

Being Shaped By God

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Read Acts 6:1-7



The opening line of this passage 'In those days when the number of disciples was increasing' sounds exciting but, this passage is a reminder that growth is often painful. Here are some brief thoughts about the passage with a question to consider at the end of each section.

The Problem

The Hellenistic Jews (those who spoke Greek and who thought and behaved like Greeks) complained that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food by the Hebraic Jews (those who spoke Aramaic and who were immersed in the Hebrew culture). Whether this problem is an example of overt racism, where those distributing deliberately withheld food from a group, or whether it is an example of covert racism, where the withholding of food was to do with an unconscious bias within those distributing, is unclear. Jews and Greeks had always existed as opposites, but these first Christians were going to have to learn and accept that 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3.28).

What prejudices do we have and how do they affect the views that we have of those around us?

Time to bury your head in the sand or to grasp the nettle?

Churches are places which usually prefer to avoid conflict. In my experience, Christians often prefer to bury their heads in the sand rather than to grasp the nettle of a problem so that it can be dealt with even, though this would be painful along the way. Thankfully, the Apostles were willing to grasp the nettle which they did by gathering the disciples together and naming the issue. It is especially significant that there is no discussion about whether what was happening was right or wrong but rather they jumped to putting the injustice right. It is reassuring to be reminded that neither overt nor covert racism should have any place in the church!

Would we rather hide from conflict or face it in order to move forwards? How can we ensure that Clare Baptist Church is a place where there is a willingness to talk about difficult issues and to seek God's leading in moving through and being transformed by him in the process?

The solution: Correcting the injustice

It's especially significant that each of the seven who were chosen had Greek names. The body of believers who consisted of both Hebraic and Hellenistic Jews chose seven who are Hellenistic rather than a combination of people from both cultures. In this wonderful moment of church unity and discernment, the Spirit guides the church to implement Galatians 3.28 before it had even been written. Until this point, the leadership of the Church consisted entirely of people from a Hebraic Jewish background and in this meeting, there is a realisation that an ethnically diverse church should have an ethnically diverse leadership. That those who had been treated unjustly should be part of the solution to correcting that injustice rather than still being excluded from the decision making.

Are there those who we have unconsciously excluded from positions of leadership based on their ethnicity, gender, or age? If so, how can we correct this?

The solution: The Body of Christ at work

The Apostles recognize that they cannot do everything and so they choose to stick with their core calling of explaining God's word to people and to prayer whilst releasing others to serve the church by distributing the food. It's worth noting that neither of these roles are seen as more or less important and in fact the church was only to consider people who were 'full of the spirit and wisdom' to distribute food. This is an early example of the different parts of the Body of Christ at work and a reminder that service in the body doesn't always involve what happens in and around Sunday services. It's also a reminder that the church should reject the consumerist culture that suggests that we pay a Minister to do everything, and that we come to church so that they can serve us like a paid employee. The passage is a reminder that we are all ministers but that the ministries that God calls us to will involve us serving in different ways.

What is my part in the Body of Christ?

Sometimes we need others to encourage us so that we can see more clearly what our gifts and calling is. Is there someone in the church who you could encourage by telling them how they are a blessing through the way they use their gifts and talents to serve God?

The result: Growth

As an injustice is put right and more people are released into service rather than the same few running around doing everything, the church continued to grow (v7).

Are there things that are stopping the church from growing? How can we remove these barriers?

God at work

Stephen, who was one of the seven chosen to distribute the food, 'performed great wonders and signs among the people' (v8). We see the Holy Spirit at work in and through him to the point where his face was like the face of an angel (v15).

Are we open to God's Holy Spirit working in and through us or do we believe that He only works through others?

God is the Potter

The Bible says that God is the potter and we are the clay but it feels to me like sometimes that Christians behave like they are the potter and that church life and even what Christianity is can be shaped by us. In response to this sort of attitude, God says to his people 'You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, "You did not make me"? Can the pot say to the potter, "You know nothing"? (Isaiah 29.16)

In Acts 6 we see God the Potter at work, shaping his church and the lives of his people. They act willingly and submissively like clay that is willing to be shaped by the master. How about us?

Are we willing to surrender completely by placing ourselves in God's hands to be shaped knowing that the result will be of his choosing rather than ours?

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