

Acts 6:1-6

The Challenges of Community Life

Introduction: Acts 6 is an example of the inward difficulties the church faced as it grew both physically (in numbers and in ethnicity) and spiritually (in a deepening of their understanding of the Gospel) and how they overcame these difficulties.

Even though this short text, vs.1-6, serves as a sort of introduction to both Stephen and Phillip, I think it is very helpful and relatable to us as well. Each church will have it's personal struggles because of the demographics and needs of it's community. I believe each church in those moments faces a crisis whether to get so self and inward focused as to forget it's main task. The early Church is an example to us of how to keep the proclamation of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus, as the main focus of the church, and when and if we do that all our issues get clarified and find their way toward resolution.

1. The Issue.

1. Because of the explosive growth of the early church, the church faced some administrative issues - The Hellenist members of the church complained against the Hebrew members, because their women were being neglected in the daily distribution.
 1. The Hellenist - were greek speaking and greek cultured Jews - those who had not been born and raised in Palestine - probably Jews who stayed in Jerusalem after receiving Jesus and joining the Church at Pentecost. These Hellenist Jews were also by definition sojourners.
 2. The Hebrews - were Aramaic speaking and culturally very Jewish - some of them had probably never left Palestine, many of them probably raised in Jerusalem.
2. We've already seen how the early church lived together like a family. No one considered that anything belonged to them, but they shared everything in common, and gave freely as needs arose.
 1. The early Christians were unusually generous with their money, particularly to the poor and needy, and not just to their own family and racial group. They were also multi-ethnic, since their common identity in Christ was more fundamental than their racial identities and therefore created a multi-ethnic diversity, which was

- unprecedented for a religion. It's still very early on in the life of the Church and they already have an established ministry to widows.
3. The scripture teaches that God has a huge soft spot for the last, the lost and the least. God cares for the poor, he takes care of the needy, the fatherless, the widow, the sick, the destitute and afflicted.
 1. In the Law of Moses God commanded that his people were to show forth his compassionate character in their legislation and practice of his law to the widow, the poor and the sojourner.
 1. **Moses said, "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. 18 He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. 19 Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. -Deuteronomy 10:18**
 2. **"The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin." -Psalm 146:9**
 3. **"You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. 23 If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, 24 and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless." -Exodus 22:22**
 2. Why did the early church provide for widows and the sojourner?? Not simply because the Law demanded it and it was the right thing to do but because their hearts had been moved to action by the Gospel. They had seen the great care, generosity and love of God displayed in Jesus substitutionary death on the cross. He was rich yet he became poor for us. He was at the right hand of God and went very low that we might be lifted high. He was forsaken, so we could be found and brought in. He was righteous, but became sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him...
 3. So many of us who revel in the classic gospel of "grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone" largely ignore the eschatological implications of the gospel. Texts like Luke 4:18 and Luke 6:20-35 show the implication of the gospel that the broken-hearted, unrecognized, and oppressed now have a central

place in the economy of the Christian community, while the powerful and successful are humbled. Paul tells Peter that attitudes of racial and cultural superiority are “not in line” with the gospel of grace (Gal 2:14). Generosity to the poor will flow from those who are holding fast to the gospel as their profession (2 Cor. 9:13). (For more study on this subject I recommend James K.A. Smith’s book - *Who’s afraid of Postmodernism*, Chapter 2 entitled “Nothing outside the text”)

1. Followers of Jesus must never act as though they are only responsible for themselves. Just as God cares for us, so we must care for others.
 2. I was reading Matthew this week and Jesus' parables basically stick it to the Pharisees telling them they're losing their place in the kingdom. He says, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing it's fruits." What are the fruits of the kingdom that Gods people should be producing? According to Matthew's gospel I would say compassion and mercy, justice, generosity, humility, repentance, faith and obedience...
 4. Issues arise - that’s just life in this broken world; It cannot be avoided. But what can exacerbate the issues is when we fail to humble ourselves enough to listen to each other, understand and sympathize with one another, and instead demonize one another over our differences.. unfortunately we do that. As fallen sinful human beings we are often suspicious and judgmental of what is different than us. This can happen between - young and the old, the married and the single, the family with kids and the family with no kids, the citizen and the foreigner, ethnic majorities and ethnic minorities, liberal and conservative, even between different ministries in the church....How do we overcome these differences? I think the early church points us in the right way.
- 2. The Main Issue - The word of God and prayer being the priority of the Church leaders. The continual proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ.**
1. When faced with this problem the Apostles see the greater threat at stake -They say, **“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 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. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

2. **The Solution** - They select men out of the Hellenist group, men who are known for their good character in the community, who are full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit. Wisdom to discern situations with a gracious, and generous spirit. Men who are like Jesus -full of grace and truth. These men will oversee this ministry. Notice the main criteria for this service here and Deacons in 1 Timothy 3 also is not special talent but character, and being full of the Spirit.
3. These Deacon/servants meet the practical needs and administration of the church so that the Apostles aren't taken away from the ministry that Christ appointed them to which is to keep the teaching and preaching of the gospel as the main focus of the life of the church. Who Jesus is and what he has done must be the church's all defining identity.
3. Something I love about Acts is that it's the truth of Jesus in action. It's real life in the church before the laid down teachings like:
 1. **For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. -Ephesians 2:14-16**
 2. **"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant" -Philippians 2:3-7**
 1. This is a bit of speculation but I wonder if when the Apostles wrote the practical exhortations to the churches if they thought upon the days of the early church and personal experiences on how they tackled those issues through the lens of the gospel???
4. **What we can learn from this passage**

1. Issues that come into the church are not to be avoided. When issues arise we don't give up, we shouldn't be disillusioned, we should actually be excited. Why? Because internal and external problems in the church actually help us grow, they help us find our gifting and help us better understand and display the fullness of God's grace.
2. I believe each church and each generation must discover, through the teaching and preaching of the gospel, the submission of our lives and community to its authority, and the particular community in which we find ourselves, how we to put the Gospel on full display. We must understand that each of us come into the church with our own true and false presuppositions, but as followers of Jesus we need to be ready to surrender those, to lay those down in order to more fully and accurately follow him.

1. **First** - We are stretched in our understanding and practice of the faith (The scriptures) to tackle these issues- this can bring such rich growth to our lives, especially in the realm of prayer and dependence on the Holy Spirit. If we are a Sola Scriptura Church, a church that believes in the priority of God's special revelation for our understanding of the world and making our way in it, then there is not a square inch of our experience of the world that should not be governed by the revelation of God in scripture. This is powerful, sanctifying work for all of us.
2. **Second** - Before this incident we don't necessarily hear of any specific gifting of anyone else in the church. Up until now it has mainly been the Apostles doing the preaching and ministry but now the ministry is spreading to others in the church. - we will see both Stephen and Phillip preaching the Gospel and others spreading the Gospel message as they scatter because of persecution. Suddenly the leadership in the church doesn't all look and have the same Galilean accent.. It's more diverse, it's more expressive of our multifaceted God who has created all people - colors, creeds and kinds - in His image. What am I saying? Needs in the church expose gifting and calling, they create vacuum's that are meant to be filled by the church's members. God has gifted each one of us, and called each of of us

to ministry in some way shape or form. Felt needs help us discover those gifting's and calling's .

3. **Third** - It stretches us to see just how far the Gospel stretches. This can only happen as Jesus is the center - and his life, death and resurrection are the focal point of our lives. What do I mean? Well the cross tells each of us that we are flawed, that we are sinful, that we get things wrong, and so it makes us humble, it causes us to examine our lives in light of Jesus perfect life; his life that was full of both grace and truth.... as each of us get our eyes on Jesus and seek to draw near to him we will become more united and be able to display that amazing unity and diversity that God desires for his Church. That beautiful community of the love of God
 1. As Jesus remains the center of lives and our church we will grow not only in Christlikeness but also closer together. If Jesus is the center and we are all moving toward him the closer we grow to him, the closer we are to one another (like spokes on a bicycle wheel). Each of us knows there are things about us that are not the way of Jesus, things that we need to be challenged and changed on, things we need to repent of and ask God to give us his eyes to see, and his ears to hear, and his heart to feel - in order that the Gospel can continue to go forward.
 2. Let's ask that God would work that Gospel humility in us that we might grow in greater christlikeness and service toward others.