

Godly leaders in the church under attack

If you wanted mess up a Christian church, a church like ours, how would you do it? What would you do to kill a church, to make it useless? In the book of Acts we have already seen how Satan tried to destroy the church in Jerusalem. Twice, Satan's attack came in the form of persecution. The apostles were beaten, threatened, thrown in prison. They were strictly forbidden to speak in the name of Jesus. Did it work? No. Acts 5:42 - "Every day in the temple and in the houses they did not cease teaching and proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ". The other attack came in the form of corruption within the church itself. You remember? Ananias and Sapphira sell their field and they lie to the church, to the apostles, and worse, to the Holy Spirit, saying that they give the church all the money they received for the sale. The integrity of the church is threatened. Does it work? No! God's judgment falls on this couple and the church continues to move forward.

And now Satan is changing his tactics again. He is stubborn, determined in his desire to destroy the Church of Jesus Christ and the advance of the gospel. In this passage this morning, we will see two dangers to the church in Jerusalem, a solution and the result of the solution.

The danger of Division - Look at verse 6 and we see something very positive: "The disciples were increasing in number". The church is growing. I remind you that in Chapter 1 there were 120 people. Here, commentators estimate it to be 20,000 people including children. And it's much easier to organize a church of 120 than a church of 20,000.

And there is in the church in Jerusalem, a system of food aid and financial aid for the poor and especially the widows. We saw this in chapter 4.35 "They distributed to everyone as needed". And we know that the care of widows was part of the responsibility that God gave to his people in the Old Testament: "When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you are not to go back to get it; it shall belong to the stranger, the orphan, and to the widow" Deuteronomy 24.19.

But with a church of 20,000 people and few leaders, it is complicated to organize this ministry of help and it turns out that some of the widows are neglected. There is no suggestion that the omission is an intentional omission. It is probably a question of mismanagement of the distribution, a lack of communication between the Apostles. There was no WhatsApp group, no emails. The apostles can no longer bear the burden of all the material needs of the people on their own. It seems almost inevitable that some will fall through the cracks.

But the danger lies in the way widows and their friends react. In the church there are two main groups, the Hellenists and the Hebrews. They are all Christians, but of different origins, different backgrounds, different regions, different languages and different cultures. And the apostles are all from the Hebrew group and the neglected widows from the Hellenist group. And although the omission on the part of the apostles is not at all intentional, it is clear that the Hellenists see the situation differently. And this omission risks sowing division in the church: V1 "A murmuring by Hellenists rose against the Hebrews". The text does not say that it is widows who murmur, it is "the Hellenists", those who are part of their group. It risks splitting the church in two. I repeat that it is not the omission, the forgetfulness that risks dividing the church. Nor is it the fact that the Hellenists have a subject of complaint, a grievance. Their grievance is legitimate. The problem is, the Hellenists murmur secretly about it. This is the way they react. This word "murmur" is a word often found in the Old Testament to describe what God's people do. They murmur against Moses. They murmur against God. And these murmurs provoke the wrath of God against his people. In Jerusalem, they murmur. They start to complain to each other. We can imagine that. When they gather among themselves, what is the topic of their conversation, when they are around the table for dinner? "It is the Hebrews who neglect our widows."

And unfortunately, in the Church of Jesus Christ there will always be accidental oversights, omissions, things not done on purpose. There can be many reasons, often quite innocent. It's not good. We must do everything to avoid it, but it can happen. There may be some very legitimate grounds for complaint. There may be well-founded complaints. But how are you to react when this happens to you? The temptation is to murmur and grumble. The temptation is to find people who are willing to listen. Instead of going directly to church leaders to talk to them openly, we grumble in small groups, with people we are close to. And by doing that, we sow discord in the body of Jesus Christ. We sow division. We turn brother against brother. We murmur to everyone instead of going to the right person. We grumble to those who can do nothing to change the situation. And we know human nature. When we grumble, we tend to exaggerate. We tend to twist things. We tend to attribute motives falsely. Murmurs become gossip, even slander, and through those murmurs, poison enters the body of Jesus Christ.

My friends, if you ever have a grievance against someone in the church, especially church leaders, before you tell anyone, instead of murmuring to other members of the church, instead of creating division in the church, go to the person first and try to sort it out without murmuring, without animosity. Often it will be a simple oversight, a misunderstanding that is easy to resolve. And if someone comes to you to grumble, I encourage you not to listen to them. Ask them, "Have you discussed this with the leaders of the church? I recommend that you do this before telling anyone." Murmurs sow division. But there is a more serious danger behind the danger of division. Do you see the real danger? The real danger is that the gospel message will be lost, the gospel message will get confused, the world will no longer hear the gospel message.

When we murmur, we not only hurt others, but we hurt the gospel. We cooperate with Satan. The world hears the murmurs instead of hearing the glorious message of forgiveness offered in Christ. The world sees Christians fighting with each other instead of Christians living out the reality of the love and grace of Christ. How many times have we heard a non-Christian say that he rejects Jesus Christ because of the conflict he saw in his church? One commentator wrote: "If we are gripped by internal conflicts, we will see our message become muddled and our energy dissipated." The first danger - division

The danger of distraction - The apostles hear about the whispers of the Hellenists and they accept that there is a problem. So far it is the apostles who take care of the distribution of food and money. We saw this in chapter 4. But with growth in the church and with more widows living in need, food distribution takes longer and longer. And The apostles see that there is a real danger - v2: "It is not right that we abandon the Word of God to serve at tables" In verse 4 they say that they will persevere "in prayer and in the ministry of the Word". Here is the danger: The more time the apostles spend attending to the material needs of the people, the less time they will have for prayer and the ministry of the Word. They never say that the ministry of mercy is not important. They don't say that they are too important to do this job, that it is a job that is beneath them. They simply say that their main task, to which they are called, to which they must devote themselves, is prayer and the preaching of the Word. We read elsewhere in the New Testament that Jesus gives his church people with different gifts and with different roles. Here is what the apostle Paul says in Romans 12: " However, since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, *each of us is to use them properly*: if prophecy, in proportion

to one's faith; if service, in the *act of serving*; or the one who teaches, in the *act of teaching*; or the one who exhorts, in the *work of exhortation*; the one who gives, with generosity; the one who is in leadership, with diligence; the one who shows mercy, with cheerfulness." And here in Acts 6 the apostles say, "We are called to a ministry of prayer and of the Word." We recognize the importance of the ministry of help and mercy. We must absolutely meet the needs of widows, but we must not neglect our calling. The consequences for the advancement of the gospel would be catastrophic if we neglected our calling."

And what is the lesson for us? I would say the lesson here is primarily for me but it's important that you understand what is at stake. In organizing my time, my first priority is to give myself to prayer and to the Word. The task that Jesus Christ has given me as your pastor is to study the Word well in order to understand it, to be able to teach it, whether in our Bible studies, in the messages for children, in the preaching Sunday after Sunday, in the Wednesday YouTube broadcast. Whatever the occasion, my main job is to preach, to teach the Word of God and to pray for the proclamation of the Word, to pray for you. Of course, I have other responsibilities in the management of the church. It's a small church so the administrative workload isn't huge. But I have to make sure that Prayer and the Word remain my priority. I have a responsibility before God first and then before you to be diligent in this task. And it is interesting that the apostles speak of prayer first. This passage reminded me this week that you need a pastor who prays for you, who prays for the ministry of the Word among you. And I have to confess that there are often a thousand other things that are easier to do, a thousand things I want to do more than spending time, every day, alone in my office, to pray for you and for the ministry of the Word. It's too easy to get distracted from this task. There are plenty of other things that are easier, often legitimate things. But you have got to demand that your pastor be a man dedicated to prayer and to the Word. My main role is not in administration, it is not in management, it is in prayer and the Word. I ask you to pray for me in this task. You will know very quickly if I ever neglect this task. And if you see it, you have to tell me. We will soon have elders. The main task of the elders - prayer and the Word.

What happens in the church when those who have the task of praying and preaching neglect this task? The church is weakened. The gospel is lost. People may be drawn to activities, but the primary means in conversion and spiritual growth will be lost. I hope you don't want to be a part of such a church. So you must insist that my main activities are prayer and the Word. Here are the two dangers in Jerusalem. Here are two dangers for us too.

The solution - Let's see their reaction and two aspects of the solution:

Leaders who lead humbly - We will see later how the apostles react, but first let's think about what they do not do. What they don't do shows clearly the humility of these men. Note that the apostles do not get offended. They don't sulk. They do not believe themselves to be beyond criticism. They don't take it out on those who murmur. They don't get all defensive. This is often how we react to legitimate criticism, to a grievance against us. We rarely react with gentleness. What do you do when you hear others grumbling about you? When there are murmurs against you, when there is a grievance against you, how do you react? The apostles do not seek to criticize the Hellenists. They don't kick them out of the church. They do not seek to intimidate by their words or by their standing in the church. I have seen all of these reactions in the Church of Jesus Christ. They humbly accept their fault. They humbly accept that there is a problem and they seek a solution to the problem. They lead the church to a solution.

It is true that the apostles summon all the members of the church, but it is not to ask them if they have any solutions to propose. No, the apostles come to the church members with a solution already prepared. They identify what is at stake. "There are the needs of widows. There is prayer and the Word. We cannot do both on our own. What solution can we offer?" The leaders lead. They find their solution. They find a solution based on Biblical principles and after finding their biblical solution, they explain it to the church.

They suggest in verse 3 that responsibility be given to 7 men for the ministry of mercy. And that's when they give responsibility to the members of the church. They establish Bible principles, they come up with a solution, and then they ask members to participate in the solution. They ask them to choose men. They give wise and biblical advice for the choice of men, but the choice is with the members of the church. You see the balance in the organization of the church. There are leaders. They have to lead. But they can't do everything without relying on other members of the church. They are leaders but they are not dictators. And it turns out the members of the church make a very good choice. This is often the case when there are godly leaders, leading humbly and wisely. We know very little about 5 of the seven men but from what we know about the first two, Stephen and Philip, we can conclude that they are spiritual men, wise men. The next two chapters of the book of Acts will describe for us the impact of Stephen and Philip and we will see how good the choice of church members is.

But their choice is also a generous and wise choice. The seven names here are all Greek names, which leads us to believe that most of these men, if not all, come from the group of Hellenists. What a generous choice on the part of the Hebrews. They choose men from the group that murmured against them. What grace on their part to entrust this task to "others". Here is a manifestation of oneness in Christ just at the time when that oneness is threatened. Here is a manifestation of humility in Christ.

A church that adapts - The solution proposed by the apostles requires changes in the life of the church. They watch what's going on in the church. They see incredible growth. They see the challenges that come with this growth and they accept that the church must adapt. They accept that the organization of the church must change. They need a new structure to meet the new needs. And often we are called to adapt, according to the new needs that arise. The number of students in the church is increasing. You have to adapt. The number of children is increasing, the number of English speakers, the number of seniors. Are we able and ready to adapt to meet new needs? Do we see these needs? While remaining true to the Scripture, while maintaining our priorities, while remaining a gospel-centered church, are we ready to adapt? Let's look at what is in front of us, look at the needs and, with humility, adapt to meet them. Let us give responsibility to each other to meet the needs. Let us keep Christ at the center of everything, let the Spirit guide us by the Word, sure, but do not prevent the advancement of the Kingdom because we are too attached to a structure that no longer meets the current needs.

The result - Let us remember what is at stake here. Clearly there is an attempt by Satan to disrupt the church of Jesus Christ, to disrupt the advance of the gospel. He does not want the work of God to advance. Through division and distraction, he tries to curb it. But again, it's a total failure. Again, we see the unstoppable work of Jesus Christ. What Satan is trying to stop is the very thing that ends up happening. Verse 7 "The Word of God continued to increase, the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." Jesus chooses to use a unified church, a church dedicated to the Word, to Prayer, and to compassion for those most in need. He blesses their testimony. He uses it to advance his Kingdom. And where Satan seeks to destroy, Jesus builds. Where Satan wants to divide, Jesus unites.

And "The Word of God continued to increase, the number of disciples multiplied greatly"

In the weeks and months to come we will have the opportunity to choose elders and deacons, to put in place structures that will allow us to respond to the needs before us. If we are granted a building permit, there will be a lot of work to do. Let us pray that God will give us wisdom, humility, that he will help us to identify the needs, spiritual and material and to respond to them. Pray that God will help us keep the priority of prayer and the Word. And pray that the Word will spread and the number of disciples will multiply greatly. Pray that the unstoppable work of Jesus will advance to the glory of God. That's the goal of everything we do. The goal is not to be able to say: Look at what we are doing in our church! Come see our structures! Come and listen to our sermons! In all that we do, in all things, we say, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to thy name give glory!"