

# “How To Thrive In An Imperfect Church”

Acts 6:1-7

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## Introduction

This is our sixth Sunday in the book of Acts, as we are moving through the book. By now you know that the book of Acts is about the church, about its beginning and first 30 years. Beyond the history, the book gives us many principles for the church. Some people have studied Acts to find the elements or principles for building the perfect or ideal church.

Most people have some concept of an ideal or perfect church, and each person's ideal has its own distinctive mix of features. A rich man went to his pastor and said, “I want you and your wife to take a long trip to the Holy Land at my expense. When you come back, I'll have a surprise for you.” Soon the pastor and his wife were off to the Middle East.

When they returned home the wealthy man picked them up at the airport. He told them while they were gone he had a new church built, “the finest building money can buy!” And it was magnificent, both outside and in.

But, the pastor noted an unusual feature. There was only one long pew in the sanctuary, and it was at the very back. So he asked, “How can you have a church with only one pew way in the back?” “Just wait until Sunday,” the man told him.

When Sunday came, the first people sat in the one pew. When it was full, a switch clicked silently and automatically the rear pew began to move forward. At the same time, another empty pew came up from below at the back and more people sat down. And so it continued, pews filling and moving forward. And for the first time in all the pastor's ministry, the front pew was completely full!

“Wonderful!” the pastor said to himself. “It's perfect!”

The service continued. The pastor was still going strong with his sermon when 12 o'clock came. Suddenly a bell rang and a trap door in the floor behind the pulpit dropped open.

“Wonderful!” said the congregation, “It's perfect!” We have all sorts of different ideas about a *perfect church*.

The first church in Jerusalem was less than perfect. While it was imperfect, the people kept responding to Christ and growing in Him. Last week we saw how they met positive and negative challenges. Today we see them thriving in spite of their imperfections. Christ wants Knox Church, every church, to be a thriving church. There are some lessons in these brief seven verses on “*How To Thrive In An Imperfect Church*.”

## Face The Reality Of Being In An Imperfect Church.

It begins with facing the reality that we all are in an imperfect church. We need to

understand that problems never take a holiday. All of us get some holidays. University students are just finishing reading week—a week off from classes. Winter getaways and breaks are starting to give way to spring breaks. And then, of course, there will be the summer weekends away and holidays. For some, whether it is 2, 3, 4 or more weeks of holidays a year, it never can be too much.

Problems do not have an off season. We can never count on them packing their bags and taking a break.

Notice the timing of this problem in the Jerusalem church.

“Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.” (6:1)

Luke wants us to catch the connection of this event to what was going on. Starting with the birthday of the church at Pentecost in chapter 2 on through chapters 3-5 we see the church thriving. It was ...

- growing dramatically in numbers;
- enjoying fellowship and unity;
- engaging in effective ministry.

Persecution had begun in small ways and there was that internal challenge to purity, but things were going well. They were thriving.

It was “now at this time” that a problem arose which could have torn the church apart. “Problems never take a holiday.” We live in an imperfect, fallen, sinful world. As believers, we are imperfect and face ongoing spiritual warfare without any cease fires. When problems pop up we can jump to the “Why?” “Why now?” “Why me?” and “What does it mean?” questions. We may or may not find some answers. However, we always can evaluate the problem and take action that pleases God through His power which enables us to overwhelmingly conquer through Christ.

Not only do problems never take a holiday, but they can threaten unity and vitality. The church was Jewish, but still had distinct divisions. Chapter 2, verses 9-11 lists at least 16 areas of origin and/or groups of people who heard the gospel proclaimed in their own languages at Pentecost, including people from Egypt to the south all the way to Rome in the west. Jewish people with differing native languages and cultural backgrounds. As well, Jerusalem was the center for the Jewish people, and some who lived in other countries and regions would move there.

Luke mentions two broad groups—“the Hellenists” or “the Hellenistic Jews,” and the “Hebrews,” or “native Hebrews.” There are different ideas about how to define the term Hellenistic here. It most likely means “one who speaks Greek,” and so refers to those whose

dominant language was Greek, not Aramaic like the majority of the native or Palestinian Jews. It is more difficult to determine if Luke is referring to Jewish people who had become assimilated into Greek culture and, if so, to what extent.

But we really don't need to understand the extent of the differences to understand the core issue of this problem. The problem was that as the church followed the highly valued Jewish tradition of providing for needy widows, "a complaint arose." Why? First note it was more than a suspicion or theory. The complaint arose "because [the Hellenistic] widows," Luke says, "were being overlooked in the daily serving of food."

Whatever the reason for them being overlooked, there was unequal treatment. Without question, this situation could lead to a serious fracture in the church. It was a clear threat to the unity and vitality of the church.

The specific problems change, but the underlying threat remains unchanged. Satan's forces seek to take differences between God's people and use them to divide us. This goes along with our natural sinful tendency to not only differentiate along lines of differences, but then also to discriminate. God intends His people's differences to draw them together, never to divide them.

How do you thrive in an imperfect church? The first step is to face the reality of being in an imperfect church where problems never take a holiday, and pose a very real threat to unity and vitality. With this in mind, we then need to make sure we...

### **Avoid The Possible Disasters Of Being In An Imperfect Church.**

Disasters come in all kinds of different shapes and sizes. Let's look at one example from the Jerusalem church's problem of one group of widows being overlooked. This example is that trying to do it all is a disaster waiting to happen.

The apostles were at the center of this church. Remember, the church started at Pentecost with about 120 people—a number which the 12 could manage. But as the church grew dramatically, and this specific problem arose which needed to be solved, they realized they could not get involved in distributing the food to make sure everyone was treated equitably.

So, verse 2 says,

“...the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.’”

Then go to verse 4,

“‘But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’”

It was not that the apostles thought distributing food, or directly overseeing the process was beneath them. Rather, they recognized their calling and office, and knew they must be true

to it.

It is reminiscent of the situation of Moses in Exodus 18.

“It came about the next day that Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening.

“Now when Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, ‘What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?’

“Moses said to his father-in-law, ‘Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and His laws.’

“Moses’ father-in-law said to him, ‘The thing that you are doing is not good. You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people’s representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God, then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do. Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. Let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this thing and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace.’”

“So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said.”

(Exodus 18:13-24)

No one can do it all. God does not expect anyone to do it all. God has not gifted anyone to do it all. Later the apostle Paul would write about the Holy Spirit distributing different gifts to people, and everyone in the church has an integral and important part to play with their unique mix of gifts and abilities (cf. 1 Corinthians 12).

The apostles recognized that their basic job description was to “devote [themselves] to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” There are two sides of the principle here for us. The first is that you cannot do, you are not called to do, you are not gifted to do, you don’t have the time or energy to do everything that needs to be done. It’s okay to say no to some things!

It's okay to try out different areas and activities, but always remembering to concentrate on ministries that are in line with your spiritual abilities.

The second side of this principle is that what is true for you is true for everyone else. It's okay for them to say no to some things. It's okay for them to try out different areas and activities, but always remembering to concentrate on ministries that are in line with their spiritual abilities.

When we forget this, it is a disaster waiting to happen. First, a disaster waiting to happen to ourselves. We can, as Jethro told Moses, "wear out." At the least, when we spread ourselves too thinly, we will not give adequate time, thought, and energy to do a good job in anything.

Then it also is a disaster waiting to happen to others. We can set bad examples that discourage rather than encourage others. We can set examples that are neither good nor right. We can give others the impression that they are neither needed nor wanted. We can give opportunities for people to grumble and complain.

The Jerusalem church moved into action on this. Action to develop and carry out corrective and preventative steps. In verses 3-6, the apostles said,

“Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.”

The apostles asked the congregation to choose seven men who would oversee this ministry. This demonstrated that they had no desire to be autocratic, top—down leaders. It was practical in that ...

- the church was so large and diverse that they themselves would have found it difficult to evaluate and balance the leadership team for this project;
- also, in this would ensure needed balance, which is evident in that each of the seven men chosen had Greek, not Jewish names;
- and, further, in doing it this way the congregation as a whole had a stake not only in the decision, but also in the success of this arrangement.

The first qualifications for these men were spiritual. An MBA or a successful career in management alone would not qualify a man to be considered.

When the congregation selected the seven men, the apostles led in prayer of dedication for them. This was not a consecration to an office in the church, such as deacons, but a time

of committing them to God for this specific responsibility.

Now fast forward to today. To avoid the disasters that can happen because we are an imperfect church, we also need to develop and carry out corrective and preventative steps for the problems we face. Good planning is very important. Action on it is vital. A plan without action is just a dream.

We need to do this together. Our leaders communicating to and involving everyone. All of us being alert and aware, picking up our responsibilities of direct ministry and support for each other.

To thrive in an imperfect church we need to (1) face the reality of being in an imperfect church and, (2) avoid the possible disasters of being in an imperfect church. Then, we can...

### **Enjoy The Benefits Of Being In An Imperfect Church.**

There are two examples of those benefits noted here. First, the benefit of sustained active ministry as we avoid the pitfalls.

Can you imagine what could have happened if the apostles had taken on the ministry of administering the distribution of food to the needy widows? A solid process would have been in place, food would have been distributed fairly, stomachs would have been filled, and people would have had no basis for complaining. But, the ministry of prayer for the people and ministry, and the preaching and teaching would have been neglected. We could not expect then to read, as we do in verse 7, that “the word of God kept on spreading.”

On the other hand, what if the seven had not agreed to accept this responsibility? This issue would have come up again and again. There would have been turmoil, a breakdown in unity and an inability to sustain active, effective ministry. The church would have been sidetracked and sapped of its unity and vitality.

As we follow the example and principles here in Acts 6 we can enjoy the benefits of sustained active ministry. Our situation and the specific results are unique to this place and time. But the principle never varies. When we face the reality that we are imperfect people in an imperfect church and avoid the potential disasters of being imperfect, we too will enjoy the benefit of sustained active ministry.

A second benefit we can enjoy is sustained genuine growth as we avoid the pitfalls. Go to verse 7,

“The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.”

Their ministry was active and ongoing, with ongoing results, with ongoing fruit! Even some of their opponents, in fact Luke tells us, “a great many” of them received Christ as Savior through their witness. That’s thriving in an imperfect church!

This principle also has not changed. As we said last week, be careful not to get caught

up in the numbers and miracles in these early chapters of Acts. We will see as we move on through the book, that they changed, although the ministry continued to be carried out faithfully and effectively.

Building on the presence and power of God in and through us, which we focused on last time, we also need to make sure we recognize our imperfections, and plan and work to make sure they don't unleash disasters. As we avoid these pitfalls, we will enjoy the benefit of sustained genuine growth.

## **Conclusion.**

Thriving in an imperfect church, in our imperfect church, requires living out the unity that the Holy Spirit has created. It requires, as we see here in the book of Acts, being diligent to preserve, to live in the unity of the Spirit.

Two men were out riding a bicycle built for two. They came to a big, long hill. It was very difficult, but finally they made it to the top of the hill. They stopped there. The man on the front turned back to his friend and said, "Boy, that sure was a hard climb!" His friend said, "Yes! And if I hadn't kept the brakes on all the way up, we would have rolled down backwards!"

Let's make sure that we all *peddle together!*

As you spend some time with God now, thank Him that He wants to bless you, to bless us, and to reach others for Him in spite of our imperfections. Ask Him to ...

- plant this truth deeply in your heart;
- to keep on shaping your character to clearly show Christ to others;
- to test all of your thoughts and motives and lead you to purity and Christlikeness that binds you together with others here and demonstrates God's glory;
- to build you and us up and to fulfill His purposes as we *thrive* here at Knox.

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