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The Times, They Are a Changin'

Acts 6:1-8

Intro: In the last few chapters we have seen the early church in Jerusalem grow from a band of 120 disciples to a burgeoning congregation of over 5000 souls and it was growing daily. This growth has not gone unnoticed by the religious leaders in Jerusalem and it has certainly not gone unnoticed by the Evil one, the one who opposes God's work at every turn. So far in Luke's account, the attacks of Satan against the early church have come on various fronts. He has tried different forms of direct opposition and intimidation and also attempted to corrupt the church from within its own ranks. These strategies have all been unsuccessful in stopping or even slowing the work of the church. Now Satan will seize a new opportunity to divide and conquer by pitting 1 group of Christians against another.

1 – in those days – We can safely say that between **ch5 - ch6**, the good old days were over for these early believers. Beside the determined opposition and physical abuse from the religious establishment of Israel, which was expected, they also had to deal with internal corruption and now, disputes and potential disputes between those believers, many of whom were new Christians themselves. The times were changing and not necessarily for the better, or for the worse – things were just different. Sure, there may have been some pinning for the good old days when it was just 120 of them meeting in the upper room – “We were all unified then. We didn't have these problems back then.”

Of course, this was just a few weeks prior to this time so they weren't really going back too far. But here's the thing: in this situation, nostalgia was not helpful. Dreaming of the days when you had less problems doesn't help you deal with current problems. In fact, it isn't even the point! The work of God is meant to grow; growth brings change and change brings problems. Our calling as believers is not to limit or avoid problems. Our calling is to face our problems and faithfully deal with them in a godly and effective manner that contributes to the continued growth of the church and ultimately, brings glory to God. The important point of this passage isn't that the church had a big problem, it's how the church chose to deal with that big problem that made all the difference in the world.

multiplying – This tells us that the advancement of God’s kingdom through the efforts of this community of Christians was still highly successful. It was actually this very success that led to the current problem. They say small churches have small problems and big churches have big problems and I guess that must be so. What this church was experiencing was just growing pains. This wasn’t anything as exciting as external persecution or internal corruption, it was merely a question of administration; it was something as banal as logistics. But even though it seems to be a “minor” problem it was providing Satan an opportunity to sow discord and it was making it difficult for the Apostles to minister to everyone effectively.

a complaint – So, what exactly, is the problem here? The “Hebrews” were Jews who embraced Jewish culture and traditions, were mostly from Judea and primarily spoke Aramaic. The “Hellenist” were Jews who followed Greek culture, were mostly from outside of Israel and primarily spoke Greek. In normal Jerusalem society, these 2 groups were constantly at odds with each other. The Hebrews regarded the Hellenist as unspiritual compromisers with Greek culture while the Hellenist regarded the Hebrews as holier-than-thou traditionalists. There already existed a natural suspicion between the 2 groups and Satan was trying to take advantage of that long standing suspicion.

The one important factor that sets this scenario apart from normal Jerusalem society is that, although the titles of Hebrews and Hellenists are being used to distinguish the 2 groups, both groups were comprised of believers, followers of Jesus Christ. They were all from a Jewish background but they all embraced Jesus as their Messiah. It’s not surprising that divisions still persist in societies all around the world: racial, cultural, language, lifestyle, financial status – you name it and people will separate themselves along whatever kind of lines are drawn. It’s not surprising that this still exists in the world because it’s just human nature. What is surprising and disappointing is when those divisions are brought into the life of the church. There is no place for division in the church because, no matter who we are or where we come from – we are all made equal by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Daily distribution means that the early church took responsibility for the care of its own widows and orphans. This benevolence was an important part of

Jewish life and was normally administered by the temple authorities. It seems that the Christian widows weren't cared for by the Jewish leaders, probably retribution for the Apostles insistence on teaching and preaching in the name of Jesus. Regardless the reason, the church cared for their own but apparently, some of the Hellenist believed that the Hebrew widows were receiving better care and they brought their complaint directly to the Apostles.

Now, no where is it intimated that the Hellenist believed the oversight was deliberate. It was clear to all parties that the problem was poor administration or supervision. Just consider the ratio of Apostle to believer: 12 to 5000+ - in a congregation that size with such a limited amount of leadership, it was inevitable that someone's needs were going to be overlooked. But, while it may be understandable, inevitable and unintentional – that doesn't mean it can be overlooked. Satan loves to use an unintentional wrong to start a big conflict among believers. The Hebrews were right in their hearts – they weren't intentionally neglecting the widows. The Hellenists were right in their facts – their widows were being neglected. These were perfect conditions for a church-splitting conflict but the Apostles handled the problem with great wisdom and, more importantly, they didn't allow Satan any foothold in the fellowship.

2-4 – How were the Apostles supposed to deal with this problem? There was apparently no divine revelation from God as was the case with Ananias and Sapphira. Luke doesn't even say that the Apostles called a special prayer meeting, though I'm sure they prayed about it amongst themselves. What we have here is an administrative problem being dealt with via an administrative decision. The Apostles considered the problem and then, guided by the Lord, they handed it back to the congregation and asked them to nominate 7 individuals who met certain criteria to take over this particular ministry. That's what the church did and the rest of **ch6** lays out the results of this decision for us.

The Apostle's decision in this instance seems logical and inclusive but when you compare it to what they could have done – what has been done in countless churches since then – their decision is nothing less than grace-filled genius!

There are churches today who would just throw the complainers out! "You're being divisive and disrespectful – get out before we throw you out!" They

would then have gone down the street and started their own church but that's not the way the kingdom of God is supposed to be advanced.

Throwing them out would be un-Christian like so instead of casting out the difficult people, they could have just shunned them. "Just ignore them, don't talk to them – that will teach them to make trouble!" They could have just out-voted the dissenters. Call a meeting, present the problem and have a vote. If it doesn't go your way well, you can't complain because it was all done democratically – the Holy Spirit speaks through the 51%, right? Hardly! They could have formed a committee to address the situation and then sat on it until a bigger problem diverted their attention away. These are all things the Apostles could have done but none of them would have solved the problem – they would have only made it worse.

The Apostles didn't use any of these tactics; they went to the congregation itself. First, they explained that they needed to remain faithful to their central calling of prayer and the ministry of the Word. This wasn't an attitude of superiority being displayed by the 12. It's not that they considered themselves above such work. They simply realized that God had not called them to be everything for the church. They knew that God could and would raise up others to serve in other ways and it was wisdom on their part to delegate these responsibilities to them.

They went to the congregation, most likely appealing mainly to those who brought the initial complaint and said, "Pick out some individuals that you believe could oversee the distribution fairly." The apostles weren't trying to protect their own rights. They weren't even protecting their own point of view. They just wanted to solve the problem. They did lay down some necessary qualifications: the candidates had to have good reputations and be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. These qualifications focused on the character of the men to be chosen. The Apostles were far more concerned with the internal quality of the candidates than their outward appearance or image.

In Scripture, to be "full of" means to be controlled by. These men were to be controlled by God and the wisdom that God brings. The idea is that they were to be both spiritually minded and practically minded. This can be a difficult combination to find because most people tend to focus on one or the other but when God is in control, He can bring us to the point of becoming

proficient in things we're not necessarily good at or even interested in. Ministry is, at its core, a work of the Spirit in the life of the surrendered believer. We don't minister because we are naturally capable. We minister because we are empowered by the Spirit to do so. He makes us capable even in areas of weakness.

"If their ministry was essentially practical, why do they need to be full of the Holy Spirit?" the reason is that even practical ministry is spiritual ministry. Think of the most menial job that can be done at the church here – whatever it is, however "physical" the job may be – it will still affect people on a spiritual level. A dirty floor or a nasty restroom will have a spiritual affect on a visitor – lost or saved. The nursery worker does more than just entertain babies; they free the parents to give their full attention to the ministry of the Word of God. No matter what the ministry is – if it has a place in the Body of Christ then it has a purpose in expanding the kingdom of God. These men weren't chosen because they had money or management experience. The problem they were meant to solve wasn't about a lack of money or even a lack of food – it was essentially a spiritual problem and it required Spirit-filled people to deal with it.

5-6 – How did the church respond? They responded with a grace and love that was evidence of the unity they had in Jesus Christ. They got together and choose 7 men and what is significant about their choice was that, from a congregation made up primarily of Aramaic speaking Christians (Hebrews), every one of the 7 candidates was a Greek-speaking Christian (Hellenist). When given the opportunity, the whole church said, "Let's elect Greek speaking leaders!" They didn't try to pack the field or even split it; they didn't see the need for diversity in this situation. Either they deliberately picked all Greek-speaking leaders or they simply picked the 7 best candidates.

Of course, the final decision rested to the Apostles. They had asked the congregation to appoint candidates and they did so with pleasure. The Apostles approach wasn't genius because the people liked it. But, God confirmed their wisdom through the agreement of the people. The Apostles were led by the Lord, not popular opinion. But, because they were all already in basic agreement, the congregation agreed on how the Lord was leading the Apostles.

The congregation nominated the candidates, the Apostles then approved them by laying hands on them and praying for God's guidance and approval. God's guidance was being given and followed in that moment and His approval would be revealed shortly in the lives of these candidates. The laying on of hands was important even if their service was mainly for the practical needs of the widows. Practical service is spiritual service.

The list of candidates is given and most we know nothing about other than their names. What we do know is that these 7 men became the first official body of officers in the church other than the Apostles. These "deacons", who were servants, will become the first true leaders in the church. They do not replace the Apostles in the church because the Apostles have their own special role. Theirs is a unique function. But the baton is now being passed on to the next generation of believer. Up to this point it's all been the Apostles – preaching, healing, winning souls – being jailed, scolded and beaten. But, from here on out; the Apostles will slowly fade off the scene and these deacons will become the prominent and most effective witnesses.

7-8– This is the testimony God's approval of the churches decision to appoint these men as servants of the Body of Christ. Because this situation was handled with wisdom and sensitivity to those who were offended, a potentially divisive issue was diffused and the Gospel continued to advance in Jerusalem to the point that even many of the Jewish priests came to have faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior! The church nominated Spirit-filled deacons and got converted priests; the Apostles chose Spirit-filled deacons and got Spirit-filled evangelists. Amazingly, 7 men were chosen to serve tables – to do common things but, because they were filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom, they were found doing uncommon things – working signs and wonders among the people.

It is human nature to avoid problems whenever possible but when a church faces a serious problem, it actually presents the leaders and the members with a number of opportunities. 1) It gives an opportunity to examine the ministry and see what changes need to be made. In times of success, it's easy for us to just try to maintain the status quo but this is a dangerous position. Any ministry or church that thinks its success will go on automatically is headed for disappointing failure. We must regularly examine our lives and ministries lest we start taking things for granted.

The Apostles looked at the problem and determined that they were to blame. They were so busy serving tables that they were neglecting prayer and the ministry of the Word. They had created their own problem because they were trying to do too much. This doesn't mean that ministry to the widows was not important because every ministry in the church is important. It's a matter of priorities: they were doing trying to do jobs that others could do as well or better. D.L Moody said, "It is better to put 10 men to work than to try to do the work of 10 men." It's better for the leadership, it's better for the worker and it's better for the church as a whole.

2) It presents an opportunity to exercise our faith. Not just our faith in the Lord but our faith in each other. The church in our text was not afraid to adjust their structure to make room for a growing ministry. When structure and ministry conflict, this gives us an opportunity to trust God for the solution. It's pointless to fight to maintain a ministry just because, "That's the way we've always done it." Nearly every position in ministry exists because circumstances warranted its existence. When circumstances change – so should the ministry structure; it should adjust to address the new circumstances. No ministry is sacrosanct and neither is any minister. We all serve at the pleasure of our Master; our authority comes from Him. The Apostles weren't afraid to share their authority and ministry with others.

3) It presents an opportunity to express our love. The Hebrew leadership and predominantly Hebrew membership selected 7 Hellenist to oversee this important task. They looked past what they might have wanted and choose to promote an effective solution to this potentially devastating problem. When we solve church problems, we must think of others first and not just of ourselves – our thoughts, desires, expectations and rights...we should extend love.

Satan's first strategy failed – he tried to divide the church over this issue but it didn't work. Satan's second strategy also failed – The Apostles weren't distracted from the focus of ministry God had appointed them to: the focus upon prayer and the ministry of the Word of God. Their insistence on this shows how much they engaged in these activities but it also shows us how consuming it is to preach and even pray properly.

God help everyone of us to pursue our own relationship to Him with the same passion and faithful determination. 😊