

## **Church Unity**

### **Introduction**

What happens when we are confronted with people different from us? How do we react when God brings other people into our lives and into our church from different cultures, languages and life experiences?

The early church was not a perfect church. It had to continually look inwardly to examine itself in light of the Word of God to see whether it was becoming what God desired. In the Acts of the Apostles, we are given the history of the church's foundation and early years. As we have already discovered the church had struggles, including hypocrisy, self-centered ambitions; the most obvious, so far, was the deception of Ananias and Saphira. We also observed how quickly the Lord, Himself dealt with problems that threaten His church. This is the same goal for us as a church today, being a faithful church, living for God's glory. The questions we should be asking is, are we becoming the community God desires? How does our behavior as individuals and as a church community reflect God's glory?

Anytime we are around other people who are different than ourselves there is the possibility of disagreements and misunderstandings, many of which are unintentional. For Christians it is not color or race that creates friction but when people come from different customs and cultures and who speak different languages, they often want to do church differently.

When Joyce and I went into the mission field I learned quickly Joyce had a gift for language and I did not. My struggle with language at times created problems in my understanding others or for them to understand me. As we prepared, here in the States, to go overseas, we were instructed to send goods useful for us to live and function in the “bush”, so we sent things in a container by ship. When it arrived, the container was put on a truck to be brought to the provincial capital and in route it was highjacked and everything was stolen. This was the best thing that could have happened, because we did not have our American stuff and had to live just as the people we came to serve. It helped us shed our American cultural traditions and adopt the Fore culture.

### **Story of Joyce’s meal of pumpkin for the Chiefs of the villages.**

I tell these stories because these were real issues that came about through unintentional misunderstandings and because of differences in our culture and language. Really, race had nothing to do with it our occasional misunderstandings. Being black or white was not the issue, the issue was the misunderstanding between cultures.

Luke begins chapter 6 with “[Now in these days](#)”. He is telling us the early church was made up of Grecian Jews and Hebraic Jews. The Greeks spoke Greek and Latin, and the Hebrew Jews spoke Aramaic. They came from very different cultures and even spoke different languages. So, it was natural for an “Us and Them” mentality to rise up as these two cultures came together to be one church.

We know the Gospel had the power to save different types of people, but did it have the power to knit these differing cultures together into one unified church? When Joyce and I were traveling throughout the world, going to multiple countries and serving churches with many different languages, customs and cultures, we

found because of our common love of God, love for His Word and having Jesus as our Lord and Savior we could quickly bond and form friendships with people that culturally were very different from us. When mistakes or even offenses arose, they could be dealt with because everyone knew they were not intentional and we could rely on our love of Christ to guide us through the process of reconciliation.

Occasionally I said something that made sense to me and was either misunderstood or confused people. I was new in a country, having only been there about 2 months and was told I had to give a speech at a dedication of a new building. The Prime Minister was there, which made me nervous. I had to give the speech in 3 languages. I mispronounced a word that sent the crowd into roaring laughter. Afterward the Prime Minister was gracious enough to tell me how much he appreciated my trying to speak their languages and understood what an effort that was. So, let me pray for us and for me this morning not to be misunderstood or cause confusion as we explore God's Word.

## **Pray**

Here in this scripture passage, there is much at stake. Unity in the church is a great force for the Gospel to advance and disunity can retard the advancement of God's Church.

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

James the brother of Jesus and the leader of the Jerusalem church wrote what could be considered the theme of Luke's passage in chapter 6 of Acts, "[Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.](#)" (James 1:27) The church is to care for its members, especially orphans and widows with loving kindness. Our focus as individuals and as a church community is to live in unity

with God's Word and each other while not allowing the world to influence or stain us or our church. Our natural inclination is to dismiss, ignore, and even be opposed to people who are different than we are. This passage in verses 1 to 7 shows us that within the church, there must be unity among all people, even those who may be ethnically, socially and culturally different than we are. We each are a "tesserae" of God's beautiful mosaic of His church. By ourselves we can reflect some of God's light to the world, but only together can form the **complete picture of the Christ's Church**, reflecting God's more complete light. Christ's church is to be a picture of the Light of the Word of God lived out in a fallen and dark world.

### **Disharmony** (v. 1)

Luke begins laying out the problem that had developed within the church, reading verse 1, "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists (*Greek speaking Jews*) arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution." Luke is clear and to the point of what the problem is.

The first part of the matter was that the disciples were growing in number. The group which started out with just 12 and it has now grown into the thousands. The church growing in the number of believers is always a good problem to have but nevertheless it is a matter that brings with it certain challenges. No longer could the church do things the way it had. This young growing body of believers in Jerusalem needed not only the Word of God but also some level of organization. The Church had to minister the Word and minister to people if it was going to continue to expand and move out into the rest of the world.

Secondly, Luke gives us the details of the specific matter at hand; the Greek Jewish Widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of the things they

needed. The issue was that the non-Hebrew Jewish widows were being overlooked. This was the specific issue but what this meant - there was a greater need which for the church was of the utmost importance.

When we began the study of the Book of Acts, I mentioned that one way of outlining the Book of Acts was by using the Great Commission from Matthew chapter 28 combined with Acts chapter 1, verse 8; Jesus commanded, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ...” (Matthew 28:19) “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Here in Acts we are seeing the church is just getting its foothold in the world. The focus is still in Jerusalem and primarily with Jews. If the Church cannot include different kinds of Jews, namely Aramaic speaking and Greek speaking, how in the world will it ever complete the Great Commission. In other words, if it is not unified while still in Jerusalem how will it ever cross ethnic and cultural borders into entirely different people groups living all over the world?

The surface issue is Hellenistic widows are being overlooked in the daily distribution of food, but it really is much more than that, it is an issue of the One Gospel and of Christ’s Church meeting the diverse needs of all the tongues, tribes and nations of the world. The question this raises, is the Gospel powerful enough to save all people and knit them together in one body? As the Apostle Paul would later write, <sup>12</sup> “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup> For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Corinthians 12:12-13) Here is a crucial time in what would lay the foundation for what the church would become in the future.

## **Solution** (vs. 2-4)

The 12 Apostles come together to consider this problem. Reading at verse 2, “And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God **to serve tables**.”

<sup>3</sup>Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. <sup>4</sup>But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” The Apostles bring the problem before all the people after they had spent time seeking God in prayer for the solution to the problem. They now present to the people how the community will move forward.

They first acknowledged that God did not want the Apostles to be the solution to this matter. God desires the Apostles to continue to focus on preaching His Word and prayer. However, the issue did need to be dealt with and it needed to be addressed quickly and biblically. This is the proper approach, leaders pray over a problem or need, seeking God’ wisdom. Once God moves, they present the problem and solution for the direction the church and how the church will address the need. Dealing with issues within the church as quickly as is prudent not only deals with the issue but keeps the issue from growing and creating conflict within the church. This is the approach Canyon Bible tries to follow. We do not seek the traditions of denominations or churches or men, but what does God and His Word reveal as the solution, for this will bring unity within the church.

God was clear with the Apostles that their job was to preach the Gospel and pray for spiritual wisdom and direction for the church’s spiritual life; they were not to serve tables. The Word of God trumps all else, but the needs of the widows also needed to be met. My job, as your pastor, is to spend time in prayer seeking God

for the benefit of Canyon Bible and to fill you with God's Word and Wisdom so you can grow spiritually to live faithfully in this dark world, to serve others and share the Gospel with the lost. As Paul would instruct the believers of the Philippian church, <sup>3</sup>“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (Philippians 2:3-4) If we all count others more significant than ourselves and serve to meet the needs of others; then no one's needs at Canyon Bible will go unmet. Practical needs are important and God gave a plan to the Apostles for these needs to be met.

The concept “to serve” as expressed in the Greek language in such a way that it encompasses a number concepts. The word used here “serve” δουλεύω may mean “to serve” as a slave, with a stress on subjection. “To serve” also means to have a willingness for service and the respect and concern for God and others of the church community. Additionally, “to serve” means in broader terms, service in and to the Church. The form used here is distinct and “to serve” διακονέω has the special quality of personal service given to another, it might be best expressed in the concept of service given by love.

Guided by the Holy Spirit the Apostles lay out the solution. This task of caring for the Greek widows was of utmost importance, the Gospel was literally at stake. It was the task of the Apostles to preach and teach God's Word while in continual prayer. The Gospel would go forth by them and then the Gospel would form a Kingdom of devoted followers who would love and care for each other regardless of their cultural or language barriers.

The Apostles tell the disciples gathered to select seven men who have been tried and true, meaning men who are living the Gospel. Those who exhibit, as Paul

would later call, the Fruit of the Spirit in his letter to the Galatians. Their lives evidenced they were full of the Holy Spirit and full of the wisdom of God. These would be very special men. These men would be the ones who initially would care for the widows but would also make sure all the church was being cared for. These men were more than servants as all believers are to serve, but they would hold the office of Deacon and be servant leaders within the church.

### **Unity** (vs. 5 and 6)

God's wisdom had again triumphed. The heavenly solution was just exactly what everyone needed to hear and everyone was in complete agreement with the solution. Reading verses 5 and 6, *“And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip called the evangelist in Acts 21:8, and Prochorus (prokh-or-os) meaning “leader of the choir” , and Nicanor (nik-an-ore) , and Timon (tee-mone) , and Parmenas par-men-as, and Nicolaus nik-ol-ah-os , a proselyte of Antioch meaning he was a natural Jew but converted to Judaism. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.”*

As we look at the names of those that were selected, we immediately notice that these men all have Greek names. I really believe this is the way God would have the church to operate. To make sure this problem is taken care of and prevented in the future, the Holy Spirit selected 7 Hellenists Christian men to take care of the widows, including both the Hellenists and Hebrew widows.

The Apostles gave full authority to these seven men to carry out their God given task of caring for those in the church community who were helpless and needed the Church to not only feed them the Word of God, which was the Apostle's job but to actually care for them physically, through the office of Deacon.

With the massive numbers coming into the church, problems occurred and needs grew. The solution was given by God and carried out by the Apostles, the shepherds of God's church and they delegated other men to oversee and serve as Deacons.

### **Outcome** (v. 7)

Because of the issue being solved so wonderfully, Luke reports something that we must not overlook, reading verse 7, “**And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.**” What does Luke mean by this phrase, “**the word of God continued to increase**”? Literally, the word of God increased in influence. In other words, no one had ever seen a problem of that magnitude handled so graciously by anyone, let alone everyone. The Gospel had such power that it could not only save Jews speaking different languages but it could also knit them together into a Christ-focused church community. This was quite different from the peoples experience with the Jewish religious leaders and the temple community. No one had ever seen widows being cared for with such love and precision. No one had ever seen such a massive movement of the Kingdom of God as the Apostles served the Word and the appointed servants or Deacons leading the way in care for the widows with heart-felt love and compassion. The outcome is seen in verse 5, “**what the Apostles said pleased the whole gathering**”. The church community was in unity. This is the fulfillment of Jesus' desire for His church; brothers and sisters living in unity with God's Word and unity through God's chosen leadership of Elders and Deacons, and with each other.

One last thing from the end of verse 7 I do not want us to overlook, “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” These are not priests within the church, these were the temple priests who were supported by the Jewish temple system. There were approximately 8000 priests who served for a fortnight at least once a year in the temple. Like Zechariah, as we observe in Luke chapter 1, after their service in the temple was completed for the year, they returned home and served as a priest in their village and were supported by the village. Christianity threatened their very livelihood. Yet, as they were exposed to the preaching of the Gospel by the Apostles on the temple grounds “a great many of the priests” came to believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. This would have created fear and anger with the priestly authoritarianism of the Sadducees. The result was they would have lost their position as a priest, lost their income, possibly relationship with family and community, and yet, like many of the early converts they were glad to pay the worldly price to follow Jesus. This is exactly what Jesus had prayed for to God the Father, <sup>20</sup> “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” (John 17:20-23) Take note, the outcome of the Church living in unity with God the Father, Jesus Christ and each other is “that the world may believe that you have sent me.” So, we see this morning that while caring for the Hellenistic widows was the initial problem, it went much deeper. The stakes were very high and the Gospel message was at risk. How leadership acted and empowered the church would determine if the Gospel move

forward or get stuck in Jerusalem. Christ desired His church to go to the ends of the earth and showed the Apostles the path forward to accomplish His goal.

My beloved, the gospel will go beyond those of us here when we live in unity. For unity in our faith for God's Word and His Son the Christ and we with each other; church unity begins the process of fulfilling Jesus' command "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ..." (Matthew 28:19) "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8) I believe we are up to the task of caring for each other and sharing the Gospel of Christ with the world in spirit and deed because we live in unity by God's Word and love for each other! If you believe this to be true, can I hear an Amen!