

THE RESPECTED

Second in the Series: Learning Church

Acts 6:1-7

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Rev. David S. Cooney

We are talking these weeks about issues faced by the earliest church and how they dealt with them in hopes of discovering lessons about being the church today. As mentioned last week, the body of believers grew from just over one hundred to over three thousand on the Day of Pentecost alone. It continued to expand quickly. How they would relate, who was in charge, who could belong, how would they organize for mission were the kinds of questions they did not have to think about or answer before. Now they did.

One issue was the major challenge of negotiating diversity, or maybe the better way to say that would be the challenge of maintaining unity in the midst of diversity. You see, the original group of followers were pretty similar. Most of the twelve came from Galilee, speaking the same language with the same accent and having generally the same cultural background. The circle around them included many family and extended family members and friends. Others who joined the group shared similar backgrounds. In other words, they looked alike, talked alike, and generally thought alike and their life experiences were alike.

That changed on Pentecost. Now they came from different regions, even different countries. Not only did they not speak with the same accent, they did not all speak the same language. There was a broader range of economic circumstances, educational levels, and social power. For instance, there were priests and Pharisees joining them. These were people accustomed to being respected and having some power, very different from the experience of Galilean fishermen. All were still Jewish. Gentiles would come later. Still, they were far more diverse than they had been.

This was not a bad thing, of course. Indeed, diversity is to be desired. It adds richness and nuance to the human experience. These early believers were not upset that they were different. It is just that diversity does add complexity to relationships. It requires ongoing negotiations. When I meet with couples preparing for marriage, sometimes these soon-to-be partners for life differ in a number of ways. They will often ask if that is bad. My response is that it is not bad at all, but chances are good they will have to work harder than couples more alike. Diversity is a challenge in relationships, in any group or community and in the church, maybe, especially the church. If you want some empirical evidence that diversity is a challenge within the faith community, walk into the vast majority of churches on any Sunday morning and you will see congregations that look alike and are alike in many ways. Very few are truly diverse in multiple ways. I am not saying that this is as it should be or that this is desired. I am just acknowledging that reality. When it comes to church, the tendency is for birds of a feather to flock together.

So, how do we know this was a challenge in the earliest church? Because we read in our lesson today that the Greek-speaking believers felt they were being discounted by the Hebrew-speaking believers. How so?

We talked last week about how folks turned their assets over to the apostles to be distributed among the community according to need. This distribution included providing food for the poor among them, specifically widows. Those who spoke Greek came to the apostles complaining that their widows were being neglected in this daily distribution.

Luke doesn't tell us who was responsible for the distribution or why this was happening, but we can guess. Almost certainly those responsible were Hebrew-speaking believers. They may have held a bias toward their own, and/or thought the Greek speakers to be less authentic believers, and/or not as important and deserving. They may have thought them to be second-class believers. Minorities in any body will often speak about how they belong, they are included, but they never are asked to hold office or be in leadership or truly be part of decision making or allowed in the inner circle or given a role of great significance. It is not the only reason by a long shot, but one reason there are so many ethnic or racially specific congregations is that the believers do not think they would ever fully belong in congregations in which they are the decided minority. The Greek speakers would have been in the minority in the earliest church. Apparently, the poor Greek-speaking believers among that early body were treated as second class members and were being skipped over when the food was being handed out.

What to do? The apostles were confronted with a rightfully grumbling Greek-speaking part of their congregation. What to do? Their response is informative.

First, they made it clear that the people were going to have to solve it themselves. This is interesting because they could have just dictated a decree or judgment or said they would handle it, but they did not. They told them they would have to solve it themselves. They did this for two reasons.

The first reason was that they already had their hands full, preaching and teaching and praying and that was their primary responsibility. They were out and about proclaiming the good news of Christ, growing the number of believers. If they became hands on negotiating and solving every issue that came up among the believers, then, in short order, they would be in the office administering the organization instead of being in the temple proclaiming the good news of the gospel. That would not be acceptable. This is the meaning of their response, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables." It was not that waiting on tables was demeaning or that this matter was unimportant. It was that their calling, their responsibility, was preaching and teaching and praying, and they refused to be distracted from that. Right away, then, we begin to see the differentiation of roles and responsibilities within the body. The apostles had spiritual oversight. They wanted others to have administrative oversight. Something to think about when you think about how you want to deploy your pastors and lay leaders.

The other part of this is that they just did not have time or energy to do everything. The body was growing and others, in addition to the apostles, needed to take on some of the leadership. Fine. But if they could not oversee this matter, who would? The apostles told them, "Select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word."

Now, this was not an original idea with the apostles. It is one Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, shared a few thousand years earlier. Moses led hundreds of thousands of the children of Israel out of Egypt and into the wilderness in route to the Promised Land. He was the sole authority. Consequently, whenever there was a dispute between people or groups, they came to Moses for a

ruling. We read in Exodus that people lined up all day long and Moses listened to them all, exhausting himself and them. Jethro, who had come for a visit, took Moses aside and told him he was nuts. You have other things you need to tend to, Jethro told him. You should represent the people before God and teach the people the statutes and instructions about how to live. Ah, differentiation of roles. Focusing on the primary responsibility. Moses should be spending his time representing the people before God and teaching. As for hearing cases, Jethro told him to “find able men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain,” and let them sit as judges. People are capable. Let them help you. Share leadership and authority.

We even see Jesus doing this in our gospel lesson. Christ first trained the twelve to be evangelist and sent them out on crusades by themselves. Then, as we see in today’s lesson, he appointed seventy others and sent them out in pairs. This expanded his mission tremendously. As Jesus said to them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” Even Jesus could not do it all by himself. He needed help. Not to mention, he wanted to train people and prepare them for leadership when he was gone. So, he focused on his primary responsibility and entrusted others to do what was needed to expand the mission.

Now the apostles were doing the same thing. They were focusing their attention on their primary responsibilities and were turning some authority over to others for the well-being of the body.

Now, one other thing I really want us to notice, because I think this is important, is the criteria to be applied for choosing possible leaders. First a disclaimer. Jethro and the apostles specified men. Let’s just agree that in those days, in that culture, women were not thought to qualify for these positions. We are in a different day and different culture. We know better. So, I am not specifying gender as one of the criterion for leadership. What I am saying applies to women and men. Now, with that in mind, listen again to what Jethro told Moses. “Find able people who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain.” Their role was to go hear and settle disputes, essentially to serve as judges. But notice he did not say to find people with legal training, or people with enough money that they cannot be bribed, or the usual suspects, or your best friends, or proven mediators. He said appoint God-fearing, honest people.

Now listen again to what the apostles said. Select seven people “of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” Their role was going to be to oversee a food distribution system. But notice that nothing was said about good organizers, or good administrators, or people with business experience, or influential people, or representatives of each faction. No, the ones wanted were people of good standing, full of the Spirit and wisdom.

I say that this is important because it differs from the way churches today often come at this. Because, at least in our denomination, we are structured much like government is structured, which makes sense since we were birthed at the same time. We often look for representative government, if you will. Who is representing the seniors, the women, the youth, the Sunday School, the kitchen people, the choir, or the long-time members? It is why in churches of 100, 200, maybe 300 people Administrative Boards have often been fifty, sixty, even seventy people strong. Every group and faction has to be represented to speak up for any special interests, instead of a smaller group of Spirit-filled people with the spiritual wisdom to care for the well-being of the whole body.

Often, churches emphasize secular skill sets. They put bankers and business owners on finance, contractors and attorneys on trustees, teachers in education ministry, and mothers in the nurturing ministries and on it goes.

This makes sense on a number of levels, but it is actually not biblical. The earliest church looked for spiritual maturity, high character and spiritual gifts. Later Paul would make clear that everybody's role should be determined by their spiritual gifts, not their secular skills. He serves as a great example why. Paul was a tentmaker by trade. His secular skills, then, included working with materials, sewing, and constructing. So what do you think? In the church, was he better suited to making costumes and sets for the various pageants and productions or for being an evangelist and starting new churches?

The Bible does not say to look for people with particular skill sets. The Bible says the leaders should be the respected – the ones who demonstrate faith and spiritual wisdom and integrity and the spiritual gifts needed for the role. This means that they may be seasoned believers or relatively new to the faith. They can have a variety of secular skill sets. They can be of any age, including the very young. Young Timothy was just such a person, and Paul encouraged him not to let anyone put him down because of his age. Paul told him he had the faith and character to lead. The criteria we so often apply are not things that matter. Unlike the secular world, what is needed in church are those with true connection to God, those respected, not for what they have accomplished in the rest of life, but because they walk the way we think Jesus wants us to walk. Think of it this way. Who are the ones around you that you most want to talk with about God and Jesus and life. The Bible says to select them to work through the church issues.

This is what we see in Acts. There is a problem with the food distribution system, some told the apostles. It is not fair. Solve it yourself, the apostles said. We cannot be distracted from our calling. Select seven people full of the Spirit and of wisdom and let them guide you through it. This is what happened, and it worked. They did not need the apostles to solve it. They did not need a large representative Administrative Board. They needed the Spirit-filled and the spiritually wise people.

We can even see how this plays out on the larger stage. Stephen was one of the seven selected. He also evangelized among Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem, drawing the circle a little wider. This angered the Freedmen, a conservative, synagogue group that also worked among Greek-speaking Jews. They saw Stephen impeding on their territory, so they stoned him to death. He became an inspirational martyr.

Phillip was also chosen. He expanded the mission by evangelizing in Samaria and with Ethiopians, those further out on the margins of Judaism. The circle grew wider. Saul, who held the coats of those who stoned Stephen, became Paul and evangelized among the Gentiles, those completely outside of Judaism. The circle grew far wider. As the leadership circle expanded, so did the mission, and the church circles got wider and wider until it became a worldwide movement. It started with Jesus, and then the Holy Spirit, and then with the Spirit-filled, the respected. And so it continues today.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.