

Introduction

A man had been trapped on a desert island for some years when a boat finally arrived to rescue him. As the rescue boat was pulling away with him on board the captain said, "I thought you were all alone on the island. Why do I see three huts?"

The man said, "Well, the one in the middle is my house and the one on the right is my church."

"Well, what's the third hut?" asked the captain

He replied, "That's the church I used to attend before 'the incident'."

Divisions in the church aren't really funny but churches quarrel and often split over some pretty funny stuff.

Thom Rainer has published an online list of 25 Silly Things Church Members Fight Over

It includes:

- An argument over the appropriate length of the worship pastor's beard
- Another dispute erupted over whether deviled eggs should be allowed at the church potluck
- Then there was the dispute about whether the church meal should be called a pot "blessing" not a pot "luck"
- Another church fought over which picture of Jesus to put in the foyer
- And two different churches reported fights over the type of coffee served. In one of the churches, the argument was over changing from Folgers to Starbucks while in the other church, someone dared to switch to a stronger blend. He reports that members left the church in the latter example.

We often look back longingly at the early church believing that they were above all the pettiness we see in churches today

But as we will see this morning the "good old days" weren't necessarily always good and the early church wasn't perfect nor was it immune to problems related to personal proclivities

As we have seen, Satan has already tried to attack the church and hinder or stop its work through outside persecution

In fact he worked through the Sanhedrin to persecute the church twice without any negative effect

And he tried to weaken the church from within by tempting Ananias and Sapphira to deceive the church over the amount of an offering in an attempt to falsely enhance their reputation

However, persecution from without and corruption from within both failed to stop or even slow the church

In fact, with each attack the church seemed to grow stronger and more successful

So in our text this morning we will see Satan tweak his tactics a bit as he attacks the church from within once more

This time he tries to use natural differences in the body and the church's own growth to sow division in the church and to cause a distraction that will hopefully dull the effectiveness of the church

As I have pointed out before, Satan is persistent but not all that resourceful and he still uses this very same tactic today

In fact, it's one of his favorite tools because it's so often effective

Whenever a church begins to experience success for the kingdom of God they need to be on the lookout for divisions and distractions to appear

Because, if Satan can get us to fight amongst ourselves, we can't be working effectively for God

Our text this morning is **Acts 6:1-7**

This passage is best known for the appointment of the Seven but their appointment is only part of the story

As we look at these verses we will first see **The Problem** that cropped up in the church

Then we will see **The Solution** to that problem

And, finally we will see **The Result** of how the church handled the problem

I. The Problem

Follow along with me as I read **verses 1-2**

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

A. Unequal Distribution

The issue that triggered the whole row was the **unequal distribution** of benevolence

We saw previously how the church was committed to helping the less fortunate members

We saw how everyone considered their possessions to be available for the common good

And we saw how many of those who had houses and lands volunteered to sell their property so that the proceeds could be used to benefit their fellow members who were in need

How they would bring the money they acquired and lay it at the feet of the apostles for distribution

The care of the needy, and particularly the widows, showed how seriously the church took God's command to care for them and his warning in **Exodus 22:22-24** should they fail to do so

You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

With that warning in mind it seems highly unlikely that any slight was intentional

And Luke gives no indication that it was anything but an innocent oversight

But that oversight led to something that isn't readily apparent in our English translations

Notice that in **verse 1** Luke reports that "a complaint...arose"

The true sense behind that word "complaint" is that there was grumbling going on

This doesn't seem to be a case where someone took the initiative to walk up to the apostles and register a complaint but more that there was a murmuring amongst the people that finally reached the apostles

This same Greek word is elsewhere in Scripture and always indicates a sinful type of grumbling

In **Exodus 16** we see the children of Israel repeatedly grumbling against God

The same is true in **Numbers 17**

In **Isaiah 58:9** the word is translated as "speaking wickedness"

And in **John 7:12** it is translated as "muttering" about Jesus for fear of speaking openly about him

Then in **Philippians 2:7** Paul commands “Do all things without grumbling or disputing” using the same word

And in **1 Peter 4:9** we read that we are to “Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.”

Because some of the widows weren’t getting their fair share of the distribution a culture of underground grumbling and complaining arose

To be sure, the inequitable distribution was a problem but the complaining was perhaps an even bigger problem because it could have led to a tragic split in the church without providing an opportunity for a solution

B. Cultural Division

So, what was behind the complaining?

As we often see today it was caused by a general culture of distrust between two groups of believers and the plight of the widows was just the incident that caused it to flare up

The two groups were the Hellenists and the Hebrews

They were all Jews but the Hellenists were Jews from the dispersion who had returned to Jerusalem and the Hebrews were lifelong natives of Israel

They were all Jews but culturally they were very different

The Hellenists had been born and raised in other parts of the world and they likely only spoke the language of whatever country they originally called home and Greek

Whereas the Hebrews were born and raised in Israel and spoke Aramaic and Greek because it was the common trade language

But there was more than language involved

The Hellenists likely thought and acted much like Greeks whereas the native Jews would have been steeped in Hebrew cultural norms

There was natural friction between the Hebraic Jews and the Hellenistic Jews and that friction didn’t immediately go away when they believed and became part of the church

Because of their language difficulties it’s even possible that they were gathering separately for worship So the general distrust and cultural animosity was already present and ready to be fanned into flame at the slightest provocation

One of our neighboring churches, East Delavan Baptist is presently in a situation like this

Let me hasten to say they aren’t experiencing problems like the fledgling church in Jerusalem

But they have three very different languages and cultures meeting for worship under their roof

They provide services for English, Spanish and the Deaf and those groups largely interact within their respective groups just because of language and cultural differences

And while they are to be commended for how well they do with remaining unified it takes work for that to happen

In the case of the early church, when the Hellenists saw their widows getting less they automatically saw intent where there likely was none and they jumped to blame those they viewed as their rivals

We see similar conditions in the church today as people divide themselves along all sorts of lines

And when relationships are already strained it doesn’t really take all that much to cause an eruption

All too often a matter that would normally be quite insignificant is the fuse that blows things wide open all because of pre-existing tensions and pre-conceived notions that have nothing to do with the issue at hand

C. Explosive Growth

There is another factor that we see in verse 1 that was the likely cause of the oversight

The verse begins “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number...”

As we have seen previously the church wasn’t merely adding new members it was experiencing explosive growth!

It was multiplying every day in a geometric fashion and in this case the church became a victim of its own success

Healthy things grow and as we’ve seen the early church was growing like wildfire due to their faithfulness to preaching and teaching God’s Word and their high standard of integrity

And while growth is exciting it can also be problematic and rapid growth can be especially so

I remember when I was a teen and went through a growth spurt

One day it was like my arms and legs were too long and I was tripping over things, bumping into things, and knocking things over

All because my brain hadn’t caught up to my body’s growth

Since that time I’ve watched nephews and sons of friends go through the same phenomenon

In this regard churches aren’t unlike people

All growth requires changes to system, policies, procedures, and so forth and sometimes our growth can get ahead of our adjustments to it

Growth may be pleasurable but it can also be painful and sometimes things get “knocked over” in the process – especially when the growth is rapid

And it never ends because the larger a church gets the more planning is needed and oftentimes the more mistakes get made in the process

Because it takes a lot more foresight; more time and space; to turn an ocean liner than it does a kayak

In the case of the distribution of benevolence in the early church it’s likely that growth simply outpaced the systems they had in place so that those who were in charge became overwhelmed

A change was clearly necessary

D. Potential Distraction

So the people did what people normally do; they looked to the leadership to fix the problem

And the problem of division which was made obvious by the problem of distribution had the potential to become a problem of **distraction**

Fortunately, the apostles recognized the danger of personally handling this problem

Since the people were laying their gifts for benevolence at the feet of the apostles I think it’s

reasonable to assume that the apostles were in charge of the distribution as the church started

But as the church grew the work became too much for them to handle along with their other duties

And the apostles were wise in seeing that shifting their attentions to more properly administering the distribution would keep them from being able to give adequate attention to preaching and teaching – which was their primary responsibility

Their reluctance to “serve tables” wasn’t due to an attitude of superiority but of priority

There is no hierarchy of value between different ministries in the church

God has blessed his children with a variety of gifts, talents, abilities, and interests and we are all to use those things in service to bring God glory

Look with me at **1 Peter 4:10-11**

As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace:

whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.

The crux of what Peter wrote is that everyone is to practice good stewardship of the gifts God has given to them personally by using those gifts to serve the church in order to bring God glory

No ministry is “better” than any other and the apostles weren’t being elitists

For them to switch their focus would have been “not right” in terms of functionality not morality

They simply knew what their primary responsibilities were and that they were not at liberty to neglect them – even when another important ministry need presented itself

And the matter before the church was a serious one

Imagine what could have happened

The church could have split along the cultural dividing line that already existed

We could have seen the formation of the First Hellenistic Christian Church which would have been forever at odds with the First Hebraic Christian Church and the church would have been diminished

Or the apostles could have sprung into action and given all their time and energy to creating a well-oiled machine for distribution of benevolence and the spread of the gospel would have slowed to a crawl and maybe even have ground to a halt

II. The Solution

But they were wise and they saw the potential pitfalls inherent in ignoring the problems of division and of allowing themselves to be distracted and they proposed a solution to both of the problems

A. Proposal of the Apostles

Look with me at **verses 3-4**

Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

They proposed that the entire assembly should select seven qualified men to handle the duty of distributing the benevolence – thereby creating the need to get along and an opportunity for unity They were to choose men who were known to possess and display **good character**

Men of **good reputation** so that all would be able to **trust** them as they carried out their task

This was a sensitive situation that could divide the fledgling church and it needed to be handled in a way that took into consideration the delicate sensibilities of all

Since the root problem was one of **cultural distrust** the men selected to heal the rift would need to be known as **honorable** men **who inspired confidence** and who’s leadership both factions would follow

These men would also need to be **spiritually minded men of God**

They would need to be men who understood and could apply biblical principles to everyday situations

And they would need to have the **skill of administration**

They needed to be men of **practical good sense** who could set up systems, inventories, and the like

Simply stated, the candidates had to be men who were both spiritually and practically minded

Notice that I said these men were “candidates”

It would be easy to let a practical matter of church administration seen in the early church slip by us The apostles didn’t abdicate their responsibility as overseers of the church and the final decision as to who would be appointed remained with them

The early church didn’t have what we would call a congregational form of government

The apostles wisely sought nominations from the members of the church but the ultimate decision remained in the hands of the apostles

As you know, Brick Church is governed in much the same way as the Elders seek nominations for the various offices of the church and then investigate the nominees and ultimately seek affirmation of their recommendation

And they also seek affirmation from the membership for many of the decisions involving the governance and business of the church while always being mindful that the responsibility for overseeing the church ultimately remains with the Elders

Then in **verse 4** the apostles indicate that when if their plan is adopted they will commit themselves to their primary task of prayer and the ministry of the word

Prayer in this case means both private and public prayer

And it includes both personal and corporate times of prayer

The apostles had to be committed to continual contact with God through prayer and to guiding the church in the practice of prayer

They also had to devote themselves to the “ministry of the word”

The word translated “ministry” here is the same Greek word *diakonia* that is used in speaking of serving tables

And it’s the word from which we get our term “deacon”

It’s a term that indicates service and here the apostles are saying that they must attend to the Word of God as a servant to it

This includes so much more than just preaching and teaching the Word

It includes the study of the Word and the preparation of the messages and lessons that are later preached and taught

For some of the apostles it even included writing the New Testament

Understanding, connecting, and communicating God’s Word is hard work that takes time and the apostles needed to be able to dedicate their time and efforts to it as servants of it

Once again, this was not a matter of one job being better than another

God calls all of his children to ministry – I often say a church member without a ministry is a mystery

And God calls different people to different ministries – for which he uniquely equips them

There are always many good things to be done in the kingdom of God but there is no way that any person can do all of them

That’s why God has ordained that the church be made up of diverse members

If we are going to be effective in doing the work that God has for us we must not allow ourselves to be distracted from our God-given priorities

B. Acceptance of the Church

The apostles made their proposal and in the first part of **verse 5** we see the acceptance of the proposal by the church

In fact we see unity restored as it replaces the division that had just erupted

The church had previously been of one mind and now they were unified once again in solving the problem before them

While unity is no guarantee of godliness the fact that all of the believers agreed with it certainly hints that the apostles had recommended a righteous solution

And in this case we see that the church took ownership of the proposed solution

Certainly, having such a strong buy-in enhances the chances of success

Proverbs 15:22 says, “Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed.”

C. Appointment of the Seven

Having agreed to the plan we see the church nominate seven men to take on this ministry
We aren't told what process they followed or how exactly they came up with these seven names or whether any of the men named had detractors, or what the vote tally might have been for each man

But what is interesting is that, according to their names, all of them appear to be Hellenists
They might have even been the leaders of the Hellenists in the church

We can't say much for certain because we don't know a whole lot about these men
In fact, other than Stephen and Philip, none of them is mentioned again by name in Scripture
We do know that one of them, Nicolaus, wasn't even ethnically Jewish as he was a proselyte from Antioch

In any event, they were put before the apostles who affirmed the choices, prayed for them, and laid hands on them conferring authority to them for this ministry
In other words, the apostles by this action gave these seven men public support so that all would know that they were acting with the backing and authority of the apostles

The people had brought the matter to the apostles and, presumably, would have followed their guidance

Now these seven men had the freedom to operate as necessary to work to solve the matter

We do the same thing today when we commission someone for ministry
The act of laying hands on a person gives them and everyone present the message that they are acting for the group and that they have our support

III. The Result

As it often does in the family of God a problem that had the potential to harm actually turned out for the benefit of the church when it was dealt with in a godly manner

In this case we see three results in **verse 7**

A. Word of God Continued to Spread

First, **the Word of God continued to spread**

The Word of God had been flourishing and it continued to do so unhindered by this squabble

The church has never been a place without problems

We are a collection of sinners who are carrying a lot of baggage and we don't always get along

But when we handle our disagreements in a godly fashion we send the world a powerful message

In **John 13:35** Jesus told his followers:

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

And love shows forth more brightly when a contention is properly solved than it ever could where there is no strife at all

Given our sin natures I have to wonder if people even talk at all if they never disagree with one another

The point is, our behavior can either enhance or inhibit the impact of God's Word on a watching world

B. Number of Disciples Continued to Multiply

Not only did the Word of God continue to spread but we also see that the church continued to grow

In fact, it **continued to multiply**

Addition is great but multiplication is better –

We also need to notice that they have begun to count “disciples” and not “converts”

A disciple is a learner

One who wants to become like their master

In the case of the church a disciple is a person who is committed to becoming like the Lord – a Christ-follower

The church wasn't just growing it was growing with people who were serious about living their lives in full obedience and commitment to God

They were experiencing both numerical growth and spiritual growth because of the commitment of the church to being true to the Word of God and to living lives of authentic Christianity

C. Priests Were Converted

Lastly, we see that even many of the Jewish **priests were converted**

There were literally tens of thousands of priests in Jerusalem at this point in history

And they served in the temple once a year on a rotating basis

Luke records that many of them had the opportunity to investigate and hear the gospel so that many of them “became obedient to the faith”

Without more information it's unwise to make too many assumptions but it's possible that these “defections” were a part of the growing animosity within the priestly leadership that ultimately led to the stoning of Stephen

But what the priestly conversions indicates is that no one was out of the reach of the Word of God and that all were welcome in the church of God

Conclusion

The early church wasn't without its problems and believers have continued to occasionally bicker ever since – sadly often to the point of tearing churches apart through division over relatively petty matters. There are occasions when churches split over true theological differences but it's actually pretty rare. Usually splits occur over hurt feelings, pride, stubbornness, and so forth.

Problems may largely be inevitable this side of heaven but problems can be productive if they are handled properly.

But many problems could be headed off by adjusting our attitudes.

In the case of the early church we have seen that the neglect of some of the widows merely brought to light a lingering distrust between two groups in the church.

If it hadn't been for this background of pre-conceived notions who knows if this matter would have had the potential to divide the church.

James 1:19 tells us to “be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger”

The hearing James speaks of is hearing with the intention of understanding.

The Simon and Garfunkel song The Sound of Silence speaks of “people hearing without listening”

How often are we guilty of that very thing in the church?

When **we think we know** what is behind another person's words or actions we often cause ourselves problems that we could have and should have avoided simply by seeking clarification.

Another factor in these types of misunderstandings is **the failure to think well of each other**.

That was the failing of the Hellenists as they jumped to the conclusion that the Hebraic believers deliberately shorted their widows.

In **1 Corinthians 13:7** we read that love bears, believes, hopes, and endures all things.

This means, in part, that we must think well of each other in the church and assume proper motives.

Then in 1 Peter 3:8 Peter writes

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.

How many church problems would be headed off or solved by following the commands in that one verse?

Unity of mind – simply means to have the same ultimate aim.

Sympathy – recognizing who it is you're talking with.

Brotherly love – true familial affection for one another.

Tender heart – compassionate and full of mercy.

Humble mind – willing to allow you might be wrong.

Divisions in the church can be deadly to the mission of the church.

And since we can only control our own behavior and attitudes; protecting the **unity of the church is an inside job that we all must attend to.**

Distractions can also serve to dilute the ministry of the church and render her less effective

We must each determine how God has gifted us and what our best role is in the church right now

We need to figure out how we can best serve the kingdom purposes of Brick Church and not allow other undoubtedly good things to distract us from fulfilling our best purpose

There is no hierarchy in ministry except for the fact that everyone should be about their God-given task because it's the most important thing they can be doing

Paul uses the illustration of the human body in **1 Corinthians 12** where he shows the necessity of each member of the body to carry out its function and when we read it we can't help but think of the absurdity of an eye trying to hear or an ear trying to smell

Possibly the only thing worse than a misfit in ministry is the person who places himself or herself on the sidelines and doesn't get involved at all

All of the members of the body have a function and should be diligent in carrying it out

We quote the old saying around here that many hands make light work and that's true but it's also true that **everyone needs to be busy in their God-given role in order to free others up to be busy in theirs**

If you're sincerely not sure where you might minister here at Brick Church, ask
I guarantee we will be able to find you a spot

The last thought I want to leave you with this morning is that **grumbling** is never the way to handle an issue in the church – in fact to grumble and murmur is sin

Issues that need addressing must be brought up to the person who can fix it in a timely fashion and in the right way – that's what we call talking to the right people at the right time in the right way
That way we avoid being guilty of either gossiping or grumbling

And we also avoid the other tendency in the church which is simply to "swallow" or "stuff" our feelings
To hold on to perceived slights and hurts in the belief that we are being loving and longsuffering only to have those thoughts and feelings explode when they can no longer be held back

That was part of the problem we saw this morning in the early church

Feelings weren't dealt with so they festered and almost gave Satan the ammo he needed to split the church

Divisions and distractions can be defeated in the church

We all just need to determine to do so

Let's pray