
The Solution to a Problem

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 16 August

Ephesians 6:1-6, Acts 6:1-7

Part 8 in Acts ser



Outline: Time marching on things settling down – BUT

Disunity & Distraction.

Hellenists & Hebrews

Distributing the Word

Ministries equal but different.

Unity not uniformity

All ministry is spiritual

The Battle Strategy:

Divide & Conquer

Fuzzy Focus

Application: The purpose and power of the Word

Let's Pray, Lord Jesus as we again come to your word open our minds to see the truth of it and our hearts to live in the light of it, amen.

As we have seen from our study in Acts through the first 5 chapters, that the church has been going from strength to strength following the events of Pentecost. The church has grown from 120 to possibly some 20,000 within a period of weeks.

The enemy has tried various things to stop this growth. The Sanhedrin first threatened the Apostles and then physically punished them by flogging.

In between these things we saw the danger of hypocrisy and compromise in the actions of A & S who were possibly wanting to appear spiritual, gain a bit of kudos by appearing to be more generous than they actually were. Their actions were dramatically judged.

The signal was sent. Take God seriously. Don't lie to the Holy Spirit. The church continues to flourish and grow as there is a healthy respect and awe for God. Come what may God is working. No attack of the enemy thus far has stood in the way of the church advancing.

Ch 6 begins, now in those days, when the disciples were increasing in number. It helps us to understand that Ch 1-4 into 5 happens over a period of weeks. As we come to Ch 6 the gap between the end of ch 5 and the beginning of ch 6 could be 2-3 years. The church is maturing. Up to this stage we have heard of numbers great and small becoming believers. Now it's disciples who are increasing in number. It points to maturity.

It looks also like the religious authorities have given up somewhat trying to deal with these pesky Christian's. It seems like the more you tried to stop them, the more they flourished. Persecution was turning out to be a bit like pruning. It was resulting in more and better growth.

Time has passed. The church continues to grow. Time for another attack, and it is the very success of the church that the enemy will now use. It's a form of opposition that is different from the others, and it is one that we see very much in our day.

Only this week our prime minister spoke of disunity and distraction in the contest of his latest political challenge. "Disunity is a distraction." He said. What we see in Acts 6 though, is the enemy using both disunity and distraction as separate things. A double pronged attack if you like.

Regrettably we do not have to stretch our imaginations too far to say the enemy is all too successful in breaking the unity we have in Christ. The constant splitting of the church into denominational groups gives sad evidence of that.

Maybe there would not be as many splits and spats if we understood that unity does not mean uniformity. Paul talks about a body. Not great if one part looks down on another. And ridiculous to think we should all be a nose, or an eye or a hand. Unity is not about uniformity. It is about being joined with Christ, empowered by his Spirit and being guided by his word.

Distraction is a bit harder to pin down. Especially when distraction can come in the form of a good thing. The Apostles were being distracted by a good thing here in Acts 6. They were making sure food was being given to those who needed it, or at least they were trying to.

What's wrong with that? Let me ask another question. What if a church is so engaged in social good that it fails to fulfil it's spiritual responsibility to proclaim the Gospel and see people won for Christ.

Love and service can absolutely be used as a part of making the Gospel real, and helping people understand about the love of God, and Gods people. But ponder this.

CS Lewis makes the point that pain and suffering is often the megaphone that God uses to reach a deaf humanity. In other words, sometimes it is only our need, that will bring us to the place where we humble ourselves, and allow God to deal with our greatest problem, sin and our alienation from Him.

If we then serve, for example, just food, and do not serve also the word of God, the Gospel, are we not just in a great act of irony, keeping people in the place where they do not recognise their need? Or to put it another way, and forgive me for being so blunt. To go to hell with a full belly is no less disturbing than going there hungry.

I think all would agree that disunity is unhelpful. We can more often than not see the enemies hand in that. Less clear, is the enemies hand in distracting us. Having us so engaged in going good things, that we do not do that which is needed.

Ch 6. There were two problems in the church. Given the passing of time and the continued growth the 12 Apostles were not able to adequately administer the resources to the poor and the widows and one group felt they were missing out.

The Church is still largely Jewish and we have Hellenists who are Greek speaking Jews who have come to settle in Jerusalem, Hebrews who are Jewish speaking believers who have principally been Jerusalem based. The Hellenists are unhappy and grumbling against the Apostles. Problem one, disunity Vs 1.

Problem two, distraction vs 2. "It is not right that we neglect the word of God to wait on tables." The Apostles were being distracted from their prime responsibility to witness to Christ and teach and proclaim the Gospel.

To deal with both the dissension and the distraction, great wisdom would be shown as 7 Hellenist Jews would be chosen and set apart to make sure the practical ministries of the church were carried out. And in a way that was fair to the two groups that largely made up the church at this stage.

This would allow the Apostles to focus on the Word. To serve the word. Both in respect to being faithful to it, and distributing it, making it known.

We have talked already of the priority of the Apostles teaching and how the believer, following the events of Pentecost, devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching. Just to refresh us. I think the fact that the apostles teaching was mentioned first, is to emphasise the point that without right teaching, we cannot rightly understand or fulfil the other things that were also mentioned the prayers the fellowship the worship.

Ch 6, Vs 4 speaking of the Apostles. “as for us, we will devote ourselves to prayer and serving the word.”

Lest we think anything we do in the name of Christ is any less spiritual than something else. Vs 5 points out that being involved in the administration, in the serving purposes of their church, is no less a spiritual matter than serving the word. The 7 Hellenists who were chosen were all described as mature and spiritual people.

We are told more about Stephen because he will be a key figure in as far as the Gospel breaking the confines of Jerusalem, all be it though his martyrdom and what follows. We could also note that Philip one of the 7 mentioned, pops up latter, as he engages with the Ethiopian eunuch. That encounter marks a significant extension of the Gospels influence.

Anyway lest we think serving tables is any less spiritual than serving the word, we see the credentials of Stephen. Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Vs 8, full of grace and power responsible for great wonders and signs, verse 10. He had great wisdom.

The point I’m making is this. True ministry of whatever sort is profoundly spiritual. Anything we do in the name of Christ is significant. There are not first and second class Christians, some of which need to be spiritual and others less so.

Vs 6, this serving, administrative ministry was just as reliant on the work and power of the Holy Spirit. The apostles laid hands on the 7 in prayer and commissioning. There is much wisdom, not to mention protection, if we in the church would see every ministry in such terms.

The result? Through wise leadership and delegation, and a prioritising of responsibility, the disunity and distraction is dealt with. Practical needs are met. Nothing gets in the way of the gospel being heard, and the gospel being taught?

Vs 7 the word of God continued to spread.

- number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem.
- Did you catch it. “a great number of priests became obedient to the faith.”

In previous chapters the priests were only mentioned in relation to thwarting and opposing the gospel. What a difference prioritising and focus can make.

- Tasks have been delegated to suitably spiritual and recognised people.
- The Apostles are now not being distracted from their primary task.

What a result. Believers are maturing in their faith, now being described as disciples. Those who were previously opposing the gospel are now accepting it.

And let me say if there were one thing that could revolutionise the practice and influence of the church in our culture, it would be the recognition that the single, and only thing that the church can do that no other organisation can do, is preach the gospel.

An atheist can perform great works of loving service. A shaman, or occultist can work supernatural healing, or other supernatural type activities.

The Gospel is the single exclusive thing that marks the church out from any, and all other groups. Lose sight of that. Lose confidence in the gospel, and the enemy will inroads into the church and render it impotent and ineffective in as far as its prime calling, which is to make Christ known.

I used the passage in Eph 6 as a companion passage to remind us of the battle we are in.

I mentioned last week about letting God's word dwell in us richly. So much so that we are able to speak the word to each other with great benefit as we encourage and exhort each other in the ways of Christ and the truth of the gospel.

I hope and trust that we have been thinking and praying about that. Imagine if we each came to church with a word on our lips and a person in our hearts that God wants to speak to through us. I don't just mean quoting scripture.

I mean applying biblical truth in a way that is applicable and helpful. We can't speak the truth if we don't know the truth.

We are in a battle. Disunity and discord is easy to see and the solution is generally more easily agreed on. Less so distraction. Especially when the distraction is a good and needed thing like looking after people. But again what are our deepest and truest needs? It is only the gospel that will make that known, and point to the solution.

To end, a story about the power of the Word and the supernatural battle we face. It happened to me over 40 years ago. I was in my mid 20s living alone in my own home and hadn't yet reconnected with the Church.

I was trying to read and figure my way out of the pit I had dropped into. I found CS Lewis particularly helpful. Both from a theological position and the way he articulated the gospel. And in a practical way as he described something of the supernatural battle, and the way the enemy operates.

Bare in mind I had travelled the country in a rock band and had rubbed shoulders with some pretty interesting and alternate characters. I'd been involved in Eastern religions. New age. And frankly some things that were bordering on the occult. Now I'm trying to reconnect with the one I had committed my life to some ten years before.

But really, it would be truer to say that God does not give up on us, and it was really the faithfulness of God, and the Spirit of God that was not allowing me any peace. That was compelling me to come home to Him.

Let me say the battle was on, and I had probably opened myself up to certain influences. I will say also, when it comes to the enemy, and things of the enemy, the best thing is to have as little experience as possible, so I would warn any not to be interested or fascinated in such things. Focus on God. focus on the Gospel and that is enough to send the enemy scurrying away.

Ok back to the story. There was a period where something would wake me up in the wee small hours of the night. I didn't know what it was, but given some of my reading and experiences, I had a pretty good idea.

After a few night of this an idea popped into my head. I think it would be truer to say the HS gave me an idea. The next time I was awoken by this thing, this is what I did.

I sat up. Turned the light on. Got out my bible and said to whatever it was in my room. 'Ok here's the deal. You wake me up, and I'm going to open my

bible. Read psalms aloud, and focus on God.” I said further. “Your bothering me simply gives further evidence that God is real, and to him I will turn.”

The next night it happened again. I did exactly as I said I would do. I sat up. Turned on the light. And started reading Psalms aloud and declaring the goodness and glory of God. I have never been bothered in the same way again. That experience showed me something of the battle. It much more showed me the power of God's word when it is used correctly.

Over the last 4 decades plus, that lesson has served me well. I try not to let anything distract me from spending time in God's word. And I pray by God's grace hopefully serving it in a way that is helpful and encouraging.

But again to reiterate where we landed last week. All of us as believers need to spend time in God's word. And further, any of us can speak God's truth into the life of another believer. It set out as a way of growth and achieving the fullness of Christ in Ephesians 4.

Let's pray, Lord Jesus we thank you for the truth and power of your word and ask that it may be living and active in our lives and witness, amen.