

Place: Lurgan Baptist: 13:2:2007

Reading: Acts 6:1-7

THE CHURCH ABLAZE

13. MAINTAINING THE MINISTRY

When a certain Dallas church decided to split, each faction took legal proceedings to claim the church property. A judge finally referred the matter to higher authorities in the 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. During the hearing, the church court learned that the conflict began at a church dinner when a certain elder received a smaller piece of ham than a child seated next to him. Sadly, this was reported in the newspapers for everyone to read. Can you imagine how the city of Dallas laughed about that situation? This brought great discredit not only to the church but to the name of the Lord Jesus.

You see, the tiniest events sometimes cause great problems. Time and again, a church has warded off a frontal attack only to be subverted from within. This passage 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 had received Christ on the day of Pentecost. Another two thousand were added shortly afterwards. According to the

historian Luke many more were added to the church as (Ch 5) indicates. So, Satan unhappy about God's successes, sowed a spirit of murmuring and gossip among the people of God, hoping to set believer against believer. Do you recall that Satan used Ananias and Sapphira and attempted to corrupt the church from within? ((5:1)) Then Satan used the Jewish leaders and through persecution he tried to crush the church from without. (5:12) But this attack in (Ch 6) was the most and cleverest of all three. You see, having failed to overcome the church by either corruption or persecution, he now tries murmuring. My have countless works for God not 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 offence. Bitter dissension ignites and spreads, and the whole work goes up in flames.

Now this passage describes such a situation. The delicate unity of the early church became endangered, threatening the spiritual testimony of many thousands of believers. To eliminate a potentially divisive problem required further organization. Let's look at this passage and notice,

(1) THE PROBLEM

Strong leadership does not guarantee an absence of problems. Even with the twelve highly gifted apostles in the lead, the early church still endured difficulties. In our

own churches as well, we should not be surprised when frictions and factions cause problems. Have a look at the problem this early faced.

(a) WHEN DID THIS PROBLEM HAPPEN ?

Look if you will at (6:1) What were those days ? Days of growth, blessing, revival, and salvation. Just how large the church had become is unknown, since they no longer kept an accurate account. The last figure given in (Ch 4) is 5,000 and this apparently included only the men. To that figure must be added the women who had joined the church since then. (5:14) Was there perhaps, 20,000 or 25,000 in the Jerusalem church at this point ? Merely to meet their spiritual needs and to deal with sin would have been a daunting task, let alone caring for their physical needs ? Not only did the size of the church create problems, but also its explosive growth left little time to adjust. As a result, the apostles could no longer handle the entire load of caring for this congregation. Further organization was needed. Now you can imagine that in a company of people this size, it was inevitable that someone's needs would be overlooked. Perhaps the very personal growth of the church tended to create impersonal relationships. (a)

(b) WHO DID THIS PROBLEM AFFECT ?

Everyone was affected, of course but special attention is given to two groups within the church. (6:1) The Grecians and the Hebrews, or the Hellenistic Jews and the Palestinian Jews. You see, Jerusalem had a large minority

of Hellenistic, that is Greek speaking 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, has 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 citizens. Then came the day of Pentecost, and thousands of Aramaic speaking Jews, plus hundreds of Hellenistic Jews were gloriously saved and became one in Christ. However, conversion, wonderful as it was did not erase all their problems. The Greek speaking widows soon felt they were being neglected and their needs were being overlooked. (a) (b)

(c) WHAT DID THIS PROBLEM INVOLVE ?

Well, look if you will at (6:1) which refers to it as “ *the daily ministrations.*” Or as A.T. puts it, “ *the daily distribution of food.*” What happened was this. When the other widows received two loaves of bread, the Hellenistic Jews only got one. One commentator on the Book of Acts helps us to understand this problem. He writes,

“ In the synagogue there was a routine custom. Two collectors went around the market and the private houses every Friday morning and made a collection for the needy partly in money and partly in goods. Later in the day this was distributed. In addition to this a house to house

collection was made daily for those in pressing need. It is clear that the Christian church had taken over this custom. But amidst all the Jews there was a cleavage. In the Christian church there were two kinds of Jews. There were the Jerusalem and the Palestinian Jew who spoke Aramaic, there were also Jews from foreign countries who had come up for Pentecost and made the great discovery of Christ. Many of these had been away from Palestine for generations, they had forgotten their Hebrew and spoke only Greek. The natural consequence was that the spiritually snobbish Aramaic-speaking Jews looked down on the foreign Jews. This contempt affected the daily distribution of alms.”

Now I trust that will help us to understand the background to this situation. Whether or not overlooking the non-Hebrew widows was intentional, cultural prejudices fuelled the turbulent feelings among the Hellenistic Christians, so they “*complained,*” about it. (a) (b) (c)

(d) HOW DID THIS PROBLEM UNRAVEL ?

Well, discontent began to fester and wherever “*murmurings,*” occur they cause trouble. They are rumblings of a volcano, they warn of trouble to come. My when God sets out to multiply the Devil sets out to divide, and one method that he uses is murmuring. I want to give you one word of advice about murmuring, “*don't do it.*” The Bible says, “*do all things without murmurings and disputings.*” (Phil 2:14) Charles Spurgeon, “*murmur is made up of two infantile sounds. Mur-mur so that when we mur-mur we are becoming*

babies again.” Now I am not saying that a Christian should not come right out into the open and say to the right person at the right time in the right spirit for the right reason, “*something needs to be done.*” That's is always helpful, but murmuring is something different. The Grecians may have had a legitimate complaint but the Devil used them to bring what been have been a legitimate problem in the wrong way. My just don't murmur. So you can see that the problem here was not doctrinal but functional. It was not primary but over a petty thing. Not that it was not important, but it was not one of the fundamentals of the faith. You see, the Devil wants us to get divided over incidental rather than fundamental things. So here, it was who was getting served the best, and first, and most and who was being neglected and so on. (1) Now how did the apostles handle it ?

1. PROMPTLY:

Look at (6:2) “*Then the twelve,*” some leadership take months to handle a problem but not the apostles.

2. UNITEDLY:

“*Then the twelve,*” it was not left to one or two. All of the disciples were called together. How often leaders are all to willing to do the nice things about the assembly, but when nasty things are to be done, they disappear like snow off a ditch. How did they handle this problem ?

3. WITH GREAT MAGNANIMITY:

For the seven that were chosen to “*serve tables*,” have all got Greek names. So it seems they were chosen from the Hellenistic group within the church. Was this not another triumph of love? But look at,

(2) THE PROPOSAL

The apostles put forward. (6:2-4) Now the apostles had the authority to make a decision, but they wisely chose to involve the whole church in the momentous change now about to be made in the way the affairs of the local church were about to be run. There is no doubt that the local church is to be ruled by its pastors and elders.

(Heb 13:17) But at the same time it’s not a dictatorship. So here we have the first hint of that happy blending of apostolic authority and congregational activity working towards a united decision, something which should characterise all local church affairs. Now what was the proposal that the apostles put forward? In essence it was to get better organised. Now there are some folk who don’t believe in organisation. My a lack of organisation and disorder is carnality. Paul writing to a carnal church said, “*Let all things be done decently and in order.*” (1 Cor 14:40) Now this proposal involved two things.

(a) *The SPIRITUAL Ministry of Feeding the WORD:*

Look if you will at (6:2) and (6:4) The apostles said in effect, “*You serve the tables and we will serve the Word.*” Now it was not that they thought they were too good to

serve tables. As a matter of fact they were probably doing it up until now. It was not that they wanted to be free from work, they wanted to be free for work “*But we will*,” (6:4) Notice what the apostles did not say “*we will ourselves to visitation and counselling,*” needful though that is. They did not say “*we will gave ourselves to committees’ and discussion,*” they did not say, “*we will gave ourselves to singing and gospel converts,*” enjoyable though that is. They said, “*But we will gave ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.*” Why is it that God’s people don’t put the same effort into prayer and the Word as they put into other things? I mean are these not God’s priorities? Prayer, Preparation, Preaching. According to a Christianity Today survey the average pastor spends only three minutes a day in prayer. How much better it would be to emulate Andrew Bonar who wrote in his diary, “*Passed six hours today in prayer and Scripture reading, confessing sin, and seeking blessing for myself and the church.*”

The Greek word translated “*ministry*,” here has the same root as the word translated “*deacon*,” in the New Testament, and this root includes “*dust*,” suggesting the idea of raising dust in a hurry, that is being busy at work. My the apostles were labourers. They all prayerfully pored over the Old Testament, working hard at understanding and communicating the truth of God’s Word. “*But we will Word,*” (6:4) My as you go through the Bible you’ll find God’s tools for ministry are the Word of God and prayer. The Word gives us enlightenment, prayer gives us enablement. When we read the Word our faith is increased because faith comes

through the Word. Then we pray, God answers because our praying is guided by the Word of God. The Word of God and prayer. Had Moses not this ministry? Moses met God on the Mount and interceded for Israel, then came down and then the Word that God had given him.

(Exod 32:31 33:5) Had Samuel not this ministry? Do you recall his response when the people requested his prayers? He said, “ *Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you, but I will teach you the good and the right way.* ”

(1 Sam 12:23) Daniel had the same pattern in his ministry. (Dan 9:1) Christ had the same pattern in His ministry. (Mk 1:35) Paul had the same pattern in his ministry. (Rom 1:9 Acts 20:18-21) Do you recall what he said to the Ephesian Christians? “ *I cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers.* ”

The Word of God and prayer. My is it not tragic that many professing Christians today have left this emphasis on the Word and prayer. They are so involved in the administrative details of the church, they have little time left for intercession and study. Yet the ministry demands total commitment, everything a man has to give. There is no substitute for hard work. A young man once said to the gifted Bible teacher Donald Grey Barnhouse, “ *I’d give the world to be able to teach the Bible just like you.* ”

Looking him straight in the eye Barnhouse replied, “ ***Good, because that’s exactly what it will cost you.*** ” Do you what I have learnt over the years? The best thing that I can do for you is to be prepared to preach. And that’s why the elders and members of this church will have to free me from a lot of other good things if they want me to

“ *gave myself to prayer and the ministry of the Word.* ” (6:4) Dr. Graham Scroggie said to the elders of a church where he had just commenced his ministry, “ *What do you want? My feet or my head? For you cannot have both.* ” My have you any idea in the wide world how many hours are spent in preparation for this Bible Class? Well, I’ll tell you. Up to 20 hours, and then add on to that Sunday morning and evening, and I can assure you that I am rarely out of the study. So if I’m not visiting you, you’ll know where I am. My if you want me to give myself to “ *prayer and the ministry of the Word,* ” I will need time and this church will have to give me time. Dr. Barnhouse said, “ *No man is ever able to fill the pulpit adequately unless he spends thousands of hours year after year in the study of God’s Word.* ” Now I know there are pastors and churches who have all kinds of programmes and some of them are doing all sorts of things but is the flock being fed?

I heard about a man who went into a store in the U.S.A. and bought a parrot. The owner said, “ *I’ve got one for 100 dollars and one for 25 dollars.* ” The man said, “ *they look alike to me what’s the difference?* ” “ *Well, the 100 dollar parrot can sing and talk real well, but the 25 dollar parrot does not sing that much, but he will sing a little and talk a little.* ” The man said, “ *I’ll take the 25 dollar bird.* ” About a week went back to the pet store and he said, “ *that bird has not said one single word.* ” The owner said, “ *well, did he peck the little bell? Why you did not say anything about a little bell. Do you have any? Yes, I have one here for 5 dollars.* ” So he bought the bell and put it in the cage and a week later he came back again,

“ He still has not said one single word. Well, did he run and down the little ladder ? Why you never said anything about a ladder. How much is that ladder ? Well, I have one her for 10 dollars.” He was back within a week and said, *“ that bird has not uttered a peep.”* *“ Oh,”* he said *“ did he swing in the swing. How much is the wing ? Here is one for 30 dollars.”* He bought it and then he came back the last week and he said, *“ let me tell you about that little bird. That little bird ran and down the little ladder, pecked the little bell, got into the little swing, and then he shuddered and shivered and stuck his little feet in the air and said, “ Don’t they sell any bird seed in that store you go to.”* My when I heard that I thought about so many churches, ministers, believers who are pecking bells, running up and down ladders, swinging in swings, but activity is no substitute for the Word of God. You have to feed the flock. Now there were people over there talking about physical food, widows were being neglected, but the apostles said, *“ but we will gave ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.”* (6:4) Is that what we pastors and elders are doing ? Are we giving ourselves to the spiritual ministry of feeding the flock ? (a)

(b) The PRACTICAL Ministry of Feeding the WIDOWS:

The word for *“ tables,”* in (6:2) is interesting. (trapeza) It can mean *“ a table or counter of a money changer,”* or *“ money matters,”* as well as an eating table. (Matt 21:12 Lk 19:23) You see, the apostles did not want to involves themselves in serving meals or handling money for that would be a distraction. So they proposed the appointment

of a seven man body to administer the material and financial affairs of the church. Now the question arises as to whether these seven can be properly viewed as the first official deacons. The word *“ serve,”* in (6:2) is the verb from which we get the noun *“deacon,”* but this title is not given to them in this chapter. Certainly, later on we find deacons mentioned in (Phil 1:1) and their qualifications are brought before us in (1 Tim Ch 3) Whether we see this as the origin of the diaconate or not, here were seven men, humble servants of the church, whose work made it possible for the apostles to *“ gave themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.”* (6:4) Now its interesting to notice that the criteria for public office was not business acumen, financial success, or organizing ability ! Did you notice the five qualifications required.

1. They had to be MEN:

Look if you will at (6:3) The Greek word used is the specific one which means male. Christian women certainly have vital roles to play (Titus 2:3) but God’s design for the church is that men assume the leadership roles. (1 Cor 11:3 14:34 1 Tim 2:11)

2. They had to be CHRISTIANS:

“ Among you,” that indicates something obvious, those who lead the church must be believers. But there is something else here. Churches should seek to develop their leadership from within their own ranks. My is that what we are seeking to do ? I ask myself and those who are leaders, what kind of legacy are we going to

leave this fellowship ?

3. They had to be REPUTABLE:

“ *men of honest report,*” (6:3) they had to be men of integrity above reproach.

4. They had to be SPIRITUAL:

“ *full of the Holy Ghost,*” (6:3) Why you say, “ *I believe a preacher ought to be filled with the Spirit of God when he preaches,*” I do also. But you ought to be filled standing in the aisle, welcoming at the door, taping the messages, shaking hands, in fact we ought to be filled when we do anything for the Lord.

5. They had to be WISE:

“ *Full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom,*” (6:4) the book of Chronicles describes some wise leaders of Israel as “ *men who understood the times , with knowledge of what Israel should do.*” (1 Chron 12:32)

Now among those who were chosen were Stephen and Philip. Stephen was a miracle worker. (6:8) yet he was waiting on tables. Philip won the Ethiopian Eunuch to Christ and opened up all North Africa to the gospel. Of these men, the first one was the first martyr, and the second was the first missionary, but they were willing to serve tables. My do you think that there is something to small for you to do ? Do you think you are so important that you could not wait on tables ? Then you are too big

for the Lord to use. Do you see why this church went on ? There was (a) and the (b) and everyone did what God called them to do, and it was not that some were inferior or superior but each did what God assigned them to do, and the church began to grow and the murmuring began to stop, for did you notice,

(3) THE PROGRESS

That was made here. Look if you will at (6:7) Do you see what happened ?

(a) UNITY WAS PRESERVED:

Look at (6:5) Satan’s goal was to divide the membership and discourage the leadership, but he was foiled by the spirit of wisdom in the apostles. You see, a split church was averted. One hot day a family travelling down the road between Johnstown and Jamestown stopped at Farmer Jones’ place to ask for a drink of water, which he gladly gave them. “ *Where are you headed ?*” he asked them. “ *We are moving from Johnstown to Jamestown to live,*” they told him. “ *Can you tell us what the people there are like ?*” “ *Well, what kind of people did you find where you lived before ?*” Farmer Jones asked. “ *Oh, they were the very worst kind,*” the people said. “ *They were gossipy and unkind and indifferent. We are glad to move away.*” “ *Well, I am afraid you will find the same kind in Jamestown,*” replied the old farmer. The next day another car stopped, and the same conversation took place.

These people were moving to Jamestown also. “ *What*

kind of neighbours will we find there ?” “ Well,” said Farmer Jones, “ what kind of neighbours did you have where you lived before ?” “ Oh, they were the very best. They were so kind and considerate that it almost broke our hearts to move away.” “ Well,” said Farmer Jones “ you will find exactly the same kind again.” You see, when Christians are unhappy and begin to murmur the first place to look is their own hearts. Believers who were unhappy at their last church, or job, or town are probably unhappy where they are now. Sure, if they feel they have just cause for criticism they should express it to the right people in the right way. But they must avoid murmuring and must be willing to be part of the solution. Yes, (a) and

(b) RESPONSIBILITY WAS DELEGATED:

For as the apostles looked out on the vast congregation they announced their plan. (6:3) You see, they delegated the responsibility to others so they continue their own duties. How successful it was, for not only were the widows given good care, but two of the greatest New Testament saints came to maturity under their new responsibilities. Can I ask those in leadership this are you serving your Master wisely and skilfully ? through delegation are you raising up an army of Stephens’ and Philips’ to spread the gospel ?

(c) MINISTRY WAS ENHANCED:

“ And the Word of God increased,” or “ the Word of God kept on spreading.” God’s Word spread. The number of disciples increased. Priests believed. Now do you see why

the ministry was enhanced ? Because the organization of the church at this time freed the apostles to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. My the Word of God will increase in this church, and your church, when those churches learn to free their pastors and elders from the 1001 things which others can do, and those pastors and elders accept that freedom in order to gave themselves to the things they ought to be doing.

Thanksgiving time for always a special time for the Jarvis family. Their sons and daughters in law made a point of being back in Indiana bringing seven exited grandchildren with them. Dad and Mum Jarvis had retired after pasturing three churches for a total of forty three years, and they were very pleased that two of their boys had followed in their footsteps. *“ Well, son how is the battle going ?”* Dad asked. Daniel hesitated because he did not want to cast gloom over the festive occasion. *“ Well, Dad, the battle’s going on and believe me its really a battle.” “ The third years’ the hardest because the honeymoon’s over,”* his father said. *“ The fifth year is often when things start to open up, but the tenth is the toughest. If you hang in until number ten, that’s when the church turns the corner.” “ The way things are going I may not last for five years. I am may end up standing on that corner all alone.”*

“ Sure you’ll make it,” his father exclaimed. *“ The Lord’s on your side and you can’t lose.”* Daniel was not so sure that it was that easy. And he did not have the people skills and staying power that helped make his father a successful

shepherd of the flock. If Daniel had his choice he would rather be in a Bible College or running a Christian camp. *“ Seriously Dad, what really builds a church ? No clichés now,”* Daniel asked. *“ Just two resources son, the Word and prayer. According to (Acts 6:4) the apostles devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. That’s the example that you want to follow.”*

My the church today needs organization for the same reasons as the first fellowship. Pastors and teachers must be allowed to focus on the Word and prayer. Better organization can help meet the needs of all the saints and thus avoid conflict. And a unified well taught church will be a powerful witness to a lost world. May we be such a church.