

“Sustaining Vitality”
Acts 6:1-7
June 15, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

All human institutions have a tendency to decline over time, and this tendency must be fought if such decline is not to occur. Take marriage as an example. It's not hard to be excited about your marriage on the honeymoon. But how many times have you seen married couples who have been together for several decades and whose marriage has declined to the point of mere survival? You see this couple in a restaurant, and they are far more interested in their food than in one another. The same thing can happen in a church. For example, 17th century England was a time of spiritual vitality, dominated by the Puritans. Many of the prayers we use in our worship services today come from this time. But in only about fifty years, in the early 18th century, England fell into a time of great spiritual need. Great social problems, particularly alcoholism and crime, afflicted the entire nation. The church had slipped theologically to a frightening degree, led sadly by the Presbyterians, who came to embrace Deism and Unitarianism.

How can vitality be maintained in these institutions? The church in Acts was able to sustain its vitality, and our passage today is of great help in understanding how. They had experienced a time of significant growth from the early days, and now the church in Jerusalem numbered many thousands of people. For the first time in Acts, an internal problem arises in the church. There had been external problems prior to this, namely persecutions from Jewish leaders. But now problems arose from within, in the form of a complaint of favoritism. It is almost always the case that when churches fail, it is for internal reasons such as these. Notice, though, that this church managed to deal with its internal problem in such a way that decline did not result. Rather, **“the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem”** (v. 7). I would like for us to notice what happened between verses 1 and 7 that allowed for this continued vitality within the church. Notice three things.

I. Constructive Conflict

Conflict can begin in a good way or in a bad way. If your wife comes to you in a humble way and says she wants to talk about your relationship, and if she does it by speaking honestly about her needs, that's good conflict. But if she were to complain to her girlfriends about what a lousy husband you are, she would be guilty of bad conflict. The conflict that began in the church here was bad conflict, simply because complaining is never a good thing. One of the early memory verses we taught our children was Philippians 2:14 – **“Do everything without complaining or arguing.”** But there were complaints within the church here, and they came from

a source that is always difficult, the ladies circle. Some of the older women in the church, the widows, were complaining of favoritism within the church.

Let's try to understand the nature of this complaint. Luke tells us that the Hellenist widows were complaining of neglect in the daily distribution of food, adding that the Hebrew widows were not being so neglected. So at the heart of this issue were two groups of widows. Both groups were Jewish Christians, so it wasn't an issue of racism. Luke says that the difference between them was that one group were Hellenist while the other was Hebrew. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking because they were part of the Jewish Diaspora, those Jews who had been spread throughout the world due to various military conquests of Israel down through the centuries. They were Jews who had grown up speaking Greek, even doing so in their synagogue services. As a result, not only was their language different, but also their cultural preferences. Cultural differences often lead to serious conflict in a church. I know of a pastor who moved from a church whose membership was largely blue collar to one that was made up mostly of highly educated professional people. Pastoral leadership expectations are very different in blue collar churches than in white collar churches. It is expected in blue collar churches that pastors will tell everyone else what to do, while in white collar churches the people want a more collegial style of leadership. This particular pastor brought his blue collar style to a white collar church and quickly found himself attacked from almost all quarters.

The specific spark that ignited this conflict was a practical one. Like most church fights, it had its origins not in some theological difference, but in one that was much more practical. The Greek-speaking widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. The church has always labored to care for the poor, and throughout its history, widows have been a major focus of this care. Until more recent times, being a widow almost always led to dependency upon the generosity of others. Opportunities to earn a living were largely cut off for women, and inheritance laws would typically pass any assets to a man's male heirs, not his widow. It was expected, though, that these male heirs would use the money to care for the man's widow. Sometimes, though, there was neither an inheritance nor any family members to take care of these women, and in that case the church initiated something like our church's meal ministry. These widows would be given food from the church's resources. A problem arose here because some widows were being neglected. They were not given a daily distribution of food and went to bed hungry. They immediately jumped to the conclusion that this oversight was due to partiality. The powers that be, the apostles, preferred Hebrew-speaking widows to Greek-speaking widows.

So the apostles were being accused of a really significant sin—culturally-based favoritism. Were they guilty? Almost certainly they were not. I think Luke implies that by saying in verse 1 that this complaint arose as the church was increasing in number. This was simply a case of losing administrative control in the face of rapid growth. Having been a part of church leadership for almost thirty years, I can tell you that even in the best of situations, administrative excellence is not normally a

characteristic of most churches, simply because of financial limitations. So their organization here just wasn't keeping up with the needs.

What I want to point out here is the response the apostles made to this unfair accusation. This could easily have spiraled into unhealthy conflict, which usually takes one of two forms—peace-faking or peace-breaking. Peace-faking is when we deal with some conflict by trying to ignore it or explain it away. So the apostles could have said, “Oh, it's just a misunderstanding; there's no real problem here.” Or they could have attempted to ignore it by ignoring the widows—walking the other way when they saw one coming or refusing to establish eye-contact. The other possibility is to respond to conflict by some form of peace-breaking, which involves some form of counter-attack. So the apostles could have said, “Those Greek widows are just troublemakers.” Or a more subtle form of peace-breaking is to retreat into a self-pitying defensiveness. “I'm just so busy being an apostle; I don't need this right now.”

Instead of peace-faking or peace-breaking, they entered into constructive conflict. They listened, acknowledged the problem and began to work honestly toward a solution. Note their honesty in expressing their concern that any solution not require that they forsake the preaching of the word and prayer. They didn't just cave in and say whatever was necessary to make this go away. No human institution, whether it be the church, marriage or some other organization, can survive without constructive conflict.

II. Loving Service

The solution the apostles proposed was to delegate this function of distributing food to needy widows. They wanted to get out of the food distribution business, with all the administrative requirements of such a job, and turn it over to others. So they proposed that the choice should be made by the church, only insisting that those selected should meet certain qualifications. They should have a good reputation, which is an obvious requirement for those handling money. And they would also need wisdom, since this kind of mercy ministry always requires a great deal of discernment. Doing this in a way that is fair and helps the truly needy as fully as they need help, while also not enabling those who really ought to be providing for themselves, takes great wisdom. And they should also be full of the Spirit. Godly character is always the key to any progress in the church, and this was no exception. So that's the proposal made by the apostles.

The enactment of this proposal required loving service on the part of three groups of people: the apostles, the deacon appointees and the church. We see it first with the apostles, in their response to the widows. The fact that they are willing to listen to the widows and propose the solution they propose is a demonstration of love. Ben Witherington says it like this. “The solution the apostles arrive at here is a rather novel one for antiquity. One commentator has called it the first example of affirmative action—those with political power generally repressed complaining

minorities; here the apostles hand the whole system over to the offended minority” (p. 248). Think what this felt like for the apostles. In the early days of the church, they had all the power. When people sold assets to help relieve the poverty of other believers, they brought it and laid it at the feet of the apostles. There is power in having control of the money of an organization, and the apostles had this power. But now they are willing to give it up completely out of love for others.

The seven men chosen to help the widows also demonstrated their love. In order for the delegation plan of the apostles to work, someone had to step up to the plate and be willing to engage in this ministry of mercy. Notice the name given to this work in verse 2. It is termed serving tables. They were doing the equivalent of being waiters and busboys in our culture. Our son’s first job was a part-time job as a busboy for Outback Steakhouse when he was in high school. We noticed that he had an unpleasant odor when he came home from work. We finally traced it to trash juice. One of his jobs was to take the trash from the kitchen to the dumpster. The trash bags would be filled with an assortment of juices from all the things that happened at that restaurant, and as he would lift his arms to throw the bags into the dumpster, some would get on his skin and clothing. It is that kind of work, work completely devoid of glamour, that these men were appointed to. And they did so gladly, giving up their freedom in order to use their time to help these widows.

The church members also demonstrated their love in two ways. First, they were willing to embrace change, something not all church members are willing to do. They were willing to let their leaders stop doing the thing that brought the people into regular contact with their leaders and instead focus on the ministry of the word and prayer, two things that require a great deal of time by oneself. Also, the church members showed their love by electing 7 men who were all Greek. Remember that it was the Greek widows who were having the problems. The church here shows its willingness to bend over backwards in order to accommodate the needs of those who were weakest in the church.

Loving service is essential for the vitality of any institution. Where did they learn to love like this? Like all of us, they weren’t born with it. Who is it who is willing to give up power, comfort and freedom for the sake of others? Jesus is that way, and their love for one another here came from knowing him.

III. Bible-Centered

Luke draws our attention to the importance of the word of God in the order of the two things he reports in verse 7. First, the word of God increased, and then the number of disciples multiplied greatly. It is important that this order be preserved. We seek to center ourselves on God’s word and let God take care of the multiplication of the disciples. Only God can bring someone to become obedient to the faith, and Luke tells us that he did so here among a group that had led in the opposition to Jesus. **“A great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”** The priests worked in the temple, where the early church viewed Jesus as the true

temple. Here were men willing to turn their backs on the foundation for their life's work in order to follow Jesus.

Illustration: I was working in my home office on Friday when someone from Alabama Power came by to change out our electric meter. He was installing a new digital meter that could be read by satellite and recorded in the home office. It's the end of jobs for meter readers. These priests coming to the Lord is like the meter readers union voting in favor of remotely-read meters.

This vitality occurred as the church centered itself on God's word. That is one of the main points of this whole passage, as the apostles took steps to preserve the preaching of the word. They made it a priority, and refused to let urgent things get in the way of this important task. If our church is to remain vital, and if you in your own walk with the Lord, are to maintain vitality and fruitfulness, God calls you to do the same.

CONCLUSION:

God calls us to center ourselves on his word, and to be intentional about doing so. If you just let things take their normal course in your life, you will find yourself drifting into the three things that are exactly opposite these three. You will not resolve conflict constructively, you will become selfish, and you will neglect the word of God. So let me invite you to take a step toward vitality by doing what the apostles did. Make God's word a priority in your life. It brings transformation because it brings you Jesus.

The Great Awakening in America occurred in the 1730's and 40's. One of the principal characters God used was a British preacher by the name of George Whitefield. Listen to this account by a Connecticut farmer named Nathan Cole as he heard news that Whitefield was coming to his community.

Then one morning ...there came a messenger and said Mr. Whitefield ... is to preach at Middletown this morning [October 23, 1740] at 10:00. I was in my field at work. I dropped my tool that I had in my hand and ran home and ran through my house and bade my wife get ready quick to go and hear Mr. Whitefield preach at Middletown, and ran to my pasture for my horse with all my might fearing that I should be too late to hear him. I brought my horse home and soon mounted and took my wife up and went forward as fast as I thought the horse could bear, and when my horse began to be out of breath, I would get down and put my wife on the saddle and bid her ride as fast as she could and not stop or slack for me except I bade her. And so I would run until I was much out of breath, and then mount my horse again; and so I did several times to favour my horse. We improved every moment to get along as if we were fleeing for our lives, all the while fearing we should be too late to hear the Sermon, for we had twelve miles to ride double in little more than an hour.... [And then he reports the effect of the sermon upon him]. And my hearing him preach gave me a heart wound; by God's blessing my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me.