

ACTS
The First Dissension
Acts 6:1-7

Satan, who is public enemy number one of the Christian Church, is always trying to divide and split congregations. The Devil will do anything to get Christians depressed, discouraged or disturbed so they will be fighting one another, causing inward dissension. When the unity and peace of a local church is damaged or destroyed, that congregation does not have the power to face a godless world.

Whenever a local church is moving forward for Christ - the Word is preached, souls are being saved, saints are being built, the walls of Satan's fortress are being attacked by spiritual weapons - it will experience the subtle attacks of Satan and his cohorts. He will attempt to get Christians to turn their attention on themselves and their problems rather than on Christ and His ministry to the world.

While Satan is not mentioned in Acts 6:1-7, it is obvious that he is the one who capitalized on a specific problem in the local church at Jerusalem, tempting the people to begin to complain and murmur about their situation. Dissension is sin and if dissension is not curbed, it divides Christians. In Acts 6, we see how dissension in the ranks of Christians was dealt with in a very practical manner and Satan's attempt to divide was thwarted.

CONTENTION AND COMPLAINING Acts 6:1

Increased Numbers. “Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number , . . .” -- The very root of the problem in the local church at Jerusalem was due to the rapid numerical growth of that congregation of believers. The church was growing so fast that the Apostles could not meet all the needs of the Christians spiritually or physically. Apparently a period of months elapsed between Acts 5 and Acts 6 since there was such a large number of Hellenistic Jews in the church of Jerusalem. Some have estimated there may have been 25,000 Christians in the Church of Jerusalem at this time. With the influx of people came new problems which resulted in unhappy saints. Their problem was not a lack of zeal or a lack of commitment or a lack of money but a lack of attention to the saints and a lack of manpower to get the work of the ministry accomplished. They had a numbers problem and the solution was in better administration based on good common sense.

As any local church grows numerically, there are going to be problems with some Christians who feel neglected or not wanted or not needed. The answer is not to pull into a shell or to gripe and complain or to jump the ship for another smaller church but the answer is found in better administration of the local church so that all the saints are using their spiritual gifts to minister.

Interpersonal Relationships: “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.” -- In the Church at Jerusalem there were Palestinian Jews who were born and bred in Israel and who spoke Hebrew and Aramaic, and there were Hellenistic Jews who were Jews born and bred in the Greek and Roman lands outside of Palestine. Even before the Christian church came on the scene of history, the Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews always had conflicts because of cultural differences which led to distrust and bickering between these groups. When the gospel was preached to Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews, some of both groups responded to Christ and were saved. However, salvation did not wipe away all cultural differences, and they carried many of the same distrusts into their Christian lives. The Christian Hellenistic Jews began to complain that their widows were overlooked in the daily service. You will notice that the words “of food” are in italics indicating that these words were not in the original manuscript. The Apostles were not serving tables like waiters but they were distributing money to the poor, needy and widows. It was through the common fund provided for primarily by the wealthier Christians that the widows were taken care of, and apparently the Hellenistic widows complained that the Apostles were giving special preference or more money to the Palestinian widows. There is nothing in

the context which states that this was actually happening but the Hellenistic Christian Jews thought it was happening which caused the problem. The real problem was probably neglect and the widows needed attention.

This tension came over what appears to be a trifling matter but most problems in a local church occur when people feel they are not being treated right or their particular pet needs are not being met. Usually local church problems get blown out of proportion and much of what is said in the heat of battle is not true or perverted. You see, the local church has not changed in two thousand years. In the first century church there were people who complained, murmured and griped about the local church just as there are people who do so today.

The first century church was not a perfect church because it was filled with sinners saved by grace. Notice that these converted Hellenistic Jews complained but they did not complain at first to those in authority, who had the rule over them, and who could do something about the situation. They simply complained among themselves. They murmured, griped and complained which is always wrong and which is always deadly to the cause of Christ. Murmuring is always the mark of a querulous, discontented, bitter, unhappy spirit and it always causes dissension and division.

“Do all things without grumbling or disputing; that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world” (Philip. 2:14,15).

When does a legitimate complaint become an illegitimate complaint? When we complain and gripe to people who are not in a position to do something about the situation instead of those in authority, this is murmuring and is a sin before God. It is this kind of murmuring that sows discord and divides Christians which is the subtle trick of the Devil to split the body of Christ.

How many churches have been paralyzed, rendered useless and put on the shelf because of a carping, griping and complaining spirit which was never brought before the proper authorities. Attitudes are not checked and people seethe and ferment on the inside which erupts on the outside into a hard spirit which in turn causes division and schism among the flock. It is no wonder that many Christians and many local churches never really get the full blessing of God when they are perpetual complainers!

COMMON SENSE SOLUTION Acts 6:2

Approaching the Congregation: “And the Twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples, . . .” -- There was a problem and the Apostles sought to solve this problem by informing the congregation of what the problem really was. The Apostles did not move without thoroughly informing the congregation of the whole situation. Without an informed congregation, there will never be any real moving out for God, for it is the congregation who is to do the work of the ministry.

Appeal to Reason: “And said, ‘It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.’” -- The Apostles had been given a specific ministry by God and that was to minister the Word of God. They knew what their spiritual gifts were and decided that under no circumstances could the ministry of the Word suffer. Therefore, they put their heads together, apparently after much prayer, and came up with a practical solution to a specific problem. The Apostles concluded the whole thing was an administrative problem and it was.

It is obvious what was happening. The needs of Christians in Jerusalem were demanding more and more time from the Apostles and they had less and less time to study the Word, pray and preach to meet the spiritual needs of men. These believers had become very need centered and the Apostles apparently thought they could administrate the money and preach too but they obviously were coming up short in the ministry of the Word. They came to understand that people, being self-centered, have many legitimate and not so legitimate needs and they would demand all the time of the Apostles, not really caring about the ministry of the Word in their lives and the lives of others as long as their particular needs were being met.

The Apostles learned quickly that the ministry is demanding and a drain on the mind and body. The ministry involves long hours, out most evenings, weekend work, constant handling of problems, a forfeiture of a normal home life and constant people pressure. The Apostles had to learn they could not meet everyone's needs but the best way to meet spiritual needs was through the ministry of the Word.

CHOOSING OF SERVERS Acts 6:3

Men of Reputation: “But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, . . .” -- The Apostles gave the authority to the Jerusalem congregation to pick out seven men among them to carry out the administrative duties of the ministry. There is nothing magic about the number seven and it probably was how many servers they thought they needed to effectively carry out the physical and administrative aspects of the ministry. We are not told how they selected these seven men but it was probably not done by the casting of a vote, for if it was, this would be the only time in the Bible a selection was made by the democratic process. There were requirements for these seven men and one was that they were to be men (by the way, the Greek word for “men” means males) of good reputation; that is, he had to have the reputation of an honest man as he would be handling the finances. He had to be respected by the whole congregation.

Many have tried to state dogmatically that this is the first mention of the church office of deacon. It is very difficult to prove this. However, the infinitive “to serve” in Acts 6:2 comes from the Greek root diakonos from which we get the English word “deacon“. It appears that this may be the beginning of the church office of deacon in seed form but it is not the official office of deacon as mentioned in I Timothy 3. It is better to refer to these men as “helpers” or “servers” to meet a specific need or crisis which arose in the church of Jerusalem. These servers may have laid the groundwork for the office of deacon.

Men Full of the Holy Spirit: “Full of the Spirit” -- These servers were not just to be Christians but they were to be Spirit-filled Christians; that is, their lives were to be controlled by the Holy Spirit so that the very life of Christ flowed out through them to others. They were to be men controlled by the Spirit with an excessive amount of patience when dealing with people about their physical and spiritual problems. Need-centered people can easily grate on the nerves of others, and that is why the deacons needed to be full of the Holy Spirit.

Even though we often hear men say, “I’m not interested in being an elder in a church because he handles the spiritual matters, but I want to be a deacon and handle the physical and administrative things,” they have misunderstood the office of deacon. Let it be known that the office of deacon requires as much spirituality as the office of elder.

Men of Wisdom: “And of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.” -- These servers were to have the ability to apply scriptural knowledge to a practical situation. The church in Jerusalem had a problem and they needed to solve it Biblically and in a practical manner. They had a technical problem which needed good administration to solve it.

The Apostles were not saying, “We are too good to serve tables. After all, we are Apostles. Let's pick out seven flunkies who can do that job while we devote ourselves to the spiritual work of prayer and the Word.” The Apostles were not downgrading the physical aspects of the ministry, but showing the importance of qualified men with administrative skills to the local church. The task of a server (deacon) in the physical realm of the church was as needed as the task of Apostles in the spiritual realm. Both were needed for the church to function properly.

COMMITMENT TO THE SPIRITUAL MINISTRY Acts 6:4

Prayer: “But we will devote ourselves to prayer” -- The Apostles clearly understood their spiritual gifts. Their ministry was spiritual in that they gave themselves to prayer and the Word. Notice carefully that prayer comes before the ministry of the Word. The Apostles clearly understood that all the preaching of the Word was futile unless the Holy Spirit made the Word living and vital to those who heard. Therefore, there was a great need to spend much time in prayer. There was no need to plow, sow and water if God did not give the increase.

The Apostles understood that prayer was an essential instrument to bring about the working of the Holy Spirit in the lives of people.

The office of Apostle passed off the scene of history after the first century and the authority of mediating Christ to the local church was vested in the elders. Elders, both teaching and ruling, must be men of prayer who are trusting Christ to work in the local church through them and the congregation. Without effective prayer by the elders, especially the teaching-elder, a local church will never experience the power of God.

I remember reading somewhere that H. A. Ironside was asked if he could do his life's ministry over again would he do anything differently. He answered, "I would pray more."

Word: "And to the ministry of the Word." -- The Apostles gave themselves totally over the knowing, preaching and using of the Word of God in the lives of people. The Apostles spent time reading and studying the Old Testament, meditating on the things Christ had spoken to them and were receiving new revelation from God which had to be assimilated into their thinking. The whole life of an Apostle was wrapped up in the Word of God.

Today, teaching-elders in a local church (pastor-teachers) should be devoted to prayer and the Word. Pastors must study the Word and give it to the people. This takes hours and hours of time for preparation. From beginning to end, it should take a pastor fifteen to twenty hours to prepare one sermon. Yet, the average pastor spends two to four hours for sermon preparation. Every minister should have time to study the Word of God and to pray. Unfortunately, the average church today is looking for a pastor who is an organizer and a promoter, a sort of vice-president to run the church, a manager of sorts. The average local church is suffering because there are so few men who continue to study the Bible after graduation from seminary and so few congregations who demand that their pastor studies the Word. It is sad but true that most ministers have very little time for prayer and the Bible because their members keep them so occupied with secondary things - matters that could be taken care of by ruling elders, deacons, staff and lay members of the church. The primary task of a pastor-teacher is to know and preach the Word, and many Christians will be called upon to give an account at the Judgment Seat of Christ for causing a pastor to spend time catering to their wishes and whims when he should have been in communion with God, feeding himself from God's Word, that he might be able to feed the flock. Why do you pay a pastor? You pay him to know, study and preach the Word of God, so that you can understand the Bible and apply truth into your life.

Oliver B. Greene says, "A minister who preaches as many as three sermons a week needs at least forty-eight to sixty hours of that week to be used in preparation for his sermons, and many of those hours should be spent in prayer, seeking not only God's will for the message, but also the enlightening interpretation of the Holy Spirit on the text God would have him use. Any message delivered without preceding prayer and study will not accomplish that which the Word of God is given to accomplish."

COMMISSIONING TO THE MINISTRY OF SERVER Acts 6:5,6

Approved by the Congregation: "And 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." -- We are not told how the congregation chose the seven servers but it probably was not by democratic vote. It seems as though in the New Testament there is never a congregational vote cast for anything, not even for elders and deacons. According to the New Testament, all major decisions are made by Apostles and then elders. Unfortunately Biblical church order in many local churches has been influenced by the principles of a democratic philosophy. In the Bible there seems to be an attitude of deep trust between the elders and the congregation which makes for a harmonious working relationship.

It is very interesting to note that all seven of these servers have Hellenistic names, indicating they were Hellenistic Jews. This probably means that the seven were chosen from among the complaining part, the Greek speaking Jews. When the far larger majority of Palestinian Jews were asked to choose men, they chose from the very group which was issuing the complaint. They were willing to trust the Hellenistic Jews to handle their own problems properly. As soon as they chose these men, the dissension disappeared. We know very little

about five of these seven men but we know Stephen had the gift of preaching and Philip had the gift of evangelist. It probably seems weird to us that Stephen and Philip who had great gifts were not in the pulpit of a local church. The reason it is strange is that today most of us do not understand Biblical church order. If these men were alive today, we would beg them to be in pulpits but apparently they did not have the gift of pastor-teacher. Yet they were deacons who preached.

Appointment by the Apostles: “And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.” -- The Apostles had the final say as to whether the seven would be accepted, and they laid hands on them. In the laying on of hands no benefit or power was passed from the Apostles to the servers but this was an identification of the servers with the work of the Apostles. The Apostles were saying that the seven were an extension of Apostolic practice in the area of administration. They were like deputies or assistants to the Apostles to care for the temporal duties of the ministry.

CONTINUED BLESSING Acts 6:7

Spreading of the Word: “And the word of God kept on spreading, . . . “ -- Due to good administration in the local church at Jerusalem, the Apostles were freed up from administration duties to preach the Word and pray. The result was that the Apostles had more time to preach the Word and the Word spread rapidly.

The task of a local church is to get the Word out to people by any and every means and God will save the souls.

“And when the Gentiles heard this they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region” (Acts 13:48, 49).

Saving of Souls: “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.” -- Due to good administration, harmony was restored in the church of Jerusalem and the Holy Spirit was working mightily in the salvation of souls. Even many of the Jewish priests were becoming Christians. That would be like a great many liberal ministers in our day turning to Christ. Great things were happening; yet, from the human perspective it was all made possible by sound administration in the local church at Jerusalem.

CONCLUSION

Saved: It is obvious that the average evangelical local church has many hang ups today. A quick glance in the New Testament and we see the glaring shortcomings of the local church. In the early church, there was a dynamic, urgency and fellowship which is rarely seen nowadays. There is in some churches much hypocrisy, facade and even counterfeits. It is impossible today to reproduce a first century church completely but this should still be our pattern. We must remember that God has ordained the local church as the instrument through which His work is to be accomplished. The local church has problems and it may not meet our every specific need but God has committed Himself to work through the local body of believers. What is a local church? A local church is a body of Christians, under the authority of Christ, ruled by elders who are gathered together in one locality to do the will and the work of God. When problems arise in a local church (and if it is not one problem, it will be another) the solution to the problem is not to criticize the church, become indifferent to the church or leave the church. The answer is to give 100% to the local church and to seek, by God's grace, to reform the church so as to make it more Biblical in nature. This reform takes time and patience and understanding and perseverance but change will come if God wills it. The Apostles did not say, “Well, the church at Jerusalem has dissension. We won't have anything to do with it. They are murmuring and disputing. There is a great deal of selfishness and hypocrisy in that group.” No, they said, “We see the problem. We see the need.” They then set out to solve the problem in a very practical manner, and by God's grace, they solved it.

There is a legitimate time, however, to leave a local church. Whenever that local church is guilty of moral or doctrinal error. There are many liberal churches today who hold to no New Testament truth and these in reality

are not churches at all. They are social clubs and religious fraternities but they are not true local churches. These churches should be left immediately by any true Christian, for they and their children are being weakened and will perhaps be destroyed by the false doctrine.

Unsaved: Are you without Christ? We read that “the number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.” Why were men and women and boys and girls trusting Christ in Jerusalem? Why were priests, religious men turning to Christ? Because they came to understand that Jesus Christ was the Messiah of the Old Testament and that He was God come in the flesh and that He was the Savior to deliver men from the guilt and penalty of their sins. They found in Christ the One who could meet their deepest spiritual needs and they discovered through Christ that God loved them and had a wonderful plan for their lives. Have you made the discovery of God's love in Christ? Have you experienced God's love and the forgiveness of every sin you have ever done? You can! How? Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved!