

10. Divide and conquer

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Any good military strategist would know that fighting against one's army in frontal attack would cause massive fatalities and casualties on both sides. So he would employ an ancient, yet very effective strategy "Divide and Conquer" by infiltrating in the midst of the enemy and separate from one to another without being detected.

That is exactly what satan is doing against the first century church. In chapter 2 through 4, we find the apostles were persecuted by the Jewish religious rulers for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ and His resurrection. That was a frontal attack. But satan only found out that his attack didn't hurt them at all, as a matter of fact, it strengthened them much to his dismay.

But in chapter 5 and 6, that sly satan changed his strategy to infiltration, corruption, and division. He was hoping that the church would be so corrupted and divisive that it soon would lose its existence.

Without the gift of the word of knowledge that came upon Peter from the Holy Spirit, that would be exactly what would have happened through the pride and deception of Ananias and Sapphira. But they were the ones who dropped dead literally.

Let's learn from the first century church congregation how they worked out their potential division with the wisdom and love that came from the Holy Spirit.

A. GROWING PAIN

Acts 6:1 Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

Remember the church went from a handful of scared disciples of Jesus to over eight thousand people congregation in matter of a few months. Eleven apostles were spread to many different locations wherever they could gather together to learn the Word of God.

I am sure that the church had some sort of infrastructure and chain of command, but the apostles were the main people who did pretty much everything until this point. But this massive growing pain brought a potentially serious issue to the church – division between the Hebrews and the Hellenists.

The Hebrews were those Jews more inclined to embrace Jewish culture and were mostly from Judea. The Hellenists were another group of Jews more inclined to embrace Greek culture and mostly were from all over the Roman Empire. To oversimplify, Hebrews tended to regard Hellenists as 'unspiritual compromisers' with Greek culture, and Hellenists regarded Hebrews as 'holier-than-thou traditionalists'. Since there was already a natural rivalry and classification between the two groups, and satan tried to take advantage of that standing rivalry.

It's important to remember that though the titles Hebrews and Hellenists are used, these were still Christians, followers of Jesus. They were all from a Jewish background, but they had all embraced Jesus as their Messiah. This classification would be like classifying among our congregation – Caucasian Christians, Hispanic Christians and Southern Swedish Christian, ja?

In the first century Jerusalem, they did not have the Social Security System, not even a bankrupted one like ours. Though they didn't have an actual governmental system, the care of widows and orphans was an important part of Jewish life, and normally the temple authorities organized the distribution to the needy. Yet it seems that the Christian widows were not cared for by the Jewish leaders; probably because they didn't like the fact that the apostles kept preaching Jesus when they were told to stop.

Apparently, some of the Christian widows from a Hellenistic background believed that the widows among the Hebrew Christians received better care due to lack of administration or supervision by the apostles. Satan loves to use any unintentional wrong to begin a conflict among Christians.

There were two purposes of satan's attack:

- 1) **Dividing the church congregation and destroying the strength of the church**
- 2) **Distracting the apostles' attention from their main duties: Prayer and teaching of the Word of God.**

B. DELEGATE, DELEGATE

Acts 6:2-4 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. 3 Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; 4 but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

The apostles were handling the situation properly and wisely by delegating these responsibilities. The Lord did not call these apostles to be involved in everything that was happening in the church. God had and would raise up others to serve in other functions.

A pastor should not have his time consumed in tasks that are basically taking care of all needs of church ministries. Yet there is something wrong with a pastor who considers such work beneath him.

I have a friend who is a pastor in northern Arizona. He told me that he counseled so many people from his congregation that he didn't have time to study. I suggested to him that he should raise up a group of men and women of faith in Christ so that they could do the counseling so that he could study the Word of God and teach. I pretty much said the same thing what Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses said to him.

When a pastor is so busy with secondary tasks, such as counseling, taking care of other ministries' needs in the church, that he fails to spend adequate time in his first task – study of the Word of God and prayer, the whole congregation will start to have spiritual deficiency. In results, they will ask for more counselings from the pastor. It becomes a vicious cycle and that is exactly what satan wants.

I am so grateful to the Lord that many men and women in our church step up and serve the Lord and His body in this church faithfully and diligently. In results, I can concentrate in prayer and studying the Word of God for you guys.

D.L. Moody used to say, "It was better to put ten men to work than to try to do the work of ten men."

The apostles didn't ignore or throw the complainers out of the fellowship, nor did they divide the church into two groups. They certainly did not form a committee and discuss the problem to death. They asked the congregation to nominate seven men to take over the responsibility of taking care of the widows.

Listen, meeting unmet needs is a great way to bring more people into ministry. Do you see something that we don't do in our church, but it would help our congregation's spiritual growth and strengthen the fellowship if we do? Come talk to the church leadership. We will seek the Lord for His guidance. Don't be surprised if the Lord says, "OK," and we might ask you to take the point since the Lord puts it in your heart.

Please note the qualification of these seven men in v3:

Acts 6:3 Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;

I know, I know, I know. Some of you godly ladies are thinking, "What are we 'chopped liver'?" Hey, if you have an issue with this, please talk to the Lord. He wrote this, not me.

The qualifications described by the apostles focused the character of the men to be chosen. The apostles were far more concerned with the internal quality of the men than their outward appearance or image. The idea behind "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" is that these men were to be both spiritually and practically minded.

Nowhere in this chapter of Acts are these men called 'deacons,' but most consider they were the first to fulfill the office of deacon as described in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. The word 'deacon', 'diakonos' in Greek, simply means "servant," and these men were certainly servants.

Church problems also give us an opportunity to exercise our faith, not only faith in the Lord, but also faith in each other. Church in general should not be afraid to adjust their infrastructure in order to make room for a growing ministry. When infrastructure and ministry conflict, this gives us an opportunity to trust God for the solution. It is tragic when churches destroy ministry because they refuse to modify their infrastructure. These Apostles were not afraid to share their authority and ministry with others.

Christians should count it a privilege to serve the Lord and His people in these basic, practical ways, instead of seeing it as an "unspiritual" burden. Apart from the cross, Jesus showed the ultimate measure of love by simply washing His disciples' feet in John 13. We can do great things for the Lord if we are willing to do little things for others.

Since "Serving God and His people" was mentioned, I will go on to a side track briefly.

Let's be honest. In our hearts, we all want to be great. That is why Jesus' disciples constantly bickered with one another. It is in our DNA. So Jesus acknowledged it and taught us how to be really great in the Kingdom of God.

Mark 9:35 And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all."

As a young man, Alan Redpath, British pastor and theologian, was a successful accountant. One day, he was talking with a Christian friend who told him, "Alan, it is possible to have a saved soul and a wasted life." Redpath couldn't forget those words. He knew he was guilty of having his soul saved, yet having a wasted life. He prayed, "Lord, I want Your will for me. I don't want to waste my life. I dedicate it to You." God redirected his course, and Redpath ultimately became an evangelist, pastor, author, president of a missions organization, and a dean of a Bible school. He served the Lord until the end of his life.

It's possible that some of us could have a saved soul but a wasted life. In other words, you have the assurance of heaven, but you're wasting your life here on earth, because you're not serving Christ to the fullest. Every person's life is filled with opportunities to serve the Lord. What we do with the opportunities is the big question. Do we let them slip by? Or do we seize the day and serve the Lord so that we can hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant"?

Matthew 25:20–21 So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' His lord said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'

If you desire to hear those words from Jesus, then make a change in your life like Alan Redpath made. Take what God has given you and make the most of it. You might say to yourself, "But I don't have much." No, you have everything you need. You have God's most precious gift, Jesus Christ. You have the Holy Spirit to empower you. God has instilled in your life certain gifts for His glory. That means your life is valuable. Take what God has given you and dedicate it to His glory. Just watch what He will accomplish. And stop making excuses why you cannot serve the Lord and His people.

By the way, when was the last time you said, "Thank you" to those who serve you in our church? We have many wonderful servants of God. They are in the Coffee and Donut ministry, Nursery ministry, Children's ministry, Youth ministry, Multi-Media and Video ministry, Sound ministry, Bookstore ministry, Movers ministry, and of course, Worship ministry.

C. THE SEVEN SERVANTS

Acts 6:5-7 And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, 6 whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. 7 Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

The seven men all had Greek names, indicating that they were probably Hellenists themselves. The people including the apostles showed great sensitivity to the offended Hellenists by appointing Hellenists to take care of the widows' distribution.

The Lord confirmed the wisdom of the apostles through agreement among the people. The apostles were led by the Lord, not by popular opinion. Yet, because they were all in basic agreement, they agreed on how the Lord was leading the apostles.

Because this situation was handled with wisdom and sensitivity to those who were offended, a potentially divisive issue was defused, and the Gospel continued to go forth.

Even a great many of the priests came to faith in Jesus. It has been estimated that there were 8,000 Jewish priests attached to the temple ministry in the ancient Jerusalem, and "a great many" of them trusted Jesus Christ as Savior. How about that!!!

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Don't be a tool of satan to divide the body of Christ.

If you have an issue with someone in the congregation, handle it according to the Word of God.

Matthew 18:15-17 "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' 17 And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector .

2) We all have parts in the work for the Lord. No one is greater and no one is lesser. Just different tasks. DO NOT compare.

3) Voluntary sacrifice and service, motivated by love, is what the Lord wants from His children.