

Acts 6:1-7 - Williams

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Preacher: Tad Williams

[0:00] Oh, good morning. Please keep your Bible open to Acts chapter 6. We are continuing to follow the development of this Christian church, this early Christian church.

At this point in the book of Acts, we think that the Christian church is about one to three years old. We don't know exactly. Luke, the writer, doesn't give us exact time stamps, but something like one to three years old.

And it may comprise as many as 10,000 people. We know there's been some rapid growth. We've seen a number of 5,000 were added and another number of 3,000 were added.

And then you see how this chapter begins. Now, in these days when the disciples were increasing in number. So this church is growing. Might be 10,000 or so people, one to three years old.

And growth comes with some challenges and some problems, some growing pains. And this is a story about some growing pains. It's a story of how the early Christian church grows and develops.

[1:13] And I want to suggest that what we see in this short passage is the church grows and develops in two ways in particular.

It grows in its cross-cultural composition and potential, we might say. Cross-cultural composition and potential.

And then the second way, it grows organizationally. A new group of leaders is added and we begin to see the development of what we might call the institution of the church or the organizational structure of the church.

And so this passage is a very important passage in what's called ecclesiology, the study of the church or the doctrine of the church.

And maybe you know this is a passage that most people say is where we see the emergence of the office of deacons. That these seven new leaders who are appointed become deacons in the church.

[2:21] And that's probably true. I actually think this growth and development of the church cross-culturally and multi-ethnically is more important to the writer of the book of Acts.

But we see these two things. And so this is really the outline of my sermon this morning. I want to spend some time thinking about this cross-cultural, multi-ethnic growth of the church.

And then we will look at the organizational growth and this growth in leadership structure. So those are the two topics, I guess, we will spend our time with this morning.

Let's begin by thinking about the cross-cultural growth of the church. And I'll begin here with a little bit of teaching. Do you know that if you speak three languages, you are trilingual?

And if you speak two languages, you are bilingual? And if you speak one language, you're an American. All right?

[3:32] You know that. Some of you were, I could see that you were. I was reminded of that joke this week as I was trying to understand the multicultural and multilingual context of this story in Acts and of the city of Jerusalem at this time in history.

And I want to take a few minutes to help us appreciate this multilingual and multicultural situation in the city of Jerusalem, okay?

I want to back way up to the Old Testament times when the Bible, the Old Testament is written in Hebrew and the people of Israel speak Hebrew.

So the written and spoken language in the Old Testament times is Hebrew. So the Babylonians spoke Aramaic, a language related to Hebrew but different.

And when those exiles return from Babylonian captivity, they bring the Aramaic language with them. So this Babylonian language becomes the spoken language in the land of Israel.

[4:54] And so Jesus and his disciples speak Aramaic, the language of the Babylonian captors.

But the activity of the synagogue for Jesus and his disciples, worship services in the synagogue are

conducted in Hebrew.

So Hebrew in the time of Jesus had become sort of the biblical language and the church language. But Jesus and the Judean disciples speak this language Aramaic.

Now there's another important linguistic thing that happens about 400 years before this story. The great general Alexander the Great leads the armies of Greece.

They conquer the entire Mediterranean region all the way to India. And they bring Greek language and Greek culture. And even when that Greek empire fades and is replaced by the Roman Empire, the Romans speak Latin.

Are you confused yet? Are you with me? Somebody's, Amber's confused. She's not in confusion.

The Romans speak Latin, but Greek has taken such strong hold in this eastern part of the Roman Empire where Israel and Jerusalem are, that the Greek language remains and a lot of Greek culture remains, even during the Roman Empire.

[6 : 28] So that the official business language in Jerusalem at this time, at the time of Jesus and these early Christian disciples, the official business language is Greek.

The government language is Greek. The Sanhedrin, this group we've seen, as they discuss in the temple, they would have spoken in Greek.

So I want you to imagine this scene with me, okay? Jesus and his original apostle disciples are up north in Galilee, where most of them are from. They go to a synagogue service, which is conducted in Hebrew.

The discussion, the readings are in Hebrew. They walk out and they're talking amongst themselves in Aramaic. They go on a journey to Jerusalem, four or five days of walking, talking in Aramaic.

As they enter Jerusalem, and especially as they enter the temple, they start talking in Greek. Or at very least, they start hearing a lot of people around them talking in Greek.

[7 : 37] The population of Jerusalem during normal times is about 50,000 people.

During these special feasts, these big pilgrimage feasts, they're called Passover, maybe 300,000 Jews from the Greek-speaking diaspora, it's called.

All around the Mediterranean, Jews would come to Jerusalem, and these Jews spoke Greek.

Hellenistic Jews, they're called. And so as Jesus and his disciples enter the temple during one of these busy festivals, Greek language is all around, and Hellenistic Christians are all around.

Hellenistic Christians dress differently. The Hebrew men would have longer hair, typically, and bushy, full beards. Hellenistic men would have short hair and a short, closely shaved beard or no beard.

The Hebrew men would have a long robe that was typically brown or gray or some kind of earth tone. The Hellenistic men would have sort of a fancier-looking Greek or Roman-inspired clothing, which would often have bright colors of purple or green.

[9 : 06] And that was sort of a status symbol. The bright colors required expensive dyes. So if you had a purple sash or a green belt or something, this was an immediate signal of your wealth, your affluence.

Most of the diaspora Jews or the Hellenistic Jews that come to Jerusalem are wealthy or wealthier. They have the money to travel internationally and come down this pilgrimage.

So this is the linguistic and cultural context of Jerusalem. And as the Christian church starts growing after Jesus in the temple, you remember they're meeting in the Solomon's portico area of the temple.

There are many diaspora Jews, Greek-speaking Jews. And this creates the tension and the problem we see in our passage.

Let's look back at Acts 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.

[10 : 22] So we learn a couple things. There's a daily distribution happening. We've seen earlier that some wealthy Christians sell land and give and they have everything in common and they're sharing their resources with one another.

Now we learn this has developed into some kind of program, an official program of daily distribution. Programs, church programs get tricky.

Church programs get tricky, especially when they involve money and the collection and then the distribution of money. And this trickiness shows up here.

These multicultural groups, the Hebrew Jewish Christians, the Hellenistic Christians, different cultures, different ways of dressing, different languages, start to feel that there's some lack of justice and equity in the distribution of the money and the Hellenistic widows, the Greek-speaking widows, the complaint is are being neglected.

It could be a reality. It could be a perception. It could be a perception. But it causes tension and friction.

[11:51] And this comes to the attention of the apostles who importantly are Hebrew Christians. Okay? Hebrew, native, Judean, in a certain way of dressing and all of that.

Okay? So this is the tension. And this is the context. And these leaders respond by saying to the crowd, the group, appoint leaders to lead this food distribution thing.

And they bring forward seven leaders. Look in verse 5. And what I want to point out is that all seven of these men have distinct Greek names.

The text doesn't tell us this directly for most of them. It does for one of them. But it gives us these men with distinct Greek names.

And so most scholars think these men are Hellenistic Jews. Jews who would have spoken Greek as their native language. They would have either been a part of the diaspora or would have had strong business or family connections, kind of international connections.

[13:05] And in their way of dressing, they would have had the look of a Greek citizen. Very importantly, I want to read you a quote from a scholar named F.F. Bruce, New Testament scholar.

He says this. He says, The church of Jerusalem, we are now told, comprises both Hebrew and Hellenists. The main distinction between the two groups was probably linguistic.

The Hellenists were Jews whose habitual language was Greek and who attended Greek-speaking synagogues. The Hebrew spoke Aramaic and attended synagogues where the service was conducted in Hebrew.

Many of the Hellenists had affinities with the lands of the Jewish dispersion around the Mediterranean shores, whereas the Hebrews were Palestinian Jews and there were other social and cultural differences between these two groups, end quote.

Okay, did you hear that key thing that there are actually synagogues at this time where Jewish believers would go to synagogue and the service could be conducted in Hebrew or the service could be conducted in Greek.

[14:23] So a Hellenistic synagogue. And there are these synagogues in Jerusalem. So in Jerusalem itself, you had the option.

We sometimes make fun, right, of our church options and we church shop and we, you know, pick your flavor of church. There was some of that going on then with a Greek-speaking service option and a Hebrew service in the synagogue.

And so the group appoints seven leaders with Greek names. And look at verse 5. And Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

A proselyte is a Gentile who converts to Judaism and adopts the full customs of Judaism, including circumcision.

Antioch is a city in what we now call Turkey. And we'll see this in upcoming weeks.

[15:39] It's a city that becomes the center of Christianity in about 50 years. So in about 50 years from this story, after this story, within 50 years, the Romans actually sack and destroy the city of Jerusalem, kill many Jewish people, including Jewish Christians, and many others scatter and disperse.

And what happens at that time is the city of Antioch becomes the center of worldwide Christianity. And so in this little story, our author is, in a sense, he's building a bridge from Jerusalem to Antioch. He's introducing us to new leaders, seven new names. And what you notice, if you read on in the book of Acts, which we will, and Lord willing, you are even at home, the original 12 apostles really fade from the story at this point.

We hear a little about Peter going forward. There's a couple of important Peter stories. But we only get one mention of John and one mention of James in the entire rest of the book of Acts.

Because what happens from this story on, the leaders of the Christian movement are almost all Greek-speaking Christians. Stephen, Philip, and then most famously, Saul of Tarsus, who becomes the Apostle Paul, is one of these Hellenistic Christians from the Diaspora.

[17:20] And so at this critical moment in the life of this early Christian church, when there's this dispute and this trouble, disparity is recognized between these different cultural groups, a very important thing happens.

And Hellenistic leaders are elevated and become the major leaders of the church going forward. And Christianity really, in a sense, becomes Greekified.

And this becomes a major theme throughout the rest of the book of Acts. We're going to see a lot more of this. But I want you to see how that happens here and how the, led by the Holy Spirit, leaders are elevated who are Greek-speaking Hellenistic leaders.

Okay, that's point number one. The cross-cultural development of this early Christian church. The groundwork is laid for expansion in the Greek-speaking Jewish community by the elevation of certain leaders.

Let's turn then to the second way way the church grows at this time and in this story. And that is it grows organizationally.

[18:48] And as it grows organizationally, I want us to see that the vision for the mission of the church is clarified. All right, let's look at this.

Look in verse 2. 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. So there's a problem.

Notice first that these twelve, they don't hide the problem. They don't try to sweep it under the rug. They don't try to pretend it doesn't exist. They summon the whole group, summons the whole group, and talk about it openly together.

That's a very courageous thing to do in leadership, very vulnerable thing. The impulse in leadership is to pretend everything is going great in your realm of leadership, and you're moving from strength to strength.

And there's never any problems. That's not what they do. There's a humility and an openness and a collaborative spirit where they come together and say, okay. But very importantly, the apostles prioritize the work of prayer and of preaching.

[20:00] They say, it is not right for us to give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Look on in verse 4 where they say again, we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

And look down in verse 7, sort of the conclusion of this little story and the word of God continue to increase. So a very important thing happens in the development of the Christian church where there's two groups of leaders.

There's the apostles and as we read on in the New Testament, this apostolic group becomes elder pastors. And then there's a group of leaders whose job it is to serve tables or to take care of practical, administrative, and perhaps financial work of the church.

But the apostles say, we're going to maintain priority on preaching and on prayer and we're not going to become consumed with administrative work.

Very important development in the Christian church. a very important establishment of priorities and establishment of the mission of the church.

[21:35] Here's one way to think about this. You remember the story where Jesus is asked, what is, a man comes to him, teacher, what is the greatest commandment? And he said, well, the first commandment is love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.

And the second is like it, love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus does not actually fall into the trap of just saying one thing.

He wants to maintain priority on two things, but he does say there's a first commandment and a second commandment. I want to suggest that for the Christian church it's similar.

There's a first priority in its preaching and proclamation of the word and ministry of the word and prayer and the spiritual work and leadership. But there is also another priority and that is to love your neighbor as yourself.

And we might think of that as the practical work of caring for the poor. And that's what the apostles do right here.

[22:42] Notice they do not cancel the program. That'd be really tempting. I read John Calvin on this and John Calvin said, well, certainly the apostles must have been very annoyed by this.

And I got the strong sense that John Calvin was very annoyed by this. If they were annoyed or troubled or frustrated with this tension, there's a strong temptation to just cancel the program.

okay, let's stop caring for the poor. Let's, just this whole food distribution, collecting money, handling money, managing cross-cultural, multi-ethnic, what a mess, forget it.

Let's get rid of it. Let's just preach and pray. They don't do that. And I think that's instructive for us. Programs are messy, it gets complicated, it's difficult, but you don't just cancel it.

You don't stop loving your neighbor as yourself. And for a local church, we should not stop loving our neighbor as ourself. So we need to think and pray and work together to figure out what this means for us actually as Holy Covenant Church.

[24:04] What does it mean? We want to maintain priority on preaching and prayer. We do that in our Sunday morning service and here and in our home groups and we're going to have an epic read.

Some of you, maybe an epic read is we'll spend an evening outdoors sitting on lawn chairs and we're going to read the entire book of Hebrews later this summer together. And it'll be fun.

It's one unusual thing we do as a church sometimes in the summer to maintain this priority on the word and the proclamation of the word. but we need to love thy neighbor as thyself and figure out how to do that and to grow in that I would say as a church.

So a couple of things let me clarify in this as the organization grows and this Christian church grows organizationally. There is an open, generous, and hospitable leadership.

Right? The apostles gather the whole group. They're open about it and they say let's have new leaders and they welcome new leaders. They don't insist on doing the work themselves.

[25:20] They don't say all right you've made a mess of this. We're going to sort this out. Get out of the way. They don't do that. They say okay appoint new and different leaders to do it and then they accept those leaders.

They lay their hands on them. They pray for them and officially install them as leaders. And these leaders are not just administrators because we'll see going on they become dynamic preachers.

Next week we're going to look at Stephen and his sermon and Philip becomes an evangelist. An open hospitable leadership by the original twelve apostles.

May we maintain that in our church. church. Let's pray for that. Let's hold ourselves to that. Let's not seek to clamp down and insist on the current leaders have to do it all.

By God's grace he will raise up new leaders in this church and those of us who are currently leading will hand off leadership by God's grace.

[26:26] so let's pray for that. I want all of you to pray for that and hold us all accountable to that actually. The open generous and hospitable leadership of the existing leaders.

Number two what we see here the church's priority of preaching and prayer. That should be a priority but number three we do not excessively prioritize that.

neighbor love okay this is what I'm talking about we don't excessively prioritize neighbor love or caring for the poor to the point where we say no that's the priority of the church.

And a lot of people do that. A lot of people say well good works and caring for the poor and building water wells and hospitals in Africa this is the work of the church should be a part of the work of the church should not be the highest priority of the church.

So we don't overemphasize that but we also don't neglect it we don't cancel it we don't say nope that's not. I read a guy this week very famous Protestant pastor a little bit older hundred years old I guess and or a hundred years ago and this is a pastor who's famous for talking about preaching and writing books on the importance of preaching so I read his commentary on this section of Acts he just latched on to the priority is preaching and prayer and he just went pages and pages and pages on this and said all kinds of things like this is the whole work of the church this must be all the work the church must and I thought he completely neglected the care for the poor part that the apostles do not completely neglect they don't cancel the program so let's notice that do not excessively prioritize or ignore the activity of loving thy neighbor in the life of the local church how do we do that how can we grow and maintain biblical health and faithfulness as a church the final thing I point out here is that the apostles give instructions to the group to appoint new leaders and they say leaders in verse 3 of good repute full of the spirit and of wisdom those are the qualifications for the new leaders of good repute of good reputation people of good reputation who are full of the spirit and of wisdom they do not say who are gifted administrators who have managerial experience in the administration of programs and you should appoint people who are personally wealthy because that would help they could kind of guarantee this distribution to the widows and if there's any discrepancies they can fund it with their own money those is who your

[30:00] God in his graciousness gives his spirit and his wisdom to people of all kinds of gifts and economic statuses and vocational roles and this is why you can have construction workers preaching your sermon on Sunday morning or businessmen or doctors and lawyers and all kinds because God in his graciousness gives his gifts gives the gift of the spirit even to college professors you believe that college professors can have the Holy Spirit so great sorry sorry Dave I couldn't and so as we look for leaders in the church and as the church grows and develops and we think okay let's appoint new leaders let's look for leaders who have good reputation who are full of the spirit and full of wisdom and let that be the criteria not things that in our human and cultural life we're tempted to look to oh may God give us grace in all of this let's conclude let me just say that

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