

Growing Pains--Acts 6

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, Wednesday November 17, 2021

You would think that in a place where God is moving in mighty ways that everything would be perfect. You would also think that people full of the Holy Spirit would not make mistakes. As this chapter will show us, even spiritual people have things to overcome. We will also see that desiring to overcome discrimination can lead to a new set of problems.

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. 2 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. 3 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 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." 5 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. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

This distribution of food was associated with the huge crowds of people that were still in Jerusalem from Pentecost. With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit many people were being converted and baptized. They were literally hungry for more of God so they stayed in Jerusalem longer than they had planned. Their travel budgets were being exhausted so people like Barnabas sold land nearby and used the money to help with the needs of the people that had remained in Jerusalem. Grecian Jews were those who came from Greek speaking areas of the Roman Empire and spoke Greek as their main language. Hebraic Jews were those who were more local or who came from areas where they spoke Hebrew in their daily lives. Within the new believers there was an intense desire to be of help to those in need because they had themselves been newly touched by God. The difference in language and experience created two different social layers among the Jews based on what language they spoke.

Acts 6 has a couple of key lessons for us. **First, being spiritual doesn't prevent you from having certain built-in, but unconscious, prejudices.** The Apostles were overlooking the Greek widows. They didn't mean to. They didn't want to. The fact is, the Greek widows traveled in a somewhat different social circle so they were easy to miss. It was out of sight, out of mind.

Every group and every person has blind spots. There are just things they don't see. Their background or life experience does not equip them to see it. This is not a reason to get upset with people. People do what they see to do. They react as their knowledge and life experiences have trained them to react. In my experience in church life, I find that good people act responsibly when given a decent explanation. In this case, the Apostles confirm our faith in good people to act properly.

When the problem was called to the attention of the Apostles, they took steps to organize the church in such a way as to deal with the problems at hand. The selection of deacons was a solution to a problem.

Second, every job in the church, including waiting on tables, requires spiritual people. Ultimately, every kind of good work flows from the work of the Spirit in our lives. In

the last chapter, we saw how the Holy Spirit caused the people to act righteously toward the poor. In this passage we have more of that. The Apostles wanted people to be full of the Holy Spirit because the Spirit helps us to do good and compassionate work. We need a spiritual awakening in the church where each of us is filled with the Holy Spirit. When we are filled with the Spirit, good things get done.

There are no unspiritual jobs in the church. A lot of church work is just managing issues and people. There are no churches where this is not true. Repairing, cleaning, organizing and the like are all part of ministry too.

There is also an administrative or management lesson here. Some Christian organizations have moved away from measuring the spiritual qualities of those who administer aid or work in the ministry. An example is Catholic Community Services which does not require those who administer the services to be Catholic or even Christian. World Vision is using Muslims to deliver their services in certain areas of the world. Christian educational institutions lower their standards of faith to fill certain positions. Seattle Pacific University did the Christian community great harm when they failed to defend their right to hire Christians all down through their organization. That opened the door for a homosexual lawyer to file a discrimination lawsuit against the Union Gospel Mission for not hiring him to work in their legal aid service just because he was in a same-sex relationship. The Washington State Supreme Court sided with the lawyer requiring that the Union Gospel Mission to hire him if he is otherwise qualified and to pay no attention to his moral character or the requirements of their faith. Thankfully Alliance Defending Freedom is appealing their case to the US Supreme court. Educational institutions are particularly vulnerable but truly every kind of Christian ministry needs to pay attention to the spiritual quality of all those who serve in the organization. Cedar Park Christian Schools is able to hire people based on their religious faith but the State of Washington removes that provision for hiring at the pre-school level. Right now we have a handwritten exemption which we jealously safeguard but the code of Washington is not in our favor and we may have to battle someday to retain our exemption. President Bush had his “Faith-based and Community Initiative” which was designed to allow Faith-based organizations to be faith-based in hiring the people to deliver the service funded through the government. It was a good effort but largely unsuccessful. The apostle in Acts 6 understood this question very clearly and preferred people to deliver services who reflected the Gospel. As such they are our too frequently neglected model for dealing with this issue.

Third, growth is good but also contains seeds of harm. The problem with the Grecian widows was apparently related to growth. When the group was small it was easier for every personal need to be taken care of. As the number of the disciples increased, new approaches were needed. This is stage two of the administrative approach to the church. There would be many stages to follow. When people talk about a biblical governance structure they are trying to freeze stage 2 as the ideal and permanent. For example, Cedar Park and most churches have seven deacons because that is how many the early church had. Nothing is wrong with that number. Nor is anything particularly right about it. The point is the Apostles built the governance structure to meet the needs which they had. This is the lesson of the passage. It is not what they did but that they did what was appropriate to solving the organizational issues that existed at that moment. This is how the church should continue to develop its governance structures.

I do believe Acts can be used as a model for governance. But we want to be careful not to institutionalize the outcome rather than the process. The outcome were the seven deacons.

The process was that spiritual leaders sought spiritual people to address the issue at hand. No matter what the presenting issue, spiritual leaders will look for spiritual people to help address whatever issue emerges. In hiring, we always solve the last problem we had. (The US Presidential election is also a case in point. We elected a president who wasn't like the last president in certain areas.) It is a disaster in the making to allow a candidate to find fault with some aspect of the system and then say "and that's why I am running for president of the United States." It is ok to listen to their ideas but recognize that their administration will almost certainly be shaped by issues not yet encountered and their success in solving that problem will be a function of their wisdom and leadership abilities rather than on promises made about some previous problem.

Besides what is obvious in the text, history offers us some additional insights. The success of the Deacons is recognized by almost everyone. It is clear that the apostles wanted everybody to be treated alike. They were advocates of inclusion. Everyone should be included and no one should be left out. However, they did not require some kind of quota system that required certain number of those distributing food to be Greek, and a certain number to be women, etc. They believed that anyone could minister to anyone else without regard to race or gender if the Spirit of the Lord was in their life. Their answer to discrimination was not identity politics. Their answer was with spiritual people in leadership.

Even though inclusion is a good thing in the kingdom of God, the idea can be taken so far that it actually becomes a bad thing. The case of one of the seven Deacons named Nicolaus is a good illustration. Nicolaus represents a success that became a failure. He was originally chosen because he was full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. It might be significant that he was a convert to Judaism and had come from Antioch which was a decidedly pagan and Gentile city. It may be that Nicolaus was also chosen because he had a good attitude toward everyone. However, his followers created a real problem by wandering over the line of inclusion.

Many years later, in the book of Revelation, the Apostle John was working to bring Nicolaus and his followers back into the fold.¹ There were some who were excessively advocating inclusion. It was no problem to go to the pagan temples and eat with the people there. After all, we can't win 'em if we never hang out with 'em. If we act in the same sexual way as other people do, no problem, Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven.

Nicolaitans wanted to mix with the crowd that went to Diana's temple and thought the Christians were being too old-fashioned with their sexual values. The Nicolaitans were following one of the seven Deacons chosen by the apostles in Acts 6. According to Revelation 2, this group was particularly active in Ephesus. Hippolytus said of him, "*But Nicolaus has been a cause of the widespread combination of these wicked men. He, as one of the seven (that were chosen) for the diaconate, was appointed by the Apostles. (But Nicolaus) departed from correct doctrine, and was in the habit of inculcating indifferency of both life and food. And when the*

¹John compares the Nicolaitans to Balaam who probably was responsible for the cohabitation of the men of Israel with the women of Moab (Num. 25:1-2; 31:16). Therefore, the error of this group was moral rather than doctrinal. If the "Jezebel" of Revelation 2:20-23 was a teacher of this sect, as many believe, their sexual laxity was indeed strong. Most likely, they were a group of anti-law practitioners who supported a freedom that became self-indulgence. It may have been the same heresy condemned in (2 Peter 2:15) and (Jude 11). Some early church leaders believed the continuing spiritual drift of the Nicolaitans caused them to become a GNOSTIC sect. Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary, (C) 1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers.

*disciples (of Nicolaus) continued to offer insult to the Holy Spirit, John reproved them in the Apocalypse as fornicators and eaters of things offered unto idols.*²

The motivation to avoid discrimination can lead to accepting people whose lifestyle is forbidden by God. So much of what passes for inclusion and non-discrimination today is merely a cover for sinful behavior.

I cite this example to show the contrast between Stephen and Philip and what eventually happened to Nicolaus. In time, one became a backslider and fell away from the faith, but the Church continued to grow. It is always sad when there are failures along the way. It has always been true and I suspect will continue. In spite of the failures, the church is succeeding. We need to pray that we don't become a Nicolaus who started well but ended in destruction.

Opposition against Steven and the seven

7 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. 8 Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. 9 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)-- Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, 10 but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. 11 Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God." 12 So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. 13 They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." 15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

We first note the success of this movement. Dan Gruber, head of Assemblies of God missions to Jews, says that 25% of all Jews in the world became Christians in the first century. We have this report that many in Jerusalem became Christians including a large number of priests. This provided a pool of trained priests to serve the fledgling movement.

Steven is described as a person full of God's grace and power. He seems to us to be more like a preacher than a Deacon. In the earliest days of the Church, a Deacon was not the terminal position for a lay person. Deacons were the initial stage of preparation for ministry. Steven is here showing his qualifications to be much more than one who waits on tables.

Jews from what is now Libya, Egypt, and Turkey took the lead in opposing the Gospel preached by Steven. They were no match for the Spirit and the obvious wisdom displayed by Steven. As a result they resorted to lying, deception, and ultimately violence. Chapter 7 has the message that Stephen preached. For 50 verses it was a simple rehearsal of how God had led Israel from the time of Abraham but ended with how Israel often rejected God's plans. Then he equated Israel's long rebellion to how Israel was acting toward Jesus. "51 *You stiff-*

² Hippolytus, "The Refutation of All Heresies, Book VII", *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Alexander Roberts, D.D., and James Donaldson, LL.D., eds., (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson), Vol. 5, pg. 115. The views of Hippolytus on this subject are very important. He lived between 170 and 236 AD. Not only is he early, but he is the disciple of Irenaeus who was the disciple of Polycarp, who was the disciple of the Apostle John himself. It would be hard to get a more authoritative statement about the Nicolaitans.

necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! 52 Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—53 you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it." 54 When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." 57 At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, 58 dragged him out of the city and began to stone him."

At St. Stephen's gate they killed him in order to silence him because he was awakening their conscience to their sin. When your conscience is stirred you either repent or you resist the stirring. That choice also reflects where society is today. Christianity is a stirring of the conscience every time we preach God's Word dealing with the sins of America, especially sexual sins. Even if we don't preach, our mere presence is a statement of God and his Word which convicts the world of its sin. The powerful movement against the rule of law and the efforts to curtail the freedom of speech and the freedom of opinion generally is the world "covering their ears and yelling at the top of the voices" so as to drown out the stirring of the conscience. It is the freedom of the faithful and the ability for us to express our opinion that is most resented by a guilty people. The covering of the ears through the media and in education and public life is only the start. It quickly escalates to removing you from your job and your ability to engage in commerce without the mark of the beast which is itself a very short step from engaging in violence and killings. Stephen was only the first. There have been millions since then who were killed for the very same reason and there will be many more before the kingdom of God fills the earth.