

# —The Message of Acts—

## *Lesson 6—Diversity in Unity*

- I. One of the byproducts of church's trying to fulfill the Great Commission is the diversity which it creates as people from different cultures fill the pews. This diversity creates friction as people rub up against each other and friction can heat people to the point of ignition, producing misunderstandings, suspicion, prejudice, pride, and anger.
- II. An example of the friction created by diversity is seen in Acts 6 between the Grecian Jewish widows and the Hebraic Jewish widows. Both of these groups had much in common to create unity, but when one group was neglected in the distribution, a division was created that could've split the church.
  - A. But the differences that threaten division can be God's prod to look beyond the circle of "our kind of people" to see the rich diversity of people from every tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev 7.9-10). "If we try to keep the peace by filtering out folks who are not "like-minded," or who will not or cannot adjust themselves to our comfort zone, then the artificial and superficial unity that results will rest on the shifting sands of culture, tradition, and familiarity. God has a way of unsettling our comfortable "fellowship," challenging us to pursue the real thing instead," i.e. true unity in Christ, Eph 2.14-16. A church that only touches "our kind of people" is a shrunken distortion of Christ's "holy, catholic, church."
  - B. The crucial question is, How will *we* handle the friction?
- III. The Seven Servers
  - A. Acts 6 reveals a diversity of need and ministry in the early church. Tables needed to be served and the Word of God needed to be administered. The solution was to appoint officers to serve the church's practical needs in order that the apostles might not be kept from devoting their attention to the church's spiritual needs. Thus the apostles appointed seven "servers" recognized by the churches as men suited for the calling. The effectiveness of the ministry of these officers was pointed out when Luke highlighted the success of the ministry of the Word in Acts 6.7 which resulted from it.
  - B. Remarkably, however, these seven men, appointed to *meet the needs* created by diversity in the church, served as God's gateway to *even more* diversity in the church.
    1. In the list of 7 men, emphasis is placed on the first and the last. The first is Stephen, through whose witness the church was pried loose from the temple and Jerusalem itself. And the last is Nicolas, a Gentile proselyte to Judaism and a native of Antioch in Syria, which will be the site of the first Gentile church mentioned by Luke (11.19-21) and the sending point of Paul's Gentile mission to the West (13.1-3).
    2. These men are scattered with the rest of the church as a result of the Saulic persecution in Acts 8 and as they go out they *add to the* diversity by bringing the gospel to foreigners—as with Philip.
- IV. Stephen, Opening the Door of Gospel Dispersion
  - A. Stephen was the most prominent of the seven and is a prime exemplar of the leadership qualifications set forth by the apostles, 6.5, 8, 10.
  - B. His speech makes him a central figure, not only among the seven, but also in Acts. His speech is unique among all the recorded speeches.
    1. It's the longest address and contains only one reference to Jesus—a veiled reference in 7.52
    2. It abounds in references to the OT and yet omits all the messianic testimonies quoted in the other sermons (e.g. Ps 16.8-11; Acts 2.25-31; 13.35).
    3. It's an indictment of Israel's rebellion, past and present; and rather than leading to a call to repentance and a promise of forgiveness, it's a pronouncement of condemnation reminiscent of the ancient prophets' oracles of doom.
    4. *Yet*, his message played a pivotal role in the spread of salvation to the ends of the earth. Through the persecution it provoked, the Lord scattered His witnesses, bearing good news, throughout Judea and Samaria, Acts 8.4. Most importantly, it laid the theological foundation for the

dispersion of believers, the scattering of the new Israel, as it broke the church loose from the temple as the dwelling place of God and from Jerusalem as the place where the name and presence of God remained. For wherever the disciples went, God went with them, blessing their witness.

5. “Stephen’s overview of Israelite history, with its attention to the themes of the location of worship and the leaders appointed by God, provides a theological transition in the narrative of Acts to the dispersion of the church among the Gentile nations. With the saving achievement of Messiah, Herod’s temple became obsolete. Exclusion from the edifice that dominated Zion was no longer exclusion from the courts of the Lord, for...God was with His scattered messengers 11.19-21.”

#### C. The Light Dispersed to Antioch

1. Christians from the Jewish Dispersion broke through the ethnic-religious barrier to announce God’s good news to uncircumcised Gentiles in Antioch, and God’s power accompanied their announcement (Acts 11.19f). To encourage these Gentile believers, the church sent Barnabas (v. 22) and he enlisted Paul to assist him (v.25).
2. The church at Antioch was therefore an extension of Stephen’s life, theology, and martyrdom. Although increasing diversity now characterized the church, a deep unity remained among them as prophets were sent *from Jerusalem to Antioch* with the Word (11.27) and an offering was sent *from Antioch to Jerusalem* for the relief of the poor (vv.28-30).
3. And Antioch was also the gateway to even greater diversity when the Holy Spirit sent out Barnabas and Saul from that church to carry the message of God’s salvation to peoples far away (13.1-4). The time had arrived when the holy presence of the Lord would travel with His pilgrim people wherever they went.

#### V. Philip, Samaria, and the Foreign Eunuch

- A. Philip, one of the seven, is Luke’s prime example of a dispersed Christian driven from Jerusalem by the Saulic persecution ignited by Stephen’s speech (8.1, 4). The dispersion of the church could be seen as a judgment on Jerusalem, but it also brought blessing to the nations, v.4. “Philip’s witness was central because through him old ethnic and religious walls were broken down and two new kinds of people were welcomed into Christ’s church.”

#### B. Samaria receives the Word and Spirit

1. The Samaritans were the product of intermarriage between the tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel and the Gentile peoples who had been transported into the regions of Israel by the conquering Assyrians (2Kgs 17.24-41; Ezra 4; Neh 4). In Christ’s day they were usually classified with Gentiles as outsiders to the house of Israel (Mt 10.5-6) and Jews didn’t share eating or drinking vessels with them (Jn 4.9) because they considered them unclean.
2. In view of this, Philip’s preaching in Samaria marked more than a geographical expansion. The deep chasm of religious hostility and exclusion that had separated Jews and Samaritans for generations was bridged by his announcement that the kingdom of God had arrived for them through Jesus the Messiah.
3. However, there was something odd about the Samaritans’ entrance into the Christian church. Luke calls attention to the fact that the order announced at Pentecost was interrupted in Samaria, cp. Acts 2.38; 8.16, 12. The separation of conversion from the reception of the Spirit’s power was so abnormal that Luke singles it out for comment. Why was this reception delayed?
  - a) The answer’s *not* to be found in viewing it as a precedent for a “second blessing” theology of Christian experience: first trusting in Jesus as Saviour and then later receiving the Spirit’s power to serve Him as Lord.
  - b) Rather, the solution is found in this: the movement of the Spirit and the Word of God across this major religious frontier had to be witnessed by Christ’s apostles (v.14). The apostles were needed to confirm that God had signified His reception of the Samaritans by giving

them His Spirit. By using the apostles' laying on of hands to give them the Spirit, the solidarity of these Samaritans with the mother church in Jerusalem was put beyond question.

(1) The coming of the Spirit on Samaritan believers was *a second installment* of the enthroned Jesus' outpouring of the Spirit of promise.

c) The Spirit's coming in Samaria also anticipates His falling on the Gentiles at Cornelius' house. Luke signals this connection by using similar phrasing in the two accounts, 8.14; 11.1

(1) When the Lord would bring in the Gentiles, with Cornelius and his house, God again provided Peter as an apostolic witness before pouring out His Spirit on uncircumcised Gentiles (11.17; 15.7-9).

d) Thus the apostles' role as witnesses (Acts 1.8) was not only to evangelize unbelievers, but also to attest to the church that God was now welcoming Samaritans and Gentiles through faith in Jesus (Rom 3.27-30). Jewish Christians had to heed the testimony of Christ's apostolic witnesses: God gives repentance and His Spirit not just to people linked by history and heredity to the patriarchs and promises, but to outsiders as well—to all who believe in Jesus for salvation and reconciliation with God.

C. Good news to a pilgrim-alien from the ends of the earth

1. The conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch provides further demonstration of God's intention to include former outcasts as full participants in His holy community, 8.26-39. Through parallels of action and wording Luke implies that the conversion of the eunuch, like that of the Samaritans, was a preview of the conversion of Cornelius (8.26, 29 with 10.10-16, 19-20; 8.37 with 10.47).

2. The eunuch was twice excluded from the worshipping community of Israel because he was both a Gentile and a eunuch (Dt 23.1). But his pilgrimage to the house of God in Jerusalem, and his faith in the good news of Jesus, signaled the beginning of the international expansion of God's kingdom predicted by ancient psalmists and prophets (Pss 68.31; 87.3-4; Isa 11.10-11; 56.3-7). This eunuch was a sign that these ancient messianic promises were coming to fulfillment.

VI. The Spirit's Unity in Today's Church of Many Cultures

A. There's encouragement in Acts for today's church as we wrestle with the stresses of internal culture shock:

1. Frustrations and misunderstandings are not abnormal when different kinds of people live and work together. The unity of the Spirit is God's creation, but He still tells us to work on it (Eph 4.3). So we need to understand that preserving and expressing our oneness in Christ demands strenuous effort.

2. The solution to the tensions is not to reduce the variety in the church. When a congregation begins to reach out and draw in people from a different cultural or social group, comfortable routines and long-held assumptions will be disturbed. The temptation to segregate ourselves into distinct, homogenous fellowships, each at home in its own comfort zone, is very strong. But Acts points in the opposite direction: the apostles didn't send the Hellenists off to start a "separate but equal" church because the solution to the tensions was not segregation, but *selfless love*.

3. Leaders who have the Spirit's wisdom are vital to the growing unity of the multicultural (or even uni-cultural) church. The complex problems posed by the church's mission to embrace all kinds of people demand leaders who can wisely analyze the problems and formulate just and compassionate solutions. "God alone has the wisdom, power, and grace to weave the tangled threads of different people into a single tapestry of glorious beauty. But He does it through the self-giving love He's placed in His children and the Spirit-guided wisdom He's given to the leaders in His flock."