

A NEW GENERATION OF LEADERS

SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD

By Steve Zeisler

It has often been said that the only constant in life is change. Change is unpredictable and often difficult, and it may be as difficult in church as it is anywhere else. There is an attitude that at least in church, things ought not change much. But God lives in no box. The wind of the Spirit is fresh. His mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:23). New wine has no business being put in old wineskins (Mark 2:22).

We have observed in the opening five chapters of the book of Acts that at times the church's internal experience is the focus—how Christians lived with each other, what their priorities were when they were together, how they grew together, and so on. And at other times Luke's "camera" focuses on the church's penetration of the world, and on both the positive and negative responses of the world to its outreach.

In chapter 6 both life within the community and outreach are in view. But there are new elements in each. We will see a third attack from the enemy on the early church in this chapter (following the direct attacks of harassment, jail, and beatings [Acts 4:1-21; 5:17-40] and by the attack of temptation to hypocrisy in the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira [Acts 5:1-11]). This third attack is in the form of division and disunity among the people.

Growing pains

Verses 1 and 7 refer to new growth. Verse 1: "Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose...." Verse 7: "The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly...." The presence of new believers introduced diversity that gave rise to issues that the church needed to solve. And we should learn from them. Let's read 6:1-15:

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen. And yet they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was

speaking. Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.” And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and dragged him away, and brought him before the Council. And they put forward false witnesses who said, “This man incessantly speaks against this holy place, and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.” And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

Until this point the church had met together in the courts of the temple and in smaller gatherings in homes. But here we find Stephen entering the Synagogue of the Freedmen. (We are going to hear Stephen’s story in greater detail in the next message, so I won’t discuss his ministry in detail here.) We are now seeing the gospel penetrate farther into the city, and not just in public, open-air proclamation, but also in settings where the Scriptures were taught and discussed.

There were many synagogues around Jerusalem, and they tended to be ethnic in makeup. The Freedmen were probably Jews who had migrated to Italy, lived there as slaves perhaps, were later freed, and came back to Jerusalem. Note the references to Cilicians, Alexandrians, Asians, and Cyrenians; synagogues throughout Jerusalem used language and cultural expressions from the home regions of their members. We find a distinction in Acts 6 between those who had Greek as their first language and those who had Hebrew as their first language. As the gospel reached out into other places, the disciples were encountering the differences that come up when people who don’t share the same background try to live together in church. Many of the recent converts in this story were Greek-speaking Jews. Things were changing in the church, and there were new issues to face.

Three problems are identifiable in this setting. These are problems that surface whenever Christian communities grow.

Subtle preference

The first is accusation. Poor widows, those who had no family to care for them, would have food distributed to them. We noted at the end of chapter 4 that collections were taken and laid at the feet of the apostles to be given away to those in poverty. But in the distribution, those well known by the leaders who oversaw the distribution received more. I don’t think showing preference was deliberate or that the problems arose because of hardheartedness. There is no prejudice evident anywhere in this. A network of friendships is often a natural means by which we know the needs of other people. And very often such a network exists around people who have been part of the church the longest, or through ties of culture and language. So if someone overseeing the distribution of food knows that Widow Jones has had a particularly hard week because this is the anniversary of the death of her husband and her children haven’t written recently, the tendency is for the person serving her to say, “I know how hard it is for you. Let me give you some extra food and additional attention.” Widow Smith might have the same set of circumstances, yet if the person directing the distribution doesn’t know that, he’ll do what is expected, but without the extra care. Eventually discrepancies become a source of friction.

One of the things I have loved about PBC is how much more multi-ethnic we have become in the last ten years or so. There are many more people here now who do not speak English as their first language. But diversity presents challenges.

The elders and staff spend a lot of time considering this. We know that sometimes seniors feel as if they are not being heard. Sometimes young people feel the same way. Often single people, especially single parents, feel that way. We know that folks who have preferences for a certain worship style feel that perhaps they’re on the margin

and others surely have the ear of the leadership. When we changed the times of our worship services last fall, we deliberately attempted to offer a wide variety of adult electives to meet different needs. We know some here are brand-new Christians who need the basics of the faith, some come to wrestle with theology, and some come to be instructed in Christian life skills. And the responsibility of leaders is to hear and serve the whole body, not just those most like themselves.

A campaign of complaining

The second problem in our text is a complaint. Another translation of this word is “murmuring.” This Greek word describes what happened in the exodus on the occasions when the nation of Israel was complaining against Moses’ leadership, and the widespread expression of discontent almost destroyed the nation.

Again, such complaining doesn’t usually begin with evil intent or darkness of heart. It most often starts with sharing a concern: “I’m frustrated and hurt. I feel misunderstood. I try to get a response, but I don’t know the procedure. I don’t know how you get someone to return your calls. You understand how I feel, don’t you? Haven’t you been misunderstood too?... ” But eventually, what may have begun as a prayer request becomes a party of people who reinforce negative murmuring and complaining. Unless it’s checked, it destroys the church.

That is what was taking place here. The Greek-speaking widows and the people who knew and loved them reinforced a complaining spirit among themselves. And then, of course, the Hebrew speakers would band together to make sure their voice was heard.

The ministry of the Word and prayer

The third problem that is identified in this text is highlighted by the word “neglect.” The apostles, or the twelve as they are called here, “summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.’” The twelve were under pressure to respond to the urgent instead of the important. This is also a persistent problem. It is easy to let leadership and responsibility settle into the hands of a few. They become ineffective at primary tasks and the leadership potential of others is stunted.

I want to make clear that the twelve were not saying, “Serving tables is beneath us. We do high and important things. Other people should do menial things.” Rather, they were saying, “We have a calling we can’t accomplish if we try to do everything.” The greatest example of serving in all of history was our Lord Jesus. On the night before he died, he took a towel, wrapped it around himself, went to his knees, and washed the feet of his disciples. These twelve would not for a moment have dismissed the work of physically serving other people as if it were beneath them. But choosing one option inevitably excludes others. The apostles had to give first priority to the spiritual feeding of the flock and as a result had to expand the circle of those who could function as servant leaders.

What are the solutions to these problems? Well, the first step is obvious, but it is very often difficult: they took action.

Spiritual solutions for spiritual problems

We’ve all been in settings where everyone hoped problems would go away. Murmuring is distasteful and difficult. One might say, “I don’t know these people very well, and I don’t know what they’ll think. There is no obvious solution. Let’s just hope things don’t get worse.”

But it's clear that the apostles, once they recognized what was at stake, immediately did something about it. They called the congregation together and said, "This is a church-wide problem. It is something we are going to have to face together." It was a forthright, unified, thoughtful, kindhearted invitation to respond. "You choose seven to whom we can give responsibility. Let's solve this together." There was no finger-pointing.

Interestingly, the seven names put forth are all Greek names, suggesting that the church leaders were not patronizing the aggrieved parties, but were listening to them and inviting them to give some of their new, young leaders responsibility. And it was very successful. You see that often in the book of Acts. When the devil attempted to do something destructive, whether it was to throw apostles in jail or create hypocrisy in the hearts of givers, if the leadership of the church responded right, the result was greater good than there would have been otherwise.

We can also note here that the qualifications for those who would assume the responsibility of distributing food didn't include even a mention of things like good management technique, a food-service background, a loud voice, or an aggressive style. All of the qualifications remind us that the problem was spiritual. These were to be men of good reputation, meaning mostly that they had solved their own ego problems. They could be trusted. And they were to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, because what destroys unity is not really food inequities and insufficient attention. It is hardness of heart and increasing selfishness. So these men had to have the spiritual qualifications to accomplish the task.

The church would later use the word *diakoneo* (to serve) to name the office of deacon in the church. (Elder became an office in the church later as well.) Deacons are not yet in view, however. This was a creative choice to solve a problem, but the wisdom employed here served the church later in formalizing responsibilities and offices.

Finally, we can note that the twelve laid their hands on the seven and unambiguously gave them a mandate to do the work they needed to do.

What lessons can we learn from this? I want to mention two things in particular that I think are most useful for us as a congregation.

Avoiding the neglect that destroys

First of all, the twelve had a once-and-for-all responsibility that would never be duplicated. Remember in chapter 1 when they needed to name a twelfth apostle to replace Judas Iscariot, they had two criteria for choosing him. One was that he had to have "accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us." That is, he had to know the Jesus story from the beginning of his public ministry. He had to have heard the parables, seen the miracles, walked with the Lord, listened to him, observed him. The second criterion was that he had to be "a witness with us of His resurrection." He had to have seen Jesus alive after his execution and be able to say as an eyewitness, "Jesus is raised from the dead."

Recurring attacks on the gospel concern these two points. First, do we have a reliable Jesus story, or is it all myth and conjecture, added to by various later Christians who wanted their version of this miracle or that event? Do we have a Jesus story that we can be sure accurately tells what he believed, what he taught, who he was? It has always been a critical foundation of the church that we do indeed have a reliable record of Jesus.

And second, is Jesus raised from the dead? Is there a miracle that is at the core of our faith, the victory of life over death? Is Christianity more than a hopeful, gentle religion that urges everybody to do their best? We can declare that it is not a human religion, because it has at its heart the central miracle of all, the resurrection.

The apostles had to be able to tell the Jesus story and to testify to the resurrection. What these twelve accomplished ultimately was committing their witness to the written word in the New-Testament documents. You have in your hands what the apostles taught and believed and how they applied what they taught in the life of the church through their letters. That responsibility was unique to the apostles.

There will never be other apostles in that sense, but the twelve also functioned as the spiritual leadership in their congregation. “But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.” There is something important that we can learn from this. Some leaders in every congregation are given the calling to study and reflect, to instruct, to listen to Scripture prayerfully. In pulpits, classrooms, in homes and the public square, they should declare God’s truth and disciple others to do the same. The calling is to be attentive to the heart needs of individuals, to ask God for the insight to say this day’s critical word to the congregation, to be reflective and prayerful. It’s the ministry of the word and prayer *together*, so that all teaching is bathed in prayer, and prayers are given content by Scripture.

But such responsibilities are easily neglected if we are not careful. The ministry of the word and prayer is life-changing, decades long in its impact. If it were to be neglected in this church or any other, you might not even notice it for a while. There would likely be just as many meetings. The shell of the church would continue to function, perhaps effectively for who knows how long, before you would even notice that we had stopped wrestling with the truths of God, longing to be fed by his word, and praying from the heart. But eventually we would die. So those who led the first church were wise enough to say, “Some need to be able to devote themselves to this critical work of the ministry of the word and prayer, for the sake of the church. Let us not neglect it.” And I am saying that to us: Let us not neglect it either.

However, neglect can go the opposite direction, too. It’s possible to spend a great deal of time being engaged with Scripture and forget that there are widows who need to be fed, broken people who need to be visited, acts of love that need to be accomplished, unbelievers who need to be sought, and all of the other active, hands-on, involved, caring, problem-solving serving of Christ. Neglect of that work will also destroy the church.

The point is that we all ought to find out what God has called us and gifted us to do. Some will have one responsibility and others something else, but nothing should be neglected. Do we do well at one or two elements of Christian expression, having forgotten others? Are we as passionate about the lost as we ought to be? Are we as committed to prayer as we ought to be? Are we as willing to attend to the hurting as we ought to be? Do we love the Scriptures as much as we ought to? Are we neglecting anything?

The second lesson we can learn from this chapter is an important challenge. It comes out of the story of Stephen in the last paragraph.

Encouraging the next generation

The role of the apostles, as I have said, will never be duplicated in the sense of adding to the New Testament. The first witnesses have left behind a record that is sufficient for us. But in another sense, the apostles can and must be duplicated.

Remember, Jesus said, “He who believes in Me, the works that I do shall he do also, and greater works than these shall he do...” (John 14:12). The twelve and the other disciples would travel farther, speak to more people, and see more conversions than Jesus did. He was giving them greater opportunity than even he himself had.

In the same way, the apostles gave away opportunity to the next generation of younger leaders who were new in the church. Almost certainly Stephen was from the Greek wing of the church and fairly new in his faith. But look at verse 8: “Stephen... was performing great wonders and signs among the people,” just as Peter and John had done! The working of miracles and the breaking of bondage was not just the apostles’ work. It was also the work of Stephen and others who would follow him. He preached with unassailable wisdom. He encountered the hard opposition of unbelief and penetrated it with winsome, loving, thoughtful, powerful exposition. He went places his predecessors hadn’t gone. He was dragged before the same Council that Jesus and the apostles were and accused of the same things, and he answered with as much wisdom as Peter did. His face “was like the face of an angel”—and the text says that of no one else. And he would be the first of the disciples to be martyred for Christ’s sake. The apostles encouraged vital, engaged, and powerful ministry in the younger generation.

This is a challenge to us to imagine the next generation serving in greater ways than the generation that is established now. It’s a challenge to believe in them, invite them, promote them, expect much of them, delight in them. The change-resistant mindset will say, “Let’s put folks who are familiar in charge. They can be trusted not to make too many mistakes.” It’s easier, but it is foolish and contrary to the plan of God. He is still raising up new generations of leaders, so let’s learn from the example of the apostles and lovingly give these men and women the opportunity to fulfill their calling.

Scripture quotations are taken from New American Standard Bible, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Catalog No. 4748
Acts 6:1-15
Eighth Message
Steve Zeisler
March 24, 2002

[Back to Index page](#)

Copyright © 2001 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the prior written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to: Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.