

# **GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH WORD-CENTERED, DIVERSIFIED CONGREGATIONS**

## **Acts 6:1-7**

### INTRODUCTION

As we return to our series in the book of Acts I want to remind you of the main purpose of this book that Luke wrote. We saw that purpose in the opening two verses of the book. This book is the second volume of a two volume series, the first volume being the gospel of Luke. In his gospel Luke described what Jesus did and said while he lived as a human being upon this earth, died on the cross and rose from the dead. In this book of Acts Luke is describing what the living, resurrected Jesus continues to say and to do. The difference is that now Jesus is speaking and acting through every local church. Luke shows this to be the case by describing what happened to and through that first church that came into existence in Jerusalem 50 days after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. On the Jewish feast day of Pentecost the 12 apostles and the other 120 Christians who are with them in Jerusalem are all filled with the Holy Spirit, the third person in the Trinity, who enables every member of this first local church to declare God's praise in the streets of Jerusalem to Jewish people from all over the Roman empire in their own languages.

This same Spirit enables Peter to preach the first Christian sermon and on that day, the same HS causes the church to grow numerically from 120 to over 3000 members. We have witnessed, in the first 5 chapters of this book of Acts, how Jesus, through his Spirit acting upon and through this first church has caused the church to grow in numbers, in loving one another and in holiness. We have witnessed the hostility of the surrounding culture as the apostles were arrested, thrown in jail, commanded to stop preaching in the name of Jesus and beaten. We have seen how the church responded to these threats by continuing to preach the gospel. The church has grown to over 10,000 members and chapter five ends by informing us that the apostles are continuing to do what Jesus said they would do by the power of the HS: they continue to preach the gospel in the temple and from house to house. Luke's point is that Jesus continues to speak and to act through every visible, local church that is continuing to teach and to preach this same apostolic message.

Our text this morning is what you might call a hinge paragraph in the story that Luke is telling. This story begins the conclusion of Luke's description of the church in Jerusalem. The next incident he will record is the martyrdom, in Jerusalem, of Stephen, the first Christian casualty in God's war against sin and death and Satan and the world. Then immediately following the death of Stephen Luke's attention will turn away from Jerusalem to Samaria and from there to the planting of churches throughout the Roman Empire among the Gentile peoples of the world. As a transition from this first church in Jerusalem to the expansion of the church into all the peoples of the world, this paragraph serves as a description of what is true for every local church through which Jesus is speaking and acting. Thus we discover here the pattern, the paradigm against which we must evaluate ourselves, as a church that yearns to be the people through whom Jesus continues to teach and to act. Isn't that what you long for, to be a church in which and through which the resurrected Jesus is speaking and acting?

### MAIN POINT

**Jesus continues to teach and act through local churches that have...**

#### **I. Problems due to sin (v.1)**

Verse one is another example of one of the reasons I love and trust the Bible. The Bible is honest about human beings and human organizations, including the church. If you read the religious literature of the world you will not discover this kind of honesty outside of the Bible. The hero of the Bible is God, not men. If you read the Koran or Hindu scripture or Mormon literature, etc., the heroes are the human founders of the religions. Not so in our Bible. There are no perfect people or churches, not even the first church to ever exist. This church, like

every church has problems because it is made up of sinners who have been saved by grace but who have remaining sin in them. The only reason the church in Jerusalem exists and continues to exist and the only reason our church exists and continues to exist is because that church was and our church is the church of Jesus.

So what is the problem in this church? Quite frankly it is a problem that besets every church to one degree or another. One group of people, the Hellenists, are complaining or grumbling about how another group of people, the Hebrews, are treating them. The Hellenists feel they are not being treated fairly. In this case, the complaint is that in the daily distribution of food and other aid for the poor people among them, their widows are not getting their fair share. We are not told whether their complaint is a legitimate complaint or not. Most likely it is a legitimate complaint but we cannot be sure as the text does not say. If it is not a legitimate complaint, then the sin that is revealed here is that the Hellenists are judging and falsely accusing their Hebrew brothers and sisters. They are suspicious and resistant to them in some way. However, if it is a legitimate complaint, then we are seeing here the sin of some form of favoritism and partiality on the part of the Hebrews.

The root of the trouble exists because Hellenists and Hebrews are different from one another in several significant sociological ways. Here is what we know about these two groups from the rest of the NT. The first thing to note is that both of these groups are Jewish people both by race and by religious persuasion. The only exception is that there are some people among the Hellenists who were racially non-Jewish but who had, as adults converted to Judaism. Also, all of these Jewish people, both Hellenists and Hebrews had professed faith in Jesus as their Messiah and Savior and Lord and had been baptized in his name and thus added to the church. These are all Christian people, or as Luke describes them, they are all disciples of Jesus.

Here are the ways that these Jewish Christians are different from each other. First, the Hellenists have Greek as their first language while the Hebrews' mother tongue is Aramaic, a dialect of Hebrew. The Hellenists know some Aramaic and the Hebrews know some Greek but their mother tongues are not the same. Second, the Hellenists were born and raised outside of Palestine in other places within the Roman Empire and in families that embraced various amounts of Greek cultural practices. The Hebrews either grew up in Palestine or they were raised in families that while living in Greek cities and culture fought to maintain as much of the culture and practices of Palestine as possible, beginning with speaking Aramaic at home and training their children in the more strict religious practices of the motherland. Third, many Hellenists had moved back to Jerusalem but due to language and cultural practices they had formed their own synagogues. Thus the Jewish population in Jerusalem, prior to the establishment of the church was already divided along these language and cultural lines. They all used the temple but they did not move within the same social or religious communities. So the Jewish Hebrews tended to view the Jewish Hellenists as not quite as Jewish as they needed to be. There existed, prior to conversion, a suspicion by the Hebrews of the religious sincerity and purity of the Hellenists and the Hellenists were suspicious of the self-righteousness of the Hebrews. Finally, and probably most importantly, all the original leadership of the Jerusalem church, including all the apostles, were Hebrews, not Hellenists.

If you will remember from 4:32, all of the care for the poor was being administered by the apostles. Obviously, the apostles did not do all the work but most of those with whom they would be most familiar and therefore would have most naturally delegated work would be the original 120 people gathered in that upper room and most, if not all of them would have been Hebrews. Thus, the distribution of the daily provision for the poor widows was run by the Hebrews within the congregation. When you combine that with the fact that probably most of the public worship and teaching took place in Aramaic and thus the Hellenists were having to work extra hard to understand what was being taught and to communicate their concerns, you can see how easily this grumbling came into existence. Whether the Hebrew Christians exhibited an intentional air of religious superiority or not, you can be sure that there would have at least been a suspicion among the Hellenists that they harbored such sentiments. Most likely, this conflict occurred due to a combination of miscommunication and misunderstanding combined with intentional and unintentional favoritism towards the Hebrew widows that would have been intensified by at least the suspicion of religious and cultural prejudice. These same kinds of suspicions and prejudices exist between various sociological groupings within every congregation including ours. Married people and single people, home-schooling families and public school families, Republicans and

Democrats, youth and adults, those raised in a church and those not raised in a church are but a few of the distinctive groupings in our church that hold the possibility of grumbling within them.

It is significant to note that the word translated “complained against” in the NIV is the word that is used in the Greek translation of the OT for the people of Israel grumbling against Moses and/or God. If you know that sad history you know that the cause of God’s rejecting Israel was their grumbling. Luke clearly aims for us to understand that this is a deadly and dangerous thing that is happening here. There is no church in the world that does not have exactly the same problem to varying degrees. There is no church that is adequately addressing all the needs and concerns of all the people and interest groups in the church. There is always ground for grumbling that I or my family or my group is not being adequately represented or considered or respected by the leadership and ministries of my church. Sometimes these complaints will be legitimate and sometimes not, but regardless the opportunity for such complaining always exists. It is an absolute fact that the larger a church grows and the more diverse it becomes the potential for such grumbling grows exponentially. Knowing this ought to be a great help to all of us. The cliché is true: there are no perfect churches. We must refuse to expect perfection from our church and the leaders of our churches. There will always be a reason to grumble in every healthy church where Jesus is present teaching and acting because every local church is made up of a diverse group of redeemed sinners.

*Jesus continues to teach and act through local churches that have...*

- *Problems due to sin*
- *And that have...*

## **II. Leaders fixed upon the gospel (vv.2-4)**

While this grumbling is not an unexpected reality it is a reality that must be dealt with as quickly as possible as we see the apostles doing. Upon learning of these complaints the apostles call the entire assembly of the church together. They called a congregational meeting. Remember, this would have been a meeting numbering in the thousands. The first thing to notice about the apostles is what they do not say. They do not assign blame for the problem. They do not accuse anyone of bad motives or bad actions. They do not become defensive, neither do they condemn anyone else, nor do they blame themselves. They simply propose to the congregation a solution to the problem. Perhaps the greatest hindrance to harmonious relationships among humans is the demand that people pay for their mistakes. Whether it is a marriage or friendship or a church or a nation an endless cycle of retribution is usually all that comes from the insistence that people always pay. Sometimes it is necessary for people to be confronted and called to repentance but often the wisest course of action is to ignore what has happened and to move forward with a solution to the problem.

The solution they propose is that the congregation choose seven wise, Spirit-filled men to take care of the problem. Up to this point the apostles have had direct oversight of the feeding of the poor. Why do they now tell the people that someone else needs to do this? The answer in v. 2 is that it would be wrong for them to stop preaching and teaching the gospel in order to feed the widows. In v. 4 it is so that they can give themselves fully to prayer and preaching. The apostles know that the church has been brought into existence by their teaching the gospel and that it is being sustained by their preaching. The word of God as the revelation of his plan to save his people and restore his world to its original condition through the life, death, resurrection, ascension and present intercession of Jesus Christ is the only means by which God gives life to dead sinners and sustains the life of born again sinners. While providing equitably for the poor widows is really important it cannot be allowed to distract the leaders of the church from their primary task which is the teaching and preaching of the gospel in public and from house to house that is supported by their prayer filled lives.

Many years ago there was a family that professed faith in Christ that came to our church. They were a family in significant trouble financially and in the marriage. I was involved in marriage counseling with them and we sought to help them financially as we were able. The marriage deteriorated and they were separated. The husband became increasingly demanding in a number of ways and expressed large amounts of disappointment

with our efforts to help them. The last time we talked he was quite angry and told me he would rather see a sermon than hear a sermon. Obviously he was accusing me of caring too much about preaching and not enough about taking care of the poor. It is true that the lives of those who preach the gospel are to commend the gospel by their love and courage and holiness and compassion. However, this man, along with many millions of other professing Christians was not thinking correctly, nor biblically about what gives life to the church. There are lots of organizations and false religions that do an admirable job caring for the poor but everyone in those organizations and religions are going to hell because they have not been reconciled to God by the cross of Jesus which is only made known in the preaching of the gospel.

There is an enormous amount of pressure in the broader evangelical church to decrease and diminish the teaching of God's word in the church and to mobilize and motivate greater involvement in doing things to correct the wrongs and injustices both within the church and outside the church. There are many from both the left and the right of the political spectrum who want the church to be far more involved in the political process. There are many who want more action from church leaders in correcting social ills of various kinds. The emergent church movement explicitly seeks to get churches to stop spending so much time and energy teaching truth and to engage the church in more social action. As we are going to see it is absolutely essential that we care for the poor but we cannot, indeed we must not care for the poor at the expense of the preaching and teaching of the gospel. The church in which and through which Jesus is speaking and acting is the church where the leadership guards and protects the primacy of the preaching and teaching of God's word, of the apostolic testimony regarding the person and work of Jesus. I'm not just talking about what I do here on Sunday mornings. We must be gospel-centered people throughout our lives and our congregation. You parents must resist the temptation to merely control your children by threat of punishment. You must be careful to not communicate to them that they can please God by their moral performance. The law must always and first be used to communicate our sinful, lost condition and we must always present to our children the glory and greatness of the love of God revealed in the person of Jesus. We want children and we want a congregation that is taken up with the manifold glory of Jesus and his salvation, not our moral performance.

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### **III. Diversification of labor for the sake of the gospel (vv.3-6)**

The solution to the problem of caring for the poor and maintaining adequate instruction in the gospel for the church is that they, the apostles will give all their time and attention to prayer and to the ministry of the word and the congregation should carefully select seven men, full of the HS and wisdom to oversee the equitable distribution of food to the poor. Providing for the widows is a very important part of what the church is called to do but it is not what the apostles should do. It is quite correct to see the apostles here as giving the pattern for every elder/pastor/overseer in the local church. I know this because Peter, who is an apostle, gives direction to the elders of local churches in 1 Peter 5:1 in this way: "To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder..." Peter, the apostle regards himself as an elder in the church and thus a model of how elders/pastors should conduct themselves. Every elder/pastor/overseer in every local church is to imitate the apostles by giving themselves fully to prayer and the ministry of the word. We are not the board of directors of a business. We are ministers of the word of God. We are not the only ones to engage in this function but we are the chief ones to be doing this. Our elders pray together almost every week and every week each of the elders is engaged in teaching the gospel in at least their own small group. This is the reason our bylaws require elders to be small group leaders because this is the main thing that elders are to do. At the same time, I know that all of our elders would say that we are giving far too much time and attention to other functions in the church. Probably most of the reason is our own fault. We are not doing a good job of delegating as these apostles did.

What did they do? They gave this important work fully into the hands of men who were publicly identified and known as trustworthy men. Many commentators say that it is at this point that the office of deacon is formed within the local church. I don't think that is the case. Whether I'm right or not about this does not matter. What we do clearly see here is that in order for the church to flourish under the preaching of the word and as the agent of Christ's love in the world there needs to be a division of labor in the church. The word must be taught by those called by God to do so and the work of love needs to go forward by those whom God appoints to do so. Both of these activities are described with the same word: ministry and so both are expressions of Jesus' work through his church. Both ministries are necessary. Please notice the pattern here. Luke in this entire book is explaining how Jesus speaks and acts through his church and in this passage we see these two functions: speaking and acting being carried out by different people in the same church.

There is another thing in this solution to which we need to draw attention. What kind of men did the apostles want to take charge of feeding the widows? They were to be men full of the HS and wisdom. They were to be men who were obviously exhibiting the character of Christ in their lives by the powerful work of the HS. These were to be men who were taken up with the greatness and the glory of Jesus, not themselves. Men who lived under grace, not under law. Men who knew they deserved death and hell and were shocked that God loved them, that Christ died for them. These are men whose lives are full of love for God and man, full of forgiveness, full of joyful obedience to Christ. This was their reputation. In addition they must be men of wisdom. That is they must have given evidence in the conduct of their lives that they had the discernment and understanding of human beings that enabled them to make wise decisions about how to help people. There is a demonstrated ability to give direction to others that results in good things happening to and for people. You can be a full of the Spirit person but not be wise and you can be wise but not full of the Spirit. Those who lead in God's church must be both and they must be known to be both.

Finally, the men who are chosen by the congregation are commissioned by the apostles through prayer and the laying on of hands. Clearly, the apostles are conferring on these men the authority they received from Jesus so that they can lead the ministry of feeding the widows. We see here the goodness of the relationship between a congregation and its elders. The congregation has one kind of authority and the elders have another kind of authority. The congregation identifies the men whom they believe to be qualified and the apostles confer upon them the authority to fulfill their ministry. They are now trusted by the elders and the congregation to serve Christ by serving the widows.

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#### **IV. Growth in and by the gospel (v. 7)**

What happens when a church addresses the problems created by sin, protects the proclamation of God's word and facilitates the practical expressions of the love of Christ in their midst? Verse 7 identifies two things. First, the word of God increases or grows. The NIV's translation, "spread" is not a good one. The word used here is usually used of biological growth, whether of plants or humans. The idea here is not so much the geographical or numerical spread of the gospel but rather that the gospel was growing up in the lives of those to whom it was preached. The word is the divine seed that contains divine life and thus it causes those whom receive it to grow up into Christ. This phrase refers mostly to the transforming nature of the word of God. In and through the first church of Jerusalem the word of God was effecting more and more growth in holiness, in the love of God, in the love of people in the lives of the people. It is this gospel, this word of God that the HS uses to cause us to grow up into Christ. This news that I, a hell-deserving sinner, has been fully pardoned of my sins and made righteous not because of anything I have done or decided but because of what Jesus has done becomes more and more

glorious in my mind and heart and fills me with joy and security that then enables me to courageously love others. This is how the word of God grows.

The second phrase refers to the growing extent of the effect of the gospel. The gospel not only changes lives but it changes more and more lives. This is the nature of the gospel. It is hard to read the book of Acts, especially verses like this and not see that it is God's plan for churches to grow both qualitatively and quantitatively. God is in charge of this growth. We are responsible to do what we see done here, provide solutions to the sin among us, preserve the centrality of the word and express the love of Christ. God is the one who is responsible for causing the growth. However, we must be prepared for numerical growth. Growth is usually uncomfortable and often brings with it more of the problems we saw in v. 1. Yet, God intends to gather his people from out of all nations of the world and so it should not surprise us as we seek to live as his church that our church grows.

The final thing Luke tells us is that a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. The growth of the church included the conversion of a large number of Jewish priests. Why does he want us to know this? Up to this point in his story it has been the priests who have led the opposition to the church, to the preaching of Jesus. So he wants us to see the power of God at work here. Not only are lots of ordinary Jewish people being converted and trusting in Jesus but even large numbers of those who have been most opposed to Christ are becoming Christians. God is able to save anyone. There is no one that is beyond the power of God's grace as revealed in Jesus. We should never lose heart when those we care about persist in hostility to Jesus. We must pray. We must love. We must take every opportunity to share this amazing good news. It is very important to note that these priests are converted by the plain setting forth of the glory of Christ in the gospel by a community of people who are worshipping God and loving one another. It is the gospel and the prayers and transformed lives of God's people that will result in an increasing number of disciples in our city and a large number of the formerly most hostile members of our community becoming Christians.

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