

# Acts 6:1-7

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[ 0 : 00 ] Acts chapter 6. And it's on page 914 in the Church Bibles.!

What is the greatest risk to the Church in the Church?! A radical LGBT plus agenda.

Authoritarian government. Take your pick. However, in Acts chapter 6, the threat, I would want to argue, is far more subtle to the Church, but just as dangerous.

In Acts 4 and 5, do you remember that? We were in it in November. There is opposition to the spread of the Gospel. More and more people are becoming Christians. More and more people are being added to the Church. At the start of chapter 5, you see the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira.

They are insiders, well-respected members, and yet are found to be hypocrites. Chapter 5, verse 41, you've got this remarkable verse, haven't you?

[ 1 : 22 ] That the disciples, Peter and John, they left the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name of Jesus.

These men had just received a beating from the Judaizers. They'd been warned not to speak any more about Jesus, but they rejoiced in it. They were glad. And so, can you see, in the early chapters of Acts, we have enemies within and enemies without.

And of course, behind these attacks are the malevolent influence of the devil. He attacks from every angle, doesn't he? And having failed to destroy the Church from the outside, from pressure and hypocrisy, he goes for his most subtle attack of all in Acts chapter 6.

That of distraction and diversion from the real priorities of the good news of the Lord Jesus. Our section is pretty obvious. So, verse 1 is the presenting problem.

And then verses 2 to 6 are the resolution to the problem. And then in verse 6, we get the results. So, let's look at the presenting problem. The chapter begins, doesn't it, chapter 6, verse 1 of Acts, with a growing church.

[ 2 : 39 ] A growing church. And we need to realise that with any growing church, there are problems that come hand in hand in that. And here, it is murmuring and grumbling.

So, chapter 6, verse 1. In those days, when the disciples were increasingly in number, a complaint by the hellness. A better translation of that is grumbling.

The word is literally kind of grumbling and murmuring. What noise does your stomach make when it's grumbling? What noise does it make? It makes that noise, doesn't it?

That is the sense of the word. Literally, the sound of the word. Here, there is grumbling by the Hellenists, the Greeks, against the Hebrews.

And both of those things, this grumbling and murmuring, are because the church has grown. Can you see, it's a problem of a living church.

[ 3 : 43 ] In this church, in Acts chapter 6, there are people of all sorts of backgrounds. There are Hellenists, and there are Hebrews, Greeks, and Jews. There are widows and families.

There are rich people and poor people. There are insiders and outsiders. There are old-timers and newcomers. And every real living church knows that when you get a cross-section of people, there will be friction.

The eternal reality of every living church is that we are one in Christ Jesus. We are one in Christ Jesus, and we have to keep putting off the old self and putting on the new self in Christ, reminding ourselves of that.

And when we see murmuring and grumbling about the ministry in the church, it is a sure sign that actually we're not focusing on the true reality of eternity. We're not focusing on who we are in Christ.

We're focusing too much on the passing earthly realities of this world. And so instead of thankfulness that other people are being added to the church and being brought into Christ, there is, verse 1, grumbling that our needs aren't being met.

[ 5 : 04 ] Every single one of us is a grumbler by nature. That is certainly the natural drift of my heart. Interestingly, in verse 1, we're not told whether this neglect of widows was real or not.

Or whether it was just a perception. It seems safe to assume that there was some kind of oversight. Some people were missing out, particularly these Greek widows. There were many Jewish widows, many women who had lost their husbands in the kind of scattering of the diaspora.

And some had come back to Jerusalem to live out their days there. And wonderfully, many of those widows had come to faith in the Lord Jesus.

They'd been added to the church. They'd believed the gospel. However, this church had to suddenly deal with an influx of newcomers and outsiders. And you can well imagine a situation when there's great growth in a church that things get hard to manage and change is difficult. And church growth is never a tidy thing. There are times out there, we've experienced that, times when the Lord has wonderfully answered our prayer for growth. But that same growth brings challenges, difficulties, tension, even conflict.

[ 6 : 34 ] And as churches grow, it is very, very easy to feel left out. And so here they begin to grumble. And probably here in Act 6, there is a genuine reason for the neglect.

But it's very important for you and I to notice what Luke is telling us. That they were wrong to grumble or murmur. That's clearly implied by the language that Luke uses.

The words that he uses in the Greek, murmuring, grumbling, complaining. That is always a negative thing in the Bible. So Luke, in the language that he's using, is describing this situation.

And he's alluding to what happened in the Old Testament. He's wanting you and I to make that connection. Think back to the people of God in the wilderness. They'd come out of Egypt. They were God's people.

But now they're in the wilderness. What characterized God's people when they were 40 years in the wilderness? Do you remember? What was it that was the great mark of that generation?

[ 7 : 37 ] They were grumblers. They murmured. They complained against Moses. But ultimately they complained against the Lord. And in Exodus chapter 16 and 17 you see this incredible contrast to Exodus 15.

Exodus 15, they've come out of Egypt. They're singing songs of victory. They couldn't be more delighted. But in the very next chapter, Acts 16, verse 2, the whole congregation of the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.

God gives them, doesn't he, miraculously manna. Every morning they got up and they were given this kind of honeycomb to eat. And then they grumble against that. And God gives them quail.

He gives them what they need. But remarkably they go on grumbling. And the Lord says in Numbers 14, how long shall I bother? How long will this wicked congregation grumble against me? I've heard the grumbings of the people of Israel, which they grumble against me. The end of the story is this, isn't it? That the Lord judges that generation.

[ 8 : 50 ] That generation is cast off. And in Acts 6, it's the same word that's used. We may very well think that grumbling is an insignificant thing.

It's no big deal. But it is a big deal in the Lord's eyes. And this grumbling, resenting, murmuring in church is actually a grumbling against God himself.

And it's incredibly dangerous. All you need to do is go home and read the books of Exodus and Numbers. And you'll see that their focus was on the world's thinking and this world's priorities.

And so they grumbled. In Acts 6, what's the issue over? It's over food and drink, isn't it? But in church life, it can be a whole host of issues, can't it?

That we grumble over. The focus of the grumblers is not on the eternal kingdom of the Lord Jesus. However legitimate the issue may be, and it seems to be legitimate in Acts 6, grumbling and resentment is a sign that our eyes, biblically speaking, are on Egypt and not on the promised land.

[ 10 : 05 ] To use the words of Philippians 3, where Paul speaks so boldly to them, your God is your belly, not the God who gave you citizenship in heaven. And it wasn't because they were all fatties in Philippi, when he says your God is your belly.

He's saying your focus is here now. That's why the New Testament is really clear and commands us not to be grumblers like they were in the Old Testament.

So 1 Corinthians 10, Paul says to the Corinthians, don't grumble and be destroyed as they were by the destroyer. It's a tough, isn't it, and an unpleasant message.

Paul says these things happened, they happened as warnings, they were written down for your instruction and mine. Philippians chapter 2, he commands again, do all things without grumbling or resentful murmuring.

Paul, can you put the bins out? Can you do the food bin? It's nearly impossible, isn't it, not to grumble and moan at that point, I find.

[ 11 : 17 ] Who's left the... Yeah. But it's a challenge, isn't it? Do all things without grumbling or resentful murmuring.

Children, do you hear that? Do all things without grumbling or murmuring. That's a great word from the Lord for me.

In Acts 6, there were real issues to be addressed. But the way to resolve those issues, can you understand this? The way to resolve those issues is never resentful murmuring. It's often the case that grumbling arises from misunderstanding.

And my guess is that is the case here. I think many problems in church life arise from misunderstanding.

But misunderstanding often occurs because you and I are very ready to misunderstand. I found it really surprising.

[ 12 : 30 ] I don't think I had any idea how people, including myself, misunderstand things. And the truth is, we often misunderstand because deep down in our hearts, there's a spirit of self-focus.

The easy spirit of discontent. I find that in my own heart. And if you're anything like me, you tend to easily put a negative construction on things first, not a positive.

And we can easily assume the worst, can't we? And not the best because the drift of our hearts is towards uncharity rather than charity.

Paul, again, in 1 Corinthians 13, says, Love is kind. Not resentful. It doesn't murmur. And I have to pray about many of you.

Help me to think well of you. And you have to pray that too. Lord, help me to think well of that brother or sister. As I read Acts 6, I find myself often reacting like these widows, grumbling, murmuring.

[ 13 : 49 ] I can easily assume there was a simple oversight. And I think, no, no, it's deliberate, studied, neglect. Intentional. And here in Acts, there's an oversight.

Probably because of the wonderful growth of the church. The apostles could barely cope with the growing situation. But the natural assumption of people is, we're being neglected. I'm being left out. They don't care about me. I'm not in. And so we feel we're on the outside. And that spirit is really common in church life, isn't it?

And it's easy for you and I to fall into this, no one cares about me attitude. Nobody thinks I'm important.

Resentment builds. Bitterness begins to grow. And it's exactly at that point that the devil gets a foothold. And Satan is right in there, stirring up murmuring and resentment.

[ 14 : 55 ] And so people get together. And instead of sharing encouragement about the gospel and each other, rejoicing in people being converted and finding salvation, of the church growing, they speak of the problems and the perceived slight or the things that really ought to be done better in the church.

And even things that are good can have faults in our eyes, can't they? And pretty soon, everything is disastrous. We have this exact warning in Hebrews 12, see to it that no one fails to attain the grace of God, that no root of bitterness springs up and causes us trouble, that we might become defiled.

It's precisely what the devil is trying to do in Act 6, to stir up resentment and murmuring, to work with the natural drift of our hearts. And it's a tactic that the devil has used very effectively in the church in the UK.

And he will do it in a growing and lively church. In every church where God is at work, the devil will be trying to do this. So secondly, let's see the resolution of the problem.

The resolution of the problem, the response of the gospel, the apostles in verses 2 to 6, is they resolutely set the priorities of church's ministry. They manage it.

[16:22] We can say that. And I think that's a surprise. In Acts chapter 6, it's not a super spiritual response. They recognize that behind this practical issue is a spiritual issue.

And the very first thing that the apostles do in seeking to resolve this is they put the gospel of Jesus Christ right at the center. Right at the center of the church's life.

And when they've done that, they put the gospel at the center, then they work out the practicalities that come from it. So notice there's no knee-jerk reaction to the practical issue.

How they don't rush to pander to the complainers. It's very tempting to do that. The temptation, I find, is to want to go to those people, massage their egos, make them feel a little bit special.

And the result is they calm down, things are smoothed over. And there's peace again. The big problem with that approach is this.

[17:23] It reinforces that the way to get attention in church is by murmuring and complaining. On a completely side note, nothing to do with act sex.

All right. When little children are crying in church, isn't it? We need to put up with that. Because if the first response of parents is just to rush out with them, what does the child learn?

If I cry my eyes out, I get taken out of the service. All right. So let's be patient with mums and dads.

So crying, murmuring, grumbling. We don't want that the way to get attention.

Now that is nothing to do with act sex. All right. But it's a very, very helpful sideline. All right. And so it would be very easy for the apostles to drop everything, to devote themselves to temporal needs to the widows, drop the teaching of the word and prayer, and go into a PR frenzy.

Their popularity would have soared. And they would have flung themselves into this issue of the widows. But actually they resolve to keep the gospel of the Lord Jesus and the word of God and prayer firmly at the center of church's life.

[18:33] Look at verse 2. 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. On first reading, that might not sound like a rebuke, but the clear implication is this, that the grumbling was about what they think the apostles should be doing.

The grumbling is against the apostles and their priority. These people, all they do is preach and pray. And the apostles are adamant that the ministry of tables is not a priority for them over the ministry of the word.

They refuse to be that diverted from the ministry of the word and prayer. However, we need to notice, don't we, that they didn't say that the ministry is important. And we're just going to stick with that.

That's all we're going to do. They didn't say, we're not going to address this problem. We'll just preach and pray. That's all I do. We won't reorder the church and change the church.

We're not going to get involved in the reforming and managing of the church. All we'll do is preaching and praying. They didn't say that. And so it is possible, isn't it, to have the gospel where it is preached and taught, but the principles of the gospel don't work themselves into church life.

[19:49] I think it's one of the real sadnesses of the last 70 years that there's often been churches where the gospel has been preached, where there's been a faithful preaching ministry, the word has been taught, but it hasn't actually changed the church.

And the congregations have been really happy to have a kind of evangelical gospel preaching man in the pulpit, but they haven't allowed that to change the structures of the church.

And so it's why, in times of crisis, or when there's a time to call a new minister, the gospel that's been preached for 20 or 30 years is actually denied by the decisions that are made.

Some of you will know that the Church of Scotland had many, many faithful men preaching the gospel, but they didn't change their churches.

And so when it came to making a stand, the churches weren't equipped to do it. And we see it in the Church of England, don't we? Churches being really happy to have good preachers, faithful preachers, but that same gospel has not been applied into their structures and into church life.

[20:59] Into the nitty gritty of how we relate to one another. It's not driven the priorities into the church. And so when it comes at a point to stand and do something and take action, well, nothing happens.

Driving the priorities of God's word into a congregation's life is hard and difficult. There's a real difference between a gospel-preaching pulpit and a gospel-preaching church.

And that distinction is eradicated only by the hard work of applying the gospel into the life of a church family. And so as a church grows and develops, that inevitably means change has to happen.

And a refusal to make those changes will just resist in blockage and increasingly will become a focus for division and complaint. And what the apostles are doing here is they are driving the principles of the gospel firmly into the church's life.

They're saying and they're showing that eternal issues, eternal issues must drive us as a church family. Not the temporal ones.

[ 22 : 21 ] It's not right to have it the other way around. They're saying we will not give up gospel proclamation to focus on another kind of ministry. The principle is that the gospel must drive the ministry of the church.

And it will dictate how the church is run and managed. And so verse 3, pick out from among you seven good men of good repute, full of the spirit and of wisdom, and we'll appoint them to this duty. They're spiritual men. And their chief focus above everything else was the gospel, even in the ministry of tables. That's the kind of person who is needed for practical ministry in the church. It's not two spheres. One is spiritual, one is practical. Practical ministry is always profoundly spiritual. It is implication, isn't it, for our church deacons.

Here is the seed of church deacons. You're not just looking for people who are good up a ladder or are good practically. You're looking for spiritual people whom the Lord has equipped with gifts that can help others.

[ 23 : 31 ] It's interesting to note that all the names appointed are Greek names. Which would have certainly helped, wouldn't it, when they were dealing with the hellness. None of these things would have been easy to implement.

But it is part of the ministry of the word to apply these things into the structures and life of the church. We are not told how long these decisions took to come about in Act 6.

And we're only given a few verses. But I don't think that means it was a short process. Managing change in church life comes only with much discussion, disagreement, prayer, frustration, even tearing what little hair you have left out.

You often say about many of these issues, we do not know. We don't know what to do. But that's realistic, isn't it?

That's what church life is like. The apostles had to give time and attention to the problem of order. That they would establish a right pattern of ministry permanently. It's why it's right in elders meeting that we give attention to the oversight of the church in looking at the various ministries, managing change in the congregation, discussing different ways of working, putting the priority of word and prayer at the centre of church life.

[ 24 : 55 ] And your elders have to do that because gospel principles drive gospel priorities. It's been stated, isn't it, often by preachers, keeping the main thing the main thing.

The main thing of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And that takes hard work as well as preaching and prayer. It is the calling of elders to grasp difficult nettles in church life.

It is the calling of elders to make difficult decisions which will not always be popular. So that the priority of the gospel is driven into the nooks and crannies of church life.

Thirdly and finally, the results. the problem, the resolution, the results. Verse 7 gives us the results. The word of God continued to increase, grow, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly.

Other parts of Acts were added to the church, but here it is multiplied greatly. And a great many of the priests, the very people, who had been opposing the gospel in the early part of Acts, became obedient to the faith.

[ 26 : 15 ] It's one of the key phrases in Acts. The word of God spread, chapter 1, verse 7, chapter 12, 24, 13, 49, 19, 20. The word of God spread.

And we can see in Acts chapter 6 that knowledge and understanding of the gospel grows inside the church and outside. The influence and the rule of King Jesus expands.

The two are linked together. As knowledge and understanding become deeper in the life of the church, therefore the church affects the world more and more. And the result in Acts 6 is multiplying greatly.

It's an extraordinary thing that these priests who had been so adamantly against the gospel are being added to the faith. They bowed the knee to King Jesus. And that happened because more

and more the church became obedient to the faith themselves and more obedient to the Lord Jesus and his promises.

They became more obedient to his priorities and not their own. To their heavenly citizenship, to their heavenly calling, they sought first the kingdom of God. God. How do we resist the devil seeking to destroy us through dissension and distraction, through murmuring and grumbling?  
[ 27 : 45 ] We put the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal gospel, resolutely at the center of church life and the priority in the church's mission.

And so whether we are ministering God's word or whether we are serving at tables side by side contending for the faith, surely that is one of the purposes of the Lord's Supper, isn't it?

And that the Lord's Supper reminds us to keep the main thing the main thing. That what are we to proclaim? We proclaim Christ's death until he comes.

And when we do that, when a church does that, his presence will overshadow everything that is done. And his grace and his power will be seen and he will add.

Ordinarily, the church of Jesus Christ grows. He will add, he will even maybe multiply the number of disciples. Because Jesus Christ says, I will build my church.

[ 28 : 53 ] and the gates of hell will never be able to prevail against the church that has the gospel of Jesus Christ as its ultimate priority.

May that be so for IPC Ealing. Let's pray together. Thank you.