

The First Murmuring in the First Church



Acts 6:1-7

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Scripture

“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 Nicolaus, 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."

If you were reading the book of Acts for the first time, you knew this was going to happen, right? You knew that at some point, there would be something in the church that would come up that would cause somebody to get their feelings hurt and there would be some complaining.

Church Increasing in Number

I want to make sure we understand the context. Luke tells us in the beginning, "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number..." We started out in Acts chapter 1 with one hundred and twenty people in the church. Three and a half years into Jesus' ministry when He went back to the Father's right hand side, there was a hundred and twenty people who constituted the first church under the leadership of the eleven. They would then chose someone to replace Judas and have twelve. When the day of Pentecost fully came and the church received the Holy Spirit, three thousand people were added to the hundred and twenty. That is remarkable. Can you imagine being in a church that goes from a hundred and twenty to three thousand one hundred and twenty in one day? It is absolutely mind boggling! Throughout these first five chapters of Acts, we keep hearing that the church continues to increase. At one point, Luke stops to tell us that there are five thousand men now in attendance. No disrespect to you ladies, but it says five thousand men. Conservatively, if we have five thousand adult age men, I would believe that at least half of those men are saved, so there is a good chance that there are at least seventy-five hundred people, just adults, in the church. I want to believe if there are five thousand men, there are probably some ladies there in the church too who are not married yet. So there could be as many as eight to ten thousand people in this count, not counting children. I have to believe

that just as God moves on children today for salvation, He was probably moving in the lives of young children in that day. Knowing how Jewish families were, there is a good chance that if you have five thousand men, half of them are married. That is twenty-five hundred couples. There is a good chance that two to three hundred of those couples have children who have come to know the Lord too. Are you doing the math in your head? There could easily be fifteen to twenty-five thousand people in church. Now, the next thing we hear is the number of believers is multiplying. There are multitudes coming to the Lord, more than ever, believers are being added to the Lord, both men and women. Some scholars believe that by the time we get to Acts chapter 6, there could be anywhere from thirty to forty thousand people in the church, in a city of about seventy thousand people. Wow!

First Murmur in the First Church

We know this is not a Baptist church because they haven't had a fight yet. They haven't even had that meeting yet where they have named themselves the First Baptist Church of Jerusalem. But you know it's going to happen...and it finally happened. One of the things that make me believe the Bible is the inerrant inspired Word of God is just how honest, trustworthy, and transparent those writers of Scripture were. This is a story that could easily have been left out, but it is not left out because it's so important to the church today, as it was to the church in Jerusalem. As the number of the disciples continues to increase, there is a complaint. The ESV smooths this word out. It chooses a word that is really nice. It is a complaint. If we read this in the Greek text, it's the same word that is used when the children of Israel came out of Egypt following Moses to the Promised Land. There came a time when the children of Israel began to "murmur." It is the same word. We now have the first murmuring in the first church, and where it came from is going to blow your mind.

I have preached on this passage on several occasions, especially when we have ordained deacons. It blows my mind when I hear what this says because the murmuring actually took place among the senior saint ladies ministry. I don't know about you, but the last place you would expect a murmuring is among senior saint ladies, and that is where it started. After

being a pastor for over thirty-eight years, I have discovered that when Granny is not happy, nobody is happy, amen. We say when Momma is not happy...but when Granny is not happy, it multiplies exponentially!

At this first church, we discover that the widows, who are Hellenists, are being neglected in the daily distribution and it is causing tension toward the Hebrews. Now, the church in Jerusalem was predominately Jewish, but the Jewish people had a little tension. See, there were some Jewish people who had always lived in the land, the Promised Land. They spoke Aramaic. They were very conservative, strictly orthodox. They followed the law code of Moses. But there was another group of Jewish people who did not live in the Promised Land; they lived throughout the Roman Empire. Some of these made the choice willfully, because of business, because it was just prosperous to travel and trade. But in their latter days, most of them wanted to retire back home in Israel. Some of the ladies had to come home earlier because they lost their husbands to death. This group who lived throughout the Roman Empire had been heavily influenced by Greek culture. That is why they are called Hellenists. It was not just because they spoke the Greek language and did not speak Aramaic. Being in the Roman Empire, even though they were Jewish in their identity, they were influenced heavily by the Greek culture so they were not as conservative as the Hebrew Jews were. They were more progressive and liberal in their lifestyles. They were Jewish people living under two different cultures.

- **Unmet Needs**

For the first five years in the life of the church, everything is going great because everybody's mind is on what God is doing. Up until this point, there has not been an unmet need in the church. Why? It is because every time there is a need and somebody sees it, someone volunteered to sell something and they brought that money and laid it at the apostles' feet, and they distributed it to everyone who had a need. So this was the first time a need was not met. Dealing with people, I have come to know that, generally, when someone has a need that is not being met (depending on how big the need is), normally, they murmur. When you have a big need in your life, it is really hard to be tickled with what is going on in everybody else's life. No matter how unselfish you are, needs cause us to turn our

attention to ourselves. That is what is happening here. There is a group of widows, Hellenists, who feel like they aren't getting what they should get. This money being laid at the apostles' feet is for the ministry of meeting needs, and now we have a group of ladies whose needs aren't being met. It is causing tension and creeping into the minds of their family members that maybe the reason their needs aren't being met is because they are Hellenists, not true Hebrews, and there is a division. There is a murmuring.

I want to make sure you get this picture. This is not the picture of a Sunday school class where all the Hebrew ladies are sitting on one side of the room and one lady says – *Oh, I love it when Peter drops by and visits me and he brings me my bread!* (and then another lady says) *James usually brings me my bread!* – and then the ladies on the other side of the room realizing they didn't get their bread this week because Peter, James, or John didn't visit them. That is not what is going on here.

See, in Jewish society, if you were a widow, you struggled to live. You depended on your family to take care of you. The Jewish nation had two offerings. One was called the basket offering and the other was called the tray offering. A basket offering was taken in the temple daily. You would come by and drop money in the basket. You knew that money was going to Jewish priests. The priests would take that money to the widows in the land who didn't have bread and then she would have enough money to buy two weeks of bread. Then there was a tray offering. It was different the basket. The tray offering was for someone, especially a widow, who had an immediate need. When you put money in the tray, if there was a lady who didn't have food her need would be met immediately.

When you have been influenced a certain way, even when you come to Christ, you still bring the old ways into your new faith. It's just hard to forget everything you have ever done and been taught. I could be wrong here, but it sound to me like the church was still taking offerings to help take care of the widows. And here were some ladies who knew that families were selling things they had to have those needs met, but when that basket and tray money was distributed, these ladies were being left out. I don't think any of us believe this was intentional. As a matter of fact, if I can defend the apostles, just imagine how it would be for twelve men

to go from caring for a hundred and twenty to thirty to forty thousand people in five years! Can you imagine how many widows there might be in a crowd that size? One of your responsibilities is distributing the money being laid at your feet, and you are trying to make sure every widow in the church has enough bread to make it through the day, and for the first time, you can't meet that need. That is what is happening.

The Apostles Gather the Whole Church

Up until this point, normally, when the church makes a decision they pray. Normally, the Bible says, they are filled with the Spirit. But nothing is said about praying, and nothing is said about being filled with the Spirit here. We are just going to see the apostles deal with a murmuring. Here is how they deal with the murmuring, and I love this! They gather the full number of disciples. In other words, they called for a congregational meeting.

Let me point out that up until this chapter, every time the church is identified, we are talked about as being believers, or the ones who believed. Our message is we believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and His ascension to the right hand throne of God. Now, we aren't called believers – we are still believers – but we are identified as disciples. The word, disciples, means a learner, a student, a follower. In five years of ministry under the leadership of the apostles, we have gone from being just believers, who believe in the good news of Jesus, to disciples. We are students. We are learners. We are followers. Let me ask you this question... How long have you known Christ? Would you still be considered a believer, or would you be comfortable with being called a follower, a student, a learner of Jesus? I think by using this term, Luke is telling us there is a maturity in this group of people. They haven't just heard a word and trusted a word. These are believers who have dedicated themselves to be true followers of Christ. They are studying Him. They are learning about Him. They are desiring to be like Him.

- **The Apostles Prioritize Their Calling**

Now we have this murmuring. There is tension. I don't know if there is a backstory to this or not, but it isn't important. All that is important is that apostles don't just call one side of the church together and try to solve a

problem; the apostles call for the whole church to gather together. I want you to see this...The church was led by the apostles, but in leading God's church, there were times when the apostles believed they should bring things before the entire church. That is what they do here. They gather the whole church and start out by saying, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables." I know the apostles had a different office and calling than a pastor, but I want to defend these guys. I want to believe that it breaks their hearts that they can't do both. I believe as apostles who were pouring out their lives for these people, they were trying to preach God's Word to the best of their ability *and* trying to take this money that was being given to them and administer it as best as they could. Now there is a group in the church who are being left out and neglected, and I think it hurts the apostles. So they called the meeting of the church and they just said we can't quit doing what God has called us to do, preaching the Word, and start serving tables. Evidently, this ministry of daily distribution to widows had gotten so large that the apostles felt that to stop this murmuring and see that everybody's need was being taken care of, the twelve of them – if they managed this the way it needed to be managed – would have to quit prioritizing the preaching of the Word. And they say we can't do it.

Serving tables...Tables can mean where you put food, or it can mean tables where you brought your money, but it's the same concept. The apostles had to make a choice of what the priority of their calling was, what the priority of their life was, and what the main thing was in their life and their relationship to the church. They felt their priority was the preaching of God's Word because it has been obvious that the reason they went from a hundred and twenty to, conservatively, twenty-five thousand people is because of the preached Word of God. God's Word was preached, people repented, put their faith in Jesus, came into the body of Christ, and the body of Christ is growing. In growth, there are times when the church will fail people, and the church failed the Hellenistic widows.

Seven Men Chosen to Serve

Praise God for the apostles! They heard the murmuring, they felt the tension, and they called the church together. They said since it is not right

for us to quit preaching to distribute this food or money, choose from among yourselves seven men with these three characteristics. They had to have a good reputation; they had to be full of the Holy Spirit; and they had to be full of wisdom.

- **Good reputation**

The guys chosen would take care of this need. I love this...Luke says this pleased the whole church! So the church chose seven men, and these men had a good reputation, they were full of the Holy Spirit, and they were full of wisdom. Hear me say this. How many men did they choose? Seven. How big was the church now? Twenty-five to forty thousand people – and they choose seven men! Many of you know that we in the Baptist church, and most churches, believe the word, deacon, is not used here. These men served the church like deacons serve the church, and so, many people believe this is the ordination of the first deacons. Paul, writing his pastoral epistles later, will address the full qualifications of deacons. I just find it funny that we have churches with four hundred members that think they need forty deacons. Are you kidding me? There are forty thousand church members, and they choose seven men!

Behind the scenes, I think this is telling us that these seven who are going to be elected, chosen, hands laid on them, appointed by the church, are just administering the ministry. They are not doing every detail of the ministry. In no way here is the Bible teaching us to have ordained people in the church to relieve those of us who have spiritual gifts to do what we have been called to do, and that is to minister to the needs of people. There are times in the life of the church where the church has to realize a certain group of people may need to be set aside to take care of certain ministries that are important because of the gigantic needs in people's lives. In this first church, seven men were chosen, but I don't believe this means there were only seven qualified men in the church to do this. The apostles said they just needed seven. There were a lot of great men in the church, but the men who were chosen had to have a good reputation. I want to ask you men a question. If you were in that church, would you be qualified to administer this ministry if the first thing it hinges on is your

reputation in the community? Are you aware of what your reputation is? Would you be qualified?

- **Full of the Holy Spirit**

These men had to be full of the Holy Spirit. That means the entirety of their lives had to be under the control of God's Holy Spirit. When these men made decisions, when they acted, they were under the control of the Holy Spirit of God.

- **Full of Wisdom**

They had to be full of wisdom. To the Jewish people, and especially the early church, wisdom was the ability to take your knowledge and apply it rightly and correctly in everyday decisions. There are a lot of people who have a lot of knowledge, but they are not very wise in how to live life.

So, in administering this ministry, these seven men had to have a good reputation, be under the control of the Holy Spirit, they had to be wise, and this pleased the church. The apostles said you choose them, and we will appoint them. The apostles are still recognizing they are the leaders of the church, but they want the congregation in on this decision. The apostles want them to pick out seven men and then they will appoint them to that duty.

The Wisdom in the Choices

Then, Luke names the seven men and we can see they are Greek names, not Hebrew names. I hope I am not reading too much into this, but here is what I think they did. I love this! I don't know this to be true, but I have to give you the context. I think the majority of the church in Jerusalem are Hebrew Jews. They speak Aramaic. They know Greek too because Greek was the worldwide language. The Hellenistic Jews were not reared in Palestine so they did not know Aramaic; they knew Greek. I think the minority were Hellenistic Jews. So the whole church has gathered together and had what may have been the first business meeting, and they chose seven men, six Hellenists and one Gentile. All of these men probably spoke Greek, had probably been influenced by Greek culture, and the church wanted them to take care of that problem. Do you see the wisdom there?

The church believed it was best to let the people who probably had widows in this group who were being neglected lead the ministry and solve the problem. The majority listened, heard, and responded to the hurt of the minority. What held them together was not their language or their culture; what held them together was their faith in Jesus Christ. That is what must hold the church together! I don't want to say too much, but this could very easily have started a split and caused some to start another church on the other side of town. Did they have tension? Yes. Disagreement? Yes. Misunderstanding? Yes. Church split? NO. Why? Because the church followed the wisdom of the apostles. The apostles were wise enough to understand this was a decision the church needed to come together on. In coming together on this decision, they made a right decision and the murmuring stopped.

The Church Multiplies Greatly

If I didn't read the next two stories in Acts, I would think these men were chosen because of their administrative ability to administer money to take care of widows who were being neglected. And it sounded to me like the apostles are going to stick to preaching and teaching God's Word. — Let me give you a preview. In the great commission, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the church is supposed to go Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth. In the next two stories, the first two deacons, or servants, of the church are going to be talked about. We are going to hear that the number of disciples multiplied greatly. Up until this point, the church is being added to, and we have some phenomenal numbers. Now, the church quits being added to and starts multiplying. Think of the possibility we have here if twenty-five to forty thousand people are going to start multiplying...Whoa! This is going to be big, amen? The church is multiplying because the Word of God continues to increase. Where did it multiply? In Jerusalem. In chapters 6, 7, and 8, we are going to start seeing a transition where the church has to get out of Jerusalem, and they have to get where God told them to go, Judea and Samaria. Guess who is going to take the gospel to Judea and Samaria? Two deacons, not the apostles. Stephen and Philip. Wow!

Obedient to the Faith

Then, Luke says in verse 7, "...and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." Reading between the lines and using my sanctified imagination, I believe it is possible that many of these priests were the priests who were dissatisfied in the priesthood because of how the Sadducees and the high priest were interpreting God's law and how they were ministering to God's people. Now, these priests see the church deal with a murmuring, and they see how they handled it to make sure the widows were being taken care of. To a Jewish person, taking care of orphans and widows was the main responsibility of God's people. How this church handled this murmuring, how they did not turn against each other but stayed together as the body of Christ under the leadership of God's Holy Spirit and God's apostles, had a profound influence on the priests who were under the Law of Moses. When they saw the real thing, the right thing, many of them became obedient to the faith. Luke ties this story to the church taking care of widows.

The outside world doesn't need to just hear a sermon; they need to see God's church living out the sermons that are preached on the first day of a brand new week. Are you? Are you living this thing out for your kids? Are you living this thing out with the one who knows you the best, your spouse? Are you living this out at work? Are you living it out at school? Are you living it out as a leader in the community?