

Solving Church Problems
August 10, 2014

When I was a teenager, my family went to Florida on vacation. I can remember when my brother, sister, and I were in line for the Space Mountain ride at Disney World. The ride was promoted as a very scary roller coaster. I remember feeling both a bit scared and excited at the same time. My palms were sweaty. My stomach was nervous. But I was looking forward to it.

I imagine that life in the early days of the first church was like that for the leaders. The changes taking place were exciting. People were getting saved and baptized and growing. The members of the church were sacrificing for each other. Look with me at what it says they were doing.

Acts 4:32 (NIV) All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.

Acts 4:34-35 (NIV) There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

So there were positive reasons to be excited. There were also reasons to be nervous. Two of the apostles had already been arrested, jailed overnight, and threatened with worse if they did not stop preaching the resurrection of Jesus. There was a real danger here. There was reason to be nervous.

So the early days of the church were full of good and bad stress. Despite the stress, the church was growing. Many people were coming to believe in Jesus Christ. And wherever the church is growing, either in numbers or in faith, our old enemy will work to bring that growth to an end. A problem was brewing in the church.

Acts 6:1a (NIV) In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews...

In the first century, Israel was not a united people. There were factions among the Jews. The two primary groups were the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees were the ruling group. They were the rich. They controlled the flow of money, especially in and out of the temple. Politically, they were a middle-of-the-road group. They tried to keep all sides of Jewish society at peace so as not to lose their own financial and political strength. They made concessions to the Roman government if it helped them maintain the status quo. We would label them a moderate group.

The other major group, the Pharisees, were ultra conservative. They rejected all things Roman or Greek and in many little ways resisted the Roman government. They weren't actively violent, but were very vocal in their hatred for the Roman government and anyone who cooperated with that government.

These two groups, and a few minor ones, all had their following among the Jewish people. But there was a portion of the Jewish people who figured the safest course in

life was to adapt themselves to Rome and the Greek culture that had been introduced. They attended the theatre, the sporting events, and other cultural events sponsored by the Romans. They may also have adopted clothing that more matched what the Romans wore. This would set them apart visibly from other Jews.

The conservative Jews, known as Hebraic Jews, ostracize these liberal Jews, whom they called Hellenists or Grecian Jews. That fact is important to today's lesson. These political and cultural tensions existed before the church was begun. And the devil used these old animosities to stir up trouble within the church.

As we read, the first Christians contributed freely and gladly to help each other with basic needs. And at some point a list of Christian widows was formed. They were being supplied with either food or money for food. This was distributed at a central place that the widows could come and receive it.

We don't know who was doing this distribution. The apostles were not doing it. But we don't know who was responsible for it. Maybe someone just kind of fell into it. At any rate, the person or persons doing the distributing were of the Hebraic Jewish group and started to favor the Hebraic widows and shortchange the Grecian widows. With that background, let's go back to the story in Acts 6.

Acts 6:1 (NIV) In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

What did the Grecian Jewish Christians do about this very real problem? Instead of bringing it to the apostles they began murmuring and complaining among themselves, and then against the Hebraic Jewish Christians. This was a damaging approach to solving the problem. They were damaging the spirit of the church. They were creating tension in the church. They could destroy all the good that God had been doing in them.

What they were doing was could be labeled as murmuring, griping, complaining, or grumbling. **Murmuring was one of the predominant sins of the Israelites.** (Ex. 15:24; 16:2-12; 17:3; Nu. 11:33, 34; 14:2, 27-36; 16:41; 17:5; Num 21:4-6; Joshua 9:18; 1 Corinthians 10:10)

Murmuring...

... **is a way of getting attention.** They do it to get attention. They aren't among the leaders of the church and want more input into what happens than their character and experience warrant. Murmurers avoid the leaders. They don't bring their complaints, even legitimate ones, to those who can do something about it. They are more interested in sharing some news, even bad news, with others than they are about solving the problem. Murmuring is closely associated with gossip. The two often go hand in hand.

... **is a rebellion against the decision of the leaders or majority.** The murmurer may gripe and complain because a vote did not go their way. And they resent it.

... **spreads a spirit of discontent in a group.** This can happen to a community, a company, or even a church. The murmuring among the Israelites spread a spirit of discontent to much of the people. The same thing might have happened in this first church. All the good that had been taking place could have unraveled. And that could have happen before the leaders even knew about the problem.

Many a church has been rendered useless to God by murmuring. Many a church has seen its good spirit of love and cooperation come apart because of murmuring and complaining. If some people start griping about the church, and no one calls them on it, others will start complaining about other things. And the whole spirit of the church goes from good to bad. Instead of praising God for all the good that is happening, they begin resenting each other, the leaders, and even God, for all the imperfections.

I don't say this because we have this problem. As far as I know, we do not have this problem. But we need to be aware that it can develop. There is always someone who is discontent about something. A hundred people can be in favor of something and one person be against it, and that one person can do a lot of damage by murmuring against the decision of the majority.

Each member of this church has the responsibility to stop murmuring from hurting our church. If you observe such activity, tell the complainers that they are sinning and need to go see the leaders of the church. **It isn't a sin to have a complaint. It IS a sin to spread it around to everyone else instead of those who can do something about it.** Murmuring, griping, and complaining hurts the spirit of the church and hinders the work of the Holy Spirit.

Eventually the leadership heard of this problem. Let's see what they did.

Acts 6:2-7 (NIV) So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

This short passage is a summary of what happened. It gives us the barest of facts. It leaves out a lot of details about what I believe happened. I believe that the apostles investigated this complaint, getting as much information as possible about it. Then they took this problem to the Lord in prayer. After much prayer they discussed the problem, believing that the Holy Spirit would lead them to a wise solution to the problem. The leaders put their faith to work by trusting that God had a solution for them.

No, the text doesn't say that, but that is what I believe. Let me tell you why.

- They were in over their heads. This was all new to them. They who had started out as fishermen, tax collectors, and such other ordinary jobs were now the leaders of several thousand Christians. They had not been trained in these kinds of administrative problems. They had been trained in how to live in the Kingdom of God. They had been trained in preaching about the good news. They had been trained in caring for people. But they had not been trained in administrative stuff.

That has always been a neglected emphasis of ministry training. Many a man has been to seminary and trained in preaching, teaching, and theology, and found that 40-50 percent of his work in a church was administration. And he felt totally unprepared. My seminary had finally caught on to this and was trying to rectify it. Even so, my education in administration was very lacking. Like most other pastors, I've had to try to learn these tasks on the job. And many a time I have felt myself in over my head. I know exactly how these apostles must have felt.

So they prayed. Jesus had taught them how to pray and seek wisdom from God for all the problems they faced. So they prayed.

- They had seen the Holy Spirit work in powerful ways already. The Holy Spirit, I have no doubt, had given them solutions for baptizing several thousand people in the city of Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had shown them how to organize all these new disciples for teaching them. The Holy Spirit had given them boldness to witness of the resurrection even in the face of arrest and jail. They had learned to rely on the Holy Spirit.

- They were a team and worked together thru discussion. Before the death and resurrection of Jesus they competed with each other. But now, God had humbled them and they worked together. We see no hint that one or two of the apostles fought their way to the front, trying to be in charge of the twelve. They were working together on the problems and challenges before them. And that takes discussion.

So I believe they prayed and discussed together to a God-given solution. Discussion of problems is hard work. Not everyone is willing to do this hard work. But that is what we must do to solve problems in the church. We must **Pray and discuss together to a God-given solution.**

This work is often long work, taking many meetings with time to pray and think between meetings. But this is what is required when problems come to the church.

One possible solution in their case would give this job to the apostles to do. In some churches that is what they do today. Every new job that comes along is automatically the pastor's job, unless there is an obvious other person well qualified for the position who might be convinced to do it. Likely it was suggested by the murmurers that the apostles take on this new job.

But the apostles had been specially commissioned by Jesus for the work of preaching and teaching. That was their main task, a task no one else had been trained for. The apostles recognized that they dare not take on responsibilities that would hinder them from their primary work. And it was on those terms that they presented their solution to the church.

The church saw the wisdom of this and agreed, and set things in motion. Seven men, full of the Spirit and wisdom, were found and approved by the church. The apostles laid their hands on them, praying over them, dedicating them to this service in the church. And the result was that the spirit of love and cooperation in the church was maintained and the church kept on growing.

Life in the church often feels like a roller coaster. We anticipate with joy the high points of people getting saved and growing in their faith. We also anticipate with nervousness the lows of problems that challenge the peace and faithfulness of our church. So we have ups and downs, good stress and bad stress. I feel both of these, sometimes at the same time.

There are no shortcuts to solving the problems and challenges that face us. It took us 18 months to decide on a church sign to present to you. And while we wait for that to be delivered and installed we have other issues facing us. In last winter's cold we had a busted water pipe. We have yet to decide on a permanent solution to that problem. There are other building and property maintenance needs facing us.

We have need of teachers for the new year starting in September. We need a teacher for a new middle school class.

We are trying to hold a soccer clinic for children here, in cooperation with the First Baptist Church of Crofton. This may, or may not, open up a new path of reaching out to families in our community.

These are the challenges we already know about. At any time new things can pop up to challenge our faith in Christ or our love for each other. But we can weather such storms if we are willing to pray them into God's hands and discuss them until the Holy Spirit gives us a wise solution. That is how God would have us work together.

So I finally got to the head of the line for Space Mountain, the roller coaster. And you know what? It was a dud. There wasn't anything scary about it. It was mostly dark so there was nothing to be seen to be scared of.

There is also nothing to fear about the problems that will face us as a church. As long as we face them with faith in God and are willing to pray and discuss until the Spirit gives us the wisdom we need.

Let us do all we can to maintain the spirit of love and cooperation in our church family. Our effectiveness as a church depends on it.

Invitation

Just as God is ready to help His church with any problem that comes up, God is ready to help you, Christian, with any problem you have. You can turn to Him for help.

God has shown us His love in meeting our greatest need, the need of a savior. And He did this before we were even aware of our sin. Recognize how much God loves you and turn to the Savior today.