

New Wine In A New Wineskin

Series on Acts

If you ever find the perfect church, don't join it. You will spoil it. Every church I have ever been a part of has had its problems. Sometimes people ask me, "How's the church going?" Well it depends on who you ask, and when you ask, and what part of the church you are looking at. For some people, it's the greatest thing since sliced bread. For others all they can see are the wheels coming off. Actually the only thing wrong with the church are the people. If it weren't for people, church would be great. Not people like me or you, you understand. We are fine. It's just the other people. Do you know that old saying "To live above with the saints we love, oh that will be glory. But to live below with the saints we know, well, that's another story!"

The Ideal Church

When we read the book of Acts, we tend to idealize the early church. We tend to think that if only Westlake could be like the church in the book of Acts, it would be wonderful. And it would be. Wouldn't you like to be part of a church that was growing in numbers daily, and especially growing with people coming to faith in Jesus? Yes, but that's a whole lot of new people to get to know, and a whole lot of new Christians to disciple. Wouldn't we be doing a little complaining about how we don't know all these new people, and that it doesn't feel like our church anymore? Wouldn't you like to be part of a church where all the believers were one in heart and mind, and where there were no needy persons among them? To be part of a church like that would mean that we had money and wealth, we would give to those in the church who were needy. And that might be difficult. The early church must have been incredibly messy and disorganized. When you get 3000 new people join the church in one day, and there are new people being added every day, there isn't much opportunity to write the church statutes, or organize a music practice, or find recruits for the church cleaning rota. In my experience, when the Holy Spirit is at work in a church, it's an exciting shambles. The most orderly places I know are cemeteries where everyone is lined up in neat rows, and the most orderly churches I know look and feel like cemeteries. Lots of order, but not a lot of life.

Here is Luke's description of the exciting shambles called the New Testament church.

"In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food". (Acts 6:1 NIV)

The Problem With Those "Other" People

At this point in the life of the New Testament church, everyone is Jewish. But the problem is there are Greek speaking Jews and there are Aramaic speaking Jews, and they don't understand one another. The Greek speakers are complaining because their widows are not getting their daily food parcel from the church. You see, when these Greek speaking Jewish widows were worshipping at the Temple, it wasn't a problem, because as Jews, they would be looked after by the Temple authorities. But once they became followers of Jesus, their social welfare system of support was cut off. So the church found itself having to care for people who had once been cared for by the Jewish authorities. It wasn't long before there were complainers in the church. What do you do with people in the church who complain?

The Leaders of the church then could have done what churches do today with complainers.

1. Throw the complainers out of the church

Imagine if they had done that. Then there would have been the 1st Apostolic Church of Jerusalem on one corner and the 2nd Apostolic Church of Jerusalem on another corner, and when someone in one of those churches complained, there would have been a 3rd Apostolic Church and a 4th and so on.

2. Ignore the complainers

Oh, let them complain! Those Greek speaking Jews – they are always complaining. You know what the Greeks are like. Live way beyond their means, borrow money and get themselves in debt and then come to us asking for a bailout, when we have been living responsibly. Let them moan and complain. They got themselves into this mess. Let them get themselves out! Why should we hardworking Germans and Swiss bail out the Greeks?

3. Call a meeting and outvote them

That's a good tactic. We Aramaic speaking Jews outnumber them, so let's play politics at a church meeting. We will make sure we stack the vote with people who agree with us, and if we get more than 50% of the vote, we will get our way.

4. Form a committee to investigate the complaints

Hopefully, by the time the committee reports back in five years time, the problem will have gone away.

Here's what the Apostles did

"So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them." (Acts 6:2-6 NIV)

Be Part Of The Solution

If you look at the list of people chosen to wait on tables and fix the problem, there is something interesting. They are all Greek names. In other words, the Apostles went back to the people who were complaining and said to them, "You help us find a solution to this problem". And they did. They came up with a list of Greek speaking Jews who addressed the problem. There is a very good Biblical principle hidden in this scripture. When people come to the leadership with a problem, it's quite proper to ask them to be part of the solution. In one church where I was Pastor I was greeted in the first week by a church leader who said "I want to tell you what's wrong with this church". He then gave me an hour and a half of complaints about people, the youth ministry, the giving, all the reasons why the church was no good. I wondered if he had been baptised in lemon juice. When he had finished I asked him what the solutions were. He said "Oh that's not my job – that's why you are here." I thought to myself, "Now I know why this church is the way it is." It doesn't take any spiritual discernment at all to see what the problems are.

Any person with half a brain can figure that out. You don't have to have 20/20 vision to see the obstacles in front of you. The Devil will give you all the help you need to see what's wrong with the church, what's wrong with the Pastor and leaders, what's wrong with other Christians. Wouldn't our churches be better places if we said to those who complain, "let's work on some solutions"? The complaint the Greek speaking Jews had was a legitimate complaint. It was something that needed to be fixed. But the Apostles were wise enough to not say "OK, we will fix it", and add one more thing to their busy lives. They gave the ministry of serving the widows to the people who had seen the need in the first place.

Over the years, I don't know how many times I've had people say to me "Why doesn't our church do this?" or "I think the church ought to do that", and then they walk away expecting that having told me about it, or having told the Elders, it will suddenly, magically happen. It's right that new ideas and initiatives should be run by the Elders first, but I'm learning more and more that if God has given an individual or a group a passion to meet a particular need, or start a particular ministry, they are probably the ones that God wants to make it all happen.

Today we have been hearing from people who are offering themselves as Elders. If you set them apart as Elders, don't expect that they are going to suddenly meet every need we have in the church. The present Elders are already very busy with their jobs, their families, and their service to the Lord. After this church service is over and you have all gone home, the Elders will be meeting into the evening. Their role is to oversee the ministries of the church, not do it all themselves.

When the Apostles were presented with this need, they were wise enough to see that if they started addressing the needs of the widows, they would be neglecting the ministry of the Word. If they had just addressed the needs of the widows, the church would have had a wonderful social service ministry, but the gospel would not have been preached. I've seen whole denominations that have done that. The Methodist church in New Zealand is largely a church of old people, and the salvation gospel that John Wesley so passionately preached is hardly ever heard. The church is involved in lots of social service ministry, lots of waiting on tables, but waiting on tables by itself isn't growing the Kingdom of God.

Changing World - Changing Church

The first seven verses of Acts Chapter 6 are about the church that had to change in order to meet changing conditions. They had to reinvent the way they did things so that the gospel would continue to go forth. What was true for them is also true for us. If we keep doing what we have always done, we will keep getting what we have always got. Every generation has to find new ways of taking the unchanging gospel, and presenting it in ways that make sense to a new generation. The gospel message never changes, but the church has to constantly be seeking ways to present that gospel to people so that they can understand it.

New Wine – New Wineskin

Jesus talked about old wineskins that were stretched to the limit that would burst if they had new wine poured into them. New wine requires new wineskins. He said this ***"Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."*** (Matthew 9:17 NIV)

One of the things the Elders have done at Westlake is to ask Soul Magura to explore with Westlakers new ways to reach some of the thousands of English speakers between Geneva and Lausanne with the gospel. At the General Assembly Meeting at the end of this month, the Elders want to share with you our desire to put much more emphasis on mission to our local community of English speakers.

I love the way this passage of scripture finishes. ***"So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."*** (Acts 6:7 NIV) Because this church was willing to find new ways of addressing issues, it continued to grow. Because people who saw a problem became part of the solution, the church stayed unified and focused on it's purpose. Because the Apostles kept their focus on the main thing, the word of God spread. May it be so for us.

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