

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Church Built for the Long Run

Acts 6:1-7

During today's children's sermon, we saw pictures from the early days of our church. Brothers and sisters in Christ gathered to break ground, to lay foundations, to construct walls and a roof, creating a space where we still gather, on this day, to worship the Lord. Our spiritual ancestors wanted to build a church that would last, a community that would endure and thrive as time passed. Across the years, the building where we assemble has developed and expanded. It has even taken some blows, the most recent being last November's car accident that damaged one of our fellowship hall walls. But again, as you've witnessed by recent progress on repairs, God has given us the grace, and the resources, to take a problem, address it, and move forward in our mission.

What's true of our building is also true of constructing the community of believers, the fellowship that we call Grace Baptist Church. The church as people often progresses through meeting challenges and solving problems. Take the situation described in this morning's Scripture passage from Acts. In one sense, it's a good problem. It's a problem created by church growth. The apostles have been faithfully preaching, teaching, and evangelizing. The Holy Spirit is moving. People are coming to faith in Christ, in large numbers. All this success leads to a work overload for the apostles who, among other things, are responsible for managing the church's common fund for the poor.

Turns out that some of the folks in the fellowship are beginning to grumble and complain about how some of the congregation's widows are being treated. Remember that widows were among the most vulnerable people in the ancient world. To neglect the widows was to neglect the lowly, which flies right in the face of Old Testament teaching, as well as Jesus' own preaching and practice about the kingdom of God. So when the Greek-speaking Christians began complaining against the Aramaic-speaking Christians, claiming that the Greek-speaking widows were being disregarded in the daily distribution of provisions, it got the apostles' attention.

The apostles faced the problem squarely and openly. For one thing, they simply didn't have the time to manage the distribution for the poor and at the same time do everything else they were called to do. Their job was to focus primarily on prayer and the ministry of God's word. Secondly, fall was approaching, and the Nominating Committee was already extremely busy trying to find officers and committee volunteers. So under the circumstances, the apostles decided to go straight to the people in the pews, trusting the Holy Spirit to guide in calling forth workers for the benevolence ministry.

The congregation goes to work and chooses seven men who have demonstrated a deep faith, and who have so fully given themselves to following Christ that God's saving, transforming power is clearly and consistently manifest in their lives. They've also got plenty of wisdom, which refers to their giftedness for administration and business and organization. These kinds of skills and characteristics are essential for anyone who's going to lead the church in carrying out its commitment to society's poor and vulnerable. After

all, leading the ministry to the poor, a ministry so central to the mission of the church, can't be handed off to just anybody.

So here in our text, once the congregation has finished its process of discernment, the leaders confirm the fellowship's work by praying over these men and laying hands on them. This commissions them for the task to which God has called them, and gives them the blessing of God's people.

And what happens next? Well, Luke states it pretty simply. The word of God spread and the church grew. That's what we like to hear, right? Disciples making disciples making disciples. An expanding congregation. A growing community of Jesus' followers that's focused outward on the work of God in the world, keeping up with the Holy Spirit as it brings down barriers to the gospel and forms the people of God. All signs indicate that the church is back on track, once again moving forward in the Lord's mission.

But before Luke moves on to the next part of the story, let's pause to consider what just happened in the life of the church. What was actually going on in this episode as the community of disciples moved from problem to resolution? Yes, we have a brief narrative of how it all unfolded, but if we look even closer, we can see how God was present and at work in their circumstances, forming a fellowship, building a community of disciples that could be faithful to God's mission for the long run.

Naturally, from the vantage point of Baptist thought and practice, we look to this text as part of the basis for the ministry of deacon. This is one of the foundational passages we turn to when we want to make the case for having deacons, or when we're in the process of selecting deacons. And that's perfectly justifiable. But we also need to keep in mind that the early church's primary aim wasn't to add more structure and create a new office called deacon. In this particular situation, the church's main purpose was to address a problem that was undermining the fellowship and threatening the integrity of the congregation's mission. In other words, a fractured and divided community of disciples was a contradiction of God's purposes. And so was a community of disciples that failed to provide adequate care for the poor. Something needed to be done. Something that would help the church keep in step with the Holy Spirit in the proclamation of God's kingdom. What we see in our text is how God led the church to respond to troubling circumstances. And part of what emerged was the ministry of deacon.

This episode certainly wouldn't be the last time that the church faced internal struggles or external threats. As Luke unfolds the story in the book of Acts, there are plenty of other stages where the community of disciples has to deal with conflicts and disagreements, especially the kinds of tensions that go along with being involved in cross-cultural mission. When you're devoted to spreading a gospel that announces how God's saving grace is reaching out to include people of all nationalities, languages, and cultures, you can expect issues to arise. Not the kinds of church problems that can be remedied with some new framing, insulation, drywall, and masonry. Rather, the kinds of challenges that require the congregation to be discerning, faithful, and prayerful.

But notice that as the community of believers is discerning, faithful, and prayerful, operating under the reign of Christ and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, God works to form the kind of church that's built for the long run. Here in our text from Acts, the church doesn't just "fix" a problem. Their goal isn't simply to be able to go down the checklist and say, "Okay, hungry widows issue, solved!" No, the church is about more than that. The church is involved in more than that. The church knows that it has been commissioned for

service in the reign of God. So the community of disciples comes together to seek the direction and power needed to be faithful to God's calling, God's plans, and God's purposes.

It's just one scene from the life of the early church. And as I indicated, there will be plenty more to follow. Scenes of success and scenes of failure. Scenes of progress and scenes of stagnation. Scenes of unity and scenes of strife. Scenes of clarity and scenes of confusion. Scenes of rejoicing and scenes of discouragement. Put them all together, and what you get isn't just a hodgepodge of moments in church life. What you get is the unfolding story of God's people participating in a divine mission for the long haul, trusting that they're not the only players in this drama. No, God the Holy Spirit is the primary mover and actor, continuously creating and refining the church as the instrument of his global work of salvation.

This is important for us to remember, especially as we're here celebrating our church's sixty-sixth anniversary. The story of our own church, like the story of the early church, contains many scenes, enough to fill many pages. As we flip through those pages, we can see how God the Holy Spirit has worked, in good times and bad, to spread the good news, to call disciples, and to form a congregation, bringing us to the point where we are today.

But the Holy Spirit has worked in and through people. People like us. People who come together under the guidance of God to make decisions, to develop plans, and to formulate strategies. People who establish ministries, organize meetings, and maintain buildings. People who sacrifice their time, share their talents, and give their money. And as God's people, filled with God's Spirit, come together to seek and do God's will, a congregation called Grace Baptist Church gets created. Our church is more than just an institution or an organization. It's more than just a collection of programs or a set of ministries. It's more than just a list of members, officers, and committees. Our church, like every church, is also a culture, an atmosphere, a way of doing things.

In fact, the kind of culture or atmosphere that we create within our church is as important as all the services, programs, ministries, organization, and structure. That's because it's not just the things we do in the church; it's how we do them. It's not just the decisions we reach; it's how we reach them. It's not just the plans we make; it's how we make them. It's not just the programs we provide; it's how we provide them. It's not just the ministries we carry out; it's how we carry them out. All these things come together to form a church that's not just trying to make it through each week and fix whatever problems pop up, but rather a church that's built for the long run, a church where the ministry, the fellowship, the building, and the mission thrive across the years.

This of course doesn't mean that there won't be challenges to face and problems to fix. From the day that there was disagreement in the early church over the distribution of food to the widows all the way up until today, we disciples struggle, sometimes with one another, over how best to preach and practice the gospel in our setting and context, in the unity of the Spirit.

Which means that as we each carry out our part in the ministry of our church, we have to take a big picture view of things and continually ask questions like, How is what I'm doing, and how I'm doing it, helping create an atmosphere, helping form the kinds of conditions, where our congregation can thrive over the long haul? How can we approach a particular situation, not just viewing it as a problem to fix, but as an opportunity to discern the guidance of the Holy Spirit together, and come out on the other side having actually advanced the mission of our church? How can each of us do our part in the mission of our church in a way that promotes a thriving congregation, not only now, but for the folks who

are Grace Baptist Church ten years, twenty years, thirty years from now? In short, when future church anniversaries are celebrated, what will we have done, and how will we have done it, so that folks will be able to say that we followed the Holy Spirit and formed a church that was built for the long run?