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The Selection of the Seven Acts 6:1-6

Sometimes organizations are victims of their own success. This seems to be true for the church. In the earliest days, Acts describes a harmonious church.

Resources were shared in common and no one went without (Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35). But the church was also growing at this time and by the time we reach chapter 6 there seems to have been a break down in the fair distribution of food. We learn that one part of the community, the Hellenists, being to complain or grumble because their widows are being neglected in comparison the Hebrew widows (6:1). The Bible doesn't tell us exactly who these two groups are but scholars think the Hellenists refer to Jews who were native Greek speakers while the term Hebrews refer to Jews who were native Hebrew or Aramaic speakers.

- Skinner writes, "Anyone who works with groups knows that grumbling can produce resentment and hostility, which is where especially damaging troubles live." When have you experienced "grumbling" in groups, including churches, you've been a part of? What happened because of it and how, if at all, did the group deal with it?

The church jumps into action and appoints seven men to be in charge of distributing food. The Bible doesn't tell us anything about these men although they all have Greek sounding names and so we might make an educated guess that these men were favorably received by the Greek-speaking Christians. (As a side note, one of these men, Phillip, features in a couple of the stories we considered last week – the story of the conversion of the Samaritans and the story of the Ethiopian Court Official.) This simple solution solves the problem.

It's not clear what led to the unfair distribution of food in the first place, but it is troubling that the division seems to have fallen along cultural/ethnic lines. This represents more than a break down in the church's ability to distribute food, it marks a failing in the church's mission and it exposes inherent biases and unstated values. This is why the church must act quickly.

- Skinner writes, "Not all procedures are meant to last forever, especially if they prove discriminatory in ways that run counter to the good news." When has OSL changed its procedures in order to more faithfully follow Jesus? How easy or difficult was the change, and what helped us accomplish it?
- What procedures, if any, do you think we still need to change in order to more faithfully and effectively witness to Jesus?

The Council in Jerusalem Acts 15:1-21

Sometimes an issue resurfaces and a decision needs to be revisited. This is especially true when the issue is contentious or the decision controversial. And that was the case about the inclusion of the Gentiles. Not whether they should be included, on that point they agreed – yes, God’s salvation offered in Jesus is for everyone including the Gentiles. But how should the Gentiles be included?

It’s worth restating that at this point in time, Christianity was a movement within Judaism. The church did not see itself as a separate religion but as a sect within Judaism. Christians, both the first believers and believers today, proclaim that Jesus is the fulfilment of the promises God made to God’s people, promises that are recorded in Jewish Scriptures (what Christians call the Old Testament).

In 70CE the Romans destroyed the Temple. Different groups within Judaism responded in different ways to this catastrophe, including Christians. It wasn’t until this time, that Christianity and Judaism really started to go their separate ways. So in the early days of the church, most believers were Law observant Jews and would’ve expected new Christian converts to become law observant as well. This is why Peter’s decision to fully welcome Cornelius and his household without any requirements was so shocking. Given what’s at stake, it is not surprising, then, that this issue comes up again as more and more Gentiles hear the good news and are brought into the church.

Paul and Barnabas had been out on spreading the good news and founding churches (Acts 13-14). While they are in Antioch, elders from the Jerusalem church arrive with some conflicting advice. They tell these new Christians that in order to be saved they must be circumcised (15:1). Paul debates with them in Antioch but eventually heads to Jerusalem to help settle the matter (15:2). In Jerusalem, it is a group of Pharisees that argue for law observance for new Christian converts (15:5).

Pharisees were well-known within Jewish groups for being strict observers of the Law. The Gospels tend to paint this group of Jews as a foil for Jesus. They are described as self-righteous and opposed to the message Jesus brings. But, in fact, Jesus has much in common with the Pharisees. They do argue over the finer points of the Law, but on the big issues, especially, for example, the issue of the resurrection of the dead, they agree. After the destruction of the Temple Pharisaical Judaism wins out among the sects of Judaism and eventually develops into the Rabbinical Judaism of our day.

- Why do you think the inclusion of the Gentiles (non-Jews) in the church was of concern for the Pharisees?
- Acts does not record what the Pharisees said. What arguments do you think they made? If you were a Pharisee what arguments would you make?
 - Read Exodus 19:1-6, Leviticus 19:1-2, Psalm 19:9-13, Matthew 5:17-20 to help you construct your arguments.

After the Pharisees make their arguments, Peter gets up and shares again his experience with Cornelius. He ends his argument with these words, “we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (15:11). Then Paul and Barnabas are invited to share their experiences and tell what they have witnessed God doing among the Gentiles (15:12). When Paul and Barnabas are done speaking, James gets up to speak (this is not James the disciple/apostle, he was martyred in chapter 12; but one of Jesus’ brothers who seems to have had a leadership position in the Jerusalem church). James argues for the full inclusion of the Gentiles but with a couple of stipulations (15:19-20). Acts does not tell us why James insists on these requirements and not others. But it seems to be some kind of compromise that perhaps touches on some of the most concerning practices without overly burdening new converts.

- In the debate that took place in Jerusalem, different groups appeal to Scripture, tradition, and their own lived experiences. In making a decision, how much weight should the church give to each of these? What happens when one is over-emphasized? What happens when we ignore one?
- Peter says that we are “saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.” How might this statement help guide our conversations with other groups of Christians? How might this statement help guide our conversations with those outside the church?

Paul in Tyre Acts 21:1-6

Sometimes the discernment process leads different groups of people to different decisions. This is what happens in the final passage we are going to consider for this week. Paul is convinced that he needs to go to Jerusalem (19:21) even though he knows that he is likely to meet opposition there and be arrested (20:22-24). On his way to Jerusalem he makes a stop to say good-bye to the church in Ephesus (20:17-38). As he gets ready to board the ship, he prays with the Ephesians and everyone is overcome with grief (20:36-38).

- When, if ever, have you followed the Spirit even though doing so caused you grief?

Along the way to Jerusalem, Paul makes a stop in the Mediterranean coastal city of Tyre. He stays for a week with a group of believers. This group tells Paul, “through the Spirit...not to go on to Jerusalem” (21:4). Acts doesn’t make clear what the phrase “through the Spirit” means. Skinner notes it could mean something like “‘For the Holy Spirit’s sake, don’t go!’ Or ...’We believe the Spirit has told us you shouldn’t go to Jerusalem.’” Whatever the Tyrians meant by this phrase it is clear that they and Paul have reached different conclusions about what the Holy Spirit wants Paul to do.

- Skinner writes, “Both sides can’t be correct – that the Spirit is simultaneously leading Paul to Jerusalem while urging the Tyrians to dissuade him – or can they?” What do you think?

Skinner notes that despite the fact that two parties have in good faith arrived at different conclusions “[n]o one panics. No one calls anyone in the other group demonic. No one leaves in a huff. In fact, Paul stays a whole week. But no one brings the other side around to their way of seeing the matter, either. Then, when they part, the scene is full of grace: all believers in Tyre accompany Paul and his associates to the beach, pray with him, and say good-bye as he boards a ship south....After the expression of unity, each group continues with their lives, presumably with a desire to be faithful in whatever is next for them.”

- What lessons does the way Paul leave Tyre offer Christians today who find themselves going in different directions because they have reached different theological conclusions?
- This story reminds us that Christian unity does not mean that we need to see eye-to-eye on everything. What are ways we can express our unity even with those whose theology is very different from our own?