Solving Problems in the Church

Acts 6:1-7

By Chris Losey

Up to this point in the book of Acts most of the problems for the church had come from the outside. The Jewish Council known as the Sanhedrin, had put pressure on the apostles on two different occasions in an attempt to stop the spread of the gospel. God had given the apostles boldness to share despite this opposition. The church was growing and life was good, but now there would be a new challenge to the church at Jerusalem. It would come from inside the church. Listen to Acts 6:1-7.

Acts 6:1-7 (NASB) states,

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.

We can learn some valuable lessons from this incident in the life of the early church. In this message we will focus on five key lessons. The first is:

**Every church will experience internal problems**

Acts 6:1 states,

> 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.

We wish it weren’t true, but every church will experience internal problems. The fact is every church is made up of individuals and each individual has a sin nature. At some point when people come together, someone will be offended by something. This is precisely what happened in the early church and still happens today.

Part of the Satan’s attack against the early church was to cause problems. This happened in at least three ways. The first was through **persecution** from outside the church. In Acts chapter four Peter and John were arrested (Ac 4:3), commanded to speak no more in the name of Jesus (Ac 4:18) and threatened (Ac 4:21). In Acts chapter five the apostles were again arrested (Ac 5:18), flogged (Ac 5:40) and commanded once again not to speak in the name of Jesus. This persecution didn’t work because the apostles responded that they must obey God rather than men (Ac 5:29). Satan’s persecution plot backfired and only made the church stronger.
A second prong of Satan’s attack against the church was to tear it apart through **sin**. You may remember that Ananias and Sapphira sinned by lying to the Holy Spirit about a piece of land they had sold, but disunity was averted when Peter pronounced judgment on Ananias and Sapphira and God took their lives (Ac 5:1-10). Again, Satan’s attempt to undermine the early church failed.

Satan’s third way of trying to create disunity in the church is through **internal strife**. In the case of the Jerusalem church, the internal conflict arose when Hellenistic Jews complained that their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. Acts 6:1 says that “a complaint arose.” The Greek word for complaint means muttering or murmuring. This murmuring eventually made its way to the ears of the twelve apostles.

The question arises, “Who were the Hellenistic Jews, and how were they different from the Native Jews?” Hellenistic Jews were Jews who came to Jerusalem from the outside the Holy Land to participate in various Jewish feasts like Passover and Pentecost, which had recently taken place. Hellenistic Jews primarily spoke Greek and also spoke the language of the country they came from. They did not speak Aramaic, the language of Jews living in the Holy land.

Hellenistic Jews, also called Grecian Jews, had either moved on their own out of Israel at some time in the past, or were part of the dispersion known as the Disapora that took place when the Assyrians conquered the Southern Kingdom of Israel and scattered Jews across the Assyrian empire. Those Jews who had been scattered eventually assimilated into foreign cultures and learned the language of the area where they settled. This is very similar to what happens to any people who move to a foreign country to stay. Within a generation or two, their families primarily speak the new language of the country they moved to.
Native Jews on the other hand were those who lived in and around the Holy Land and spoke primarily Aramaic but also spoke Greek.

Some of the Grecian (or Hellenistic) Jews who had travelled to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, were saved on or after the Day of Pentecost and became part of the Jerusalem church. Some decided to stick around Jerusalem rather than return to their homes outside the Holy Land. Perhaps they anticipated the soon return of Jesus. Every generation of Christians longs for Christ’s return.

In the Jewish world, there was some rivalry between Hellenistic and Native Jews and this rivalry, to some extent, came into the church. The Apostles who led the Jerusalem church were Native Jews, and for whatever reason did not ensure that the Hellenistic Jewish widows were taken care of. Although this oversight may have been unintentional, the Hellenistic Jews complained about it. People have a great sense of what’s fair especially when they think they are being taken advantage of or being neglected. So it was in the Jerusalem church with the Hellenistic Jews.

It is interesting to note that this problem happened while the church was expanding and increasing in number. The more growth of a church the more things can fall through the cracks. It is estimated that with men, women and children, the Jerusalem church may have numbered as many as 20,000. It was an almost impossible task for the twelve apostles to minister to so many people. No wonder things fell through the cracks!

The complaint lodged by the Hellenistic Jews was obviously true because the church leadership didn’t deny it.
The question arises, “Why were the Hellenists concerned about the widows in their midst? The answer is simple. In Jewish culture it was imperative that widows be provided for since many of them had no way to adequately support themselves. For example Deuteronomy 14:28-29 (NASB) states,

28 "At the end of every third year you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in that year, and shall deposit it in your town.
29 "The Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance among you, and the alien, the orphan and the widow who are in your town, shall come and eat and be satisfied, in order that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do.

God has a special place in His heart for aliens, orphans and widows.

The new church in Jerusalem carried over this laudable custom of caring for widows. Probably there were offerings taken, and distribution of food and perhaps money to help meet needs.

Later in his letter to Timothy, Paul stressed the importance of caring for widows. 1 Timothy 5:3-4 (NASB) states,

3 Honor widows who are widows indeed; 4 but if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God.

In other words if widows didn’t have family to care for them, the church should step in to help. But if widows did have living family, those living family members should care for their own family.
Getting back to the subject of problems, one thing we need to remember is that having problems isn’t the main problem. Everyone has problems. Individuals have problems, families and problems, and church families have problems. The main issue is solving problems effectively and preserving unity. After all, unity in the church is vitally important. Ephesians 4:3 (NASB) states, “being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” If problems aren’t solved, unity crumbles.

This brings us to the second point.

**It’s up to leadership to help solve the problems**

It was essential for the early church leaders not to sweep the widow problem under the carpet. After obviously discussing it among themselves, the leadership decided the best course of action was to call the congregation together and solicit their help. We don’t know who the congregation of disciples consisted of, but it was apparently made up of key disciples from the Jerusalem church. Enlisting the congregation’s help, would help preserve unity.

Acts 6:2,3 states,

> 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.

The leadership presented the plan to the congregation to select from among themselves seven men to help solve the problem. The leadership didn’t have time to wait on tables because of the vast number of new believers who needed to be taught and discipled, and the need to continue to preach the gospel message.
Selecting **seven men** may go back to the tradition in Jewish communities where seven respected men managed the public business in an official council. (The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty.)

Some people believe that Acts chapter six is where the office of deacon began. It is somewhat how we select deacons today. Congregation members recommend qualified people and then vote on them.

This brings up a good point about a church or any other organization. If you want to minister to more people, you have to enlist more people to help. This principle is illustrated by sand on a table. Only so much sand can be piled on a table before it begins to fall off the sides. If more sand is to stay on the table, the base of the table must be made bigger. If the table gets bigger, the pile can go higher and wider. If a church wants to meet more needs it must make its base of servants bigger. By enlisting seven deacons, the serving of tables could be done effectively without overloading the twelve apostles.

**People who serve should have certain qualifications**
The next key point from the passage is that people for key positions must have certain qualifications. In this case because there may have been the distribution of money involved as well as food, the people chosen needed to be high in the area of integrity. The specific qualifications are mentioned in Acts 6:3 which states,

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.

The qualifications were that the men needed to be:
- **Of good reputation** who were known as men of integrity and could be counted on to do a good job because that is what they had been known for in the past.

- **Full of the Spirit.** They needed to be Christians who followed the promptings of the Holy Spirit and obeyed the Word of God.

- **Full of wisdom.** They needed to be known for their wisdom in applying God’s truth to life in practical ways.

Such men would do an honorable job caring for widows. It is interesting that Jews were chosen who had Hellenistic names. Acts 6:5,6 states,

> 5 ...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.

Hellenistic widows would undoubtedly be best cared for by Hellenistic men who spoke their language and understood their culture.

**Church elders must keep prayer and the Word their top priorities**

Again, Acts 6:2-4 states,

> 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."

God has given elders (pastors) to the church whose primary responsibility must remain prayer and the ministry of the word, that is to say preaching and teaching.
You may remember Ephesians 4:11-12 (NASB) which states,

11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;

These verses state that the church leadership is given to the church to equip and train the saints (the congregation) so that the congregation can do the work of service. It is only as the congregation gets equipped and begins serving in ministry that a church can be all it is meant to be.

It was impossible for the apostles in the early church to do everything that needed to be done. Each member of the Jerusalem church had something to offer and needed to get involved. It began with the appointment of these seven men to minister to the widows. Leadership of the early church could thus focus on prayer and teaching/preaching God’s Word. If they got caught up in administrative or logistical endeavors, it wouldn’t be long before prayer and the ministry of the Word suffered.

The same is true in the church today. Leadership must keep focused on prayer and the ministry of the Word. It can be easy for new Christians to think the pastoral staff is supposed to do everything rather than realizing that every member of the church needs to plug in and serve.

Some pastors try to do everything and burn out. If prayer is neglected a church runs on the power of the flesh rather than Divine power. If the ministry of the Word is neglected, the church receives substandard teaching and preaching and the people are not adequately equipped to serve.
I’m so thankful at Valley that there are so many people who serve which allows the pastoral staff to focus on the things that God wants every church to keep as priorities: prayer and the ministry of the Word.

Some people in the early church might have accused the church leaders of being prima donnas, being above serving tables, but that would be a wrong accusation. I can tell you that being a church leader means often doing whatever needs to be done, whether it is plunging toilets, or mopping floors. And it is gratifying to me that I keep getting encouraged, especially by our deacons, to keep focused on the things that pastors should remain focused on.

**When problems are solved, the church continues to grow**

This brings us to the final point – when problems are solved, the church continues to grow. Acts 6:7 states,

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.

What a beautiful picture of the church continuing to expand. The problem was solved, Satan’s plan to stall out the Jerusalem church through internal strife was foiled, and the church moved forward.

Let’s do a quick review:

- Every church will experience internal problems
- It is up to leadership to help solve the problems
- Those who serve must meet certain qualifications
- Church leaders must keep prayer and the Word their top priorities
- When problems are solved the church continues to grow
Final Thoughts
There is so much we can learn from the life of the early church! Let’s be sure we apply these truths to our church today.