

"Overcoming Divisiveness"

4/28-29/07

6 p.m.; 9 & 10:45 a.m.

Acts 6:1-7

PREAMBLE

Thank those who were a part of the week of prayer last week... prayer tent... etc.

OPEN to Acts 6:1-7 (**PAGE** 1700)

INTRODUCTION

One couple thought they'd come upon the answer to overcoming divisiveness in their marriage:

A young man saw this elderly couple sitting down to lunch at McDonald's.

He noticed that they had ordered one meal and an extra drink cup. As he watched, the gentleman carefully divided the hamburger in half, then counted out the fries, one for him, one for her, until each had half of them. Then he poured half of the soft drink into the extra cup and set that in front of his wife.

The old man then began to eat, and his wife sat watching, with her hands folded in her lap.

The young man decided to ask if they would allow him to purchase another meal for them so that they didn't have to split theirs.

The old gentleman said, "Oh no. We've been married fifty years, and everything has always been and will always be shared, 50/50."

The young man then asked the wife if she was going to eat.

She replied, "Not yet. It's his turn with the teeth."

When we read "Acts 4:32, 34, we saw a church where **'all the believers were one in heart and mind'** and among whom **'there**

were no needy persons.' In chapter 6 we see problems in both these areas." (NIVAC, Acts, p. 225)

There will always be challenges to the unity of any group of people, from marriages to families to roommates, to churches.

Being a Christian doesn't mean we won't have interpersonal conflicts, but it should make a difference in how we choose to resolve those conflicts.

What we're going to read refers to a specific situation within the early church, but the principles that emerge apply to any situation where there are struggles.

PRAY: "Father, please place in my heart the desire and resolve to be a peace-maker."

READ Acts 6:1-7

To overcome divisiveness...

I. Refuse to Reach Premature Conclusions (Acts 6:1b)

Acts 6:1b: "...the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food."

A. Clear appearance of division over race

"According to the Talmud (*a Jewish commentary on how to apply the OT law*), Pharisaism made little secret of its contempt for Hellenists (Greeks) and... they were frequently categorized by the native-born (Hebrews)... as second-class citizens." (EBC, Acts, p. 329)

We're also told a familiar Pharisee prayer was, "Thank You, God, that I am not a Gentile, a woman or a dog."

Do you get the picture of the racism that existed?

With most of the new Christians in Jerusalem being

converted out of Hebraic Judaism, the Grecian Jewish widows being overlooked in the daily food distribution, this situation looks like more of the same old stuff... prejudice, bigotry.

From all outside appearances, even solid, objective appearances, it is a racial issue; Hebrews vs. Greeks:

Fact: The Apostles are Hebrews;

Fact: they are managing this food ministry to the widows;

Fact: the Hebrew-speaking widows are receiving their food every day,

Fact: the Greek-speaking widows are not.

Can you see how it would appear to the Grecian Jews that this was racism, pure and simple?

One lesson we can learn from this situation is that even when the obvious "facts" of a situation make you wonder about the character of someone,

or actually lead you to be certain that they are so wrong,

you must not allow yourself to reach conclusions without taking your concerns to the person/persons involved and hearing them out.

Now, it appears that by the time the Apostles find out there's a problem, there is already a rift in the church; the Grecian Jews are complaining against the Hebraic Jews. (v. 1)

B. What should we do in situations like this?

Matthew 18:15: **"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."**

Galatians 6:1 "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted."

The goal is to gently and humbly get clarification of the problem and seek to resolve it... not to be right or to straighten someone out.

If you're going to follow Jesus, this is not optional.

- We don't do it only if we feel it will do some good... or that we will get what we want.

We are free (and encouraged) to overlook minor offenses:

Proverbs 19:11: "It is to a man's glory to overlook an offense."

but we are responsible to talk to someone about sin.

We are not to "complain" against people, start "murmuring" as these early disciples did.

Remember: things aren't always as they look (or as someone else told you)

C. Each one is personally responsible for their response

You owe it to Jesus to handle problems His way, because however flawed a church may be, however flawed you feel a sister or brother in Christ is, the Church is Jesus' body; and your brothers and sisters in Christ are equally God's children, along with you.

How you treat and speak of others equals how you are treating and speaking of Jesus Himself.

That may not make sense to you, but it is what Jesus clearly says.

To overcome divisiveness... I. Refuse to Reach Premature

Conclusions

To overcome divisiveness...

II. Discover and Address the Real Issues (Acts 6:2-6)

What were the real issues?

Real Issue #1: Poor management on the part of the Apostles.

The poor management of meeting the widow's needs was caused by so many people coming to Christ, which increased the number of people to whom the apostles were ministering; including an increase in widows.

This passage makes clear that sometimes our spiritual leaders fail us.

Let me be very specific: sometimes your spiritual leaders will fail you. Sometimes I will fail you.

When that is brought to our attention, and it is clear that we need correction, that correction will happen.

If it is a difference of perspective (which is different from being wrong), understanding and resolution will be sought.

Real issue #2: the Apostles can't handle the needs of the entire church

The apostles are overwhelmed with the work load, and so a new group of leaders is appointed and empowered to meet the need.

This is one reason why we as a church encourage everyone to be in a small group... to be sure that everyone is cared for... physically, spiritually, emotionally, mentally, etc.

Real issue #3: other people in the church are capable of helping with needs

v. 3: "**Brothers, 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.**"

Greek: "**diakonia**"; where we get the word "deacon" is translated differently in the following three verses:

v. 1: "daily **distribution** (serving) of food"

v. 2: "**wait on** (serve) tables"

v. 4: "**ministry** (service) of the Word"

Apostles must devote themselves to prayer and the **service** of the Word.

Deacons, these *very godly men*, are to **serve** the widows, taking care of their physical needs. They must be men of integrity because they are handling money and because they are caring for widows, who can be very vulnerable.

At the same time, it is the responsibility of the entire congregation to take care of one another.

To overcome divisiveness... II. Discover and Address the Real Issues

To overcome divisiveness...

III. Make Special Efforts to Re-establish Unity (v. 5-6)

A. Involve the offended parties in the solution (v. 2a)

Greeks and Hebrews were involved in the selection of those who would be involved in caring for their widows.

B. Go the extra mile

The Hebraic Christians make every effort to demonstrate their hearts were pure:

- All seven of the deacons have Greek names
- Even though there was no racism involved at all, the Hebraic Christians go the extra mile to dispel the perception.

"We trust you to care for our Hebrew widows as well as your Greek widows. We are one in Christ."

This is incredible humility on the part of the Hebrew Christians!

Why? Because Christ-centered unity was more important than just the right answer and the right solution and countering the false perceptions of racism.

Christ-centered unity is about relationships. It's possible to have all the right answers, but still not touch the heart and heal the relationship. The Hebrew Christians did both.

To overcome divisiveness... III. Make Special Efforts to Reestablish Unity

To overcome divisiveness...

IV. Stay Focused on the Mission (Acts 6:7)

Acts 6:7: "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**".

A. Unity Amongst Believers Proves the Truth of the Gospel

We now see even priests, "**a large number of priests,**" coming to believe in Jesus.

Why? Genuine unity, genuine love proves the authenticity of the Gospel message:

John 13:34-35: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another."

John 17:20 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message,

21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You. May they also be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me.

22 I have given them the glory that You gave Me, that they may be one as We are one:

23 I in them and You in Me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me."

B. Keep reaching out

Groups that focus on themselves alone fight and bicker more than groups who reach out to others. Reach out in the love of Jesus!

CONCLUSION

We can take these precious pages and read these God-inspired words and see what really happened, just 2,000 years ago in a place that is still on the map.

Can we take the next step and dare to see what God is wanting to do here in this congregation...

and beyond this congregation, in all the Christ-honoring churches in this region...

One thing for sure, people will be talking one way or another.

What will people be saying about you?

About this church?

Do you have an issue that needs to be resolved with someone in this church? At work? In your family? Amongst friends?

Will you handle it God's way, and overcome divisiveness?

"Father in Heaven, with Your strength, I will choose to be a peacemaker. I will deal with conflicts Your way. May the unity this brings point many people to Jesus! Amen."