

SIMON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

ACTS 6:1-7 DECEMBER 4, 2019

In the film *Apollo 13*, after an oxygen tank explosion, Tom Hanks utters the unforgettable line, “Houston, we have a problem.”¹ In response, every member of Mission Control Center springs into hyper-focused action. The way in which they all work together toward the *new* goal of getting the astronauts home is made clear when Ed Harris’ character says: “I want you all to forget the flight plan. From this point on we are improvising a *new* mission.” From there, the team works tirelessly around the clock to solve the problem faced by Jim Lovell and his crew.

Imagine for a moment if when Tom Hanks said, “Houston, we have a problem,” Ed Harris responded: “I’m sure you’ll figure it out. That’s not really my area.” Then went back into his office, shut the door and started looking over the original flight plan again. That would make for a much different movie! In the real situation, a response like that would’ve been *fatal* for the astronauts in the spacecraft.

In our text we’re going to see a problem boil over in the life of the Church - a problem that could’ve split the Body in a vicious way. In response, the Apostles *essentially* say, “That’s really not *our* area.” Then head back into their offices to study and pray. What are we to make of that? And, seeing that even the most *dynamic* Church of all time had significant issues that needed to be dealt with, what do we do when conflict, disappointment or offense rear their heads in our own Christian fellowships?

I think we’ll find that, as we’ve been seeing again and again in these chapters, the answer isn’t as simple as, “Just copy what the Jerusalem church did and everything will be great.” Because, the truth is, there’s a lot we *don’t* know about this situation. Many of you are familiar with the story. Even if you’re not, it’s very straightforward. There’s a conflict, a complaint, and then a course of action agreed upon to deal with it. But, here’s the thing: We don’t know if their plan *solved* the problem. There’s no follow up. We don’t know if the plan was God’s idea or man’s idea. We don’t even really know if the problem was actually *real* at all, or if it was only a *perceived* issue. So, as has often been the case, the simple answer of “pattern our church after what the first Church did” is inadequate. Let’s take a look at this critical moment of Church history, starting in verse 1.

Acts 6:1 - In those days, as the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution.

“In those days.” They were days of rapid growth. Days of miracles. Days of everyday gatherings to study and worship and share in the Lord’s supper. They were also days of growing persecution. There was a *lot* going on in and around the church. But, even during this remarkable time of revival and miracles, there were internal problems cropping up. A divide was growing between two demographic groups.

Hellenistic Jews were those who lived out in the Gentile world and therefore spoke Greek, rather than Aramaic, which is what the Hebraic Jews spoke. Of course, their differences weren’t *only* about language. There was a cultural divide as well.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3J1AO9z0tA>

The first question is: Was it *true* that the Greek-speaking widows were being systematically neglected? We simply don't know. Luke doesn't give us all the information. What we *do* know is that racial prejudice would dog the church consistently, through the end of the Book.

Now, whether the neglect was real or only perceived, this *is* a big issue. One group was saying their *widows* were being denied absolutely essential charity. Churches have split over much, much less. Christian author Thom Ranier did research for a book and polled a bunch of church leaders to find out what sort of fights they'd experienced in their churches. Here are a few of his favorites: An argument over the appropriate length of the worship pastor's beard. A forty-five minute heated argument over the type of filing cabinet to purchase: black or brown, two, three or four drawers. A dispute because communion was served with *cranberry*-grape juice instead of just grape. And a church argument *and* vote over whether or not a clock in the worship center should be removed.²

Those issues are sad and silly. This one was not. Before we move on, let's be encouraged here: God can do great and powerful things even through imperfect churches. Which is good news, because there *is* no perfect church! It doesn't mean that problems shouldn't be addressed or that concerns shouldn't be raised, but there is a sort of mindset that we in America sometimes fall into that says, "Well, *this* church doesn't address this specific need that I feel. My *group* is being neglected. So I'll leave and go find a church that doesn't neglect my specific group." And, this is why, many churches in America are replete with different clubs. Every sort of demographic category is represented so as not to make anyone feel "neglected." And, if that's how the Lord has led that fellowship, great. What I'm saying is that you should be led *by the Spirit* when it comes to what church you go to, not by the church's array of programs. It's a Body, not a buffet.

Acts 6:2 - ²Then the Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, "It would not be right for us to give up preaching about God to handle financial matters.

They got the *whole* Church together. So, obviously the Apostles considered this to be a really big deal. We know the Church had to have more than 5,000 people. Some scholars estimate it upwards of 25,000 at this point! But, whatever the number, it's a big crowd. The 12 get up to address this potentially church-splitting division and here's what they say: "This is going to be *your* problem, not *ours*." Wow. Their message wasn't: "We have to unify!" It wasn't: "You people over there need to repent." It was: "We're not going to handle this. It wouldn't be fitting."

Now, wait just a minute! Didn't Jesus wash their feet and say, "You need to do this too"? Aren't we called to take the place of the lowest servant? Absolutely! It wasn't that the apostles were unwilling to perform that *kind* of service, it's that they were unwilling to neglect what their Master had asked them to do in order to do something *else*, even though that something else may have been important or significant to people. While *every* Christian is given the general charges of compassion, kindness and service, we're *each* given specific commissions and giftings so that we can serve in the Body of Christ in particular ways. Paul explained in Corinthians that there are different gifts, different ministries and different activities. They are given by the same God who *activates* each gift in each person, distributing as *He* wills. Therefore, if God has activated some gift and calling in your life, it is *not* desirable for you to neglect those things and instead do some *other* ministry that seems good or maybe even *is* good. It's not desirable to the Lord and it's not, ultimately, good for the Body.

Your ears may have perked up there at the end of verse two where it says "not be right...to handle financial matters." It's often translated as "to wait tables." The term used there is used many times in

² Thom Ranier *Who Moved My Pulpit?*

the New Testament. Sometimes it's used for the table where you would eat, sometimes for a table where money was changed. And, we recall that individuals like Barnabas or Ananias and Sapphira brought *money* to the Apostles. So, it's very possible that the widows weren't being served food, soup kitchen style, but that they would come and receive *money* to go and *buy* food.

Acts 6:3 - ³ Therefore, brothers, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty.

What I find remarkable about this is that the Apostles assumed that *all* the Christians could act in a mature, spiritual manner. Remember: They're talking to the *whole* congregation. And they say, "You guys don't actually need us to solve this." More than that, I think it's possible that they were applying a lesson they had learned from Jesus to the situation. In the Gospels, they were once among a crowd of thousands, full of hungry people. They went to the Lord, saying "do something!" And what did the Lord reply? "*YOU* give them something to eat." And here, when a complaint comes before them as leaders, their response is: "*You* give the widows something to eat. *You* solve this problem in a Godly way. *You* begin to serve and support others. *You* join the ministry one to another."

Now, it's clear that the Apostles weren't being cavalier or uncaring. They simply knew it wasn't the responsibility God had given them at the time. They called it a *duty*. It wasn't *their* job, but it *was* an important job nonetheless. And it was a job that needed to be accomplished through *spiritual* people, not a strategic program. They didn't establish a curriculum or set of procedures. They said, "Find some spiritual men and then God will work through them." Men who lived as *martyrs* for the Lord. That's the word that's used for "good reputation." Men who were already being led by the Spirit and already applying Godly insight to the way they lived life.

Acts 6:4 - ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the preaching ministry."

There *are* higher priorities in church life and in the Christian life. In the life of a church, the preaching of the Gospel, the teaching of God's Word and corporate prayer are non-negotiable, top priorities. That doesn't mean the other things aren't good or important. They are. The welfare work they were doing among the widows was significant and needful and *commanded* by God. But, as far as the Apostles were concerned, *nothing* was of higher priority than prayer and preaching. And, again, their response shows that they were convinced the congregation would be able to deal with this problem. They knew how serious division was. But here they say, "By the way, we're *done* talking about this."

Acts 6:5 - ⁵ The proposal pleased the whole company. So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte from Antioch.

The answer from the 12 was *probably* not what the people were expecting, but it satisfied their complaints. We don't know how they went about selecting these 7 guys out of thousands, but somehow they *all* had to work it out.

Commentators point out that all 7 of these men have Greek names, indicating that they were *probably* all Hellenistic believers. From our perspective, this does show some maturity. The Hellenistic group was probably the minority and they were the ones that were complaining, but the group as a whole *empowered* them to address what the Greek speakers saw as a shortcoming in the life of the church. And they were then given charge to minister, not just to their own, but also to the Hebraic widows as well. Great trust, great unity, great grace being demonstrated here.

Were these guys the first deacons? This passage is frequently cited as the beginning of the church office of deacon. But is that true? We don't need to fight about it. I will say this: None of these guys are ever *called* deacons. In fact, at least one of them, Philip, is labeled as "the evangelist." Not "the deacon." After this passage we see Stephen *immediately* doing other things. Namely, signs, wonders and preaching. He's no longer sitting behind a table with the widows.

So where does the idea come from? Well, in these verses, the words diakonia, and diakonein are used where we read "distribution" and "financial matters." And so, some feel that, "There you go: That's the start of the deacons." And that's fine. But, here's some food for thought from the Bible Knowledge Commentary:

*"The words [connected with deacons] do not seem to have a technical sense here. These words in the Greek New Testament are commonly used in a nonspecialized sense...the best approach [seems to be]...that these seven men held a temporary position for the purpose of meeting a specific need."*³

Of the seven men we'll see a little more about two of them: Stephen, who will be the first to die for the cause of Christ and Philip who has a longer role in the book. We're given the tidbit that Nicolaus was a proselyte, meaning he was Gentile by birth but had, at some point, converted to Judaism. There is an argument among early church fathers as to whether he became the leader or inspiration for the sect of the Nicolaitans. We're not sure. Church history tells us that 5 of the 7 were ultimately martyred for their faith. And so they lived out their "reputation" till the end as faithful, spiritual men.

Acts 6:6 - ⁶ They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The Apostles had said, "We're going to devote ourselves to prayer." And then, when the congregation shows up with these 7 guys, the Apostles say, "Alright, let's pray!" They practiced what they preached. They devoted themselves to what they had been called to do.

And they don't say to these guys, "Now remember: You answer to us." They say, "Go do the ministry." The Apostles trusted the Spirit and, therefore, were able to trust Spirit-filled men.

Acts 6:7 - ⁷ So the preaching about God flourished, the number of the disciples in Jerusalem multiplied greatly, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.

Here Dr. Luke gives us one of his regular health checkups on the church. We see summaries like this at various times in the book. He's sort of taking a reading of the vitals. Despite the issue described here the church was healthy and thriving and continuing it's heavenly work. And we see that it was the *preaching* that led to conversions. Not the welfare program. Not the administrative structure. The Gospel is the power of God that brings salvation. The other ministries are significant, needful, even commanded. But one stands ahead of the rest and must always be the principle focus of every congregation.

The preaching of the Gospel, we're told, led to a large number of Jewish priests converting to Christianity. It's estimated that "there were 8,000 priests attached to the temple ministry in

³ *ibid.*

Jerusalem.”⁴ What an amazing revival it must have been! Thank God that He called some to preach and others to help the widows.

This text serves as an important example of why it’s important that we live Spirit-filled lives, and not just become bandwagon Christians. If the 12 had been bandwagoners, just doing what *seemed* important to this group of Hellenists, then they would’ve left their primary calling of teaching. Evangelism would’ve stalled out, a lot of sick people wouldn’t have been healed and all sorts of other ministry wouldn’t have happened. *God knows how to get His work done!* What He needs is willing servants who don’t try to be the boss themselves. The Lord said to Jeremiah, “Go where *I* send you.” Not public opinion. Not whatever is trendy or whatever has the limelight. Go where the Master sends.

So, applying this passage and the principles here, what do we do when we encounter a problem, a divide or some disappointment within our Christian fellowship? Well, first, don’t cut and run. God wants His body to remain unified. Second, you have to determine whether or not the issue particularly concerns you. It’s true that a problem like this impacts the *whole* Church, but in our example here we have at least 4 different groups that you might belong to. You have the people who felt slighted. You have the people who were being accused. You have the Apostles. And you have the people called to engage on that issue.

Now, Luke refers to them *all* as disciples. And that’s the place to begin. To remember that my role and your role, all of us together, are called to *discipleship*. One Bible dictionary describes the word this way: *A learner, [whose] thoughts are accompanied with endeavor.*⁵ Every member of Christ’s Body is to be not only a pupil, *hearing* the teachings of God, but an *adherent*, who imitates their Teacher, Jesus Christ. In that sense, a disciple is much, much different than an onlooker. And, as we’ve seen, it was expected that *all* the members of the Church would act and respond in maturity and spirituality, even in a tense situation like the one seen here.

But, as a disciple, when an issue arises in your Christian fellowship, here or elsewhere, you’ve got to figure out where you fit in the situation. Are you the one being accused? Then it is your duty to honestly humble yourself before the Lord and say, “Lord, is it me? Have I wronged my spiritual family here?” And be willing to accept correction and make it right. Perhaps some prejudice *has* crept in.

Are you the one bringing the accusation? If yes, your duty is to *first* be sure you are not complaining and murmuring. That never pleases the Lord. And your duty is to try to honestly evaluate whether what you *feel* like is happening is *actually* happening. And, if you feel slighted, is it something that is actually wrong, a true offense, or is it just that your preference is not being chosen? In *Apollo 13*, when the distress call first goes out, a lot of the guys in Mission Control are convinced there wasn’t *really* an explosion in the ship’s guts, that it was just an instrumentation malfunction. And, you know, that happens sometimes not just with spaceships but in the human mind as well.

When conflict arises, are you part of the Apostle group? Meaning, you need to figure out if the Lord *doesn’t* want you to be involved. Because often He doesn’t. At least not directly. The Apostles said, “This isn’t our area. This isn’t our calling.” It wasn’t because they just didn’t *want* to get involved, it was because they were tuned in with what God had given them to do and they *devoted* themselves to that.

⁴ Warren Wiersbe *The Bible Exposition Commentary*

⁵ Vines Complete Expository Dictionary

If God has called you to some work or ministry or situation, don't get sidetracked on some other project that He's called other people to be a part of. Encourage them, pray for them, but *you* work the section of vineyard He's given *you* to work.

Finally, maybe you're part of the fourth group: One of the 7 set apart to address some particular need. When you put your hands on the job, remember: It's not by might, nor by power, but by the *Spirit* that you accomplish God's will. Don't always assume *someone else* is responsible to do the job. It might be you! Because there's *something* God has for you to do in His Body. And He wants you to discover it, that His dynamic, powerful work might spread and flourish in and through your life and your church in your community.