

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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Sermon title: How Unity Expands Ministry, Acts 6:1-7

Date preached: March 30, 2014

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INTRODUCTION: As I am preaching through Acts on Sunday nights, I've decided to continue it on Sunday mornings. There is so much good truth, which is relevant for us right now at this point in our history. It's important for us to study Acts and seek the truths within it. It's important for us to discuss and consider what these truths are saying to us.

In a short period of time, the Church went from a handful to several thousand people. A revival swept the region. People from all walks of life heard the Gospel and responded accordingly. The excitement of it could not be contained. Stories of miracle healings spread like wildfire. Those who felt like they'd been left out of the family of faith learned this new Gospel was for them and everyone else. This alone brought in many people to the Church.

Prior to the birth of the Church, it was complicated to understand the rituals of the life of the Jewish believer unless you were raised this way. There are several examples of people outside the Israelite world who were included in the family of faith because of their trust in God.

When Jesus came and fulfilled the Law, as the scriptures say, he simplified all laws into two laws—love God and love people. When it came to forgiveness of sin, Jesus' death became the payment for all the sin of all people. Now, in Acts, the Church age had begun. The new Church was a culmination of all God had begun in the lives of his people long ago. And the message became extremely simple. Instead of a lifetime of teaching in order to understand, now the message was: Jesus was the only way to God and through him we have forgiveness. People from all walks of life understood this simple message of salvation.

And wow, what excitement! The Church grew with the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Any time a crowd grows, logistics become a challenge. Things have to be

organized. Once, I was with another preacher, and we talked with a man about the Lord. The man said he was not into organized religion. My preacher friend quickly asked, “Then, what are you into, disorganized religion?”

Let’s turn to Acts Chapter 6.

SCRIPTURE: Acts 6:1-7 ⁶ *In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”*

⁵ *This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.*

⁷ *So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.*

Here we will look at issues the early Church faced:

1. The early Church was faced with two threats— Prejudice and Distraction.
2. How did the early Church handle these threats?

First, THE EARLY CHURCH WAS FACED WITH TWO THREATS—PREJUDICE AND DISTRACTION.

The Church grew by leaps and bounds. Before the Church, God chose a race of people to be a blessing to the world. Now, he called all people to be a part of the Church and therefore, be a blessing to the world. This new Church would be God’s equipping center for all believers.

Prejudice found itself in the church. You might read it differently. You might read it to mean a group of women were accidentally overlooked. And, perhaps they were. But, it just so happens, a whole group of women of a particular ethnicity was being overlooked. So, accidental or not, I am using the word “prejudice” because this is what it was.

The good news is this scripture indicates to us in no uncertain terms, people of different backgrounds had come together in the Church. The bad news was one group was getting preferential treatment.

The Hebrew widows were treated differently than the Greek widows.

ILLUSTRATION: While I was preparing this sermon on Thursday, a friend of mine called me from South Carolina. He is a music minister. He told me he talked with a church about coming there to serve as their music minister, until he read the church constitution, which said black people were not welcome. He ended his talks with the church right there. I told him I appreciated him calling because what he told me fit in with my sermon. There is no room for prejudice in the Church.

APPLICATION: When this prejudice was pointed out in the early Church, the leaders and congregation worked to correct the problem immediately. I would hope we would do the same thing.

The second threat to the early church was Distraction.

EXPLANATION: In verse 2, the disciples decide they cannot be distracted. I think this is very interesting. They had a central focus on preaching the Word, and they refused to be pulled in other directions. Churches may tell you the main role of the preacher is to preach but then task him with a million different things and criticize him when he isn't involved in even more things.

ILLUSTRATION: Military strategists create distractions for the enemy. How many of you remember Stormin' Norman? Norman Schwarzkopf was the general who led one of the smoothest military victories in history. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, a coalition of countries led by the United States reacted. People watched in shock as General Schwarzkopf gave away all his war strategy on TV. Or, so we

thought. What he did was trick the enemy and us into believing the pursuing Army was going to strike a certain way, but then he did just the opposite. As a victorious general, he got the last laugh. The distraction he created led the enemy to complete defeat.

ILLUSTRATION: I know a man who went to pastor a church in California. The church was full of strong personalities and was very vocal about what their pastor should be doing. He hardly had a day to himself or his family. He literally went to England and France just to relax. After only three years, he went home one day and told his wife they must leave before he had a complete breakdown. You see, he'd been distracted from his calling.

APPLICATION: We must learn from the apostles, who would not allow distractions from the spreading of the Gospel. It's easy for churches to get caught up in so many distractions they forget what their main objective is—reaching people for Christ. Anything we do, we must see if it is connected with reaching people for Christ, discipling them, and equipping them for personal ministry.

Review—

So, we see the early Church was faced with two threats— **prejudice** and **distraction**.

Second, HOW DID THE EARLY CHURCH HANDLE THESE THREATS?

They rose to the occasion! And, they passed the test with an A+.

1. They did not allow the threats to linger and grow. It would have been easy for the Apostles to say, “We are too busy to deal with this.” But, they discerned this was important enough to be addressed immediately.

Had they ignored the situation, it is very possible there would have been a split, and then Christianity would have gone in two directions— the First Hebraic Widow Church and the First Grecian Widow Church. There were large splits, which happened later on in history, but at least not at this point? Why? Because they wanted unity.

We must not allow threats to linger and grow. But, we must be wise enough to know what a threat is and what a threat is not.

Let me tell you what a threat is NOT. Sometimes people feel threatened if their own church doesn't follow the latest trends other churches are following. In the church in Acts, they didn't have another church down the road to copy.

2. Another way they handled the threats was by setting up a clear decision-making model.

The leadership proposed a solution, and the congregation agreed to implement it. What they did not do is debate for weeks and months and thus, accomplish nothing. Why did this work so well? The reason is because the people trusted the leaders and the leaders trusted the people. Why did they trust each other? Because they wanted unity.

ILLUSTRATION: A church I know of needed to make an important decision. They elected a team comprised of a healthy cross-section of the church to make a recommendation about what needed to be done. After a short while, the team reached its conclusion and made a rational recommendation to the church. The church voted against the recommendation. The lack of unity led to a complete breakdown of trust and communication.

It's important to have a clear decision-making model, and it's important for everyone to follow the model. Why? For unity.

3. Another way the church in Acts handled the threats to the church was to turn the threats into an opportunity for ministry.

Instead of arguing which ethnic group should be first, they decided to put everyone on equal terms. Instead of leaving one group of widows hungry, they decided to feed all of them. Instead of complaining the apostles weren't working hard enough, they elected men to help them. Really, the way they handled the situation was beautiful.

Now, let's look at the results of their actions:

- A need was presented, which the church could meet.
- Unity was restored.
- Ministry was expanded.
- The laity became involved in ministry.
- The Apostles focused on their main calling.

With these things in place, let's look at verse 7 again.

SCRIPTURE: Acts 6:7 ⁷ *“So the word of the Lord spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”*

CONCLUSION: A unified church can accomplish anything with the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

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Sincerely, Paul Gunn
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