

When the Spirit Makes for Trouble

Acts 6:1-6

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Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. (2)And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. (3)Therefore, my brothers and sisters, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. (4)But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." (5)And what they said pleased the whole multitude, 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. (6)These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them.

The book of Acts, from which this passage has been read, begins with the miracle of Pentecost, that dramatic moment in which, through the power of the Spirit, all barriers seem to come down, and the Mede and the Parthian can understand as well as the Cappadocian and the Elamite, and the Spirit is poured upon young and old, male and female. At Pentecost, all these various people heard the Gospel. But they were not all made to understand the Aramaic that the apostles spoke. The text tells us that they each understood "in their own tongue."

At Pentecost, God had pronounced a divine and final "NO" upon any incipient "Aramaic-only" movement that might have been brewing among the disciples. The church of the Spirit is a church in which all hear, "each in their own tongue." I could say much more about that, particularly in the light of some current events and movements. But we have a saying in Spanish, "al buen entendedor, pocas palabras bastan" —which could be roughly translated into English as "a word to the wise is sufficient." Or, as the Good Book says elsewhere, "those who have ears, let them hear."

Yet, even in the book of Acts, not all is rosy. In chapter 5 Ananias and Sapphira drop dead for having lied to the Spirit. And now here in chapter 6, we are told that "the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution."

Let us look more clearly at the dynamics involved in these brief opening verses. First of all, it is important to understand that all these people are Jewish Christians. Those whom the text calls "Hebrews" are in reality Aramaic-speaking Jews, people from Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Those whom the text calls "Hellenists" are also Jews. But they have become much more Hellenized than their "Hebrew" counterparts. Most likely, they grew up away from Palestine, and they speak Greek much more fluently than Aramaic. The Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians are the leadership in the church. That is not surprising: they are the natives of the area. (Although they are also Galileans, and as such are marginalized by the "in" crowd in

Jerusalem, as the Gospel and the early chapters of Acts have made abundantly clear.) They are the inheritors of the original proclamation of the Gospel. The Greek-speakers are the newcomers. That much is clear. Within the earliest church, the Hellenists are at a disadvantage.

So the Greek-speaking portion of the congregation is somewhat marginal within the Jerusalem church—and also within the religious structure of the city as a whole. Their widows do not feel they are being fairly treated in receiving support from the whole congregation. And they are probably right.

There is murmuring. And the murmuring is against the leadership, against the twelve. Indeed, a few verses earlier Luke has told us that those who sold properties and brought the proceeds for the relief of the needy “laid them at the apostles’ feet.” The apostles were responsible for the management of resources, and if there was criticism, it was ultimately directed at them.

So, what do they do? They call a meeting of the whole congregation. They did not downgrade the problem. Today some would say that the problem is that some widows do not know their place. We have already given them something. Something is better than nothing. Let them be quiet and take what is given to them or go away and leave us alone. Today we would speak of “the problem of the widows” or the “problem” of one ethnic minority or another, or the “problem” of immigration. But the fact is that, if one reads the book of Acts as a whole, clearly the widows were not the problem. The problem was the Holy Spirit, who on that day of Pentecost was poured on all flesh, young and old, sons and daughters, and invited all to join, “Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphilia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians.”

The problem is not caused by the widows or by the Hellenists or by any ethnic minority. The problem is caused by that subversive Spirit of God, who bloweth from where the Spirit listeth, and who destroys all our neat patterns and classifications. And because the problem was caused by the Spirit, the leadership took it seriously and decided something needed to be done. (Note also that the reason moving them to action was that there was “murmuring.” They did not try to ignore the complaints of those who felt left out. They did not wait until somebody began picketing the church nor even until a caucus was formed.)

The “something” to be done would involve a new administrative structure. The Twelve decide that they have the charge to proclaim the Gospel—evidently largely in Aramaic—and cannot in good conscience spend their time organizing the relief work for the widows. It is important that someone do that, however, and the present arrangement is unsatisfactory.

So, the leadership suggests that the congregation is to choose seven from among its members to carry out such tasks. And here comes the *first great surprise*. Today we have a solution for this kind of “problem.” If we are slightly enlightened, we appoint a token member to the committee dealing with the distribution of resources. If we are a little more enlightened, we set up a quota for such tokens. If we are still more enlightened, we allow those minority representatives to administer that part of *our* resources that *we* have set aside for them. Sometimes, if we want to show we are really enlightened, we find a person from the marginalized group to whom we give a big title and little power. But that is not what this congregation does. Those who are chosen all

have Greek names. Some might be natives, but chances are most are not. At least one is listed as a proselyte from Antioch—a Gentile who had become a Jew. So this congregation, where presumably the majority are still Aramaic-speaking, chooses leadership that empowers those who had been more marginal.

But there is more. Given the political situation, empowering the Greek-speaking segment of the congregation may well have been a courageous thing to do. It implied a sharing of leadership with a new part of the community. It gave leadership to those who might raise even more questions about the church in the wider city. It would lead to strife and conflict that might possibly be avoided if the Apostles had refused to expand the leadership beyond their own small group. (And we know that it did, for in the very next chapter of Acts, persecution will break out against the church. It will break out first of all against these Hellenistic Jews who have become Christians, such as Stephen. And, if you read the story carefully, you will see that for the first time in the book of Acts, the enemies of Christianity were able to gain the support of the people and to join their efforts with those of the high priests, the scribes, and the elders, in order to suppress Christianity.)

You see, the Hellenists were not “respectable folk” in good Jewish society. Some of the more traditional Jews felt that they were not real Jews and should go back home. Some among the more nationalistic feared that, just as God had punished Israel in ancient times for lack of total obedience, so now God was punishing Israel, subjecting it to Roman rule, precisely because these Hellenists, these newcomers, were not as strict as they should be in their religious practices.

One may well imagine the arguments that could have been adduced against appointing them. If the financial resources of the church are put in the hands of these outsiders, giving will surely go down! When you come to church to be fed, both spiritually and materially, do you want one of those people to be in charge of the table? If it were today, we could find a dozen reasons for not taking the radical steps that the early church took. And we would convince ourselves that we were doing it out of love for the church!

The twelve had an alternative. They could have refused to empower the Hellenists. They could have kept the purse strings. But, had they done so, the miracle glimpsed in Pentecost would have been undone.

But that is not all. Then comes the *second great surprise*. The Twelve had decided that they would give the management of resources to the Seven and that they would keep for themselves the ministry of the Word and Prayer. But then, what does the very next verse, verse 8, say?

“And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.” And the result is that Stephen ends up preaching. The Twelve may have decided that the Seven would not preach. But the Spirit had other plans, so that the rest of chapter 6 and all of chapter 7 are taken up with the story of Stephen’s preaching. (Actually, the longest sermon in the entire book of Acts is this sermon by Stephen, who is not even supposed to be preaching!)

Then chapter 8 turns to Philip, another of the Seven who was not supposed to preach. And by chapter 9 our attention shifts again, focusing now, not on one of the Twelve nor even on one of the Seven, but on one who was standing by during the martyrdom of Stephen.

You see, the Twelve are structural conservatives. They apparently believe that

their task is to preserve the structure that existed in the beginning, perhaps with some minor adjustment. And so in chapter one, even before they receive the Spirit, they attempt to elect another to fill the gap left by Judas. Jesus appointed twelve, and twelve we must be, says Peter. (Note also that Peter even sets up criteria for this election that several of the eleven did not meet: it must be somebody who had followed Jesus “beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken from us.” Read the Gospel of Luke and see how many of the eleven met that criterion.) So they go about electing someone to keep the structure whole. But apparently the Spirit had other plans, for of that Matthias whom they elected we hear not one word more.

And now, although the twelve are willing to give up the ministry of serving at tables, they are not ready to share the ministry of preaching the Word. But the Spirit is ready, “And Stephen, full of grace and power,” began preaching.

The significance of this is enormous, for there is a tendency in every church and in every denomination to think that there is a God-given structure and that this structure must remain forever, perhaps with some minor adjustments. We all know of many United Methodists who are quite liberal when it comes to the Bible, but radical fundamentalists when it comes to the Discipline. (Apparently they think that when Jesus said that not one iota would pass away, he was speaking of the Discipline!)

But no. The Twelve wanted to keep the ministry of the Word for themselves, and the Spirit had other plans.

Likewise, the Twelve asked that seven *men* be named, and the congregation did name seven *men*. I hope that if today we were dealing with an issue having to do with widows in the church, we would know better than naming seven men to deal with it! And that too is not simply the result of the modern world; it is also the work of the same Spirit who turned Stephen and Philip into the preachers they were not supposed to be.

Then there is the *third great surprise*, the surprise of the entire book of Acts. Because the early church took the risk of responding to injustice by opening up its leadership, the mission progressed far beyond their own expectations—from the Hebrews to the Hellenists; from the Hellenists to the Gentiles. And who are we but the spiritual descendants of those first Gentile Christians, outsiders brought in not because the others really wanted them, but because the Spirit would not be thwarted?

The issues posed in this passage continue to this day. They continue at the level of the local congregation, and they continue at every level of the world-wide church, and they continue in seminaries and other such academic circles. The issue is simply whether we are willing to see leadership in the church going to groups that have formerly been excluded from such leadership, especially to groups whom the rest of society does not consider apt for leadership. Until we face that question squarely, all our talk about mission to Hispanics or mission to other minorities—in fact, all our talk about mission—will remain little more than talk.

And if we do face the issue, if we realize that it is not just a question of looking good or of being politically correct, but rather a question of being true to our mission, of being obedient to that subversive Holy Spirit given to us at Pentecost, then what happened in this story will happen again. And the word of God will continue to spread, and the number of the disciples will increase greatly, not just in the past in Jerusalem and in Judea and in Samaria, but today in Denver and in Colorado and in the entire nation and to the end of the earth. So be it!