

Spirit Filled Conflict Management

Acts 6:1-7

*“Choose seven from among you who are known to be full of
the Holy Spirit and wisdom...”*

A sermon preached at the First Presbyterian Church of Clarksville

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This is a message on Leadership, and specifically what kind of Leaders should we seek for your church. I want to point out again the mystery of God’s providence that accompanies the reading of God’s Word. We “happen” to be in the middle of our summer series on the Book of Acts. We come today to the sixth chapter, and it “happens” to be addressing what is crucial to our church right now. Your Pastor Nominating Committee is hard at work to sort out some 85 Personal Information Forms, looking for those who have promise in becoming our next pastor. What criteria should they use in this discernment process? In August the Session will appoint an Elder Nominating Committee to recruit eight new elders to join the Session in January. What criteria should they use in their discernment process? There is a mystery about the timeliness of God’s Word, when we just give it the attention and expectation it deserves.

In the 6th chapter of Acts, we enter into this examination of godly Leadership on a negative note. We may have the misguided assumption that the Spirit-filled Church of the first century was somehow above the human foibles we deal with today, but such was not the case. Being “filled with the Spirit” does not mean we don’t also have to contend with our “flesh,” as the Apostle Paul called it--our blindness, our brokenness, our fears and struggles with the ego, our racial biases. He talked about how *“the Spirit battles against the flesh, and the flesh against the Spirit,”* and he admitted that his knowledge of this was all quite personal, in his own struggle. (See Romans 7:15-24; it reads like Augustine’s *Confessions*.) Simon Peter apparently experienced the same, as we shall see.

In chapters 3, 4, and 5 we see the Apostles at their best, evidencing a new courage and confidence to stand up against the severe resistance they experienced from the religious leaders. What was not anticipated, however, was the threat from within, what we could call “a failure of Love” within the Church. It was not intentional, but the Apostles were blind to it, insensitive. Interesting that this first inner conflict in the Church fell along racial lines, between the “Hebrews,” the native born, Hebrew speaking Jews, and the “Hellenists,” the Greek-speaking Jews of the *diaspora*. These were the Jews who, generations before, had emigrated all over the

Mediterranean region, but came to Jerusalem for the three great Jewish festivals—Yom Kippur, Passover, and Pentecost. While at the Pentecost festival, noted in Acts 2, some experienced the mysterious event of hearing the apostles speaking in their own native languages. They heard Simon Peter speaking about Jesus of Nazareth and, by the Holy Spirit’s enlightenment, they became believers.

Now, as these Hellenistic Jews and Hebrew Jews were brought together in the early Church community, they began to experience tensions. The widows of the immigrants were not experiencing the same attention as the widows of the native-born Hebrews. It was probably not intentional, but it certainly was a “failure of Love”—insensitive, blind, disrespectful, discriminatory. Sound familiar? In America, North and South, we call it racism; or more now, “racial profiling.” Racism and racial profiling was alive and well in first century Judaism. Jesus shocked his culture so much, and enraged his fellow Hebrews, because over and over again He made such a point of having the same respect, attention, and concern for Hebrews like Himself, as He had for Romans, Samaritans or Greeks.¹

The lesson in Leadership we are shown here is not that Simon Peter was faultless, but in how he handled criticism. Quite amazing, really. First, he took it seriously; second, he empowered the critics instead of silencing them; and third, he used their vision that went beyond his own, to establish new roles that ended up strengthening the Church. And because the Apostles handled the criticism in a humble, godly way, the Church ended up growing all the more because of the conflict: *“So the word of God spread, the number of the disciples increased, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”* (Acts 6:7)

This afternoon, the Pastor Nominating Committee will be meeting for 2nd interviews by phone with two candidates in whom they have an interest. They have developed a list of questions they will ask both, and we will be able to watch and hear them respond through our video conferencing *Skype* program. One of the questions that will be asked is, “How do you handle criticism?” What is of great interest to us is the question behind the question: Does this pastor experience criticism as a threat, or a friend?

Simon Peter, representing the whole council of Apostles, meets the criticism not with a “circle the wagons” defensiveness, but with a genuinely humble heart and listening ear. He takes them seriously.

Then, the Apostles empower the complainers by not clinging to their “power” and appointing the intervention team themselves. Rather, Simon Peter recognizes them as “brothers.” (=respect) and says, *“Brothers, choose from among yourselves seven men who are*

¹See John 4:1-27, John 12:20, Matthew 8:5-11, Luke 4:26-28, Acts 10.

known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them, while we give our attention to the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:3) All the names of those chosen were Greek names, not Hebrew names: Stephen, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolas, Philip, Procorus.

In doing so, something else was happening, that was much bigger than any humanly devised strategic plan could have offered. Because the Apostles had the humility and the faith to believe that the Holy Spirit was working through the criticism, an entirely new category of Leadership was born. In most Presbyterian congregations, this is seen as the emergence of the Board of Deacons, the third “ordained” position recognized in the Church, alongside “teaching elders” (pastors) and “ruling elders” (elected elders).

In closing, how do the criteria for Leadership in the Church, which were set by the Apostles, translate into our church today? “*Full of the Holy Spirit*” is not about being super-religious, Biblically knowledgeable, nor other-worldly. Rather, “*full of the Holy Spirit*” means having a heart that wants nothing more than to do God’s will. It has been said that God is looking not so much for those with *ability*, as for those with *availability*. Being *available* for God to use us, guide us, change our course, change our opinions, scramble our plans if need be—this is “*full of the Holy Spirit*.”

Being “Biblically knowledgeable” is certainly a pre-requisite for our next pastor; yet it is the heart and will to put it into action that sparks the Holy Spirit’s work. Becoming more “Biblically knowledgeable” is an important growth curve for any elder, but not a pre-requisite. The calling to be an elder requires devoting oneself to that growth curve, so that she/he can be better tuned in to the Spirit of Jesus in leading the Church.

“*Full of wisdom*” (Acts 6:3) is the human gift of a listening ear, a teachable spirit, common sense, and good judgment. Whereas the Holy Spirit is God’s gift to all believers, “*wisdom*” is a special gift for leaders. (See Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 12:7-11.) As you pray for your Pastor Nominating Committee, ask that each would have discernment to identify those pastors who are “*full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*.”

As the Session appoints the 2013 Elder Nominating Committee in August, pray that the elders who will be chosen would be men and women “*full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*.” Then, working together, Pastor and Elders, this beloved congregation will grow and thrive as a joyful expression of Christ alive in Clarksville.

Alleluia! Amen.

Spirit-Filled Conflict Management

Three things re: becoming a Spirit-filled Church:

1. The kind of Leadership you seek in your next pastor, and in elders you elect.
2. The establishment of clear spheres of responsibility; who is in charge of what.
3. How Spirit-filled leaders will not avoid or ignore conflict, but respond to it with godliness and wisdom so the Holy Spirit can use the conflict to BUILD UP the Church.

First, the kind of Leadership you seek in your ext pastor, and in the elders you elect:

**"FULL OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND WISDOM"* (=the JESUS SPIRIT—Mission statement; practical wisdom, good judgment, common sense)

*This afternoon, PNC: 2nd phone interview; Q: How do you deal with complaints? Does he candidate we're looking at see Criticism as a THREAT, or a FRIEND?

*This summer, Session appoint the Elder Nominating Committee to begin its work in September; in January, Installation Sunday with "laying on of hands and prayer" Acts 6

Second, clear spheres of responsibility—"teaching elders" (pastor= prayer, teaching, discipleship verse 2, 4), and "ruling elders" (run programs, committees, reflecting JESUS ALIVE TODAY, "With Christ as our Savior and Guide, we seek to know God's love and share it, with each other, our community, and the world...") verse 3

Third, how Spirit-filled Leadership will not avoid or ignore conflict, but respond to it with humility, godliness, and wisdom...to build up the Church. Entire Book of Acts, CONFLICT...

What were the RESULTS?—READ verse 7

How did they get there?!

*They leaned in to the conflict; did not ignore it; RESPECT

READ verse 3:

"Friends"! ("brothers")

Hellenists chose their own to represent them! ALL GREEK NAMES! “affirmative action”

The Apostles demonstrated publically that the role of these “elders” was JUST AS SACRED, just as spiritual as that of the Apostles; and that they were just as needy of the Holy Spirit’s guidance as were the Apostles: READ verse 6 (what will happen here in January Installation).

WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO PRAY BEFORE EACH MEETING!!!

Property, Finance, Committees...

Conclusion

Want to have a growing, thriving Church? Your model is right here, in the Word of God, in the Book of Acts...

Pray for your PNC

Pray for you Elder Nominating Committee

And TO GOD BE THE GLORY. ALLELUIA! AMEN.

Notes: Taylor Stokes, “Skeeter Scholar Scholarship Banquet; Racism as old as Tower of Babel; from our Blindness.