SOLVING PROBLEMS IN THE CHURCH

Acts 6:1-7

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Acts Lesson 16

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Acts 6:1-7

Someone has said, "If you ever find the perfect church, don’t join it because you will spoil it!" I often tell the new members class, “I promise that if you join this church, we will at some point offend you.” Or, as some wag put it, “To dwell above with the saints we love, O that will be glory! But to dwell below with the saints we know, well, that’s a different story!”

To have been in the early church would have been a wonderful experience. God was working in powerful ways. Daily there were reports of new people coming to faith in the risen Savior. It was an exciting time. But the early church was not a perfect church. We’ve already seen the problem of hypocrisy, with Ananias and Sapphira. Now Luke shows us another problem that occurred in the midst of this phenomenal growth: a complaint arose that threatened to split the church.

Luke has followed a pattern from chapter one that alternates between a picture of the church alone and the church in relation to the world (James Boice, Acts [Baker], pp. 103-104, develops this). In chapter one, the church is alone, gathered for prayer in the upper room, where they elect an apostle to replace Judas. In Acts 2, we see the church in the world. Peter preaches and 3,000 souls are saved. At the end of Acts 2, Luke gives another picture of the church life. In Acts 3 through 4:22, we see the church again in the world, with the first instance of persecution. For the rest of chapter 4 and through the first part of chapter 5, we again get an inside view of the church. They gather for prayer, and we learn of their unusual generosity and care for one another. But we also learn of the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira. Then (5:12 ff.) Luke again turns to the church in the world, describing the apostles’ witness before the Sanhedrin, resulting in their being flogged. Now Luke again turns inward, showing us this problem that occurred within the church at this time of unusual growth. By introducing us to Stephen, he sets the stage for the next outward scene, where Stephen is stoned and the church is scattered.
By this alternating pattern, Luke seems to be showing us that the church must maintain a balance. Some churches are so outwardly focused that they fail to attend to problems within. If those problems are not addressed, the church may grow at first, but eventually the internal problems will result in discord and disintegration. Other churches are so inwardly focused that they forget their mission in the world. If they do not recover their sense of mission, they will be consumed with bickering and self-centeredness, leading to demise. Healthy churches maintain the balance of dealing with internal problems, but also staying focused on the task of taking the gospel to the world.

Our text reveals to us some principles for solving problems that arise in the local church. To sum up:

**To solve problems in the local church, both leaders and people must be spiritual people in submission to God’s Word.**

Since seven is the biblical number of perfection, I want to give you seven principles for problem solving in the church, derived from our text. First, what do I mean by “spiritual” people?

1. **Spiritual people orient everything in their lives to God through prayer and God’s Word.**

   A spiritual person builds his life on God’s Word, in dependence on God through prayer. In the words of Proverbs 3:4-5, he trusts in the Lord with all his heart and does not lean on his own understanding. Rather, in all his ways he acknowledges the Lord. God’s Word permeates all of his thinking and doing. He does not act with human or worldly wisdom, but in accordance with the wisdom revealed in Scripture.

   Note our text’s emphasis on these themes: The apostles hear of this problem in the church. Their first response is, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God” (6:2). They reiterate this in 6:4: “We will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.” The result was, “the word of God kept on spreading” (6:7). The requirement for these men who were to deal with the problem was that they be “men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom” (6:3). Stephen, one of the seven men, was “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (6:5). Before the apostles laid hands on them, publicly setting them apart for this ministry, they
prayed (6:6). The whole problem-solving process was oriented to God through prayer and God’s Word.

This is vital to solving any problem in the church! The entire congregation, especially the leaders, must walk in daily, practical reality with the living God, in submission to His Word, in dependence on Him in prayer. There is nothing wrong with conducting church business according to Robert’s Rules of Order, if people are not self-willed, not acting on the basis of worldly wisdom, not grabbing for power or influence. But I’ve been in church meetings where Robert’s Rules were followed, but the Spirit and the Word were effectively absent. Many churches are run like American politics, with influential men forming power bases, working behind the scenes to get enough votes to orchestrate a victory. But they are not seeking the mind of God in submission to the Word and the Holy Spirit. Such power-hungry men know how to use prayer to make their agenda sound spiritual; but they are seeking their will for the church, not God’s will. Spiritual men seek God and His will for His church through prayer and God’s Word.

Today we have many books on church management, conflict resolution, and church growth that are based more on worldly wisdom than on God’s Word. These books give the overall impression of being based on the Bible, but often they are based on the latest secular ideas. If you’re not discerning, you end up swallowing the whole thing. Spiritual people may glean some insights from such books. But spiritual people judge everything by God’s Word, which is our only authority for faith and practice.

Note also that spiritual people are concerned for the total person. In other words, spirituality isn’t limited to the soul, but also to the body. This problem arose in connection with distributing food to needy widows in the church. The Bible has a special concern for widows and orphans (see 1 Tim. 5:3-16). In that culture, widows often were left destitute, with no family and no means of support. The church tried to meet these needs. True spirituality is not impractical and other-worldly. Spiritual people care about people’s physical and spiritual needs. They don’t just dish out pious platitudes, but they offer real help to those in need. As Amy Carmichael once pointed out to some critics of her ministry to the needy people of India, souls are rather securely fastened to bodies!
You may be thinking, “If everyone in the church were spiritual, there wouldn’t be any problems.” But that is overly idealistic.

2. **Even spiritual people have problems.**

We have already read of the sense of unity and community in this early church. They had the best leaders imaginable in the twelve apostles. They were growing in a way that can only be attributed to the power of the Holy Spirit. And yet they had this problem.

Whenever you have growth through new conversions, you will have problems. Spiritual babies always dirty their spiritual diapers. They wake you up in the middle of the night with their crying. Like all babies, spiritual babies are usually self-centered at first. Even mature believers are not exempt from self-centeredness, struggles, and sin. So every church, especially every growing church, is going to have problems.

This problem was probably not deliberate. The Hellenistic Jews felt like their widows were being slighted, while the Hebrew widows were getting more than their fair share in the daily distribution of food. The Hellenistic Jews mostly came from outside of Palestine, spoke Greek, and were largely influenced by the Greek culture. The Hebrews were Jews who spoke Aramaic and grew up in a Jewish culture, mostly in Palestine. Both groups in the Jerusalem church had come to faith in Jesus as God’s Messiah and Savior. But getting saved did not erase all of these background factors. It is naïve to think, “Since we’re all born again, we won’t experience any conflicts.” Salvation does not eradicate different cultural assumptions and attitudes. This applies both to the church and to entering a marriage, by the way!

Acts 6:1 is the first description in Acts of Christians as “disciples,” which means “learners,” referring to those who are learning to follow Jesus as Lord. That is a lifelong process. There would not be all of the exhortations to Christians to love and forbearance in the New Testament, if it were automatic. Even spiritual people have problems and conflicts.

Note also that this problem arose out of a ministry. It was because they were trying to serve the Lord by meeting the needs of these widows that this conflict arose, not because they were
worldly-minded and doing nothing about the problem. Christians often naively get involved in serving the Lord with the assumption that everyone will get along since “we’re all doing the Lord’s work.” But often it is when we try to serve the Lord together that conflicts erupt, which never would have happened if we had not been serving the Lord. It’s shocking to discover that the Lord’s other servants do not all agree with my way of doing things!

We are not told whether the Hellenistic Jews went directly to the apostles and discussed this problem, or whether the apostles heard about it through the grapevine. We are told that the Hellenistic Jews had a complaint. The Greek word means a “murmuring.” Probably they had grumbled amongst themselves and word spread until the apostles heard about it. But God’s way to deal with a problem is not to grumble amongst the body, and not to leave the church, but to go directly to the leaders who can listen and deal with the problem in a constructive manner. Leaders cannot deal with problems that they do not know about.

When the apostles heard about the problem, they called together the whole congregation. They did not blame anyone or lash out in self-defense. Rather, they explained their philosophy of ministry, laid out some guidelines, assigned the congregation the task of finding seven qualified men to deal with the problem, and gave those men the authority to deal with it.

3. Spiritual people are committed to harmony expressed through diversity.

It is significant that the apostles did not say, “It’s time that we divide the church up into the First Hellenistic Church of Jerusalem and the First Hebrew Church of Jerusalem.” They never considered division as an option. Even though these two groups had diverse backgrounds and even different mother tongues, they wanted to work this problem out in a spirit of unity, not division.

There are legitimate times to separate from professing Christians or churches, although that subject is beyond the scope of this message. But unless there are biblical grounds to separate, God is glorified when people from diverse cultures and backgrounds worship Him together on the common ground of salvation through Jesus Christ. One Church Growth trend today is to plant churches
that are targeted to reach only one segment of our society, such as the Generation Xer’s or the Baby Boomers. That’s not biblical. God wants us to reach all segments of society so that those from every walk of life will gather in love and unity to sing His praises. So we must commit ourselves to work through our problems whenever it does not compromise essential truth.

4. **Often problems in the church can be explained and resolved by understanding spiritual gifts.**

Not even the apostles could do it all. They were gifted and called to the ministry of prayer and preaching the Word. They were not control-freaks, who had to direct every aspect of church ministry. They were willing to delegate responsibility to other godly men who could deal with the problems. The laying on of hands symbolized the apostles giving recognition and approval to these capable men to carry on this aspect of ministry.

One key to solving church problems is to recognize and implement the division of labor on the basis of spiritual gifts. No one man or group of men, however gifted, can carry on the work of the local church. It is only when every member gets involved in serving in accordance with his or her gifts that the church will be strong.

Also, we need to understand that often people grumble about problems that are directly related to their area of spiritual gift. If someone complains that the church does not do enough in outreach, you are probably looking at a person with the gift of evangelism. If she complains that the church is not friendly enough, chances are she has the gift of hospitality. The one who grumbles about how disorganized the church is probably is gifted in administration. The man who laments the lack of discernment of spiritual error is probably a prophet. The key to resolving differences is for each person to recognize the validity of all the gifted members and to use his (or her) gift to work on the problems that he perceives. The church will only be strong when every member commits himself to the ministry that God has gifted him to do.

5. **Spiritual leaders must maintain their focus on prayer and the ministry of God’s Word.**

Acts 6:4 (along with Eph. 4:11-12 & 2 Tim. 4:1-5) has been one of my main directional verses in ministry. It has kept me fo-
cused on my major task when many other things pressure me to spend my time in other ways. Prayer and the ministry of the Word are interrelated. You cannot properly preach the Word unless you wait upon God in prayer. If you neglect prayer, all you’re doing is putting together clever sermons that may entertain, but surely will lack God’s power. Also, prayer is essential because even when God has gifted you to preach His Word, you will always be overwhelmed with how inadequate you are for the task (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5). You must pray that God will bless your preaching of His Word with lasting fruit.

Many pastors get carried away with building the church through management and marketing principles, to the neglect of God’s Word. If a man is not committed first and foremost to the ministry of God’s Word, he should not be the preaching pastor of a local church. It takes time to prepare biblical sermons. That’s why the apostles said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables” (6:2). They could not do both. They were not despising the work of serving tables; it was rather a matter of only having so much time in a week. Their focus was on the prayerful study and proclamation of God’s Word. If a shepherd slight his responsibility to feed the flock, even to do other good things, he fails in the primary biblical responsibility of a shepherd.

Years ago my office was at home. Marla would screen my calls while I was studying for the weekly sermon. One day a woman from the national headquarters of Pioneer Girls called and wanted to talk with me about how that ministry was going in our church. It was only with great difficulty that Marla finally persuaded her that I had no clue how that ministry was going, and if she really wanted to find out, she needed to call the woman who headed that program. The reason that woman couldn’t believe what she was hearing is that so many pastors neglect the principle of devoting themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

6. Leaders at every level must be spiritually qualified.

The apostles did not say, “Find seven willing bodies and have them serve tables.” To serve tables, these men had to be of the highest spiritual caliber. The congregation wisely chose seven men with Greek names, who probably were from Greek backgrounds. The Hebrews did not demand equal representation or a majority
on this board. There may have been seven Hebrews already on this board, we don’t know. But they let the Hellenistic men minister to the Hellenistic widows. Note the qualifications:

(1) They had to be men, not women. The Greek word refers to males. We do not know if these men were the first “deacons.” Probably they fulfilled that role, but the office did not originate until later. While there is a biblical basis for having female deacons (1 Tim. 3:11; Rom. 16:1), they must be under male elders who have oversight of the church (1 Tim. 2:11-15; 3:1-7).

(2) They were plural in number. Every reference to church leaders indicates a plurality of elders in a singular local church. While one man may be the leader among equals, as Peter was among the apostles, he is not to be an autocratic leader who calls the shots without regard for his fellow elders. We do not know why the apostles here designate seven men. Maybe they knew that the job required that many men.

(3) They were to be men of good reputation. The Greek word (“witness”) means that these men had to be attested by others to be men of integrity. Reputations take time to build, and so it is implied that these men were not new believers.

(4) They had to be full of the Spirit. Someone has pointed out that everybody is full of something, either of self or of God’s Spirit. These men had to be under the Spirit’s control.

(5) They had to be full of wisdom. They needed to know how to apply God’s Word to practical, everyday situations. Such wisdom does not come apart from maturity and experience.

The main thing to note is that to carry out this ministry that involved handling and distributing resources, these men had to be godly. It is a major mistake to put men who are not spiritually qualified into a responsible ministry position.

7. A growing organism requires new levels of organization in order to solve problems.

The church is primarily an organism—the living body of which Christ is the head. But all organisms are organized. It is a mistake to over-emphasize organization to the neglect of organism. It is also a mistake to over-emphasize organism and neglect proper
organization. The need for new organization grows as the body grows. The apostles here were willing to change the organizational structure of the church to meet this legitimate need. They didn’t cry, “We’ve never done it that way before!”

Note also the blend between apostolic direction and congregational participation. The apostles did not choose these seven men; they delegated that job to the congregation after giving the necessary qualifications. The congregation brought the seven back to the apostles, who validated the choice by praying and laying hands on them. Later, Paul appointed elders in every church to have oversight. He gave us the qualifications to recognize elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). The church is not a democracy, but wise elders will involve the congregation on important decisions. The entire church must be functionally under the headship of Jesus Christ, seeking to honor Him and follow His will.

Conclusion

To sum up all of these principles: to solve problems in the local church, both leaders and people must be spiritual people in submission to God’s Word. Verse 7 shows the result of this problem being solved: God’s Word kept on spreading, the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and even a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. Humanly speaking, they would have been the most difficult to reach. They would have been entrenched in the Jewish ceremonies and customs. They would have been prone toward salvation by works or because of their Jewish birth. They would not have seen that they were sinners in need of a Savior. Yet God worked mightily through the gospel to bring them to salvation!

If you do not know Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, that is your first need. You must come to Him as a sinner, let go of your own good works, and trust in the shed blood of Jesus as the only basis for forgiveness and eternal life. If you are a Christian, but are not using your gifts to serve the Lord, you need to seek God for how He wants you to serve Him. If you’re grumbling about a problem in the church, that may be a clue as to where He wants you to get involved. All of us need to make sure that we are walking daily in reality with Jesus Christ, growing in our knowledge of and obedience to His Word.
**Discussion Questions**

1. How can a person know when problems are so serious as to warrant leaving a church?

2. How can a Christian discover his/her spiritual gift(s)?

3. How can a local church help its pastor to focus on prayer and the ministry of the Word? How can it hinder this?

4. Is the local church to be a democracy? If not, where is the balance between elder rule versus congregational government?

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