

CONTEXT:

Luke peppers his account of the early church (Acts or Luke vol.2) with summaries but, we noted, as a way to outline and understand this book, there are six strategic summaries or growth points: 6:7, 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31. This extensive and intensive record of early church life is brimming with growth: "added, grew, multiplied, prevailed" are all words applied to disciples/followers/learners of Jesus and to the word of God.

In this passage, we have the first growth summary. Luke, as he does throughout the book, brings one section—the first "Jerusalem" section of growth to a summation (Acts :8), while at the same time introducing key characters for the next part of the story in Stephen and Philip (6:5). The irrepressible nature of the resurrection of Jesus is enfleshed in the lives of his followers in the foregoing account 5:40-42. BUT.....

CONTENT:

The Problem:

v1: "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."

"Disciples increasing... a complaint arose...": (v.1)

The point of growth is the point of danger. Mainly, external problems (persecution) have been the lot of the church but here is the second internal problem, the first being in 5:1-11, where we have had the problem of Ananias and Sapphira (cp. Achan who was similarly judged in Joshua 7). Now is the mirror image of grumbling in the wilderness (cp Israel in Ex. 16:2, 17:3), which was destructive. There and here it's about food, except that here a fair point is made. Inequalities had surfaced along cultural lines (not language) between Hebrew and Hellenistic Jews. And it appears to be an ongoing problem: "were being neglected." (V1b). This vibrant life looks like it could be disrupted..... Until....

The Solution::

"and the 12 summoned the full number of the disciples and said ".(v.2a)

1: Openness: The problem was not ignored, it was not delayed by kicking the can further down the road. It was not minimised. It was dealt with.

ILLUSTRATE: South Wales: Deacon to Pastor regarding a church matter: 'Don't say: 'A little birdie told me.' Who told you? Call a spade, a spade but don't call it a garden implement.'

Matters should be in the open. (Not sensitive and private things but social and corporate issues). Transparency (though there are confidential things) can be about behaviour, teaching, rotas, people, direction etc.

Communication is vital.

2:Priority: “ It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God in order to serve tables.” (V.2b)

The apostles had been given a charge by the Lord Jesus to “make disciples.” How? Firstly, by “baptising them.....”. That was instant. Secondly, by “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” That takes longer..... lifelong learning...obedience is the goal. Now, in Acts 6, they were obedient to that call of Jesus. They refused to be sidetracked. They needed to pass on instructions, commands and were not deflected.

What are our priorities? Matthew : 6:33: “ Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things (ie. food, drink, clothing-our everyday worries) shall be yours.” What has God called you to do? Firstly, “ called to be saints/ to belong to Jesus Christ “.(Rom.1:6,7). If there was nothing else, wouldn't that be enough?

But, secondly, God does give us more: “ Paul, called to be an apostle...” (Rom.1:1). There are specific gifts and callings. They can be neglected, disobeyed: Col.4:17: “And say to Archippus, ‘ See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord.” Did he? Have you? Are you? Will you?

2 Tim. 4:6 “ Fulfill your ministry.” An exhortation is a good thing.

Does anyone say on their deathbed, ‘I wish I'd spent more time at the office.’? We are called to be good, thorough, honest, hard working etc. But we belong to God. Where are our priorities? To love God and love one another and to love a lost people ? To fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission?

3:Ministry: “Tables” : this word can also be translated as “food” or “bank”.

In John 13:1-17, Jesus gave one of His object lessons when the Master, clothed with a towel around his waist like a slave or common servant, washed the disciples feet. The purpose was to inculcate humble, obedient, caring, servanthood. Or ministry. The humble service of “tables” was not beneath the apostles’ dignity; they had a specific and different calling, in teaching the words of Jesus. Without this there would be no ministry at all. What is ministry? The same Greek word occurs 3 X. In v. 2,3 it refers to the distribution and administration of an early food bank. In v.4 it refers to the preaching/ teaching of the word of God. It is ALL ministry.

V.5: “ Stephen and Philip.....” : The 7 names appear to indicate Hellenistic Jews.(Bruce thinks it likely that they were leaders of the Hellenistic Jewish Christian community). A bold move and, it seems that the whole church, in choosing them, owned the problem. There wasn't a 4-3 majority even. It was 7 men from the Hellenists! The first 2 will be major actors in the ensuing chapters.

V.5: “7 men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” To carry out ‘serving tables’!!! (See introduction to Acts for “full” in Luke-Acts). If you add into the mix the other things attributed to Stephen, we have “ faith, Grace, power”, plus “great signs and wonders among the people”.(v.3,5,8). The CHARISMA of Stephen is built upon CHARACTER (v.3), “7 men of good repute,” CHARACTER and CHARISMA are the twin benchmarks for ministry.

What do we mean by “ ministry”? It is committed service to Jesus and others through the gifts that He has equipped us with. It is organic. I think that we can misunderstand that. e.g: we think that “discipling” or witnessing to others is yet another thing to do in an already busy schedule. That is not so. It is a call to :

A: in some instances, simply recognise that what you ARE DOING is ministry. Your view of “ministry” needs to be redefined e.g. witnessing/evangelism (ILLUSTRATE: Bob Wall, guitar player of Love Song, who was told by one of the pastors at Calvary Chapel. “Bob, you have to realise that you are a minister of Jesus.” That changed the life of a young musician who was also a young Christian.)

B: In other instances the point is to be more aware of everyday opportunities to be “witnesses” for Jesus, “disciple makers”.

It might help if we unpacked one of Charles Spurgeon’s sayings:

‘Every Christian is a missionary..... or an impostor.’

How many agree?

How many of us immediately feel bad?

Does ‘missionary’ scare you with thoughts of distant shores, cannibals, strange languages or the fear of standing and speaking before a crowd?

But what if we redefined ‘missionary’ as ‘one who joins Jesus in His Mission’? Will you do that? Not everybody travels the world like Paul. Some of us might only ever live in one place in our lifetime. We are still “called” by Jesus, to His mission, right where we are. We are not called to be embarrassing or embarrassed nags. We are called to belong to Jesus, love God, love one another and make disciples from all nations and peoples. And sometimes we get mocked, persecuted, reviled. Yet there are other times when people listen respectfully, check things out carefully and respond to the message gladly.

Stephen, a man equally at home serving food, healing the sick or speaking truth to the Sanhedrin (Jewish ruling council). With nothing contrived. This following phrase may describe him: ‘naturally supernatural and supernaturally natural.’

4: A Definition: The wall of partition as found in the Jerusalem temple was, in spiritual terms in Jesus, broken down. (Eph. 2:11-22). This will be illustrated in the book of Acts. Looking at our own church prayer, let’s just make sure that the phrase “A church without walls” is not misunderstood. It does not mean that the church without structure or cohesion. It does not mean that the gathered church is unimportant. It means that the church is open, doesn’t consciously create false barriers to others. Gather together on Sundays, reach people where you are, join a small group or let’s create some new ones. Daytime? Dinner time? At work? In a Cafe? In a pub? In your home?

The Outcome:

V.7: “And the word of God continued to increase”:

The apostles’ were free to keep teaching... part of making disciples... the word of God, therefore increased in the apostles teaching AND through all the other disciples as they reached others.

“and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.”

The first area that Jesus mentioned in Acts 1:8, Jerusalem, has been thoroughly evangelised. JUDEA and Samaria will follow in the subsequent chapters. But there are pointers beyond in that next part of the book. The apostles were freed to continue their task, to make disciples, who made more disciples, who made more.....

“ Priests”: The influencers, the High Priests, reject Jesus and His followers constantly. The priests mentioned here are the ‘everyday’ ones. For them the life of Jesus is preferable to the death of bankrupt religion. And they choose life.

ILLUSTRATE: Iranian Christians say that the best evangelist for them was the Ayatollah Khomeini, a feared, radical cleric. The emptiness of mere legalistic religion enlightened many to its spiritual bankruptcy. Resultantly, many hearts have opened to the truth of Jesus Christ in that country.

It's not Ayatollah's that you and I have to worry about. It's apathy.

As we read the Book of Acts, we discover that churches grow, disciples multiply, God acts, Jesus is central, the Holy Spirit is vital.

QUESTIONS:

1: Priorities (Section: The Solution point 2)- what are ours? Matt 6:33.

2: A radical Ayatollah or spiritual apathy. Which is the deadliest?

How do we avoid this?