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When Jesus walked this earth, he once said to those who were following him: *“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away”* (Matthew 13:24-25). Jesus was giving us insight here as to what would happen in his church from its first birth until he returns to take us home to glory – which is the time we live in today. This particular parable describes the reality that even though Jesus has sown seeds of the Spirit of God in the hearts of those in his church – our enemy, the devil, the fallen world we live in, and the sin that continues to live in our hearts – will also sow seeds of evil and human depravity in the hearts of those in his church. There will be weeds among the wheat.

In the book of Acts we have seen the historical fulfillment of Jesus' words. We have seen the wheat springing up and growing in men and women filled with the Holy Spirit, empowered by the Spirit of God, trusting and depending upon the life of God within them, boldly living and serving and speaking and sharing throughout the whole city of Jerusalem. They were not afraid, they were not discouraged, they were fired up by the flames of the Holy Spirit, burning witnesses to the truth and life of the transforming power of the resurrected Son of God, Jesus Christ. We saw this, time and time again, all through the first four chapters of the book of Acts. But two weeks ago we saw the first indication of “weeds” among the “wheat” when the “enemy” of our souls “sowed” the “weeds” of hypocrisy and self-righteousness in the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira, as they deceitfully pretended to be something they were not, caused their stunning immediate death in the early church, in the midst of a great movement of God’s Spirit. Remember that we saw that once Ananias and Sapphira and their heart attitudes were removed - the church once again enjoyed a season of “great grace” with “great power” – even through persecution for their bold faith. In our text for this morning we once again see how in the midst of this great movement of the Holy Spirit in the *wheat* of God’s harvest, the *weeds* of darkness of the fallen, sinful nature rose up against the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The first thing we see in our text for this morning is that the church was growing. Our passage for today begins and ends with a reference to growth. Acts 6:1 says: *“Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number”* and Acts 6:7 tells us: *“And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”* Praise God! What we are reading here is that when the body of Christ, the people of God, the church, truly surrenders to the Holy Spirit, the church will grow spiritually. But what we’ve already seen and what we will see again today is that with growth there comes internal tensions and problems - and as the Jerusalem church grew in numbers it struggled with diversity and complexity. Luke wrote the book of Acts not only to document the glorious growth of the Holy Spirit-empowered movement of the first church, but also to show us how it all happened and what dangers they faced and how various threats to the church and obstacles to growth were overcome. And so sandwiched between the first and last verses of our text we read of a dangerous threat to the movement of the Holy Spirit in the first church and how the church handled and overcame that dangerous threat.

*"Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables" (Acts 6:1-2).* In these two opening verses Luke identifies the dangerous threat the first church was facing, and he also tells us the threat was twofold: 1) the threat the church faced was the conflict that resulted in certain widows were being neglected, and 2) the church also faced the dangerous threat of solving the problem of the widows being neglected in a way that would have diverted the leadership of the church from call to minister the Word of God to God's people.

This all began when a conflict arose between *"the Hellenists"* (Greek-speaking Christians who *had not* been born in Palestine) and *"the Hebrews"* (Hebrew speaking Christians who *had* been born in Palestine), regarding the failure of the church to take care of the widows of *"the Hellenists."* In Acts 4:32, 34 we read that all *"those who believed were of one heart and soul"* and *"there was not a needy person among them."* In chapter 6 we see problems in both these areas. The truth is, every church of Jesus Christ that tries to practice true Spirit-empowered community will encounter problems in the very areas of their strength in the community life of the church. What we are reading here is that the *"great grace"* with *"great power"* in Acts 4 was now being replaced with *"great discontent"* and *"great division"* in Acts 6. We know this is true because the word *"complaint"* here in the Greek means *"to murmur or mutter"* which indicates that the *"Hellenists"* were complaining, murmuring, criticizing, gossiping about *"the Hebrews"* causing discontent and division throughout the whole congregation.

Complaining, murmuring, criticizing, gossiping is always wrong and is always fatal. Rather than bringing their concerns to those responsible in leadership, these Greek-speaking Jewish Christians began to complain among themselves, and their murmuring attitude spread discontent throughout the whole body of Christians. This is still the devil's favorite trick to divide the church. We murmur when we complain about a problem, rather than bringing our concern to one who can do something about it. We also murmur when we complain to other people who might be involved but who are not in a position to do much about it. Murmuring brought the judgment of God upon the children of Israel in the wilderness, in Old Testament days. Murmuring is always the mark of a critical, discontented, rebellious spirit. This is still how the evil one divides us today. He loves to get us hurt or angry about something and convince us it's in our best interest to share our discontent with one another, usually under the guise of concern, rather than to go directly to the one with whom we have differences. Such behavior is a serious violation of Jesus command in Matthew 18 to personally address one other when we have issues, and it is a deadly defiance of God's divine law of relationship that calls us to love Him and one another. Murmuring, complaining, criticizing and gossiping are not gifts of the Holy Spirit.

In our text for today that murmuring was about a distribution of food that was made every day to the widows in the church who were in need, which came from the collections we read of at the end of chapter 4 that were taken and laid at the apostles' feet to be given away to those in poverty. But in the distribution, those well known by the leaders who oversaw the distribution received more. There is nothing in our text that tell us this preference was deliberate. There is no prejudice evident anywhere in this. The reality is that we all have a network of relationships that is often a natural means by which we know the needs of other people. And very often such a network exists around people who have known each other longer and which also exist through ties of culture and language. This would have even been more true for those in the first church that we are looking at today. And what we see today in that one of the results of the differences in the relationships, cultures and languages was that the system developed back in Acts 4:34 to take care of the poor was not working for the minority group in the church. This was causing murmuring, complaining, criticizing and gossiping and division through-out the church – and when the leadership heard about it, we read that *"the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.'*" In these words, the apostles are telling us they recognized a second threat to the church.

At first glance, the apostles' statement might seem somewhat defensive. Most likely someone must have made the suggestion that it would in fact be a good idea if the apostles gave more hands-on time to this problem of the neglected widows. But as leaders of the church, the apostles recognized that if they did so, they would end up neglecting their primary call of ministry of the Word of God to the people of God that God gave them as leaders of the church. The apostle Paul spoke of this in Colossians 1:24-29: *"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me."*

The structure of Luke's words in our text for today affirm the primary importance of the ministry of the Word of God in the church by the link he forges between verse 2, where he quotes the apostles as saying that leaving *"the word of God"* would be a grave mistake – to Luke's report of the effect of not leaving the Word of God in verse 7: *"And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."* In other words, the Word of God kept spreading and bearing fruit because the apostles did not make the mistake of neglecting their focus on the Word of God to fix a pressing problem in the church. The greatest major threat to the church in their day - and in our day - is neglect of the Word of God. Born-again followers of Jesus Christ are to be a people of the Book, the Bible, the Word of God. The Bible calls Jesus *"the Word"* and in John 1:1-5 the apostle John declares: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*

The truth is, in keeping their focus on the Word of God rather than a hands-on approach to solving the problem, the apostles - filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit - used *principles* of the Word of God put the matter to rest. *The Word of God clearly states our call to help those in need*, as James, Jesus' brother, who was no doubt in the church at that time, wrote some years later: *"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world"* (James 1:27). *The Word of God also clearly states our call to love one another and take care of one another and serve each other*, as evidenced later on in the abundance of *"one another"* texts throughout the New Testament. *The Word of God also clearly states our call to serve the people of God as a whole*, as evidenced later on in the abundance of New Testament texts that tell us God gives each one of us a gift of the Spirit in order to fulfill a specific role in the church. The apostle Paul later writes that these differing gifts are all empowered *"by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills"* (1 Corinthians 12:11), so that in the church, *"each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good"* (1 Corinthians 12:7). And so the apostles, filled and empowered by the Holy Spirit, resolved the issue with the principles of God's Word:

*And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will 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 gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.* Acts 6:2-6

For the second time in the history of this first church, the leadership of the church took action as dissension began to creep throughout the whole congregation. And as they did so it's important we keep in mind that the apostles were not indicating "*serve tables*" was beneath their role or position when they said: "*It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.*" Remember that these apostles had been in the upper room with our Lord Jesus. They had seen him take off his coat, gird himself with a towel, take a basin of water, and wash their feet. They had heard his words, "*Let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves*" (Luke 22:26). They were not, in any sense, denigrating the ministry of "*serve tables.*" They made that statement based on the different roles that God gifts them people for and calls them to use in the church. Luke gives us a very clear example of the way the early church assigned roles and duties upon the basis of the distribution of gifts by the Holy Spirit. The glory of the leaders in the first church was that they were conscious of the superintendency and preeminence of the Holy Spirit -- so aware that the Lord Jesus himself, by means of the Spirit, was the head of the church -- that they could discern the calls and sense the gifts, and assign the roles to the ministries to various individuals, giving them orders and sending them out, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. All through this book of Acts you can see the wondrous manifestation of the presence and direction of the Holy Spirit. Through this whole book of Acts we see the Spirit of God is at work.

The apostles understood that their calling and gift and role was that of an apostle -- and that they were to lay the foundation of the church. The foundation they have given to us is God's Word. It is on God's Word that the church of Jesus Christ rests. The minute the church departs from these Scriptures it loses its strength, its light, its understanding, its purpose, its mission and its witness. That always been the unchanging pattern throughout twenty centuries of church life. Whenever the church has rested upon the foundation laid by the apostles, the truth as it is in Jesus, the church has always had strength, power, and grace. It was necessary that the apostles give themselves to the ministry of apostleship, which involved, as they themselves said, "*prayer and the ministry of the word.*" As they met together in prayer they learned and understood the mind of God. The Spirit of God reminded them of things which the Lord Jesus had taught them, and they in turn imparted this to the church. None of the New Testament was in writing at this time, yet all of the principles and truths reflected in New Testament were being uttered by the apostles as they taught the people in the first church. They taught them what we now have written down for us -- and most specifically for the leaders of the church. The Bible is the word of God that the leaders in the first church has given to the leaders of the church of today. And as they treasured and measured all things according to God's Word, we are to devote ourselves to also.

But they recognized also that there were other callings and gifts and roles given by the Spirit to all others in the first church. In our text today we see how the leaders of the first church began process of listening and discerning and guiding the church to know the calling and gifting of God which would qualify them to do fulfill the roles that were needed in the church. This is the divine interdependence God created the church for. We see this interdependence in the unity that flowed out of the humble acceptance and respect for the God ordained roles of both those called into leadership and those had been gifted within the church for the common good. We see this in that the apostles, led by the Spirit, laid down the requirements for those who would be chosen to "*serve tables.*" The assembly then did the *choosing* (nominating) while the apostles did the actual *appointing*. This is a picture of humble unity between spiritual leaders and the members of the flock. The apostles also specified that the church "*pick out*" ("look out for" in the Greek) seven men. This would have followed the Jewish practice of setting up teams of seven men for particular duties. These men also had to be highly qualified: "*Men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.*" All three of these qualifications remind us that the church is not to function like the world. Organizational management would require men who "*serve tables*" to have good leadership styles, a food-service background, a confident voice, and a customer service attitude. But the church, which is not to be of the world but of the kingdom of God, requires "*men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom*" because all service for Jesus is spiritual in nature.

God chooses and qualified His leader by different standards than the world. Samuel 16:7 says: *“For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”* Spiritual problems can only be solved by spiritual leaders. Spiritual growth can only happen when spiritual leaders use spiritual principles. In the context of our text for today the qualifications required by the apostles remind us that the problem they were addressing was spiritual. Those helping resolve the problem were to be men of good reputation, meaning mostly that they had solved their own pride or ego problems. They could be trusted to work unto the Lord and not for themselves. And they were to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, because what destroys unity is not really food inequities and insufficient attention; *it is hardness of heart and increasing selfishness.* So these men had to have the spiritual qualifications to accomplish the task. The same would be true for the church today; the qualifications and character qualities listed in the New Testament are to be the baseline by which we choose and appoint leaders to serve in the body of Christ, the church.

What is significant in our text this morning is that all seven of those whom the apostles appointed to *“serve tables”* had Greek names. That means those who were appointed to lead this ministry were chosen from among the murmuring party, the Greek-speaking Christians. Those who were complaining about the problem of what was not being done were willing to step forward and give of themselves to be the solution to the problem. This again reflects the humble unity of interdependence of a Spirit-empowered church. As soon as they chose and appointed these men there was no longer any dissension, as both groups made the decision to quit pointing fingers at each other and instead join hands in cooperating for the good of all. What we are seeing here is that while complaining kills, commitment gives life. Acts 6:7 tells us *“And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”* Once the leaders in the church made the decision to deal with the conflict in the church in a way that would not divert them from the ministry of the Word of God and prayer - and once those in the church humbly accepted the leadership’s guidance and their own responsibility to serve – the Word of God once again went forth with *“great power”* through *“great grace”* and *“the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.”*

The humbly unity of our interdependence should be the witness of the Spirit in the church. We the symbol of this when those who were chosen by the church and appointed by the leaders were *“set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.”* When the apostles *“laid their hands”* on the seven men, they were identifying with the ministries of *“serving tables”* for the widows. In the Old Testament, whenever a Hebrew brought a lamb or a bull or any animal to be sacrificed he first laid his hands upon it, by which he said, *“This animal and I are identified. My sins are laid upon him and his blood shed for me is as my own blood being shed.”* In other words, laying on of hands is a symbol of humbly confessing our desperate need for God and acknowledging that God has fulfilled that need through the provision of God. That is what the Old Testament practice of the laying on of hands meant. In the New Testament *“laying on with hands”* was carried on into the body of Christ as an act of identification. The apostles were saying, *“These seven men have gifts and the qualifications are part of our ministry as apostles, and we are part of theirs. We belong in the body together.”* Paul would write of this later in 1 Corinthians 12:12-21: *“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’”*

Members of the church of Jesus Christ are interdependent, one upon another. While Paul gives us a picture of that in 1 Corinthians 12:12-21, we see the practical side of that interdependence in the more than 30 “*one another*” verses in the New Testament, which reveals to us that the care-giving ministry in the church is not be primarily done by the leadership but by “*one another.*” This was the problem we just saw in the first church; and the problem was solved by men chosen from the church.

The dangerous threats the first church faced are the same dangerous threats that we face today. We must remember that when we as the body of Christ, the people of God, the church, truly surrenders to the Holy Spirit, our church will spiritually grow. But with that spiritual growth there will come internal tensions and problems - and if we grow in numbers we will also struggle with diversity and complexity. We must also take care to not neglect those in need in the church and remember that the Word of God clearly states our call to help those in need, to love one another and take care of one another and serve each other, and to serve the people of God as a whole. Caregiving – taking care of one another - is the responsibility of everyone in the church.

We all must not make the mistake of shifting our focus away from the Word of God when we deal with issues and problems in the church. The greatest threat to every follower of Jesus Christ and to every church is the neglect of the Word of God. Jesus is “*the Word*” and we are born-again followers of Jesus Christ who is “*the Word.*” We are to be a people of the Book, the Bible, the Word of God.

Complaining, murmuring, criticizing, gossiping is always wrong and is always deadly. The evil one loves to divide us this way. Jesus commands us to personally address one other when we have issues with each other. We must not deny or defy God’s divine law of relationship that calls us to love Him and one another. Murmuring, complaining, criticizing and gossiping are not gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The leaders of the church are to devote themselves to “*prayer and the ministry of the word*” because God’s Word is the foundations of the church, given to us by the apostles. The minute the church departs from these Scriptures it loses its strength, its light and its understanding, and its ability to fulfill its purpose and mission. That always been true; it’s the unchanging pattern throughout history.

Leaders of the church are to listen and discern and guide those in the church to know the calling and gifting of God which would qualify them to do fulfill the roles that were needed in the church. This is the divine interdependence God created the church for. We see this interdependence in the unity that flowed out of the humble acceptance and respect for the God ordained roles of both those called into leadership and those had been gifted within the church for the common good. Acts outlines different methods of decision making in the church at different times in the church. A balance must be struck that allows for the humble God-ordained role spiritual leader in the church and requirement that members of the church be humble, committed, spiritual, partners in making decisions - that reflect not the will of the people, but the will of God. Because the church is the body of Christ, it is to not function like a school system or a business or a government agency. The Kingdom of God is not a democracy. Jesus is Lord of Lords and King of Kings; only his vote matters. As children of the King we are to use spiritual and biblical standards when we make decisions, and when we choose and appoint leaders.

All followers of Jesus Christ are called to members the church, the body of Christ – and we are all called to find and function in our role within the church as “*God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.*” May the witness of the Spirit at Arrowsmith in the days ahead be our humble unity we seek to fulfill our roles in the church so that the Gospel and the Word of God will move out with “*great power*” through “*great grace*” in our lives and in the lives of all in Port Alberni. Amen!