

Sermon for Sunday, January 9, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Senior Pastor
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"APPOINTMENT TO SERVE"

Acts 6:1-7

Text: "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."

--Acts 6:3

The opening verse of our Scripture for this morning reads this way: "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number..." So the first thing we learn about the Church was that it was growing. After the ascension of Jesus the Bible tells us that the disciples gathered in an upper room to wait for the promised Holy Spirit. It also tells us that there were 120 believers. Yet, after the Holy Spirit came upon them on the day of Pentecost, we are told that 3,000 persons accepted Jesus as their personal Saviour and became a part of the body of believers. Then, just a few days later, as Peter and John were preaching, the Bible tells us that many of those who heard the word believed and the number of the men came to about five thousand. Well, that is a very spectacular start! Did you ever wonder why the early church had such fantastic growth? Well, that is what I want to talk about this morning--I want to share with you what the Bible tells us about that early church that made it grow and perhaps it will give us some insights for today as to how the church can still grow.

However, before that, let me point out several other things we can learn about the church from our passage of Scripture for this morning. You see, we learn that they had problems. The verse not only says that the disciples were increasing in numbers, it goes on to add, "the Hellenists murmured against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution..." Now, the Hellenists were simply Jews from outside of Judea. They had come to Jerusalem from other lands for the feast days and when they had been converted, they simply stayed on. But now there is "murmuring" in the church. There are only two kinds of churches where there is "murmuring"; a church where things are going badly or a church where things are going well! The fact is, I have never known a church where there was not some murmuring. As a young pastor it used to bother me that there was always murmuring in the church. Now I am older and hopefully wiser, and I understand that this has always been the case and it will always be the case. I've learned that the church is not perfect. It is made up of sinners--forgiven sinners, to be sure, but sinners nonetheless--and so there is always murmuring. Sometimes people want the church to be perfect--they want it to be free of trouble or disagreement--but the problem is those of us in the church are not perfect. No, we are sinners who know we will always be imperfect and will always be in need of forgiveness. Even St. Paul and Barnabas, the first two full-time missionaries, couldn't agree and broke up their team. So the church will always have some murmuring in it. The man who expects the church to be perfect or free of hypocrites simply does not understand human nature. The way it works out, that sort of person ends up murmuring because there are other imperfect people in the church who are also murmuring.

Well, a third thing we learn about the early church is that not only was it growing, not only was it murmuring, but as it grew it began to organize itself and to have a division of labor. Now, I cannot impress upon you how important this is, even today. Within the body of believers everyone is called to a ministry. As I am fond of saying--and as you have heard me say many times--God doesn't call us into the vineyard to eat grapes, but to hoe. No one is called into God's kingdom to serve in an advisory capacity. Over in the 12th chapter of I Corinthians we are told that there are varieties of gifts and varieties of service and varieties of working, but that each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (I Cor. 12:4-7)

Now, the Bible makes it clear that the hand isn't better than the foot, or the eye better than the nose or the ear, but that each is necessary for the whole body to function well.

One reason Central is doing so well and God is blessing it is because a lot of you have a ministry of one sort or another. Some of you have a ministry of serving, some of teaching, some of sharing the gospel, some of being officers, some have a ministry of giving, some have the gift of sewing, and many gifts of the Spirit are being manifested in our congregation. The body functions well when all of its parts are working. And Central is functioning well because so many gifts of the Spirit are being used, are being manifested, in our midst. Praise God for that. People are free here to do what ministry God calls them to do and God is blessing that. I think the question all of us need to ask ourselves is this: "What gift has God given me for serving in the church and am I using that gift?"

So the early church was growing, it was murmuring, it was organizing for ministry. Now, I said earlier I intended to talk this morning about why the church was growing and I want to do that now. First, it was growing because everybody was out sharing the good news about Jesus. Over in the 8th chapter of Acts we are told that persecution broke out against the church there in Jerusalem. As a consequence we are told that the believers were scattered. Most of them had to leave Jerusalem. But persecuting the early church was like trying to put out a grass fire with a broom--every time you hit, you only scatter more sparks. And that's what happened to the early church--the more they were persecuted, the more they were scattered; and the more they were scattered the more the gospel spread. The Bible says (Acts 8:4) "Now those who were scattered went about preaching the word..." When this service is over those of you gathered here will scatter throughout the city--the church grows when you scatter to tell others the good news. If I had the secret of how to cure cancer and told you that secret this morning, by tomorrow morning when you had scattered throughout the city, everybody in town would have heard the good news. Well, I've got some even better news than the cure of cancer. I've got the secret for the cure of eternal death--I've got the secret of eternal life--and that secret is that God in Jesus has died for our sins, he offers to forgive us and to make us his Sons. The early church grew because everybody was excited about that and they went everywhere sharing that good news. And the church today is going to grow when all of us--not just one or two but all of us--are sharing that spiritual breakthrough.

The second reason the early church was growing was because they had the right kind of leadership. When the need arose to chose some new leaders, the Bible tells us the basis on which they chose that leadership. In our text for this morning we are told that they chose men "of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom."

Notice first that their leadership was of good repute. A leader of the church should have a good reputation. There should be no breath of scandal, no inkling of wickedness, no tale of disrepute about the character of a Christian leader. The world judges the church by its leaders. As St. Paul says, we ought to be above reproach. Now, there are a lot of people about whom you can say nothing bad. That is, they have never been linked to a public scandal, they have never been convicted of lying or cheating or stealing. But the absence of a bad reputation is not adequate. The Bible says that the church leaders should be men of good reputation. That is, their lives should be such that positive things are said about them. Do you remember how Jesus described the people who would get into heaven? He said it was the person who had acted affirmatively, who had acted positively, who would be invited into heaven. He put it this way, "I was hungry and you gave me meat, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was sick and in prison and you visited me..." So, being of good reputation means not only to refrain from wickedness, but also to be engaged in a positive ministry of service.

Notice secondly that their leadership was to be full of the Spirit. Now, according to the Bible, every Christian has the Spirit of God at work in his life. St. Paul put it this way, "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." (I Cor. 12:3) However, it is one thing for you to have God's Spirit, but it is another for God's Spirit to have you. Those early church leaders were men full of the Spirit. And I have always been intrigued by the fact that others could tell it. It would be foolish to tell the church to choose men full of the Spirit unless it was observable. So these men had a spiritual dimension about their lives that others could see--it was obvious to them. Sometimes a congregation selects a man to be a leader for the wrong reason. Sometimes a church will elect a man as an officer because he is a big contributor, or because he is influential in the community, or because he happens to come to church with regularity. But a man may be or do all of those things and not be filled with the Spirit. Above all a leader should be full of the Spirit--so much so that it is apparent to everybody.

The third qualification for a leader in the church is that he be a man of wisdom. Now, the Bible speaks of two kinds of wisdom, the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God. The wisdom of the world is important in some respects. For example, in handling the funds of the church we need to use the best bookkeeping methods of the world. In keeping the buildings in repair we need to use the best methods of the world. But the Bible tells us that by the wisdom of the world men did not know God. So being wise in the things of the world is not enough. No, when the Bible says that leaders ought to have wisdom, it means spiritual wisdom. I know some churches today who have the best leadership of the world, but they are spiritually dead. Above all a church needs leaders who have spiritual wisdom. A church needs leaders with spiritual wisdom, leaders who are sensitive to the will of God, the leading of God, the mind of God. This church will continue to grow and have an impact on St. Louis in direct proportion to the spiritual wisdom of your officers. Everything hinges on their spiritual insights and wisdom.

When the church has leaders who are of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, do you know what happens? Here is what the Bible says, "And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly..." (Acts 6:7) Our congregation is experiencing an incredible growth. We have many disadvantages as a church--we do not have enough space, we do not have enough parking, the growth of the city passed us by 15 years ago, we are in an older part of town. Yet, in spite of that, we are experiencing an incredible growth. Our Sunday School is booming and we are having to add additional space to handle it--even though it is inconvenient to have to go across the street and half a block away. Our church services are growing in attendance and during Lent we will add a third service at 8:15 to make room for more people at the 11:00 service. There are a lot of reasons for that growth--one reason is that so many of you are excited about Jesus that you are sharing the good news with others. Another reason is that so many of you have a ministry here as you exercise the gifts God has given you. Another reason is that so many of you are opening your lives to Jesus and opening your hearts to His Spirit. But one of the biggest reasons of all is that God is raising up leaders among us--men who are of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom. With that kind of spiritual leadership surely the word of God will increase and the number of disciples will multiply.