

Church 1.0
Acts 6:1-7
“Christian Conflict”

1. A car pulled over beside a boy on the street, and asked him for directions to the Reformed Church. The boy said, “Go one block south and you’ll see a church on the corner. That’s the United Church. Go one block more, and you’ll come to a church that’s not united. That’s it.”ⁱ

2. Ideally, every church should be a “united church”. However, history has proven that very often, churches are better at division than they are addition. Though Christian and conflict seem like contradictory terms, sometimes the disciples will dispute, the brethren will bicker, and the faithful will fight.

3. A father once heard an awful ruckus coming from the back yard where his daughter and some of her friends were playing. There was shouting and bickering, and it sounded like things were getting rather heated.

4. The dad thought he should intervene, and so he called out from back door and said, “Hey, what’s going on? Stop all that fighting.” The daughter answered, “Oh, daddy, were not fighting. We’re just playing church.”

5. Though conflict in the church may be more prevalent in our day, the Word of God reveals that it is not a new thing. In Acts chapter 6, Luke gives us a very honest glimpse into the first hint of problems among the original church family.

6. The opening verse of the chapter states the case plainly. It says, *“And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.”*

7. This conflict had the potential to explode into an all out division and split, and yet when we read verse 7, we find the whole situation concluded by the statement, *“And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly...”*

8. As we observe the first church dealing with this internal problem, we are given some inspired and important lessons about Christian conflict, and how it is to be resolved in a way that honors Christ and helps His Church.

9. Look with me at this text, and notice first of all that this original church teaches us about:

I. THE POSSIBILITY OF HAVING A CONFLICT

1. There may be some who believe that only bad churches have conflicts. In their minds, it is only the churches with crooked leadership, or carnal membership that go through strife and division.

2. Acts 6 stands as a testimony to the fact that even good churches can have internal conflicts. This church had the apostles for leadership, and 5 to 10,000 exited, energetic, newly-converted, Spirit filled and anointed Christians as their congregation.

3. The church has never been more pure, and nevertheless, we read in verse one that “there arose a murmuring.” Mark that word “murmuring”. It is translated from a word that literally means to grumble. A.T. Robertson explains the word as, “The secret grumbings that buzz away until they are heard.”ⁱⁱⁱ

4. If ever there was a human congregation close to being perfect, it was this one. Yet, it was not perfect. Even though this was a holy church, it was still a human church, and therefore the possibility of having a conflict was still there.

5. This group reminds us of the ever present possibility of conflict among us; regardless of how good and pleasant our church may seem. Why is this so? The text points us to a couple of reasons. First of all:

A. Because of mistakes

1. Verse one says that the grumbling of the people had to do with the daily “ministration”, or as some translations have it, “the daily distribution”.

2. Apparently, the first church community had carried over the Jewish practice of taking a daily allotment of food to the widows, and other destitute people, who could not provide for themselves.

3. We have already read in chapter 4, how money was given to provide for those in the church who were in need. Now, as the ministry of distribution was being carried out, a mistake of some sort was being made.

4. Verse one says that the complaint was that the widows who spoke Greek (called “Grecians” in our text) were being “neglected”. The word “neglected” in verse one is an interesting word. It is translated from a word that literally means “to overlook”.

5. For some reason, either purposely or otherwise, a certain segment of the widows were not receiving their portion of the benevolence. The tense of the word translated “neglected” indicates that it was an ongoing problem.

6. This ongoing problem in the first church serves to remind us that no church functions without mistakes. No church ever gets it completely right.

7. Edwin Bliss said, "The pursuit of excellence is gratifying and healthy. The pursuit of perfection is frustrating, neurotic, and a terrible waste of time."

8. Every church should strive for excellence, but a perfect church is as mythological as a Big Foot -Tooth Fairy.

9. Notice not only that there is the possibility of having a conflict because of mistakes, but there is also the possibility of having a conflict:

B. Because of misunderstandings

1. While it is possible that the Greek-speaking Christians were given less attention than the Hebrew-speaking ones, it could also very well be that this was just what the Greeks perceived to be taking place.

2. The beloved, old Bible commentator, Matthew Henry, suggests that the apostles were doing the best they could to distribute what had been given to them, and they did not intend for anyone to be left out, though it obviously happened.

3. If that is the case, then this conflict arises due to a misunderstanding. The Greeks felt as though they were being slighted simply because they were not Hebrew speaking Jews, but it is very likely that the mistake was an innocent one.

4. How often is it that a conflict arises, not based on a valid problem, but on what someone *thinks* is a problem? Is it not common for someone to *feel* as if they have been slighted, insulted, or offended, when the truth is that no one intended any harm whatsoever?

5. In 1972, the Canadian hockey team traveled to Moscow to play the Russians. The Canadian team feared that their hotel room might be bugged, in an effort to discover their strategy.

6. Phil Esposito, one of the members of the team, said they finally found a small, metal object under the carpet in the center of the room. They dug it out, and then heard a crash. They had removed the anchor, and the chandelier fell in the room below them.ⁱⁱⁱ

7. Sometimes conflicts arise when someone digs up a problem that never really existed. As humans, at times we misunderstand the actions of others. When we jump to conclusions, we are usually jumping into a conflict.

8. This first church was made up of forgiven, and yet fallen, fallible human beings. They were prone to mistakes and misunderstandings, and therefore, they faced the possibility of having a conflict.

9. Notice something else this passage teaches us about Christian conflict. Notice not only that this first church speaks to us of *the possibility of having a conflict*, but notice also further that they give to us:

II. THE PRINCIPLES FOR HANDLING A CONFLICT

1. One of the buzzwords of our modern society is a fairly new phrase – conflict resolution. Everyone from married couples to major corporations are turning to so-called experts in conflict resolution.

2. There is even a national Association for Conflict Resolution. They print a quarterly magazine, and host an annual conference, that will be held in Atlanta this coming October.^{iv}

3. Long before “conflict resolution” became a recognized practice, the first church was able resolve their conflict without the help of any experts or outside mediators.

4. When we observe how the first church handled their first conflict, we find some important principles for all churches to remember when there is a struggle within the body. Notice how they handled this conflict. First of all:

A. They did not let it divide them

1. Verse one tells us that there was a grumbling from the “Grecians against the Hebrews.” The chapter begins with two groups, one of which has an issue with the other.

2. This whole situation was ripe for a split and a division. If not treated with care, there might have been the First Christian Church, and then down the road, the New Christian-Grecian Fellowship.

3. Instead of this conflict dividing this first group of Christians, we read in verse 2 that, *“Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them...”*

4. Rather than splitting up, this first congregation came together. They remind us that while we may have differences, our differences don’t have to become divisions. Our conflicts may stress us, but they should not split us.

5. You don’t cut off a broken limb. You seek to mend it. Likewise, when handling conflict, a peaceful discussion is always better than a painful divorce.

5. Notice a further principle they give us for handling a conflict. Notice not only that they did not let it divide them, but also:

B. They did not let it distract them

1. Before any solution was offered by the apostles, they quickly reminded the congregation of the priorities for their church. Look at second part of verse 2. The apostles say to the people, *“...It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.”*

2. Notice that word “reason”. It is translated from a very common adjective that literally means acceptable or pleasing. In other words, the apostles said, “We understand that feeding the widows is an important task, but it will not please God if we set aside our preaching of the gospel in order to do benevolence.”

3. Whatever solution was going to be offered, it was one that would not hinder the primary task of the church – the proclamation and advancement of the gospel.

4. Some churches become so caught up in their own little struggles and problems that they lose sight of the primary mission for their church. Yes, we need to decide the color of the carpet, who is going to sing in the Christmas play, and where the old church bell should be hung.

5. But if we spend all our time and energy discussing and debating what is going on in the boat, and we never cast the net into the sea of lost humanity around us, then we have become distracted, and we are failing our Lord.

6. Notice something else we draw from the way in which this first church handled its conflict. Notice not only that they did not let it divide them, or distract them, but notice also that:

C. They did not let it defeat them

1. The problem was that a certain segment of widows were being overlooked in the ministry of the church. The solution offered by the apostles was a wise one. Look at verse 3. There the apostles say to the people, *“...brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.”*

2. Look at verse 5. It says, *“And the saying pleased the whole multitude...”* Rather than being overcome by this problem, the people came together and worked together to overcome their conflict.

3. In so doing, this first church reminds us that a Spirit-led, Spirit-filled church never needs to be slowed or stopped by a conflict. If we are willing to stand together, and serve together, we can handle whatever conflicts may arise.

4. I heard Dr. O.S. Hawkins tell about a childhood friend of his from Ft. Worth who had an interesting habit. He said whenever his friend would get a knot in his

shoelaces, rather than taking the time to untie the knot he would simply pull out his pocket-knife and cut the laces, and then retie them on the next set of eyelets.

5. As you can imagine, the boy's shoelaces were never long enough for his shoes. Dr. Hawkins applied that friend's practice to relationships, and he gave this piece of advice. He said, "Never cut what you can untie."

6. This first church teaches us that dealing with conflict may take some time to work through the knot of contention, but when we do, it is worth it in the long run.

7. That leads us to a third truth we draw from this text and this church in conflict. They teach us not only about *the possibility of having a conflict*, and *the principles for handling a conflict*, but notice also thirdly that they point us to:

III. THE POWER OF HEALING A CONFLICT

1. Verse 5 lists the names of the men who were chosen to serve in the first deacon ministry. It is interesting to note that each of these men have Greek names.

2. The church came to a wise decision, and they let the very ones who felt slighted take over the care of the widows. It was a move that helped to heal the conflict within the church.

3. What happened after the apostles ordained the men is a sign of God's blessing on a church that handles conflict wisely and carefully. Verse 7 says, "*And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.*"

4. Rather than conflict hurting this group, it actually served to help it. Following this healing solution, the church was able to do more than it had been doing.

5. Notice a couple of the results that came from healing this conflict. First of all:

A. The Church's ministry expanded

1. The apostle's made it clear that the primary ministry of the church was the preaching of the Word of God. They said in verse 4, "*But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.*"

2. The newly-ordained deacons enabled them to do just that, and in verse 7 it says, "*And the word of God increased...*" Note that word "increased". It is translated from a word that literally means to grow, or to add.

3. It is interesting word for Luke to choose. What he is indicating is that the church's ability to preach and proclaim the Word grew as a result of the healing of this conflict.

4. I've read a number of church growth books, and I can't think of one who measures church growth based on a church increasing its ability to preach the Word.

5. However, before the Bible tells about numerical growth for this church, it speaks of Scriptural growth. This is the kind of "increase" that every church should seek.

6. May it be our hearts, that when a conflict arises, we are quick to heal it, not so much to mend the hurt feelings of the membership, but so that we may increase our proclamation of the Lord Jesus and His Word!

7. The power of healing a conflict is seen not only in the fact that the church's ministry expanded, but also in the fact that:

B. The church's membership enlarged

1. Again, in verse 7, we read, *"...and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith..."*

2. There are two things that strike me about this verse. One is the *rate* of this growth. Notice that the disciples "multiplied". They did not have just a few additions. They were multiplying!

3. Oh that we would not be satisfied with merely growing by addition! May we multiply those who are coming into the Kingdom of Christ!

4. I am struck not only by the *rate* of this growth, but also by the *reach*. Verse 7 says that Jewish priests were leaving the sacrificial altars of the Temple to join those who followed the One, True Sacrifice, the Lamb of God – Jesus Christ!

5. When the gospel is proclaimed with conviction, and portrayed within a congregation of true believers, it overcomes not just the condemnation of sin, but also the confusion of error as well.

6. We hear all the time about the rapid growth of the Islamic Religion and the Muslim population. One author even predicts that by 2025, Muslims will account for 30% of the world's population, and will soon after surpass the number of Christians in the world.^v

7. Many Christians are afraid of Islam. However, if we understand the power of the gospel, the truth is that Islam should fear Christianity! When God's people work together for His kingdom, the reach of the gospel leaps over the walls of religious error, and captures the heart of those whose are held in its grip.

8. The first church speaks to us about the importance of working through our conflicts in order that we might see our Savior's name proclaimed with power, and His church filling with people!

1. I read about a couple who were visiting the countryside near Edinburgh, Scotland. The man took a photograph of his wife standing in field next to a fence. A few months later, the man and his wife brought their whole family to Scotland, and tried to show them the place where the photograph had been taken.

2. For some reason, they could not find the fence. When they asked a local about it, he said, "You must have been here in the spring. Now it is harvest time, and the grain is grown so high it blocks out the fences."^{vi}

3. Every church will have conflicts and issues that threaten to divide them. However, we must deal with our conflicts in such a way that they do not hinder the harvest God has called us to reap.

4. If we will stay focused and faithful, we can see blessings and growth that will overshadow any differences that might arise.

ⁱ Flynn, Leslie B., Great Church Fights, (Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1977) p. 13

ⁱⁱ Robertson, A.T., Word Pictures in the New Testament – Vol. III – Acts, (Broadman Press, Nashville, 1930), p. 72

ⁱⁱⁱ Bugged?, *Anecdote.com*, accessed 5/21/09, <http://www.anecdote.com/index.php?aid=9103>

^{iv} The Association for Conflict Resolution, accessed 5/21/09, <http://www.acrnet.org/>

^v Huntington, Samuel, Growth Rates of Christianity and Islam, *religioustolerance.org*, accessed 5/22/09, http://www.religioustolerance.org/growth_isl_chr.htm

^{vi} Flynn, Leslie B., p. 60