and teaching.

If a church becomes too focused on the outreach, then often times those who are already there suffer in some sort. Whether it be the funds of the church being so focused on outreach that many who may need aid are not helped, or more likely because the focus is on outreach, the congregation never grows spiritually, are never challenged to the greater things of God, in fear of making the services uninviting...or in their words, not “seeker sensitive.” A church like this as an appearance of love, but tends to be a shallow representation, for they compromise the truth, the meat of the faith in favor of the milk.

Or likewise you see the opposite, where a church can focus on doctrinal practice, have solid teaching, and a hunger for the deep things of the word, but become insular, cold, and closed off to anyone outside. We have all seen both of these examples of churches, and the issue in both is the same...it is a loss of focus. The focus of the church, is to glorify God, and the church does by edifying and building up one another, by helping, by praying, by teaching, by providing for one another, by nurturing spiritual growth and faith, and none of these things are mutually exclusive and once you make any one thing the main thing, then your true focus is lost.

Look at our example this morning, the church had grown to a place where the 12 apostles could no longer keep up with the daily needs of the people, and the ministry of the word. So they appointed 7 men to help, as it says in verse 2, to serve tables. But quickly, Luke changes and focus' on Stephen, one of these 7 men chosen to help with the daily tasks of distributing aid, of setting tables...but what happens? Verse 8, “And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people”.. wait what? Stephen one of these table setters...is out there preaching and teaching as well? I think that is the point, and the point I am trying to make this morning....the ministry of any body of believers is first and foremost to God....that is, the focus should always be to do that which God has set before you to do, to the best of our ability. Just because you are a table setter...doesn't mean you also don't share the gospel, and just because you are a teacher, or preacher doesn't mean you don't set the tables.

And all of it is done, for the glory of God himself. We do not outreach so that our church can merely grow in numbers and buy a nicer building, but we do so because it is what God says we must do. The Church doesn't help the poor, the widows, and those who are in need because it gives them a sense of pride and accomplishment or bragging points among the community, as Ananias and Sapphira were seeking....no, we do all things for the glory of God. And that is the secret, to remain faithful to God, to stand upon the truth of his word, and it is God who adds to the church. So many today are afraid to preach the bible, that is honestly, and truly preach it for fear that it will scare people away. But look at what is happening here in Acts, these men are preaching the word that they were given...and it is offensive, many seek to imprison, or even kill them.....yet how many times now have we seen Luke, record....that many were added to them, or their numbers multiplied greatly.

I think of the words of Gamaliel who we read about in chapter 5, when he says, “if this plan, or this work is of men, it will come to nothing, but if it is of God you can not overthrow it.” We should have this ever before our eyes as a reminder of the work of our sovereign Lord. And likewise remembering that he chooses the base things to confound the wise.. and it is by the foolishness of preaching the gospel that God has chosen to save his people. Honestly, if you stop and think about it....the gospel is not inviting, it sounds absurd, it's offensive, as the bible says, to some it is the stench of death unto death, and to others the aroma of life, and this is why it takes the ministry and awakening of the Holy Spirit within those whom God has given to hear and to believe, for no one of their natural inclination would ever believe and trust in this so called foolishness of the gospel.

And since this is true, it is probably the best course of action for us to appeal to man's will and desires right? Make them feel comfortable, and at home? To design and cater our ministry to draw people in? Is this what we see the Apostles doing? Is this the example we are given of the early church? Of course, not...in fact the only thing that brings about the new birth is a God-given conviction of sin from the teaching and preaching of the word....so yea, that's what we should be doing, not taking the edges off because the edges of the gospel are needed to cut to the heart. And this is why I wanted to read chapter 7 today as well, for it is Stephen's account when he was brought before the council. Even standing before those who were seeking to silence him, in the face of such persecution he remained faithful and preached Christ to them. Starting in verse 1, (read chapter 7.)

Just how God used the rebellious and murderous religious leaders to bring about the death of Christ on the cross, something that was intended to cause harm, something intended to intimidate and drive his followers away, only served as the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation... likewise it is the same when persecution arises. The intent of persecution is to silence, to drive fear and despair into a group of people, and in some ways it works, but when it comes to the children of God, and God's sovereign plan, it always has the opposite effect. Even in this account of Steven, it is recorded that Saul, later to become Paul stood there and was a witness to this. You know that this would have had a lasting impression upon him, as with the reactions of all the others he later had imprisoned or killed. God is pleased to use persecution as a means to grow his church....yes you heard me right, God uses persecution to grow his church. That is because the message of salvation is not brought about by comfort and peace...sure, with it comes comfort and peace but one must first be torn asunder, one must first die before they can be born again. Recognizing the separation our sin brings, and with it the agony of guilt and shame. It isn't until we rest in the blood of Christ that there is peace. And this peace does not bring about success, glory, or fame...but is a peace in the soul when all else is turmoil.

And it is when all else is turmoil is when the peace of God is sweeter, for we can do no other than to turn to him, and rely upon him, Like wise it is the same for the church, when persecution arises, the church does not fall apart....of course there will always be those who appear to fall aside but they were never truly a part of the body of Christ to begin with. It is like the parable of the sower...when the sun comes out, those on shallow ground wither and die. Such is the same in the church, persecution has a culling effect separating God's true children from the herd. Those who remain faithful, and stay strong become knitted together in faith and love. It always causes a time of spiritual growth that will likely not happen without the trials and persecution.

It is God's way of bringing us closer to him, it is God's way of causing his true church to shine, and it is God's way to add new believers to the faith, When trials or hardships arise in our life, or if persecution comes for the church....we must determine that we will stand upon the God of our faith, and that even if like Steven we are called to die for our faith, we do so singing praises to our Father, who found us worthy to suffer for his name sake, that though the body may die, he will deliver our soul into his very presence. And this is the crowning moment for any believer, it is the prize at the end of the race...to stand before our God, justified, by his blood. And it is this promise, that gives us that peace, and that hope when all else is chaos, when all else hopeless.

God did not abandon Steven, God will not abandon you...if you are his child, there is nothing that will snatch you out of his hand. This is why these apostles rejoiced in persecution....it is not that they desired it, but rather they rejoiced that through it God is glorified. No suffering is meaningless, but all things are to serve God, and this should be our mindset when trials or persecution arise...not why must we suffer so, but rejoicing that through the suffering that God has allowed that his purpose and will is being carried out.

There maybe those in our lives, like Paul here....who are standing on the side lines, even reveling in our suffering, but God may use our witness through it as a seed which may spring forth life with in them. In all things let us rest in him, knowing and believing in his promises...that all things work for the good to those who are called according to his purpose.