

When a certain Dallas church decided to split, each faction filed a lawsuit to claim the church property. A judge finally referred the matter to the higher authorities in the particular denomination. A church court assembled to hear both sides of the case and awarded the church property to one of the factions. The losers withdrew and formed another church in the area.

During the hearing, the church courts learned that the conflict had all begun at a church dinner when a certain elder received a smaller slice of ham than a child seated next to him. Sadly, this was reported in the newspapers for everyone to read. Just imagine how the people of Dallas laughed about the situation! This brought great discredit not only to the church but to Jesus Christ!

The tiniest events sometimes cause great problems. Again and again a church has warded off a frontal attack only to be subverted from within.

Acts 6 shows us Satan trying to disrupt the inward peace of the early church. Wonderful things were happening as the new church grew by leaps and bounds. Three thousand received Christ at Pentecost. Another 2,000 were added shortly thereafter. Acts 5 tells us that many more were then added to the church. Satan, unhappy about God's successes, sowed a spirit of murmuring and gossip among God's people, hoping to set believer against believer.

Countless works for God have been destroyed in this way. God blesses a work, souls come to Christ, the church reaches its community, missionaries are sent out. Then someone complains that he or she is not appreciated or is being neglected. Perhaps this comes in the form of a critical glance, a name forgotten, a social gaffe, or some imagined offense. Bitter dissension ignites and spreads, and the whole work goes up in flames.

Acts 6 describes such a situation. The delicate unity of the early church became endangered, threatening the spiritual testimony of many thousands of believers.

THE APOSTOLIC MINISTRY ENDANGERED (v.12)

We might think everybody would have been so occupied with each day's new blessings that there was no room for murmuring. Not so!

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. (v.1)

Jerusalem had a large minority of Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews-Jews who, though they spoke no Hebrew because they had lived abroad for centuries, returned to Jerusalem because it was their holy city. Many of these Jews had returned so they could spend their final days in Jerusalem- much like modern-day Zionists. As a result there was an abundance of Greek-speaking women who had outlived their husbands. Resentful, the native Aramaic-speaking Jews discriminated against the Hellenistic Jews, whom the Pharisees held in utter contempt, considering them second class Israelites.

Then came Pentecost, and thousands of Aramaic-speaking Jews plus hundreds of Hellenistic Jews became one in Christ. However, conversion (wonderful as it was) did not erase all their prejudices. The Greek-speaking widows soon felt they were being shorted. When the other widows received two loaves, they only got one. At least that is the way they saw it. So they “complained” about it. “Our Hebrew-speaking brothers are favoring their own people.” The offense may have been more imagined than actual, but that made no difference to those who felt overlooked.

At any rate, word finally reached the apostles who, rightly perceiving that situation was serious, called a congregational meeting. They saw that the corporate witness of the church was at stake. Jesus had said:

“A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know you are my disciples if you love one another.” (John 13:34-35)

Concerning this specific situation, Acts 6:2 tells us:

So the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.”

The apostles’ statement tell us that more than corporate witness was at stake. Evidently some had suggested that the way to dispel hard feelings between the foreign Jews and the hometown crowd was to have Peter, John, Philip and the others divvy up the widows goods. Though such counsel may have appeared sensible at first glance, it actually brought apostolic principles of discipleship and delegation under well-meaning but deadly attack. The power of the apostolic church would have been greatly diminished, and this glorious chapter of the early-church history would have been sadly tamed.

Waiting on tables would have left the apostles little time for anything or anyone else. The apostles would have dried up spiritually under the pressure of serving meals plus all the counseling and preaching, with little time for preparation and prayer. Furthermore, if the apostles had agreed to personally run the food program, others might have hesitated to perform the slightest ministry without apostolic direction, and that would have fostered the overdependence we sometimes see today, with followers afraid to tie their shoes without getting permission from the pastor. Delegation is at the heart of developing followers.

The ill-advised suggestion must have been a substantial temptation for the apostles. No one wants others to think they see themselves as above common work. “You are not willing to wait on tables? Are you better than Jesus? He washed your feet, and you will not even set a plate before a hungry woman? Did not Jesus say, ‘The greatest among you will be your servant’ (Matthew 23:11)?

This was also a temptation to think, “Things will not happen the way they should if I don’t do them myself.” By nature, we like to be the ubiquitous hand of God to others. Certainly no one can do the job the way we can. It is to the apostles’ credit that they resisted this. In fact, in the

years to come they would wash one another's feet again and again and would repeatedly refuse the temptation to set themselves up as little gods.

THE APOSTOLIC MINISTRY ENHANCED (vv.2-4)

Beyond saying no to the suggestion, the apostles refused to assign blame and made the people part of the solution. Thus their ministry was increased through spiritual delegation and discipleship, and others grew spiritually. "Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them" (v. 3).

They allowed the congregation to choose men of impeccable character: "full of the spirit... full of... wisdom." Morgan said concerning this:

A man full of the Spirit is one who is living a normal Christian life. Fulness of the Spirit is not a state of spiritual aristocracy, to which few can attain. Anything less than the fulness of the Spirit for the Christian man is disease of the spiritual life, a low ebb of vitality. Fulness of the Spirit is not abnormal, but normal Christian life.

These men—evidently the first deacons—lived in dependence upon God's Spirit and not their own strength. They know how to take truth and apply it to a practical situation. They address the plight of the overlooked widows with sanctified common sense.

The apostles' act of delegation was supremely successful. Not only were the widows given good care, but two of the greatest New Testament saints came to full maturity and power under their new responsibilities. Stephen soon afterwards preached his epic sermon before the Sanhedrin becoming the first martyr of the Church. Philip had a multifaceted ministry as God transferred him from place to place (consider for example, his witnessing to the Ethiopian Eunuch to Christ immediately after successful mass evangelism in Samaria).

The apostles had served their Master wisely and skillfully, and their discipleship and delegation raised an army of Stephens and Philips to spread the gospel. The ministry of the apostles and of the church was multiplied marvelously!

This also came about because the apostles were able to maintain needed spiritual discipline. "[We] will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word" (v.4)- prayer, preparation, and preaching.

"[We] will give our attention to prayer..." And pray they did! In this respect they were like Jesus who during his "life on earth... offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears" (Hebrews 5:7). This contrasts sharply with today's average pastor who, according to a Christianity Today survey, spends only three minutes in a day in prayer. Perhaps this is due to our feeling that we must be present at every meeting and have our hand on every ministry, producing an overcrowded schedule that leaves no time for personal fellowship with God. How much better it would be to emulate Andrew Bonar, who made these entries in his diary:

I see that unless I keep up short prayer every day throughout the whole day, at intervals, I lose the spirit of prayer.

Too much work without corresponding prayer.

Today setting myself to pray. The Lord forthwith seems to send a dew upon my soul.

Was enabled to spend part of Thursday in my church praying. Have had great help in study since then.

Passed six hours today in prayer and Scripture reading, confessing sin, and seeking blessing for myself and the parish.

The apostles' prayers were accompanied by "the ministry of the word"- preparation. The Greek word translated "ministry" here has the root includes "dust", suggesting the idea of raising dust in a hurry- that is, being busy at work. The apostles were laborers. Some wrote portions of Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They all prayerfully pored over the Old Testament, working hard at understanding and communicating the spiritual truths of God's Word. This is where shepherds often fall short today. Phillips Brooks said:

I know of no department of human activity, from the governing of a great nation to the doctoring of a little body, where the disposition is not constantly appearing to invent some sudden method or to seek some magical and concise prescription which shall obviate the need of careful, comprehensive study and long-continued application. But this disposition is nowhere so strong, I think, as in the ministry.

Dr. Donald G. Barnhouse adds:

NO man is ever going to be able to fill the pulpit adequately unless he spends thousands of hours year after year in the study of God's word.

Phillips Brooks called preaching "truth being mediated through personality". The prophet prays over his message, personally absorbing every point. Then, with fear and trembling, God's spokesman steps before the people.

By divinely-directed delegation, the apostles not only freed other to grow in their service to God, but they freed themselves for prayer, preparation, and powerful preaching. Thus the spiritual ministry of the Church was enhanced.

Verse 5 and 6 describe the implementation of the apostolic plan:

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Everyone- the Greek-speaking Jews and the Aramaic-speaking Jews- came together and chose the favored seven. What a beautiful event- especially considering that all those chosen had Greek names. Though Hebraic Jews comprised the majority of the congregation, they chose Hellenistic Jews to administer the program. The Holy Spirit was reigning. The result?

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. (v.7)

God's Word spread. The number of disciples increased. Priests believed.

When Satan does not succeed in stopping the church with a frontal assault, he attacks from within. This usually happens subtly- an invitation not sent, a job unnoticed, a critical comment overheard, jealousy over something that really does not matter (like the size of a ham slice). When the murmuring begins, the devil smiles.

When believers are unhappy and begin to murmur, the first place to look for the problem is in their own hearts. Christians who were unhappy at their last church or town or job are probably unhappy where they are now. If they feel they have just cause for criticism, by all means they should express it to the right people in an appropriate way. But they must avoid murmuring or gossiping and must be willing to be part of the solution.

If the widows are being neglected, we should be willing to wait on tables. If the Sunday school needs help, we should be ready to assist however we can. If we see a need for a small group, perhaps we should host one. If we see the need for evangelism, we should be willing to share Christ.

We must not just complain but must be willing to lead, to delegate, and above all, to serve.