

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

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Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the body of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And what they said pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Proch'orus, and Nica'nor, and Timon, and Par'menas, and Nicola'us, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them.

And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.
(Acts 6:1-7 RSV)

This fifth book of our New Testament, which we call "The Acts of the Apostles," is a strange book indeed. Early on, it tells us that the early church elected a twelfth apostle, Matthias, to take the place left vacant by Judas. But then it doesn't say another word about Matthias. Indeed, it doesn't say much about nine of the other eleven. By the third chapter, Peter and John have become the main characters, and the other ten are completely forgotten. In chapters seven and eight, our attention is turned to Stephen and Philip, who were not among the original twelve apostles. Then, after the conversion of Paul in chapter nine, we hear again about Peter, only to lose track of him again at the end of chapter twelve. After that, there will be only one more brief mention of Peter, and we will not be told what happened to him, where he preached, or where he died. This is because in chapter thirteen Paul has taken the center of the stage, and the rest of the book will deal with his missionary travels. But even when it comes to

Paul, the information in this book is unsatisfactory, for at the end we are simply told that he is a prisoner in Rome, awaiting trial, and then the book quits on us. It doesn't end. It simply quits, leaving us wondering whatever became of Paul, to say nothing of Peter, John, and the other apostles.

This is so, because the book of Acts is not really about the apostles. Its author gave it no title, and it was only much later that someone decided to call it "The Acts of the Apostles." Yet, in spite of that title, the book is really about the Acts of the Holy Spirit. If you take time to look at it after you return home, you will see that this is the second part of a two-book series. The first, which we now call "The Gospel of Luke," deals with the acts of the Holy Spirit through Jesus of Nazareth. The second, which we call "The Acts of the Apostles," deals with the acts of Jesus of Nazareth through the Holy Spirit. This is why it is not particularly interested in following the life of any one of the apostles. Its interest is rather to follow the life of this community we call the church.

The book of Acts begins with the account of Pentecost. You remember how the Holy Spirit was poured on all who were present, and they overcame the barriers of culture and language, and they gave witness to the mighty acts of God. It then moves on to describe the life of the early church, how they witnessed, how they broke bread together with joy, how they shared in all things.

But not everything is rosy. By the fifth chapter we come across the episode of Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to the church and paid dearly for it. Now, in the sixth chapter, we come to another difficult situation. There is “murmuring” in the church because the Widows of the Greeks were being neglected in the daily distribution.

In order to understand this passage, several things need to be clarified:

- First, the “Greeks” and the “Hebrews” . . .

Hebrews were the original bearers of the Gospel

“Greeks” looked at with suspicion in Jerusalem

- Secondly, the “widows” . . .

Given such a situation, it is not surprising that the widows of the Greeks were being neglected.

So, there is murmuring in the church. All is not well. At this point, the “Hebrew” leadership has a clear option, a most human and most natural option. They could say simply: “Who do these people think they are? They are latecomers. Let them be content with what they have. Take it or leave it. After all, we are already being sufficiently nice to them, and now they are creating problems for us.”

Yet, they cannot really say that, for the truth is that the problem has not been created by the Greeks and their widows. Their problem has been created by the Holy Spirit, who on that day of

Pentecost made the Gospel be preached far and wide to all these strange people who were present in Jerusalem. The Greek are in the church not because they forced their way into it. These Hellenistic Jews, and soon Gentiles of every culture and background, are in the church because the Holy Spirit has this nasty habit of tearing down human barriers. The problem is not created by the Greeks. The problem is created by the Holy Spirit, and either the church deals responsibly with it or it ignores the work of the Holy Spirit.

What that early church does is remarkable. The twelve could have asked that a token Greek be named to help them with the distribution to the Greek widows. But they did much more than that. They created a new structure for the administration of the daily distribution. By the names of the seven whom they elected, it appears that they were all Hellenistic Jews. They all have Greek names. Indeed, of one of them, Nicolaus, we are told that he was not even a Jew by birth.

This was a courageous and unexpected thing to do. Yet Luke tells us that it was the right thing to do, for "the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.

If this were all that Luke tells us, it would already be a remarkable sign of the strange way in which the Spirit works among us. But there is more. The twelve decide that they will give to these seven the administrative tasks, and that they will reserve for themselves the ministry of the word. But even this is not enough for the Spirit, who has other ideas. Were we to continue

reading the book of Acts, we would find that, immediately after the passage read, we are told that Stephen, one of the seven elected to manage the financial resources of the church, is giving witness, first with his speech, and then with his own life. In the next chapter, it is Philip, also one of the seven, who takes up the ministry of the word. And then we pick on Paul's conversion, and we are off on the mission to the gentiles, and ultimately to us.

Without even intending to do so, the early church made this possible by responding to the murmurings of the Greeks. By empowering the Greek-speaking element in the church, they opened the way for the mission, first to other Greek-speaking Jews, then to the Gentiles, and ultimately to us.

The twelve had a very limited vision of the mission of the church. They did not need a full vision of all that the Spirit would do in the future in order to be obedient in their own time. And yet because of their obedience in their own time, a new future that they did not even suspect was opened to the church and eventually to us. They knew that injustice was not to be tolerated in the community of the Spirit, and that was enough. But because they knew this, acted upon it, new horizons were opened to that community.

Time has passed., and we are constantly facing similar situations. Various groups in the church tell us that we are not being entirely fair in today's equivalent of the "daily distribution." We can ignore

them. We can remind them that they are latecomers, and that by all human standards they should be content with what they have. We can make token gestures towards them. We can find a dozen ways to tell them that their presence is a problem.

Or, on the other hand, we can acknowledge that the problem is not with them. The problem is that as a church we live by a Spirit who has the uncomfortable habit of creating this sort of problem, of bringing in strange people, of making us sisters and brothers to such people. And for that we are thankful, for were it not for that uncomfortable habit, that indescribable grace of our God, none of us would be here. We are here because the Spirit is inclusive, and we are here because long ago that early church was willing to do justice to the murmurings of the Greeks. And, if we will but be obedient to the Spirit today, only the Spirit knows what avenues of mission will be opened for the future.



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