

Leading Through Tension and Growth - Acts 6:1-7

The chapter today is short, but it's packed with incredible wisdom on how to navigate through differences in the church.

You see, here's why we need this chapter - because it's most often the case: the world doesn't do "different" well.

And when God birthed a church, his intention was that we model for the world what it means to do "different," WELL.

It's something the Bible calls the "mystery" of God. What was God doing when he created the church?

Ephesians 3:6 tells us:

The mystery is that people who have never heard of God and those who have heard of him all their lives . . . (outsiders and insiders) stand on the same ground before God (Ephesians 3:6, The Message).

This is what the church is to depict to the world, and this is what God wants to the world to know. So here's the thing:

THE WORLD WILL NOTICE, WHEN PEOPLE CAN DO DIFFERENT, DIFFERENTLY!

So if you go to a church and everybody looks just like you – everybody dresses just like you – everybody votes just like you – everybody wants music just like you.

IT DOESN'T PRESENT THE MYSTERY!

And so, therefore, one of the tragedies of the modern church today—it too often leans in the direction of alienation instead of reconciliation.

Paul said in Romans 14 that we are to "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."

To do that, we must care about, work in partnership with, listen to the thoughts and insights and hurts of people whose backgrounds and experiences are not at all like our own.

If you're a football fan you recognize this picture – Vince Lombardi – one of the greatest coaches in the history of the National Football League, his name is on the Super Bowl trophy.



He was known as a crusty, tough as nails coach. Lee Iacocca had a chance to interview him before he died and said, "Coach, you know football, but all coaches know X's and O's – all coaches have an atmosphere of discipline, what makes a champion team?"

And old tough Lombardi said something Iacocca did not expect. He said,

"The missing ingredient in most teams is love. You have to care about your teammates more than you care about yourself. You have got to think, 'I have got to make my block so that this guy doesn't kill my guy, because a champion team is a team where everybody is playing for someone else.'"

And so in the church, that means we are committed to service over self.

Now – as we move into the sixth chapter of Acts today – just by review – I want to remind you of what's been happening up until this moment.

(God's mathematics are amazing).

- At first the Lord **added** to the church daily those who should be saved, Acts 2:47. The Lord was adding.
- Then as we continued to read through Acts, we saw multitudes coming. (So we've seen that the Lord not only adds, but he

multiplies. (His work was spreading so rapidly that there were thousands of people in the early church coming to Christ. **So the Lord adds. The Lord multiplies.**

But then last time we met, we discovered the Lord is also sometimes in the business of **subtracting**. Anaias and Sapphira were eliminated from the church.

- They were subtracted from the church by the Lord. (And sometimes, because elders are called to be shepherds of the flock, they have to say to a wolf, “you’re no longer going to harm the body of Christ.” So there is a place for subtracting.

So the Lord adds. The Lord multiplies. The Lord subtracts.

But - one thing he never does in his math, he never divides. That's the devil's work.

And when you read verse 1, you see division in the body, and then how the Lord corrects that so that the church can continue to grow and multiply.

So let's pray – then we'll jump right in -

Father, we thank you for the word of God that does the work of God in the hearts of the people of God by the Holy Spirit of God. Father, we are here asking you, as the good physician, the great physician, to do surgery on our hearts, to work in our lives, to remind us of truths long forgotten, unknown perhaps by some, that need to be reaffirmed tonight in this place to us. As we consider, Lord, prepare our hearts as we share together at your table in Jesus' name. Amen.

Read 1.

So you have two communities.

Hebraic Jews – live their whole life in Holy Land, spoke the local language, Aramaic – they're like Savannah natives, know all the best places to eat

Hellenistic Jews – spoke Greek, moved here from different places

And among them are widows, and if the Christians didn't take care of the elderly and the poor, no one else would. There was no Medicare, no health insurance – no nonprofits – and in a society where there were no social programs, unless the Christians stepped up, no one would help them. So the responsibility for the social well-being of these widows fell on the church.

And so the church is growing like crazy – but the Hellenistic Jews felt like they were not getting fair treatment – their widows were not getting the money and food that other women were getting.

- The Hellenistic Jews were the minority –
- they even read a copy of the OT in Greek called the Septuagint. It was a Greek translation – and it was considered a little more liberal, if you will.
- They adopted Greek culture.

(And isn't it funny? People haven't changed that much. These folks read a different translation of the Bible, they had – you know - a different church background, they spoke differently, and there was division among them. So things haven't changed, right?)

And even though they worshipped the same God, they differed on minor issues – and that divided them.

And here's why this is important: The slight was unintentional, but the potential negative impact was unimaginable.

Because the very message of the Gospel – **that we can do different, differently** – was at stake.

And the apostles saw how big this issue was, so what they do is propose the creation of a new ministry that will allow them to stay focused on outreach while at the same time taking care of the needs of people.

So where there are people, there are problems. But where there are problems, there are also solutions.

And we see how the Lord solves the problem in chapter 6 through selecting capable leaders to address the problem.

Verses 2-4

Verse 2 – Now do you think they're saying, "Serving widows is below us?" I don't think so. In fact, the reason they're looking for help is because they've been serving widows the whole time, and doing everything else in the process.

No - as you look more closely, they were so convicted about their primary calling to preaching, they believed they would be sinning. "Not be right" – means displeasing to God for them not to devote their lives away from teaching and telling people about Jesus.

So they make a proposal (3)– choose seven qualified men to handle this task who are full of the Spirit and who are very wise to take care of these widows.

In our day of government programs and subsidies, we need to understand as Christians in this room, when the day of Judgment comes and we stand before Jesus, it's not gonna be governments or social services who are gonna be held accountable for the needs of the poor and the helpless, it will be you and I. Christians will be held responsible for ministering to people in need.

So the TWELVE gathered all the believers together and they said, "We need to come up with a plan for distributing the food and taking care of these needs."

And they came up with practical steps to address the problems.

Verses 5-7

Stephen, Philip, Prochorus (PROH-koh-rus), Nicanor (nigh-KAN-or), Timon (TIE-mun), Parmenas (par-MEN-as), and Nicolas (NICK-oh-las).

So what you see happens next is a defining work of the Holy Spirit, because the whole church liked the idea – and that only happens through the Holy Spirit.

So look at all the names in verse 5 – and we miss this because we're so far removed from the story, but every name that is mentioned is not a Jewish name, it is a Greek name.

(Two of note are Stephen – the first martyr; Philip, the first missionary).

And here's why this is so powerful – you have this large group that's in the majority that's now reaching the minority. And because they believe so deeply that the name of Jesus should be lifted up in their city, **the majority hands over power to the minority for the good of the church.**

They hand power over to the very ones they were serving.

So seven people of the exile are elected to serve.

And here's the leadership lesson I take from that:

LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT RELEASE, NOT CONTROL

It's about giving power away, instead of gathering it to ourselves.

We saw that last SATURDAY when our men served together at the church work day: trusting one another, benefitting from the wisdom of the group.

(When I look at these men, all taking their Saturday that they could have done anything else for, giving of their time to the building up of the church – two things stand out –

HERE ARE MEN – full of the Holy Spirit, and men full of wisdom!

ANOTHER EXAMPLE – Award to Gracepoint, recovery church of year in West Tennessee

Two groups – Gracepoint, and AA (94 Wednesday night - and brothers and sisters all mixed up in between. (Only the Holy Spirit is capable of that).

The Bible says – verse 5, “This PLEASED the people . . . So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly.

The Holy Spirit begins to stir in the community – when they did different, differently!

NOW – there’s seven men mentioned – but I want to key in on one in particular. His name is Stephen and he will figure prominently into next week’s lesson as we move forward.

Verses 8-9

Let me just say a word about verse 9. Synagogues became central places of worship during the **Babylonian captivity** (between the Old and New Testaments), which is why they don’t appear in the Old Testament but are widespread in the New Testament.

By Jesus’ day, Jewish sources claim there were **390 in Jerusalem**), and they functioned like local churches with distinct identities and cliques.

One Synagogue in particular - the **Synagogue of the Freedmen** - was made up of **former slaves (literally “freed men”** who were Jews freed from Roman slavery who returned to Jerusalem from places like **Cyrene, Alexandria, and Cilicia**.

Now here’s an interesting fact – Saul (persecutor of the church, who later has his name changed to Paul), was from Tarsus (which was in the province of Cilicia).

So because of family ties to Cilicia, this was probably the synagogue he went to. And he’s going to play a central role next week in the life and death of the man we read about here.

Opposition arose from the members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen . . . who began to argue with Stephen.

Verses 10 - But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

Stephen is going to be the first Christian in the early church to die for his faith, but if there ever was a man of God – a man whose life resembled that of his Master – it was Stephen.

And you may not have noticed this – but the Scripture tell us – that Stephen was a man who was full of five things: **MARK THESE IN YOUR BIBLE**

1. **Full of Faith (verse 5)** - Stephen was a believing man. He was a hopeful man. He was a trusting man.

Romans 5:5 says, “Hope does not disappoint.” People will disappoint you. Bad choices will disappoint you. But HOPE – it will never disappoint. Stephen was a faithful man!

He believed in the Lord. He chose to do what was right over what was easy.

2. **Full of the Holy Spirit (verse 5)** - You know, you can have all kinds of leadership qualifications. But if you don't have this one, you'll never lead to your God-given capacity. Stephen was filled, controlled by, managed by the Holy Spirit. He was spirit-led. He was in tune/in step with the Spirit of God. (His prayer? Holy Spirit, lead me. Show me what you would have me to do. Guide me through your work and in prayer toward righteousness). That was Stephen.

3. **Full of Grace (verse 8)** – don't you want to follow someone who's full of grace? Loving? Forgiving? Welcoming?

One of the pastors prayed at the awards celebration – “Lord, keep us so close together, that one cannot fall without the other.” That's grace.

4. **Full of Power (verse 8)** - The world exerts power – control, authority, title and position. But the power that Stephen possessed was different. He used his power not to control, but to heal. To bless the lives of others.
5. **Full of Wisdom (verse 10)** – he was wise enough to trust the collective wisdom of the group. And because of his wisdom, the people trusted the process, and they trusted the man.

And here was this early church. And Satan once again came after them with perhaps his greatest weapon – division. Disunity.

And here were these men, who were considerate, and faithful, and loving, and full of grace, and full of power, and full of the Holy Spirit – and because they loved the Lord so much – they solved the problem, and everyone was satisfied, and they went on to literally change the world.

Because Stephen and all the others, had this one principle they lived by – one principle that made him the kind of guy who keeps people together, that keeps that keeps everything moving forward – and that principle is: “It's not about me!”

And because of that spirit – the church succeeded, at doing different, differently!

When it comes to that, one of the best illustrations I can think of is a story told by author Robert Fulghum. He writes:

Giants, Wizards, and Dwarfs was the game to play.

Being left in charge of about 80 children 7 to 10 years old while their parents were off doing parenty things, I mustered my troops in the fellowship hall and explained the game.

It's a large scale version of Rock, Paper, and Scissors, and involves some intellectual decision making. But the real purpose of the game is to make a lot of noise and run around chasing people until nobody knows which side you are on or who won.

Organizing a roomful of grade-schoolers into two teams, explaining the rudiments of the game, achieving consensus on group identity - all this was no easy accomplishment, but we did it with a right good will and were ready to go.

The excitement of the chase had reached a critical mass. I yelled out, "You have to decide now which you are: a GIANT, a WIZARD, or a DWARF". While the groups huddled in frenzied, whispered consultation, a tug came at my pant leg.

A small child stands there looking up, and asks in a small concerned voice, "Where do the Mermaids stand?" A long pause. A very long pause. "Where do the Mermaids stand?" I said, "You see, I am a Mermaid." "There are no such things as Mermaids." "Oh yes there is, I am one!" She did not relate to being a Giant, a Wizard, or a Dwarf.

She knew her category – "Mermaid" - and was not about to leave the game and go over and stand against the wall where the loser would stand. She intended to participate, wherever Mermaids fit into the scheme of things, without giving up dignity or identity.

She took it for granted that there was a place for mermaids and that I would know just where.

Then he reflects: Well, where DO the Mermaids stand? All the Mermaids - all those who are different, who do not fit the norm, and who do not accept the available boxes and pigeonholes?

Answer that question and you can build a school, a nation or a kingdom on it. What was my answer at the moment? Every once in a while I say the right thing. "The Mermaid stands right here, by the King of the Sea!" So we stood there, hand in hand, while the Wizards and Dwarfs and Giants rolled by in wild disarray. It is not true, by the way, that Mermaids do not exist. I know at least one personally. I have held her hand.

QUESTION – WHERE DOES THE LORD NEED TO OPEN YOUR HEART – TO DO DIFFERENT, DIFFERENTLY! (Somebody here is thinking about that today).

Where do you need to not be so hard on some people or people groups?

To cross the aisle and get to know someone who is NOT just like you.

To give someone the benefit of the doubt instead of preconceived judgment?

To extend a hand, rather than withdraw one?

And wisdom, you know what wisdom is. You can be smart and not wise. You can have a high IQ. You can have a degree. You can have several degrees. You can have a PhD degree, but God will give you the third degree if you're not wise because knowledge is one thing. Wisdom is the right application of that knowledge.

And let me just say, I am very thankful for the book of Acts. I'm thankful that we have a record, an honest record, of the earliest weeks, months, and years of church history and how it unfolds. And the reason I say I am thankful is that it doesn't pull any punches. It doesn't gloss over any personalities. It tells you straight up who these people were, where they excelled, and where they failed.

- For example, we have already read about the suicide of one of the apostles. Judas killed himself. That is honestly portrayed in this book.
- We have already discovered the elimination by God, the judgment of God, on a couple, a notable couple in the early church, Ananias and Sapphira, his wife.
- Later on, we're going to read about two leaders, Paul and Barnabas in chapter 15, getting into such an argument that they have to split company and go in two entirely different directions. So it's a very honest rendering.

Now we have another problem here. The problem is a complaint of one group against another group. And the complaint brings division in the church.

So far, we have watched Satan attack the church, **first of all by persecution**. Persecution against the church was the first tool

Satan employed. It didn't work- it backfired. It grew more. It went from addition to multiplication.

So he tried **another tactic-- corruption, hypocrisy**, Ananias and Sapphira lying to the Holy Spirit, in effect lying to God. That didn't work. God eliminated them, purified the church, and the church grew, as we saw last time.

But now he **employs another tactic**. The Bible says, we are not ignorant of his devices. He will always employ one of these devices. And here we see that **division, that dissension in the early church**.

Whenever there is a church that is complaining, quarreling, arguing, one group against another group, the message that they preach is so watered down the world can't hear it.

Because of the captivity in Babylon, there developed the institution known as the synagogue. You never read about synagogues in the Old Testament. Suddenly they appear in the New Testament. That's because they develop between the Old and the New Testament in captivity.

By the time we get to the New Testament, they're everywhere. Jesus in Capernaum went into the synagogue. He went into the synagogue and all the cities around Galilee. The Talmud tells us-- the Jewish writings tell us that at this time, there were 390 synagogues in Jerusalem alone.

So think of the synagogue back then as sort of like churches today. Each synagogue had its own flavor, its own kind of emphasis, own style of people that were from different parts. And they just sort of got along and saw things that way, their own little cliques, their own little groups.

You know how people do that today? It's like, I don't like church because my friend goes to this church. I'm going to that-- all of that happened in the synagogue, 390 of them in Jerusalem.

The Synagogue of the Freed Men was the synagogue comprised of ex-slaves, freed slaves, or the family members of freed slaves, hence, freed men. We know that Pompey, the general of the Romans, took an enormous amount of different people from North Africa and Asia Minor as his personal slaves in the city of Rome. They eventually were freed in Rome, and a lot of them, who were Jewish, made their way here back to Jerusalem. They established a synagogue.

Again, you're told where they come from, North Africa, Cyrene, Alexandria, Egypt, and also from Cilicia. Now, who comes from Cilicia? Saul of Tarsus. Tarsus was a city in the province of Cilicia.

So no doubt, here is a synagogue that Saul of Tarsus, AKA Paul the Apostle, that was his synagogue. Even though he wasn't a freed man or the relative of a freed man, because he will say, I was actually born a Roman citizen, free-born, nonetheless because of the family ties to Cilicia, this was probably the synagogue he went to. So he's going to be there that whole time Stephen is he going to give his message in the next chapter. I'm just setting you up for that.