

Jesus Extends His Community through Internal Conflict

Acts of the Exalted Jesus Sermon Series

Acts 6:1-7

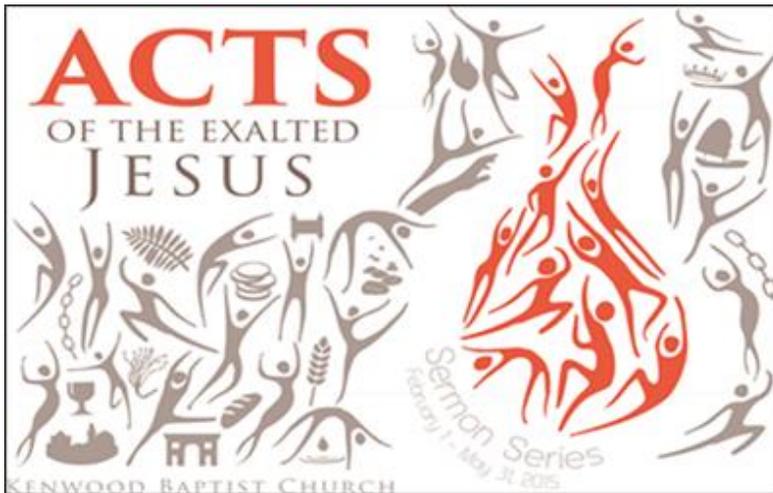
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

March 8, 2015

TEXT: Acts 6:1-7

This Sunday, we continue our New Testament series on *The Acts of the Exalted Jesus*. Last Sunday, we looked at how Jesus uses external conflict to extend His community in the world.



We saw that He uses societal pressures to press us into a deeper boldness and courage in witnessing for Him, and He provides unexpected allies from the highest levels of society. This morning we look inside our community; we listen to God's Word as Jesus provides an important lesson in shared leadership. In the text this morning, this jewel of a passage, there is a conflict, an

argument inside the community of faith, and we will see that Jesus uses this internal conflict to cause His kingdom to extend in the world. Conflict is not something to be feared under the sovereign hand of Jesus Christ. Many of us are familiar with conflict. There is conflict in marriage, conflict in our workplaces, and conflict can sometimes erupt in ministry. When I meet with couples for premarital counseling, I stress with them that a strong marriage is not a marriage that has the absence of any conflict, but a strong marriage is a marriage that grows through those conflicts and the relationship deepens and becomes even more effective. So, we will see this play out in our text this morning.

The setting of this conflict begins on a very positive note. Back in Acts 6:1, we read:

"In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, . . ."

Luke has shared with us massive response to the preaching of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem: 3000 believe; 5000 believe. At least 25% of the entire city of Jerusalem has turned itself to faith in Jesus Christ, and the early Christian community is growing. The language that Luke uses is the same language that we find in Genesis: *be fruitful and increase in number*. It's the same language at the beginning of Exodus 1: *the descendants of Jacob increased the number*. It's that positive image of a teeming population. It's a little like what happened in the Palmer fish tank

when the mollies decided to teem. When we looked in the tank one morning, there were 30 new fish in a 20-gallon tank! It was teeming, and life was swarming. God's purpose is for life, that the body of Christ is to grow in the world. God's design is to fill the earth with worshipers for His glory and our joy.

As the ministry grows, we then read that all a sudden there is a complaint or conflict. We read in Acts 6:1:

“ . . . the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews. . . ”

Who are these two groups? Different translations lead us to perceive this differently, and it is important for us to pause here briefly. The ESV, for example, says that when the disciples were increasing *there was a complaint* by the Hellenists against the Hebrews, and they translate very literally and just leave it at that. The King James Version says that *there was murmuring*, and that seems slightly more dangerous than complaining, doesn't it? Murmuring. They leave this translation as a *murmuring* of the Grecians against the Hebrews, and it suggests in this translation that these are Greeks versus Jews, different ethnic groups is suggested as the groups of the conflict. The New Living Translation highlights that the difference could be the difference between language. It says it was the *Greek speaking believers* complained against the *Hebrew speaking believers*, so they see it not as different ethnic groups but just two different subgroups within the church. The NIV says the *Hellenistic Jews* complained against the *Hebrew Jews*. I think it is probably not the case that these are Jews versus Gentiles; it is the case that the conflict is between believers, but the conflict erupts between different subgroups within the developing Christian community. Sometimes language, our native language, can define a group of people. Oftentimes in ethnic churches in the United States, language changes second and third generation. We were part of a Spanish-speaking church in Boston, and in that Spanish-speaking church the elder generation wanted the whole service to be in Spanish, including all the songs. Their children stood in between the grandparents who spoke Spanish only and their children who were raising children in an English-speaking environment. These generations were not in conflict, but their needs were different. Like most of us, we tend to notice, first of all, people who are just like us, and yet within the body of Christ, there can be different cultures or there can be different generations. So whether there's a culture gap or a generation gap, the reality is that needs are being missed, as we will see.

Luke continues and tells us the nature of their complaint. Their complaint arises because their widows were being overlooked, passed over in the daily distribution of food. In other words, as the ministry grew, some needs were not being met. As ministry increases, sometimes you need more workers, as we will see. Their widows were being neglected. and the care for the widow, or the person on the margins, is a deep theme in Scripture. Exodus 22:22 says:

“You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child.”

Deuteronomy 10:17-18 says:

“For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.”

This great, awesome, and mighty God cares for those on the margins. Biblical law commands a portion of the tithe to be set aside for the care of widows. Psalm 68:5 says of God:

“Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in His holy habitation.”

In Psalm 146:9, we read:

“The LORD watches over the sojourners; He upholds the widow and the fatherless.”

Our Lord Jesus healed, raised to new life, the son of a widow, the widow of Nain. He used widows as an illustration of teaching. In Luke 21:3-4, when the widow placed her two mites into the offering box, her two small copper coins, Jesus highlighted this poor widow and says:

“Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.”

Our God is a God who delights to make sure that the vulnerable and those on the margins are cared for. James 1:27 says:

“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.”

The care of the widows was a practice of the early Christian community. It was a daily distribution of food. Jesus said to pray for our daily bread, and part of our life together early on is a giving for those in need. But, as ministry growth happens and there is more work to be done, somehow a certain segment of the body of Christ is being overlooked, and conflict is a regular feature of life in this world. I love to do premarital counseling sessions. I love seeing people come into my office, and they are in love. It's just exciting. Then I love to be sort of a voice of reality and remind them they're marrying someone who has inherited a sinful nature from Adam and they'll will discover the depths of their sinfulness in the first few years of marriage. They look at me like, “Who is this guy? Do I want him to be involved? Is he going to say absurd things like this? I love this woman! I love this man! They're perfect.” I say to them: “Well, they're not, and you will find that out, but more than that, you will discover that about yourself.” Some respond with: “I've already figured that out.”

Conflict is a feature of this world, but what is unusual about the way this passage develops is how conflict is resolved underneath the sovereign power of the Exalted Lord Jesus Christ. When there is conflict that erupts, under His Lordship, look what He does with it. Beginning in Acts 6:2 we read:

“So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, . . .”

That word *so*, as a result, is really important. As a result of hearing about the overlooking of this need, the apostles didn't just say: “Well, I hope that situation gets better.” They didn't say: “Be quiet, there's no complaining in the house of God.” Instead, they gathered all the disciples together. They cared enough about the concerned to hear it; they brought the concern out into the open in front of the community. They recognized that not dealing with this overlooking of the widows threatened the authenticity of the whole ministry. You can't say that the needs of one section of the body of Christ aren't important. Sydney Finkelstein, a business writer, wrote a fascinating book called *Why Smart Executives Fail*, a case study of 51 companies that tanked. It is not that edifying at one level just look at another blunder, another huge mistake, but what's fascinating to me about this book is their discovery that in the case of these businesses, big businesses, successful businesses like Rubber Maid, Schwinn, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the Boston Red Sox, Motorola, they shared a surprising mistake. The shared mistake was that executive leadership was not listening and altering the company's perception of reality. Then there were breakdowns in communication systems and leadership qualities that kept executives from correcting their course. So, not listening. Isn't that amazing? Motorola, for example, continued to pour millions of dollars into analog cell phones even after large numbers of executive leadership and polls from their customers reported back that people had a strong preference for digital phones. They weren't listening, and so they kept dumping millions into analog phones. They were not listening. Under the watchful care of Jesus Christ, the apostles are empowered to listen.

Here in Acts 6:2, they recognize the threat to the ministry. They say:

“It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.”

This verse comes across a little negative in English translation, as though the apostles are saying, “I'll never be a waiter.” I think it's really good parental advice, as an aside, for every child to work at a restaurant at some point in their lives. Something changes when you work behind the counter, even for a week. You become so grateful for the people who are serving you in this very ordinary way. The issue for the apostles is that the daily demands of the ministry of caring for the widows has grown so great that they are neglecting their primary task. It's not that the apostles are not involved in that. In fact, we read earlier in Acts 4:34-35:

“There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”

It is not that pastors or other leaders are above caring for people. I love to be involved with this, and I am in ways, but I praise God for our deacons who take the bulk of this work. It takes me 15 hours a week to prepare a sermon, and that's my primary ministry. It is the part of our ministry

together that I am uniquely responsible for. The issue here is not of pride. It is an issue of not neglecting your primary role and allowing other needs to be met by others. Look what they do in Acts 6:3:

“Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.”

As a result of hearing this, they respond. They don't just listen. Have ever had someone give you that expression where you think they are listening to you? Your reason for thinking that they're listening to you is only that they're not saying anything, as though not speaking means I'm really listening. You know, though, it doesn't. You can keep your mouth closed and your ears closed at the same time. It is hard to keep your mouth open and your ears open at the same time, but you can keep them both closed at the same time. This is not the case here; they hear and respond, and the solution is fantastic, and it just gets better and better. First they say, *brothers and sisters*. That word is literally *brothers*, but it's a generic term for the community. They placed the responsibility for a solution in the hands of the community. They don't say: “Oh, we heard you. We'll go to the back room meeting and will hatch a solution and you will all be pleased with it.” No, they hear, and they say look into this. They say: “Brothers and sisters, choose seven men.” Again, this is the generic, probably better translated as *people*. There are men and women who function as deacons in the New Testament. They say: “Choose seven people from among you.”

The verb they choose is the same word that is used for making a visit. In other words, don't take the warm body approached leadership, or the random scan through the church directory with the dartboard. Say we need someone to teach third grade Sunday School, and so we throw a dart and your name is hit. That's a bad model, and praise God we don't use that. We don't use that for any mode of leadership. You look into it, and seven people are chosen, so there's a broad base for that. They are people from among you. Notice that the solution is not outsourced. We are so tempted to take this route: “Oh, there's a problem? Whom can we contract to fill this need?” No, it's people from within the community, and the two greatest qualifications: full of the Spirit, and full of wisdom. Full of the Spirit is an important qualification for serving in leadership, because if you are full of the Spirit, that means you will serve in a way that has a mentality of Christ-likeness. You will not be in it for your own ambition. It means serving for His glory and not our own. Full of wisdom people have understanding of what is involved with making sure that the needy widows among the church of 10,000 people are cared for.

Think of the skill set that you need. I am not a person that makes a difference between spiritual gifts and natural gifts. They are all spiritual gifts, because none of us has natural gifts on our own any more than we have our own brain or our own heart or our own fingertips. Everything we have comes from God. God gives wisdom, giftedness together with godliness, integrity with money, impartiality, and that often-lost art in this situation: full of tact, making sure people's

needs are met, ability to cross cultural lines. The apostles say in Acts 6:3-4:

“We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word.”

There is a real recognition of the need: we will turn this over to them; and there is a real empowerment to meet the need. Then the apostles are diligent with their own primary responsibility from Christ. The word that is used here, *we will give our attention*, is the same word that is used in Acts 2:42: *“but they devoted themselves.”* They gave their attention to their primary task. What is the primary task that God has given to you? Use that wholeheartedly. What is your primary ministry among us for the building up of the body of Christ? In Acts 6:5, we read:

“This proposal pleased the whole group.”

Again, we see that this plan is communicated well. It is not just decided on and implemented, but it is known to the community, and people are pleased.

Next comes my favorite part of the whole passage; this is so fantastic! Look at the people that they chose. Look carefully in Acts 6:5:

“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.”

Let's consider the word *Stephen* for just a moment. Stephen means *crown* in Greek: *Stephanos, crowned with a laurel wreath placed on your head*. The imagery is of victory, achievement, and status. The crowning of a person in this way with an olive branch on his head comes from the ancient Olympic Games. It's a Greek name. They chose Philip. *Philippus* is a lover of horses. Philip was an Olympic champion of the sixth century, but the most famous Philip, when the name Philip really became popular, was the father of Alexander the Great, Philip II of Macedon. Remember the city of Philippi in Greece. A letter to the Philippians is sent to this community. One of Herod's sons was given the surname Philip, another Greek name. The third leader was *Procorus*. We know nothing about him other than that this man loved to dance because *procorus* means the guy who's out in the front of the line with the dance. If you have ever seen Greek dancing, there's that guy in the front with the napkin, and he is just making it go. Occasionally that guide does the most amazing thing, and you've got have those monster Greek thighs to do this. He goes down and just holds himself three inches off the ground and rotates. We wonder how a human being can do that safely. It's another Greek name. *Nicanor* means *a conqueror of the people*. Nicanor was a distinguished officer in the service of Alexander the Great. He was the leader at the three battles: the battle of Granicus, the battle of Issus, and the battle of Gaugamela, and this name is also a Greek name. What is going on here? Remember who was being overlooked. They also chose *Timon*. This is not Timon from The Lion King; this is Timon named after the Greek philosopher, celebrated writer and poet. They chose Parmenion,

again, one of Alexander's leading generals; a Greek name. They chose *Nicolas*, a proselyte from Antioch, that is he someone who fully converted, underwent circumcision. He was of Greek descent, and he has converted. His name means *victory or conqueror of the people*.

What's going on? You see, it was the Greek speakers who were being overlooked, and the solution of the community is to put seven people in charge of that ministry area who are Greek speakers themselves. These are not common names. It is true that Greek names were used by Jews, such as Andrew and Philip for the disciples, but these are unlikely names for Hebrew speakers. The rest of these names are Greek speakers. It would be like if we had a generation gap at Kenwood and we said we need to address this. We need to make sure that our church is positioned for a vibrant future, and we need to make sure there are serious resources and staff and program funds to reach children and youth. Can you imagine if we put a committee together and said everyone that's 65 and over is going to run that committee? That would be a big mistake. You want to position people to work who know the need and are sympathetic to it. It is so obvious, and yet it so often misses us. This happens, not because the apostles are great and wise; this happens as the act of the Exalted Jesus.

These people are presented to the apostles, and they are prayed for. The community lays hands on them and commissions them in a public way. This is the origin of the office of the deacon in the Bible: servant. Different areas of service are not better than one other. The ministry of the Word is described in the same way. What is the end result? The end result is Jesus does what Jesus does. Jesus extends the Kingdom; He extends His community. Last week, He did it through huge external pressure on us and made us bold. This Sunday, He takes an overlooked aspect of ministry. He takes a conflict that begins to develop, and He uses that for our sanctification and for growth, real growth. As a result of working this out, of increasing shared leadership, the ministry extends. Acts 6:7 concludes this episode by saying:

“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.”

The Word of God spread, literally it increased, and again these are the two verbs used in Genesis 1: to be fruitful and increase. It's like a sprouting, a growing of the Word of God, of the people of God. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and this astonishing new development – that a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. Luke says literally that there was a huge crowd of priests. There were about 8000 priests at this time in history, and Luke doesn't give us a number. I don't know what a huge crowd is of priests, but it's a large number. I think it's very probable that it's precisely the working out of this issue that overwhelmed the priests with the truth of the Gospel, because up to this point, the distribution of funds for the needy, orphans, and widows was something that happened through the ministry of the temple. The priests saw the faithfulness of the early Christian community, and I think they concluded that if they are right about this, maybe they are right about Jesus Christ.

Let me apply this very briefly to us.

The first application is: *Don't be afraid of conflict*. It is frightening especially when someone's upset. Sometimes people don't manifest their complaint in the best way. Sometimes it doesn't come to you in rhyming verse; sometimes it doesn't come to you after five staggering complements that have you swollen with pride. Sometimes it comes out a little awkward, or with a raised voice, or "I'm concerned about this." You know, that can happen in ministry; it can happen in marriage; it can happen in work. But as a Christian, as someone who belongs to Jesus Christ, don't be afraid of it.

The second application is: *Expect Jesus to grow His community through it*. Really expect that. When your spouse comes you and says, "I am so upset about this," don't martial your reasons for why you've acted this way. Take a deep breath and think: "Lord Jesus, here it comes. I'm about to become a better husband." That's what you should think: "Lord Jesus, this is going to be awesome. I'm going to become a better wife in three months after we work this through. I can't wait." Don't you really want that? I do. I want Kenwood to become a better church, more robust its ministry.

The third application is: *Never stop with just the complaint*. This is only a halfhearted participation. Sometimes we think my job is done here. I have done the kind service of alerting you to this need, and now I'm walking away. I need to get back to the sports center or whatever else am draining my time and resources in. Be part of the solution by the power of the Holy Spirit when asked. We don't know if there were more than seven people who were asked, but we do know that these seven who were asked to serve said 'yes.' So when Christ asks you to do something, Discipleship 101, you do it. Right? When Christ asks you to do something, you do it. Don't just complain, but be part of working through a solution, and the ministry grows in our homes, in our workplaces, in our church, and in our community. Isn't this a fantastic little portion of the Word of God? Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we honor You and we praise You. We thank You, Lord, that You do all things well and that Your desire is for the Word of God to spread. Your desire, Lord, is for the weak and those on the margins to be cared for. Your desire, Lord, is for subcultures and different language groups to worship You together in holiness. Lord, it is our desire this morning to worship You with all of our heart, with all of our soul, that Your praise would resound from this Your church. Lord, we confess to You our sinfulness. We confess our failings. We confess to You times when a vital aspect of ministry here has been overlooked, underfunded, underserved. Make us aware, Lord. Lord, we ask forgiveness when we've just noticed it and complained and refused to be part of the solution. We honor You, Lord Jesus, and we just want to confess to You that we long to see the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ known and loved in our city, in our families, and in our workplaces. Would You work mightily, Lord, among us to this end.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.