

Unity in the Church:

Lessons from Acts 6 for Modern Believers

Take your Bibles and turn with me to Acts chapter six. I'm glad the Bible is truthful and transparent—it tells us how it was and how it is. This account isn't whitewashed; it shows us that even the early church had difficult times. Spirit-filled Pentecost had exploded upon these people. Great things were happening, yet they still had issues. Issues are just part of living. Amen?

The Biblical Account

Now, in those days when the number of disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. The twelve summoned the multitude of disciples and said it wasn't desirable that they should leave the Word of God and serve tables. Therefore, they asked the brethren to seek out seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, to appoint over this business. The apostles would give themselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

And watch this—the whole multitude agreed. That's a miracle when everybody in the house agrees! Oh, the power of agreement. Sometimes I think we might all be in the same book, but are we on the same page?

Understanding the Context

The church was experiencing growth pains. Disciples weren't just being added to the church—they were being multiplied. In Acts chapter two, after Peter's sermon, 3,000 people were added to the church. Later, 5,000 were added, and then multitudes started coming. It was phenomenal growth.

The growing church was a cross-section of society in Jerusalem and Judea. You had your homegrown believers who spoke Hebrew fluently. They knew Greek as a second language, which made sense since it was the language of trade and commerce since Alexander the Great. Then you had the Jews born outside

Palestine, who we call Hellenists in our text. They spoke Greek but didn't know Hebrew. They were considered outsiders by many.

The Challenge of Making Everyone Feel Welcome

You know, as the church begins to grow, you've got to really be on guard about making everyone feel welcome. How do you make somebody that walks through the door feel as welcome as somebody who's walked through the door 500 times? How do you make them feel like they're part of the family as much as anybody else? That's a real challenge that every church, and especially an expanding church, has to deal with.

Satan's Methods and God's Unity

Throughout centuries, Satan has had two major methods to hinder God's work. The first is inward dissension—stirring the nest, creating friction. The second is outward persecution, which we'll see later in Stephen's life. Do you think the devil is happy when disciples are being multiplied and the church is growing and needs are being met and people's lives are being changed? No, he's not.

In Ephesians 4:3, the Bible tells us to endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. That word "endeavor" means you're going to have to work hard at it. You have to intentionally arm yourself and guard your actions and attitudes regarding one another in the House. This is your job as a believer, as a soldier in the army of God—to keep the unity, the oneness.

Psalm 133, verses one and two says, "Behold, how good, how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity." I love that word "pleasant"—it's such a warm and fuzzy word. It's like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. Israel understood what this image was. It's saying that our unity, our love for one another, our support of each other is like when Aaron, the high priest, is anointed with oil and it runs down, beading up on his beard, running down on his garment, going all the way from top to bottom. This high priest is absolutely saturated with his anointing oil.

The Orchestra of God

We're instruments of God, kind of like the orchestra of God. Think about the first violinist—key position in the orchestra. They're the one that gives the note that every other instrument in the orchestra will tune itself to. Jesus has to be allowed to sit first fiddle in our lives. We have to bring our hearts and our lives and our attitudes and our actions in tune with Jesus Christ. We can't allow him to be made second fiddle.

Three Opportunities in Church Problems

1. Examining Our Ministry

Problems give us the opportunity to examine our ministry and discover necessary changes. Growth creates problems that demand change. The real question isn't if we want to grow—it's are we willing to change?

Henry Ward Beecher called success "last year's nest from which the birds have flown." Any ministry that thinks its success will continue automatically is heading for disaster. We need to stop periodically, especially during a season of phenomenal growth when you can start taking things for granted, to examine our lives and reevaluate our ministry.

2. Exercising Faith

Church problems give us an opportunity to exercise faith not only in the Lord but also in one another. You know, I didn't want to be a leader. I really didn't. I stuttered. I just wanted to serve the Lord. And one day God called me, and I thought, "Oh, I'll serve you, Lord, but I don't want to be a leader." The thought of standing up before people was just my worst nightmare. If I had a report to give in class in high school, I'd break out in great hives. But sometimes people and leaders are the problem, and as the apostles analyze what's going on, they say, "Wait a minute. We've contributed to this."

3. Expressing Love

Problems give us the opportunity to express our love. And really, isn't that what the church is supposed to be all about? Remarkably, all seven chosen deacons had Greek names and were from the Greek-speaking group—the minority who

had voiced the complaint. This shows the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the Hebrew-speaking believers.

Love is a universal language. You may not know what I'm saying, but you know what I'm doing. You can see what I'm doing, and you can know that love abides. That's supposed to be the language of the church. You know, the New Testament says God is love. So when love is in the place, when love's at work, God's at work—genuine love, love from above.

The Results and Looking Forward

The blessings of God continued and increased. The Word of God continued to spread through the community. The number of disciples multiplied beyond what anyone could have imagined. And here's something amazing—many priests became obedient to the faith. God was reaching right into the temple, touching the hearts of religious leaders, some of whom might have even been involved in the crucifixion of Christ.

I see every pew full. I don't know if you do, but I see the pews filled more than once. Will you dream with me? Can you believe with me? I don't think it's something that I've conjured up in my heart. I think the hour in which we live demands that the church finally wakes up and steps up and lives up to what God has called it to do.

Closing Questions

As we close, I want us to consider three important questions. First, do we want to grow? It's a fundamental, primary question we need to answer. Second, are we willing to pay the price for growth? Growth is based upon the anointing of God flowing, and that's based upon our unity with one another. And third, are we willing to change to maintain the growth?

Remember, even a deacon who "served tables" like Stephen went on to perform miracles—the first person other than an apostle to do so in Scripture. He was a humble man, full of the Holy Spirit. The power of God was upon him, and he served other people. God can use anyone who serves humbly and is full of the Holy Spirit.