

No Perfect Church

Text: Acts 6: 1-7

Readings: Isaiah 55; Acts 4: 32-37; Acts 6:1-7

When you read about the descriptions of the early church...

The miracles, the sharing, the generosity, the fellowship, the phenomenal growth...

You might wish that you could have been part of that perfect church.

In reality that early church had problems...just as we do today.

No church has, or ever will be perfect until Christ returns.

All churches have problems.

If the problems in the church concern you, ask yourself:

Would a perfect church allow me to be a member?

One of the encouragements from this passage we read in Acts is that the church does not have to be perfect to be a powerful and effective witness for Christ.

In fact, the way the church handles the problems that arise, serve as a huge part of that witness.

Let's look at the passage from Acts 6 together and see what we can learn from it with regards to dealing with disputes in the church.

One of Luke's purposes in writing the book of Acts is to tell the story of the remarkable growth of the church in the years after Jesus left the earth and sent his Spirit to empower his people (Acts 1:8).

You can see this if you notice how frequently he highlights the growth of the church.

For example,

Acts 2:41, "and about 3000 were added to their number that day."

Acts 2:47, "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

Acts 4:4, "Many who heard the message believed and the number of men grew to about 5000."

Acts 5:14, "more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number."

Acts 9:31, "So the church throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria...grew in numbers."

Acts 13:49, "The word of the Lord spread through the whole region."

Acts 16:5, "So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and grew daily in numbers."

Acts 19:20, "In this way the Word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power."

Luke, writing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, tells us these things because they are good for us to know.

This is the ongoing work of the Lord Jesus referred to in Acts 1:1.

It's the effect of the power of the Holy Spirit referred to in Acts 1:8.

It was an amazing movement, full of supernatural vigor.

But it was not pure.

We must not idealize the early church.

There were the likes of

deceitful Ananias and Sapphira in the Jerusalem movement (Acts 5:1-11),
and power-hungry Simon the magician in the Samaritan movement (Acts 8),
and fearful, retreating John Mark in the missionary band (Acts 13:13; 15:38),
and doctrinally confused Apollos in the Asian movement (Acts 18:24-28),
and professing Christians in Ephesus

who for some time concealed their black magic (Acts 19:18),
and so on.

Besides documenting the growth of the Christian movement in the early years, Luke also shows some of the obstacles and threats and how they were overcome.

That's what this passage is about.

It begins and ends with a reference to growth.

Acts 6:1, "In those days the number of disciples was increasing. . ."

Acts 6:7, "So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."

What we have sandwiched between these two statements is a threat to the Christian movement and how it was overcome.

As the apostles are continuing to teach and preach Jesus as the Christ daily in the temple and from house to house, the number of believers is growing in Jerusalem.

The church has been multiplying as the people hear the gospel message that Jesus was sent by God, whom they crucified.

But, as with any group of people that adds more people to the mix,
problems begin to arise.

We sometimes call these problems "growing pains."

In Acts 6 we are introduced to a conflict in the local congregation. The scriptures do not hide the problem, but lays bare the details of human failure.

The widows of the congregation that had a Greek background and spoke the Greek language were being neglected in the distribution of food.

So the charge was laid by the Hellenists against the Christians that spoke Hebrew and had a Hebrew background that they had neglected their widows, while apparently taking care of their own widows.

I think it is important for us to realize that even with the apostles around there were congregational problems and conflicts.

So, as much as in theory, we all ought to act like Christians who would promote harmony, we must also realize we are human and strife will come.

But what we see is how the apostles handled the problem.

So there are some cultural or ethnic tensions in the Christian movement in Jerusalem.

If that were to continue then Christians would come into disrepute and the glory of Christ would be dimmed in the eyes of the world and the movement would experience a serious setback.

An easy temptation for the apostles would have simply been to do the work themselves.

The apostles could have gone with the philosophy “if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself.”

The other part of the threat to the movement is what would happen if the problem was solved in the wrong way.

You can see this clearly in verse 2.

That sounds like a defense, doesn't it?

Somebody must have made the suggestion that it would in fact be a good idea if the apostles gave more hands-on time to this problem of the neglected widows.

So the second part of the threat to the Christian movement was that those called to the ministry of the word would leave that calling and serve tables.

The major threat to the movement, Luke teaches us, is whatever threatens the ministry of the word.

And in this case it would have been something very good that was threatening it, not something bad.

While it was important for the widows to receive their distribution, it is important that the apostles not forsake the talents they had to do something that others had the ability to accomplish.

The apostles declared that they would continue to give themselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

But they also:

- did not throw out the ones who brought up the issue
- did not shun or ignore the ones who brought up the issue
- did not take a vote
- did not form a committee

The ones who brought up the issue did not start a new church

God led the apostles to overcome both parts of the threat by not playing them off against each other.

In verse 3 the apostles acted quickly to appoint seven leaders who were full of the Spirit and wisdom, to take care of this need.

They delegated.

And the apostles kept on devoting themselves to the ministry of the word and prayer (v. 4).

Those chosen all have Greek names, and one of those chosen, Nicolas from Antioch, is described as a Gentile convert to Judaism.

By choosing seven men from this body of Greek speaking Jews, the apostles were ensuring that Greek widows would not be short-changed.

Indeed, those chosen are said to "full of the Spirit and wisdom," implying that they have administrative abilities (wisdom) and yet seek to be lead by the Spirit in all their dealings, presumably by following biblical directives about how the poor, widows and orphans are to be treated.

It is important to point out that even though Philip and Stephen were appointed to oversee the distribution of food, the next few chapters find both of the active in preaching as well.

Stephen, who will shortly become the first Christian martyr is singled out as one who had great faith, and we also find Philip mentioned, which is important since the next section of Acts, the balance of chapter 6 through chapter nine, deals with three key figures in the church, Stephen, Philip and a certain "Saul," a great enemy of Christ and of his church, who would shortly become Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

We also learn that the Apostles made the proposal to do this, but the members of the church ratified it -- Luke says "*the proposal pleased the whole group.*"

The way Luke celebrates the triumph of the church over this threat is by showing its effect in verse 7: "So the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."

In his vision, Isaiah saw the great age of the spread of the word, and the beginning of the reign of Christ.

Isaiah saw what Luke describes here.

In Isaiah 55:11-13, speaking through the prophet, God declares: "*my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*"

God's word goes forth in the power of the Holy Spirit, accomplishing the very thing he intends.

What Luke is celebrating is that the triumph over this in-house problem resulted in a new breakthrough in evangelistic power.

Now, even priests, who had been so hostile (Acts 4:1), are responding to the word of God and obeying the faith.

The church had been tested. She had passed the test by caring for the widows and guarding the word. And God honored this triumph with new power and fruitfulness.

How we handle problems will determine our impact in the community

It does not take long for unbelievers and visitors to know that there is a problem within in local church.

Strife and conflict can be seen and tension can be cut with a knife in congregations where there is no harmony or unity.

We think that we can keep the problem to ourselves, but strife results in a drain of our resources.

Too often problems cause us to become internally sighted instead of continuing to look out to the community to save souls.

Again, we start thinking about ourselves in this local church and not about the people in the world who need our help and need to hear the message of the gospel and see that Christianity can be practiced the way God wants.

We become more concerned about being right and winning arguments.

Conclusion:

Be like Christ at all times. It is amazing how often being Christ-like is thrown out the window when controversy arises.

We bully, threaten, make a scene, and carry on in such a way that we completely damage the name of the Lord by calling ourselves disciples.

There is no time when we can stop living like Jesus.

Always look for solutions. I believe solutions are available if we are willing to look for them and we are willing to surrender our rights for harmony. We can remain sound to the doctrine of Christ while realizing that we do not need to push our liberties on others.

People are different.
We are different in color, race, language, dialect, beliefs, habits and personality. These things along with a zillion other idiosyncrasies make each of us distinct individuals.

The church is the one place which is truly multicultural...
Where different people, those who might never associate with each other, have something in common and can praise and worship God together.

The nature and design of Christianity is to allow Christ's teaching to unite God's people by overcoming these distinctive barriers.

Jesus demonstrated how the basic truths of the gospel should unite us as God empowers us to overcome these man made barriers.

He seemed to preach almost exclusively to those held back by the barriers of his culture.

He did this as he went to saint and sinner.

We are desperately in need of a more powerful demonstration of our unity today.
Christianity can look so divided:
Over language, culture, age, worship styles,

The response of the early church gives us several keys that help solve our problem separating barriers.

They developed a listening ear that took in the opinions of the other people.
They accepted responsibility for the error of overlooking the needs of the neglected group.
They took immediate action to rectify the problem.
They prayerfully appointed people to administer the program.

We can gain much wisdom from their actions.

What problems do we, as a church, need to face?
What problems do you, as an individual, need to face?
How are you prayerfully going to deal with the problem?

My prayer is that no obstacles--inside the church or outside the church--will hinder the word of God at Dandenong, and that the same power that brought thousands into the church in Acts will do the same here and around the world.