

Acts ~ Reimagining

Acts 6

The Gospel was being faithfully and boldly proclaimed. People were responding in droves. This new Jesus movement was now well into the thousands. But such growth is not without its challenges. In this chapter we see a problem arise that was a combination of practical/logistical/administrative issues and cultural prejudice...with, obviously, the prejudice being the greater concern.

As we've seen mentioned twice so far (2:25 & 4:34-35) the early Christian community took care of each other's needs physically/materially/financially. In this chapter we see that again, specifically in the daily distribution of food amongst the widows. In so doing, they reflected the heart of God. Numerous passages of the Hebrew Scriptures point this out, as Psalm 146:9 represents, "*The Lord watches over the alien, and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but He frustrates the ways of the wicked.*"

Such care for the most vulnerable is beautiful...but not without its challenges. Luke tells us that "*the number of disciples was increasing*". (Quick sidenote: please notice that Luke refers to the early believers as "disciples", which should be understood as "students"...though in less of an academic sense and more in an apprentice sense...and specifically apprentices of Jesus.) We typically view growth, particularly in a Church setting, as a good and positive thing. And it is...though, again, it comes with challenges. Growth is change...and change is hard. People say they want growth. Few people really want change.

We can understand and appreciate the logistical challenge that naturally comes with an increase in the number of people in need. We get that. And a higher level of coordination and organization should suffice to solve the problem. But the deeper problem/issue was more complex and potentially damaging because it was inconsistent with the way of Jesus and His Kingdom.

Luke notes that there was some emerging diversity in the early Church—it was made up of both Grecian/Hellenistic Jews and Hebraic Jews. Hebraic Jews were those who were born and raised in Palestine. They spoke Aramaic and likely read the Hebrew Scriptures. Grecian/Hellenistic Jews, on the other hand, were those who grew up outside of the land of Israel but who had migrated back to Israel. They were more influenced by Greek/Hellenistic culture, likely spoke Greek as their first language and relied on the Septuigent (the Greek translation of the Old Testament). There were long-standing tensions between these two groups, and apparently even as people from both groups became followers of Jesus, the tensions and distrust persisted.

Sadly, humans have a tendency to be suspicious of, distrust, or flat-out not like those who are different from them. The natural diversity that the Gospel invites means that this is an issue the Church has to constantly be on the lookout for and vigilantly deal with on an ongoing basis.

How intentionally versus unintentionally were the Grecian/Hellenistic widows being overlooked? Luke doesn't comment. But the Twelve [apostles] rightly saw this as a problem that needed to be addressed. The wisdom in which the apostles handled this delicate situation is remarkable on a number of levels.

First, they *"gathered all the disciples together..."* (6:2) They didn't pronounce mandates from on high about how this matter should be handled, nor did they try to minimize or cover up the issue. Rather, they openly acknowledged it.

Second, the apostles recognized their limitations as well as prioritized and stewarded their time and gifting well. These guys had spent the most time with Jesus and had received the most instruction from Him. They were first-hand witnesses to the resurrected Lord Jesus. Their best use of time was to continue to broadly proclaim what they had seen and heard. Additionally, they understood the high priority and role of prayer in undergirding this entire endeavor. Now we need to be careful to recognize what they were NOT saying. They were NOT saying that they were above serving the widows or that they didn't want to serve them. Rather, they had unique gifts and roles to play in the life of this new society of Jesus and to be distracted by stuff that others could do would have a detrimental effect. In fact, they were empowering others to take over an important function of the life of the early church. In other words, they weren't micro-managing but rather trustingly delegating.

Third, it is important to notice WHO they delegated this responsibility to. It is not obvious in our English translations but the seven guys proposed and ultimately chosen for the role of overseeing equitable food distribution were all Grecian/Hellenistic Jews. When the apostles said *"choose seven men from among you..."*, the *"among you"* part was from the offended party. As commentator Craig Keener states, *"Those with political power generally repressed complaining minorities; here the apostles hand the whole system over to the offended minority. This may thus be the first recorded instance of what we might today call 'affirmative action.'"*

Let's remember that not too long before these guys, the apostles, were fishermen, tax collectors, and assorted "nobodies"...now here they are exemplifying extraordinary leadership. How do we account for that? Well, they were trained by Jesus (the best leader ever) and they were guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is important to remember that nearly everything that was at their disposal is at ours as well.

The practice of laying on of hands, which signified the conferring of responsibility and authority, goes back to the Hebrew Scriptures. For example, in Numbers 27, we see Moses laying hands on Joshua to symbolize the transferring of leadership. It is still a practice today by many churches, traditions, and denominations, often as part of ordination.

"So the word of God spread." (6:7) We see again the pattern/rhythm of Acts...trouble arises (this time an internal crisis of discrimination in the benevolence ministry of the Church), but the Gospel overcomes and continues to advance. This harkens back to something Jesus said in

John 16:33, *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* We can/should have incredible trust in Jesus and His way, in the empowering Holy Spirit, that we can pursue the task He's given us (of proclaiming and demonstrating the Gospel) with great confidence. He will help us succeed at the job He's given us to do.

From here through chapter 8 Luke will now highlight two of these seven appointed guys...Stephen and Philip. Keep in mind that these guys were known among the Church for being people *"full of the Spirit and wisdom"* (6:3). This week and next we'll focus on Stephen, and the following week we'll focus on Philip.

"Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people." (6:8) It appears that the early Church was quite discerning in who they chose. Additionally we're told that Stephen was a powerful and persuasive preacher (and we'll actually see the longest sermon in Acts given by Stephen in the next chapter). Stephen's teaching/preaching apparently caught the attention, and displeasure, of some members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen.

While the Temple was the center of religious, cultural, and political life in Jerusalem, synagogues also played a prominent role in Jewish life throughout all of Israel. Even in Jerusalem the number of synagogues was in the hundreds. When the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC, synagogues became the center of religious and social life. This continued even after the Temple was rebuilt. The typical Jewish person/family would go to the Temple for sacrifices and holidays/festivals, but for regular weekly worship and teaching they would go to their local synagogue (or if in a major city like Jerusalem where there were numerous synagogues, they would go to their preferred one...likely where their preferred rabbi taught).

The Synagogue of the Freedmen, as the name implies, was made up of Jews who had previously been slaves. Luke specifically mentions that they were from various places—Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia—which means they were Hellenistic Jews, like Stephen.

Luke seems to go out of his way to let the reader know the nefarious nature of these men and their charges, as he says, *"...they secretly persuaded some men to say..."* (6:11), and *"They produced false witnesses..."* (6:13)

Let's look closely at the charges that they brought against Stephen. He allegedly was *"speaking words of blasphemy against Moses and against God"* (6:11); more specifically, *"This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."* (6:13-14)

Was Stephen speaking blasphemy? No. But, would the Gospel put an end to the significance of the Temple (the Temple was *"this holy place"* they were referring to) and change the Mosaic customs by fulfilling the Law given to Moses? Yes. How so? Well, the entire sacrificial system

becomes obsolete with the sacrifice of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And with the Holy Spirit indwelling followers of Jesus, the Temple in Jerusalem as the meeting place between God and humans shifted to believers being the temple of God. All of this was symbolized/signified when the curtain in the Temple was torn when Jesus died. (see Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45) Something new and revolutionary was afoot. But again, not everyone likes change...especially, in this case, for those who had a vested interest in Temple life...say, like, the religious leaders. Referring back to 6:7, it appears that some priests, however, understood and embraced the change; they were the “early adopters”, if you will.

Stephen was allowed to make a defense against the charges leveled against him. Stay tuned for next week’s chapter to see what unfolded.

Possible Discussion Questions:

- How or where have you seen prejudice and discrimination alive and well in the church? (How/where have you seen it in your own heart?) What are some ways we could go about addressing it and growing past it?
- This passage highlights the widows among the early Church. There is a strong Biblical and historical record of the Church taking care of orphans, widows...basically those most vulnerable. Who are the vulnerable among us today? How are we taking care of them?
- How or in what ways have you experienced people being resistant to change? How or in what ways might you be resistant to change?
- What do you think/feel about the way the apostles handled the situation regarding some widows being overlooked in the distribution of food? What was at stake if they mishandled this situation?
- Describe a time when you’ve seen leadership (in whatever context) handle a difficult situation well. Describe a time when you’ve seen leadership handle a difficult situation poorly. If you’ve been in the role of leadership (in whatever context), what are some challenging/delicate situations you’ve faced?
- Who is the most powerful speaker (teacher/preacher type) that you’ve ever heard? (You can qualify “powerful” as you see fit.) What about them made them so powerful?
- Over the course of the Gospel of Luke and through Acts we’ve seen the disciples/apostles truly transform. That sort of transformation is available to us as well (actually, it’s one of the primary goals of our faith...to be transformed into the image of Christ). What sort of transformation have you experienced by knowing Jesus and through His indwelling Spirit in you?

- To what degree do you believe, or live in the confidence of, that there is no problem, issue, or challenge that we can't overcome by the power and wisdom of Christ? (Perhaps one way we can approach this question is by examining how we respond when relatively minor issues come our way.)
- Who can you identify as people who are "full of the Spirit and wisdom"?
- The Gospel naturally changes everything. Some changes are welcomed and relatively easy. Some changes can be harder to embrace and more difficult to implement. What changes has the Gospel brought to your life? What changes were easy/welcomed? What changes have been more difficult or are still in process?

Soul Training Exercise ~ Reflection Question

Many people conceive of their faith and its role in their life incorrectly/inadequately. This week we're going to reflect on a question that will, hopefully, allow us to examine if our thinking/conception is on target or not.

Consider a computer. A computer has an Operating System by which it functions. In fact, it really can't do much of anything without an Operating System. Computers also have various applications or programs...but it's the Operating System that allows those apps/programs to work.

Many people, it seems to me, think of their faith more as an app. They use it, or not use it, at their discretion. It might even be their favorite app and one they use everyday. BUT, I would contend, to conceive of our faith as an app/program is an incorrect/inadequate way to understand the whole nature and essence of faith.

Instead, we need to think of our faith as the Operating System whereby everything else functions, or doesn't...based on compatibility.

So that is the question we're inviting people to reflect deeply on this week. Is your faith in Jesus more like an app that you can choose to open and use as you see fit? Or is your faith in Jesus the Operating System by which your entire life functions?

Prayerfully consider this question this week and share with others (i.e. your Table Group friends) the fruit of your reflections.