

Text: Acts 6:1-7

Title: “Unstoppable Ministry”

Open your Bibles to Acts 6:1. Tonight is our Evening of Prayer and Praise where our church gets down to serious praying and we want to pray for you. Later in our worship time you'll have an opportunity to share prayer requests with us. So if you have a need write it on the prayer card in your worship folder and put in the offering basket later. Also let me remind you that this Wednesday evening is our church conference where we present our budget for 2015-16. We invite you to come to hear the presentation and participate in the discussion. We'll adopt the budget on March 8 in our morning worship services. Read Acts 6:1-7.

ILLUSTRATION – When I was in college I was a youth pastor at a church in the day when everyone wore coats and ties (at least the men did). I got up late one Sunday morning and didn't have a clean dress shirt so I grabbed one out of the dirty clothes. It was all wrinkled so I quickly ironed the collar and the cuffs, thinking that was the only part anyone would see. It was so stinking hot that day that I wanted to take my coat off but I couldn't because I didn't want anyone to see my wrinkled shirt.

ILLUSTRATION – I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but ladies, do you have a housekeeper come to your house from time to time, maybe every week? How many of you spend a lot of time cleaning your house before the housekeeper comes? There are some things you just don't want anyone else to see.

It would be tempting for the Holy Spirit and Dr. Luke (the human author of Acts) to hide this next episode in the church. After all, we see here that as powerful as the early church was, they had problems, just like every church does. They didn't get everything right.

Acts 6:1a - In those days when the number of disciples was increasing...

The church is moving forward in the power of the Holy Spirit. People are being saved; disciples are being made. But even the best of churches will face challenges. But God is glorified, the Gospel is extended and our ministry is unstoppable when we remain true to our biblical priorities.

It's easy for us to lose sight of our priorities. In fact, Satan would love nothing more than to stop the Gospel ministry of the church. Satan's attacks on the church are unrelenting. First he tries to *defeat* the church through persecution. We see that in Acts 4-5 when the apostles are arrested for preaching the Gospel. (Tonight in our Evening of Prayer and Praise we'll spend time praying for the persecuted church around the world. The beheading of the 21 Coptic Christians last week in Libya is a great reminder to us.) Then Satan tries to *corrupt* the church through impurity and hypocrisy. We see that in Acts 5 with the deception of Ananias and Sapphira. If Satan can't defeat the church through persecution or corrupt the church through impurity and hypocrisy, he will try to *distract* the church by misplaced priorities. And that is what we see happening here in Acts 6. God gave the apostles the calling and assignment to proclaim the truth and the Word of God in the Gospel. If they are distracted from that priority, it will leave the church vulnerable to false teachers, not to speak of the fact that the Gospel will not penetrate the world as it should. At the same time, Jesus commanded the church to love one another and to care for one another. That's also a priority. And if they failed to care for each other it would reflect poorly on the Gospel they proclaimed.

THE PROBLEM

Acts 6:1 - 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.

There are cultural differences in the church. Most of the earliest Christians came from a Jewish background. But among the Jewish believers some came from Greek speaking regions and others came from Hebrew speaking regions. Now they are all together in the church, but these cultural differences remain.

We're not told if this was a deliberate neglect, or if it was just an oversight. For whatever reason the Grecian widows who were needy had been neglected when the apostles distributed food. Remember that we learned earlier in Acts that one of the sweet things that was happening is that there was no needy person among them. People gave sacrificially so that no one was in need. Now this system is being threatened.

THE SOLUTION

Acts 6:2 - 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.

Now it sounds like someone suggested that one solution to this problem was to ask the apostles to tend to this need. But the apostles were wise enough to know that for them to spend the time to meet that need would mean them having to neglect something they had already been called to do ... the ministry of teaching and preaching the word. The apostles are not saying, "We are above this kind of service. Find someone else to do it." They are saying that they have a calling that requires a huge amount of time, and for them to add another responsibility (no matter how important it is) would cause them to neglect something important. So to solve this problem...

Acts 6:3 - 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

Acts 6:4 - and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

Now what is happening here is that the apostles are putting into place a system that will become part of all New Testament churches. The apostles in the church in Jerusalem are setting the pattern for pastoral leaders in the churches that will come as the Gospel spreads and churches are planted. They are also setting a pattern for servant leaders later to be called deacons. These seven men are not called deacons, but the presumption is that they are the first deacons in the church.

For example, when the Gospel spread to Macedonia (Greece) and a church was established in the ancient city of Philippi, Paul addressed them:

Philippians 1:1 - Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

So there are two offices in every NT church: the office of the pastor (also called overseers or elders) and the office of deacon.

Acts 6:5 - 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.

Incidentally, these are all Greek names. The church chose men who understood the needs of all people, but particularly the ones in the minority ... the Grecian widows who were being neglected.

Acts 6:6 - They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

This pattern of testing and qualifying men for the office of deacon is spelled out in I Timothy 3. We use this passage in our interviewing of men the church nominates to serve as deacons in our church.

THE RESULTS

Acts 6:7 - 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.

Satan's attack was unsuccessful; and the ministry of the church is unstoppable. Our text begins with the note that the number of disciples was increasing. It ends with a note that the word of God spread and the number of disciples rapidly increased. And even a large number of Jewish priests were saved (a group you might expect to be resistant to the Gospel). When we remain true to our biblical priorities our ministry is unstoppable. The Word of God continues to be taught and preached to establish the church and expand the Kingdom of God. And the neediest people in the church (widows) were cared for in an effective way.

Now there are three points of application I draw from these verses:

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH

Just reading this passage shows us that there was a network of ministry that permeated their fellowship. In Acts 6:1 there is a "daily distribution of food." The word for "distribution" is the word that is often translated "ministry." In Acts 6:2 this is called waiting on or serving tables (again, the same word that is translated "ministry). Then in Acts 6:4 the apostles have a "ministry of the word," using the same word for "ministry" as in vv.1-2. There is the ministry of the twelve apostles and there is the ministry of these seven servants, later to be called deacons. But there is much more ministry than that going on in the church. Why? Because that is the heart of our Savior.

Matthew 20:28 - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Where people are filled with the Spirit of Jesus there will be service.

1 Peter 4:10 - Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

We tend to put the spotlight on certain kinds of ministry in the church, but there are many important ministries that operate in a hidden way that we could not do without.

PHOTO - ILLUSTRATION – Legendary college basketball coach Dean Smith died a few weeks ago. He was a trend-setter in basketball circles. In fact, it was Dean Smith who started something that is common today in basketball. Maybe you've seen a player after scoring a basket as they turn to run back down the court they point to someone. Dean Smith started that by teaching his players to point to the assist man. Give some recognition to the player who found the open man and passed the ball to him.

There are hundreds of roles in ministry in the church, all of which help us keep our priority on proclaiming the Word of God and caring for people.

2. THE DISTINCTIONS OF MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH

ILLUSTRATION – Just think about the Marvel Superheroes. There's a bunch of them. Maybe your favorite is the Hulk or Black Widow or Captain America or Iron Man. But they work as a team. The Hulk's solution to everything is to smash it. Captain America may not be the physically strongest, but he's a leader. Iron Man knows technology. They all have different weapons and strengths (and weaknesses). No one of us has the time, the gifts and the energy to do everything that needs to be done in the church. That's why God gave us differing gifts.

There are countless ways of serving in and through the church. Here in Acts 6 are just two ways. There is a distinction between what the apostles (pastoral leaders) are called and gifted to do and what these seven men (deacons) are gifted and called to do.

Pastoral leaders are called to teach and preach to equip the church:

Ephesians 4:11-12 - It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

So all of God's people are to be engaged in works of service (ministry). Just as pastors equip the saints for works of ministry; deacons provide the leadership in doing the works of ministry. Some churches have a "deacon board" that runs the church. But that is not the way the Holy Spirit established the office of deacon in the church. I'm grateful that we have a biblical deacon body. They are a body of servants, who lead the church in caring for everyone.

But beyond those two offices there are countless distinctive ways that ministry goes on in the church. We need to celebrate that diversity that Christ has given to His Body, the church. Find your unique place of service and glorify God in it.

3. THE EMPOWERING FOR MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH

The Seven were to be men filled with the Spirit and wisdom.

Acts 6:3a - Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.

Obviously the apostles were men filled with the Spirit. We see it repeatedly in the book of Acts to this point.

Acts 6:4 - and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

They knew that the power of the Holy Spirit for unstoppable ministry flows from prayer and the proclamation of the Word of God.

What if someone stopped you in the hallway on the way out of church today and asked, “What ministry do you have?” Could you give a quick answer? I serve in the preschool, or I help in the parking lot, or I help greet people. There are many important ministries in the church. Find your place and glorify God in it.