

**Everyone Doing Their Part - Acts 6:1-7**  
**Argyle – 7/23/17 – Studies in Acts**

**Introduction to Worship**

(“Job title” on the fire fighter physical form) What is your “job title” in the church?

**Introduction to Scripture**

I once heard a speaker in seminary say something that really bothered me. Over the years, however, I have found what he said to be true. He said in the church you have two alternatives. You can have growth and conflict or you can have stagnation and peace. He said you can't have both growth and peace. That may be a little overstated, but we'll see this point illustrated in this morning's Scripture passage. The church is growing and that has led to conflict. (Read) (Pray for one another).

**Introduction/Bible Study Tool**

As part of this sermon series, Bryan and I have been sharing some of the Bible study techniques and tools that we find helpful in our sermon and Bible study preparation. The past two weeks we have been talking about the importance of reading a Scripture passage in its context. Think of it in terms of looking through a pair of binoculars (picture - please **keep this picture up** until I start talking about John Stott on page 3)

Here are 4 different views of the same building. In the right hand corner is a close up of a building. That is like looking at the passage we are zooming in. This morning

that is Acts 6:1-7. We'll see all kinds of details. The middle picture is like looking at a passage in its immediate context. What happens right before this and right after it. So, in Acts 5 we read about the church starting to run into trouble with the Jewish religious leaders. The apostles have been arrested, tried before the Sanhedrin, beaten and released. In Acts 7 Stephen, one of the men we are introduced to in this morning's Scripture passage is stoned to death and the opposition to the church increases in intensity. These are important days for the early church. Will it survive and, if so, how? We, of course, know the answer to the first question. 2000 years later the church continues to carry on the work that Jesus entrusted to us. The answer to second question is what we are really interested in because it can help us figure out how to we respond to opposition and persecution in our day.

Last week we talked about another context to consider for looking at a passage and that is how it fits in the whole Biblical story. That is like looking at this building in the top picture where you can see the whole city and some of the surrounding area. Some of the larger Biblical themes we will encounter in Acts 6 are the church's diversity, its responsibility for the poor and the shared responsibility we all have for the church's ministry.

One other context I would like to introduce you to this morning is what I'll call the "book context." How does this passage fit in the overall context of the Book of Acts? It is helpful in studying a passage to first read or at least skim the whole book to get a sense of the themes of the book. In his commentary on Acts, John Stott points out an

interesting theme that Luke has been developing in these early chapters of Acts. He points out that after the church got off to a great start in its first few weeks after Pentecost, Satan launched a counterattack.

Several years ago I was trying to understand my dad's experience of fighting in World War II, so I asked him if there was a good book I could read on the Battle of the Bulge which was one of the battles he fought in. Without hesitating he said, He recommended *A Time for Trumpets* by Charles MacDonald. So, I ordered it from the library and after a couple of renewals I completed all 700 pages of it. When I reported this to my dad he said, "Wow, I've never been able to get through the whole thing.

One of the things I learned in reading *A Time for Trumpets* is that when an army advances, the enemy will almost always counterattack. As soon as the America troops would take a hill, rather than celebrating, they would dig in expecting a counterattack. That is true in spiritual warfare, as well. In the early chapters of Acts, the church was advancing. 120 believers became 3000 and then 3000 became more than 5000. The enemy, however, wasn't going to relinquish his hold on this world without a fight and so Satan counterattacked. Beginning in Acts 3 we see Satan's tactics begin to unfold. His first and most obvious tactic was persecution. Peter and John were arrested for the first time after healing a crippled beggar. They were threatened and released. In Chapter 5 the apostles are all arrested. This time they were beaten before they were released. As we read further in Acts we'll see this persecution intensify culminating in the execution

of Stephen which we'll be studying next week. But every time the church experienced persecution, it grew.

Satan's second tactic was to attack from within through moral compromise. That is what we studied last week with Ananias and Sapphira. They sold a piece of property and led the church leaders to believe that they were giving the whole proceeds to the church, when they were really only giving part of it. This kind of deception could have had devastating consequences in the church which is why God's judgment was so quick and severe. Again the church grew.

This morning we will be looking at Satan's third and most subtle form of counterattack and that is distraction. He tried to distract the apostles from their primary responsibility of prayer and preaching, but presenting an urgent administrative need. It was a good thing to feed the widows, but it would have led the apostles to neglect praying and teaching which would have left the church exposed to doctrinal error. John Stott points out that Satan continues to use these same three tactics of persecution, moral compromise and distraction to attack the church today.

As we study Acts 6 this morning, it is helpful to see what is going on here as part of Satan's counterattacking strategy to undermine the church. (Picture) So, with the whole Bible context, the book context and the immediate chapter context in mind, let's zoom in and look at Acts 6.

## Unyielding Care of the Poor in the Church

The first thing I would like to point out is the unyielding care of the poor in the church. Our tendency with this chapter is to jump right into the conflict over the way the food is being distributed to the widows, but we don't want to miss the fact that the widows were being fed by the church. We've already read in the earlier chapters of Acts that a characteristic of the early church was that they cared for the poor. In chapter 2 we read "All the believers were together and had everything in common.<sup>45</sup> They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need." (Acts 2:44-45) Similarly in Acts 4 we read, "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all<sup>34</sup> that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales<sup>35</sup> and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. (Acts 4:33-35)

The church was building on the teaching of the Old Testament that God's people will share God's concern for the poor. A few verses from the Book of Proverbs will summarize this teaching.

- Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God. (Proverbs 14:31)
- Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done. (Proverbs 19:17)
- The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor. (Proverbs 22:9)

- The righteous care about justice for the poor, but the wicked have no such concern. (Proverbs 29:7)

In reading the Old Testament prophets, we discover that one of the things that most angered God was when his people failed to care for the poor or treat them justly.

As we rush to examine the problem and its solution in Acts 6, we don't want to miss the fact that the church was unyielding in their care for the poor.

### **Unsurprising Presence of Conflict in the Church**

The second thing I would like to point out is the unsurprising presence of conflict in the church. In distributing food to the poor widows in Jerusalem, favoritism was being shown to the Hebraic Jewish widows over the Grecian Jewish widows. The Jewish community was made up people from Palestine who spoke Aramaic and Greek and those who grew up in the Grecian world who spoke only Greek. As is often the case, different languages also reflect different cultures. Although these folks shared a religion, they were different than one another and differences among human beings often leads to conflict. These differences weren't checked at the door when these folks became Christians. They brought their differences and the tensions that resulted from them into the church.

This shouldn't surprise us. The differences and resulting tensions between races, ethnicities, social economic classes, genders, etc. that exist outside the church, also exist inside the church. In addition to that, our sinful tendencies, things like greed, lust, pride and laziness, also come with us into the church. The day we came to faith in Jesus Christ,

we were justified, but we weren't sanctified. We were forgiven for our sins, but we didn't stop being sinners. This is often surprising to young Christians. They are excited about their new journey with Jesus, only to discover that they still commit the same sins as a Christian that they committed as anon-Christian. The difference is they now feel guilty for those sins, which they sometimes didn't before they came to Christ. And, they have the Holy Spirit within them and a community of fellow believers around them to help them turn from those sins.

Still, until Christ comes and perfects the church, conflict will be present in the church. It shouldn't surprise us. And like these early Christians, when conflict arises, we should deal with it promptly so that it doesn't hinder the ministry of the church.

### **Unfolding Development of the Church**

The third thing I would like to point out is the unfolding development of the church. When the church began, the 12 apostles were in charge of everything - the praying, the preaching, the distribution of food to the widows and whatever else needed to be done. That was a model, however, that was unsustainable. As the church grew, they just couldn't do it all. So, the conflict over the distribution of the food to the widows became an opportunity to change the model to one that would sustain more growth.

So, the suggestion was made to create another group, the Seven, to take over the distribution of the food. This was important work and it needed to be done well. As we read throughout the New Testament we see this unfolding development of the church. Our memory verse for this week says, "It was Christ who gave some to be apostles, some

to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up..."(Ephesians 4:11-

12) What started out to be one group of leaders in the church - the apostles, now included prophets, evangelists and pastor/teachers. And note - this is very important - the purpose of these leadership positions in the church is not to do the ministry of the church, but to prepare the people of the church to do the ministry of the church.

Paul uses the illustration of the human body to show us how the church is supposed to work. Every part of our bodies - the eyes, the knees, the lungs, the pituitary gland, has a crucial role to play. The proper functioning of our bodies is dependent on every part playing its role. The same is true of the church. We each have been given spiritual gifts by God to play a particular role in the church. What is your role? What is your job title in the church? Are you a hand or an ear or a heart or a pituitary gland? Do you know? If so, make sure you are playing your part. If not, find out so that you can fill the role we need you to. The church is an "all hands on deck" operation. Everyone is needed or else the widows might not get fed or the word might not be taught or folks might not be prayed for or the building might not be maintained or the lost might not hear the gospel.

### **Conclusion**

In the glimpse we get of the early church in Acts 6 we see that Satan is out to destroy the church by trying to distract them from prayer and the word. He still is trying to distract us. We see the church's faithfulness in caring for the poor. A healthy church will always be engaged with and caring for the poor. We see, not surprisingly, that there

is conflict in the church. What would we expect of a group made up sinners - redeemed and recovering sinners perhaps, but still sinners? We still encounter conflict in the church and we can learn from these early Christians that it is important to deal with conflict promptly. And we see the unfolding development of the church. As it grew and changed it needed more and more folks to step up and use their gifts to do the work of the church. That need continues today. We want to do our part so that the word of God will spread and the number of disciples will increase.