

Acts 6:1–7

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[0 : 00] taken from the book of Acts, chapter 6, verses 1 through 7. This can be found in the White Bibles on pages 1012. Again, the scripture text is Acts 6, verses 1 through 7, on pages 1012 of the White Bibles.

Please stand for the reading of God's word. Now, in these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch.

These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. And a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

[1 : 31] This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning, and welcome to Holy Trinity Church during this Advent season.

We are so glad that you're here, and we are praying that the Lord will meet you week by week as we get to know one another and together give ourselves to a better understanding of the word and our lives together lived under it.

I wonder what you would write down on a piece of paper were I to hand them out to each of you individually.

If I were to ask the question, list one thing that you think threatens the growth of the gospel in this congregation.

It would be interesting to see. I'm sure there would be a number of things listed. Certainly be difficult, actually impossible, to determine one thing as the most important threat.

[2 : 46] But my guess is, if I were to ask you to list one thing that you feel threatens the growth of the gospel in this congregation, you'd have something to say.

In business planning materials, I've run across an acronym, SWOT.

It stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. Evidently, firms, as they begin to look at the future, are advised to think about all four areas and to address them.

I say this because for three consecutive weeks, Luke has been laying out threats to the early church, things listed which could hinder the progress of the growth of the gospel in that early congregation, things which, if any one of them had taken root, might have slowed the advance of the gospel or inhibited it in such a way as to almost disable the growth around the globe and its advance altogether.

Let me just refresh your memory. Threat number one, from Acts 4, 1 to 22. The gospel made progress, even though Peter and John were interrogated and placed under a gag order by outside religious authorities.

[4 : 14] It appeared to be a threat. It actually became an opportunity. The main spokespersons, under a gag order, were not a threat that could be overcome in the advance of the gospel.

Threat number two, Acts 5, 1 through 11. The gospel wasn't derailed, even when threatened from the inside by Ananias and Sapphira and their moral compromise of falsehood.

In other words, a couple in the church living in outright lie before the congregation did not derail the advance or progress of the gospel in that congregation.

Threat number three, from Acts 5, 17 to 42. The gospel even gained a wider audience after not just Peter and John, but all the apostles had been imprisoned, found to be in contempt of court, and they themselves were the recipients of corporal punishment, beatings and lashings. Even that did not stop the advance of the gospel. These vignettes then, that are all running in this early moment of Acts, are teaching us that the progress of the gospel was from its very earliest inception under threats, both external and internal, yet the threats were not able to derail the progress of the gospel in their midst.

[5 : 47] The gospel made persistent advance. Today's text, for a fourth week running, you will see the relentless progress of the gospel, even when it may have been caught flat-footed by another threat.

It's an important one to me because of all the threats that are listed, and we'll hit one again next week. Of all the first five threats to the early church, this is the one I feel most easily in play in our own day, but in particular, in our own church and in our own congregation, and the one which we need to pay attention to.

You don't want to be caught flat-footed by the threat of Acts 6, 1 through 7. Let's take a look at it. For no sooner is the progress of the gospel stated than this new threat emerges.

6, 1. Now in these days, when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

Problems come up. And the problem here is important to get a hold of. What exactly is the nature of the threat?

[7 : 30] It's not complaining in the church, which you might wrongly deduce simply by the word complaint.

It's not wrong to file a complaint with the 12 apostles for the way life is going on in the church. Did you know that in our own constitution, every member has the right to file a complaint against the action that's taking place?

A complaint is different than a complaining spirit. And the indication here, there's no reason to think that the complaint of the Hellenists was fabricated or not real.

But rather, there is a complaint and it distinguishes between the two words here, Hellenists and Hebrews. So what exactly was the nature of the threat?

Evidently, I think it was a conflict that appears to be one of ethnic and cultural partiality in the way they were living together day by day.

[8 : 39] Ethnic and cultural partiality. Let's unfold it. Look at the word Hellenist. What does it mean? What's the distinction between a Hellenist and a Hebrew?

You need to remember that probably a century or two even before the New Testament really gets underway, we learn from 1 Maccabees that a number of Jews living in the holy city left and began to make their way in the outer reaches of the world and near the Mediterranean and in Maccabees it actually indicates because life had become so difficult on us that some Jews went out and in a sense joined lives with the quote heathens and so you have Jews living far afield from the holy city trying to make a way in the world.

Hellenists were Jewish people by race as were the Hebrews. It's the same race here. But they were separated by language geography culture influences customs background the makeup of the home in which I was raised to be a Mediterranean Jew to be a Greek speaking Jew living away from Jerusalem exposed you to almost growing up in a completely different world even though you were of the same race as a Palestinian Jew.

Now we know that a number of people back from chapter 2 and it's worth seeing it in chapter 2 verse 5 that there were at the time of Pentecost dwelling in Jerusalem Jews devout men from every nation under heaven and then there's that wonderful listing of all of the individuals who were returning to Jerusalem at some point in their life having lived out their lives in a sense as a Hellenistic Jew as a Greek speaking culturally ethnically diverse individual that now lives in Jerusalem and perhaps even a number of the widows later in life moved back to the center of life to live their way forward.

So the threat here the complaint here to the apostles indicates that in some measure this early communal living where everyone had everything in common and where people were giving their offerings and those offerings were actually being distributed so that no one was without need that the most needy among them in the church were obviously widows because they had no means of

providing for themselves and the charge or the complaint is that the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked because I think you can surmise they were ethnically and culturally distinct from the Palestinian Jews in the daily distribution of the food let me put it to you this way even one of the some of the manuscripts that we have of Acts the western texts have a clause in this verse that indicates that the

[12:10] Hebrew leaders the Jewish speaking Jews in the early church were the ones who were responsible for making sure that all the needs of everyone were being met so imagine a majority culture congregation as it were now mixed from a variety of backgrounds and places and someone is not in a sense getting their fair share problems come up the presenting issue then was food daily food I don't have enough to eat but the underlying problem dealt with what happens when we have different languages different cultures different ethnic backgrounds it's not a racial issue it's an ethnic issue and what is an ethnic or cultural distinction if it's not language

I mean we all speak different languages think of it this way we're all Chicagoans well those of us who are Chicagoans are all Chicagoans you're in Chicago today I'm calling you a Chicagoan but that doesn't mean you grew up in the same place even though you grew up in the same city your family background might be so distinct and different from someone else here your influences your prejudices your proclivities your values your way with Jesus might be very distinct or different from those who are sitting around you today so think about it that early church had had a unique threat that the ethnic and cultural distinctions might actually lead to ethnically or culturally partiality to the disservice of the whole in other words it's when you come into

Holy Trinity Church and you go you know what my language is being overlooked my preferences my customs my needs interestingly the apostle Paul will later put the onus squarely on the back of the majority culture maturity quote unquote persons to do away with their own proclivities in the interest of serving all in love let me put it to you this way everybody likes diversity until they get it my wife kindly mentioned that to me last Sunday evening as we made our way home from the congregation wide prayer meeting we we gloried together in prayer last Sunday night if you if you weren't there let me just state this whether you come or not that's entirely up to you but for those of us who are there it is one of the most splendid enjoyable different strengthening hours

I've experienced in all my years in Chicago part of the reason for that is it's culturally and ethnically diverse did you know last week we had a brother from our congregation stand and tell us all how he learned how to pray in Chicago from his home background and then we had another brother stand and indicate how he learned to pray from his background and these are worlds apart worlds apart and it's one of the most beautiful things we could see everybody likes diversity until they get it welcome to Holy Trinity Church Church now the way churches normally deal with ethnic and cultural conflict is they excise any ethnic or cultural distinction from their midst that's the fastest way home the fastest way home is to say no no no we're not going to deal with it so we're going to do it this way and if the majority culture is in charge then they adopt a majority culture way and everybody else has to conform to it along the way and eventually people find their way out

I mean think of the opportunity here though that we have most congregations don't have a shot at being culturally or ethnically diverse because the whole country already lives in homogeneously culturally and ethnic ghettos and so people who live together worship together and they never have any chance of actually demonstrating cultural or ethnic distinctions let alone having a cultural or ethnic problem they don't have this problem they don't have this problem because they're not even in relationships from people that love Jesus who come from a different way a different language a different custom a different way forward so the great threat that we have here is also the great opportunity for the gospel the surprise of the conflict if that's the conflict it actually interestingly there's an escalation of the conflict if you just hold off from knowing the whole story because in one sense we say okay well what's a pastor to do what are people to do!

[18:17] who are actually trying to express the fullness of the gospel in a culturally or ethnically diverse congregation well what's a pastor to do and I'm not equating the pastor with the apostles here but by way of principle the apostles actually hand this thing down to ruling elders and to pastor teachers and the pastor teachers are to conform their pattern of life by way of priority to the apostolic pattern so I know I'm making a principal leak here but look at this verse two actually the conflict escalates when you just stop this sentence and the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables problems come up but but the problem the conflict here has actually escalated because the pastors

in that church said you know what I'm not going there it's not my issue to get my feet in on to make sure that it gets done because

I had a priority according to them of preaching the word of God and notice it's a different kind of service the word serve tables there isn't derogatory it isn't like I'm going to serve any table during the family lunch today no it's actually the same word you're going to find later in verse four the ministry of the word the service of the word it's a different form of service and so what they're actually indicating is I am serving the congregation through the preaching and teaching and prayerful ministry of it according to the apostles and they were not to give up that function for the welfare of the whole in order to do another meaningful service on behalf of everyone in other words they are resisting the pressure to answer the problem themselves so we got a problem in the church and the problem has escalated because the pastor said not my job it's fascinating to me the surprise of the text is the apostolic unwillingness to play the lead or the point on how it gets resolved now let me say a word then on this good leaders stay on task they have priorities it's not priorities in what's better more elevated than another it's one form of service to another but they don't lose their priorities let me just say in regard to the church today in which you and

I serve pastors pastoral ministry is under pressures from two ends one I mean it's it's obvious from sociological data that the role of the pastor over the last century has continued to expand to where it used to be pastors were asked to do a set of things and now the pastor is increasingly asked to do a host of things to the point where most I've actually heard somebody say when they looked at the candidate for their senior pastor position they said there's no way you're going to find everybody to do all this so so so the people are putting pressure on the pastor to perform hands on service in a plethora of ways that probably 150 years ago never would have been addressed I'm not too concerned about that what I'm also concerned about is some pastors today actually live this out within their own person that they actually feel themselves that for some reason they're the ones who have to meet all the needs that they're the ones who all right we have an issue out there and I'm going to get right in the middle of it and I'm going to because I love the church I'm going to go do it all and you know the people aren't! so I'm going to do it you know that's another very delicate and unhealthy way of living and so these things are happening where you have people in pastoral ministry who are neglecting the preaching and teaching of the word because they think what it really means is to go solve every relational issue most of the things that happen in an ethnically and culturally diverse congregation that are problematic didn't happen that way overnight we're done until his father in law finally came in for a visit over the weekend and said son you got to figure this out because you got a nightmare going on here and what happens in the scriptures is that Jethro comes and basically tells him I'm not going to point the reference out you have to go look it up I think it's Deuteronomy 18 or so maybe it's Genesis 18 by thinking that you are the one to do all the things and then he tells him this interestingly you are supposed to bring the needs of the people before God that's prayer and you are supposed to teach and proclaim the people the word of God that's preaching so Moses is told you're supposed to be interceding for the people and preparing messages from the word for the people and this is not good for you or them that you have a pastoral complex that needs you everywhere in the congregation that's the precursor and so here it is problems come up according to the text the apostles surprisingly demonstrated unwillingness to get overly involved because they have a different priority and so then the question now comes how does the text get resolved and here it is the people themselves have a critical role to play front line role to play on the expansion of the gospel by meeting the cultural and ethnically diverse problems that emerge in a congregation look at their plan problems come up the apostles resisted but they put a plan in place that would require congregational engagement with it verse three therefore brothers pick out from among you seven men of good repute full of the spirit and wisdom whom we will appoint to this duty but we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word and what they said pleased the whole gathering and they chose

[25 : 49] Stephen a man full of faith and the holy spirit and Philip and the other five I did that because they're difficult to pronounce including one Nicholas at the end who noticed interestingly is a proselyte proselytes were mentioned as being present in Jerusalem back to chapter two from Antioch a non-Jew himself who's actually now working for the benefit of the non-Jewish speaking Hellenist widows and they set them before the apostles and they appointed them and prayed over them that's what happened the apostles said look we need a self-selection process but with apostolic oversight we understand that the need is genuine notice it's not that these men said that's

not important you know the preaching is the important thing and the people's needs that are being overlooked is less important no it is critically important that there be zero ethnic cultural expressions of church life where partiality are hindering the welfare of all and it is so important that there's a self selection process that the congregation itself emerged with names that were notice notice interestingly something about them all

Greek names this is a practical appointment if it's the Greek speaking Jewish widows who were being overlooked it doesn't surprise me that the congregation comes up with the Greek speaking members in the congregation who actually can make a lookout for themselves in other words the majority culture Palestinian Jews Jewish in origin now find appointment in the church where the diversity both culturally and ethnically begins to measure up a leveling of the field that's one thing to notice that cultural ethnic diversity by way of appointment and not only that notice it had to be they were well spoken of this little phrase well spoken of comes up again in Acts 16 and 22 it actually comes up later when you begin to formulate what church life looks like in the pastorals you don't appoint people to offices of elder or deacon who are not well thought of well thought of even not only in the congregation but according to the time you get to the pastorals well thought of by outsiders so they're looking for well respected people who can meet the need of the hour which must be met as a as because the gospel is actually bringing everyone back together let me just give you an aside here just realize that we speak different languages even though we all speak English here this morning at least you're able to understand it some of you most of you we all speak different languages and we celebrate cultural distinctions but not all that should be celebrated where do different languages come from in the scriptures the actual effect of coming from diverse cultural ethnic distinctions goes all the way back to the tower of babel and at the tower of babel god places his judgment on the world by separating languages because they wanted to live without god so while we love and enjoy different cultural expressions in our midst you also need to realize that cultural distinctions in our midst is in some sense god's way of judging us for wanting to do life alone without him so everything within our cultural distinctions there are areas of our proclivity that need to be rooted out that people need to repent of that rather than merely walk forward in it and so here it is if that's all going to be redone if it's all coming back together in the church if Jesus is the one person to whom we are all looking then there will of necessity be both pastor and people fully engaged those who are well respected appointed to ensure that God's family works differently than the family in the world and that's the challenge before us that's the opportunity and what it requires is a congregation that is all in notice they got to be followed through on too they set them before the apostles and they prayed and laid their hands on them they actually had a plan and the plan actually followed through to real tangible appointments we make three kinds of appointments here generally at Holy

Trinity you can be appointed to the office of the elder you can be appointed to the office of the deacon both of which come through the consensus of a congregation who selects but you can also be appointed here to the role of a community group leader people that are well thought of that are trying to be on the ground facilitating discussion in the word and caring for the individuals let me put it to you this way our congregation will only be as healthy as our weakest community group that's just the way it's going to work we are as healthy as our weakest community group some of you say I don't even go to community group okay I'm going to be pretty tough to really walk with you well then you know when people become a member of holy trinity they take a vow to to the best of my ability join myself to this church and its worship and its work well we know the work is the making of disciples we know the worship of the church requires that you would be coming regularly to sunday services and i would say be involved in life and community in fact we'd be probably much better off measuring the health of holy trinity church not by looking out here today and seeing what we see or finding out how we sound but actually back back in the living rooms during the week because that's actually where the needs are going to be made known and that's why the first line of defense quote in the church in its health is actually to address things in the community group for the welfare of those who are there if there's a problem that someone has a need in this church that is not being met for the welfare of those in your living room and many of the issues ought to take place right there never even needing to rise up and beyond but we have we have godly men and women who are appointed the office of deacon who are charged and desiring to make sure that this culturally ethnically diverse congregation represents the word of

[33 : 44] Christ well where there would be no! partiality! And it begins to move so they appointed them the problem the role of the pastors in it the role of the people in it the actual follow through with purposeful appointment for it and as a result look what happens verse 7 the word of God continued to increase and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith the progress of the gospel notice the word increase there the word of God continued to increase that was the book ended in verse one now during the days when the disciples were increasing so in the days where the progress of the gospel was going out and it was growing a problem existed that threatened the in the congregation and when it was well dealt with we get a summary statement that it continued to move forward so

I'm telling you this is a threat for any congregation that's situated where we are we have the joy we have the joyful privilege of all the places in this country to live we have the joyful privilege of by nature of waking up here living in a racial culturally socioeconomically ethnically diverse context it is a rare privilege when you walk out the door and see someone completely unlike you it is a beautiful privilege to hear on a Sunday morning a young man with incredible talents sing rap and then come the next week and hear something totally different and the next week out of something entirely classical!

You can if you want go out of here and go they don't speak my language there I wish they did my thing all the time I'm going to tell you I hope we never do your thing all the time nor my thing all the time!

because of some ethnic partiality in our midst I love that thing there at the end I'm done notice the last thing the disciples multiplied!

greatly in Jerusalem and check this out and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith wow even those who were tasked with the old religious cultic way, the old way, the majority culture way, the Jewish way, even some of them got on with the new way, with the way.

[37 : 18] We have so much to offer if we will lay ourselves down to serve the welfare of one another.

And as we do it here, and we learn to do it, we will by nature embrace problems, deal with them maturely, live with one another graciously, that the gospel would speed its way not only to the end of the earth, but more deeply into our own hearts.

We all want to come to the manger, but you and I need to sit down and live it out in all of its mess. Our Heavenly Father, bring us to the cradle as the glue of why we would sit together.

But Lord, then take us to the kitchen table to learn how to live well with one another. I pray for us that you would help all of us, 100% of us, no more of this 80-20-20-80, 100% engaged in healthy ways for the welfare of this family.

[38 : 54] Take us to Jesus. Take us to the church in Jerusalem. Take us to our life together in His name.

Amen.