



# VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH

## SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

## Unfinished

Part 11: Threats From Within—Acts 6:1–7  
Steve Lombardo | November 19, 2017



Many people wrongly assume the things we read in the Bible are not true of us in 2017. Some people believe the Bible doesn't apply to us because our culture has changed so much since the days of Scripture. But this is categorically not true. Admittedly, there were some miraculous things that happened in the Scriptures that we don't see today, at least in the American church, such as people being healed on the spot. As Tim mentioned last week, God is still in the miracle working business, but I don't know of any man or woman who can walk around and command a lame person to get up and walk or command the blind to see. In that way, there are differences. But most of what we read about the early church is true and will be true of the church until Jesus Christ returns.

Last week we heard about persecution happening because of the church's witness to the Lord Jesus Christ. Look at Acts 5:40–42. After the apostles had proclaimed the true message of salvation through Christ the resurrected Savior alone, they were called together by the leaders, who *"beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."*

So what is true for the early church is also true for us today. Persecution still happens. If you claim the name of Jesus Christ, you will be persecuted. If you claim that the name of Jesus is above every name, you will be met with ridicule. You will be mocked and scorned for lifting up His name.

Today in chapter six we're going to see how, in addition to persecution from the outside, there arose conflict from within the church. Dr. Luke is continuing his pattern of going back and forth between outside challenges and inside challenges. As you recall from last week, we see that a healthy church needs to be concerned with both kinds of challenges. We need to be reaching out to a lost and dying world, but at the same time we also are to care for the needs of the people within the church.

As the church looks after its own people, there will often arise internal conflicts and threats. God set up the church to be a place where His presence and power are changing people into the likeness of Christ, and thus it should be an incredible environment where health and safety prevail. We should be strong and not caught up in strife.

Nevertheless, many times we find ourselves in conflict within the church. I'm sure many of you would testify that you've been hurt by the church or by someone in the church. Many of you have known church leadership to fail or even to be abusive. So while God created the church to be the place where His Spirit resides and the means whereby He does His work in the world, that doesn't mean we will be free from conflict.

We'll see today that these problems existed even in the early church. The Jerusalem Bible Church had a great beginning. We've seen that their first few months were great, as we've gone verse by verse through the early chapters of Acts. We've seen God do amazing things in their midst. The church began when the Holy Spirit came, then it exploded with growth. People were repenting and turning from their sin. They held all things in common. They studied the Scriptures and took care of each other's needs. Even when persecution started, they stayed strong and grew even stronger, as more people were continually joining them. It was a wonderful season.

We'd like to believe that any church would be free of conflict—for the first few months. So if you've been here for a few months, give us some time—we'll probably fail you somehow. That's reality, because all churches are made up of sinners.

## **The church will experience conflict.**

Let's look at the situation Luke describes in Acts 6, beginning with verse one: *"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."*

It's interesting to note what has happened to the church since Acts 1. Back then, as they waited for the promise of the Holy Spirit, there were about 120 people. If you divide that number among the 12 apostles, that would mean each apostle would be responsible for about 10 people. That was a manageable number. But now the church had grown to number somewhere between 12,000 and 20,000 people. So in the same way, each apostle would now be responsible for at least 1,000 people.

### **The complaint was complicated**

Because of this, a complaint came up—and it was complicated. The Jews had a support system for widows and orphans. You may recall in the Old Testament that God had commanded His people to take care of their widows and orphans. So the nation of Israel took this command seriously. Within the synagogues, there were offerings and these funds were distributed among the widows and orphans who were needy.

But now, while the church is still meeting in the synagogues, they're preaching and teaching something new. Does that support continue for the Jews who had become Christians? No, it doesn't. That meant the church needed to learn how to care for their own widows and orphans, which they did on their own. But as their numbers increased so quickly, this became more and more complicated. The apostles could have been intentionally discriminating against the Hellenists, or they could simply have been ignorant of the needs.

At this point the early church was primarily made up of two kinds of Jewish people. The larger group were those who were from Jerusalem, who spoke Aramaic and who were Hebrews by birth. There was also a minority of Jewish Hellenists who came from the Greek world, speaking and writing in Koine Greek. You may recall that these Jews came to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of Pentecost. After the Holy Spirit came and the church began, these people stayed and did not return to their Greek-speaking lands. The complaint that arose came out of their realization that as a minority group, their widows were being neglected. The Hebrew-speaking widows were cared for, but the Hellenistic widows were not.

So while this could have been an intentional choice of the apostles, I don't think that was the case. Nothing in the text indicates it. Rather, it was more likely a matter of their ignorance of what was probably an unforeseen administrative problem due to the church's explosive growth.

### **The conflict had serious consequences.**

How the apostles were going to deal with this conflict was important, as it threatened to divide the church. You can imagine the seriousness of this situation. They had experienced incredible growth and were seeing God move in astonishing ways. The people were so on fire that even persecution did not stop them from preaching the name of Jesus. People were repenting and believing in the resurrected Savior Jesus. But now this internal conflict threatened it all. A divided church would be very serious.

As you know in our day, churches split all the time over even lesser things. Thom Rainer, a researcher who is currently president and CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources—part of the Southern Baptist Convention—lists 25 true stories describing things churches have divided over. Here are a few I chose to share with you:

1. There was a church that fought over whether or not to build a children's playground or to use the land for a cemetery. A deacon accused another deacon of sending an anonymous letter, asking him to meet in the parking lot to settle the matter.
2. A church dispute arose over whether or not to install restroom stall dividers in the women's restroom.
3. There was a petition in a church that people signed requiring all the church staff to be clean-shaven. [You don't want to see my face clean-shaven.]
4. Another dispute arose over whether a church should purchase a weed eater or not. It took two business meetings to resolve that issue.

5. Two different churches reported fights over the type of coffee they would use. In one of the churches they moved from Folgers to a stronger Starbucks brand, and in the other they simply moved to a stronger no-name blend. Members left the church in that second case. Thom Rainer suggested they ought to start a new church called the "Right Blend Fellowship." [We use Papa Nicholas, by the way, and we're not changing.]

6. Some church members left their church because one member hid the vacuum cleaner from them. It resulted in a major fight and split.

So as you can see, churches split over all kinds of things. But as we see in our text today, this was a serious matter. There was an accusation of discrimination on the part of the apostles.

**Application: If you are part of a church, you will have conflict.**

Let me give you three different types of church conflicts:

1. Doctrinal distinctives. This might include what a church believes about the Bible, about God and how He saves people, about the return of Christ, about heaven and hell, about spiritual gifts, about roles of men and women. These are doctrinal distinctives over which people can differ and which can create conflict. Some of these beliefs are foundational and not open for disagreement.

These truths are ones we at our church would say we hold with a closed hand. If you disagree with some of the foundational beliefs of the church, it's not going to cause much conflict, because we're going to tell you, "This probably isn't the church for you, because you don't agree with our beliefs about God and how He saves people."

Yet there are other beliefs we hold with an open hand. We're open to debating these or leaving them as open questions. But some people take what we believe is an open-handed issue and consider it close-handed for them. When this happens, conflicts can erupt.

2. Interpersonal issues. These are frequently the source of conflicts. Someone has been wronged either accidentally or intentionally, and the battle begins. People take sides and things are said that no one who claims to follow Christ should be saying. "How dare she say that about me?" "Who does that pastor think he is?" "They'll be sorry they ever crossed me."

3. Personal preferences. These might include the color of the carpet, the length of the service, the style and volume of the music. Maybe you prefer shorter sermons. [Let's just say you came on a good Sunday. If you're a guest, ask somebody around you.]

It's interesting to note that the word in verse one that's translated "complaint" in the ESV is the Greek word *gongusmos*. It's a word that sounds like its meaning—the literary term for that is onomatopoeia. Those are words like swoosh or meow or bang. One translation, in trying to capture the meaning of *gongusmos*, uses the word murmuring. Let's practice it. The Bears are playing. Murmurmurmurmur. Instead of turkey for Thanksgiving, we're having spam. Murmurmurmurmur.

But this complaining is a serious thing when we look at other contexts in Scripture where the word *gongusmos* is used. One place is 1 Corinthians 10:10, where Paul is describing how the nation of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and really against God Himself. In Exodus 15, the nation of Israel had just been freed from slavery in Egypt. God had parted the Red Sea, allowing them to walk across on dry ground. Beginning in Exodus 15:22, we read:

They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" And he cried to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a log, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

Right out of the gate, the people began to murmur and grumble and complain, because things weren't as good as they had known in Egypt. Then in Exodus 16:8 we find them grumbling about the food they had to eat. "And Moses said, 'When the Lord gives you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to the full, because the Lord has heard your grumbling that you grumble against him—what are we? Your grumbling is not against us but against the Lord.'"

They really weren't complaining to Moses—they were complaining to God. Exodus 17:3 says, "But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, 'Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?'" While it's not a sin to have a concern, it is a sin to grumble against God and His leaders.

"Wait a second," you might be thinking. "It's a sin to complain?" Yes. A whole generation of the nation of Israel perished in the wilderness because of their grumbling. Look at Numbers 13. They were right on the edge of the Promised Land and they sent 12 spies into the land. When they returned with their report, essentially ten of the spies said, "These people are too strong and too

big. They're warriors. We're stupid for being here. We can't ever hope to gain this land." Two of them said, "We can do it, because God is on our side and He's promised this land to us. Let's trust Him."

In Numbers 14:22 God tells them, *"None of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it."* The judgment against them for their sin of grumbling and complaining was that a whole generation was unable to go into the Promised Land.

Now looking at 1 Corinthians 10, Paul holds up the nation of Israel as an example for us. Beginning in verse five, we read:

Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer.

Notice that the nation of Israel is given to be an example to us and their sins are listed for us. Idolatry—"Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." They were putting false gods ahead of God. That's a big deal. Sexual immorality, another big deal. Putting God to the test—big deal. The fourth one is grumbling. Complaining is a very serious deal.

So this conflict that came from within the church threatened the church and complaining remains a threat for us today. So when we become frustrated concerning an issue in the church, here are some things we can do.

1. Check our hearts. If you feel frustration welling up inside you over some church matter or about some fellow church member, ask, "Am I a complainer?" Or here's the test: ask your spouse if you are. Then ask, "Why am I frustrated? Am I concerned for the church or is it because my opinions and preferences are being ignored?"

2. Choose to believe the best. The Hellenists in our story today seemed to believe the worst about the apostles so they were grumbling. But when the apostles heard about their complaints, they called for a meeting. Verse two, *"And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples."* This *gongusmos* arose because people were talking among themselves. "Do you know the Hellenist widows aren't being served? Don't the apostles care about them?" The people believed the worst instead of choosing to believe the best.

3. Comply with the chain of command. Instead of complaining, we should go to our leaders—or to those with whom the frustration lies—and then follow the chain of command. That would have been the way to do this. The people should have gone directly to the apostles with their concerns, believing the best about their leaders. Maybe it was an organizational problem. Maybe they could have offered to help.

So when we're frustrated, we should not criticize others or believe the worst about them. We're also not to collude with others, bringing people into the situation who aren't really involved but who will sympathize with our complaints—and maybe even join us. If I'm a Hellenistic Jew, I'll go to other Hellenistic Jews rather than approaching the apostles or even the Hebraic Jews. I'll make sure the people in my camp are on my side of the issue.

I haven't done this, but here's something I could do. If I'm not happy about how much my son is playing on the basketball team, I probably won't complain to the parents of the starters. I'll go to the people whose sons are at the end of the bench, because I know they'll identify with my problem. "Hey, that coach stinks, because he's not letting my son play." I'll collude with other parents and the conflict begins.

4. Finally, don't carry unrealistic expectations. The apostles honestly could not keep up with the church growth. They weren't able to see every person's needs—which is also true of today's leaders. Your elders can't supernaturally know what's going on in your heart. They can't know when you're taken to the hospital. We have to let them know when things happen and not have unrealistic expectations.

It is no fun to be in a church where there is out-of-control complaining and murmuring. I've been there. You can't control those around you, but you can choose not to sin. You can choose to be part of the solution to the problem.

## **Church leaders have to lead.**

The story in Acts 6 continues:

<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.' <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

There was a real problem in the church, as Luke explains. So even though *gongusmos* is a bad thing, it was for a reason: the Hellenistic widows were being neglected. Luke doesn't say the complaint was just an accusation against the apostles; there was an actual issue that needed to be resolved. We read later in Scripture that the needs of the widows were being recognized and taken care of. In 1 Timothy 5 we find some parameters for how this was to be done. But at this point a decision had to be made. So the apostles made the decision that they would focus their efforts on prayer and the preaching of the Word, and not sacrifice these in order to "serve tables." That expression could have meant serving food to people, or it could have referred to the distribution of the finances, in that which probably took place over tables. But in either case, the church leaders realized this wasn't to be done at the cost of sacrificing their prayers and preaching.

So their solution was for the people to select seven men to do this serving and included in the list of names were some Hellenists. That decision pleased the whole church. They chose the seven, they blessed them to do the work and the conflict was conquered.

Jesus was the greatest leader ever, having come as a Prophet, Priest and King. This is all over Scripture, particularly in the book of Hebrews. As a Prophet, He taught sound doctrine and defended the truth. He called out the false teachers. He would also call people to repentance. As a Priest, Jesus loved and served people. As a King, He had authority to organize the people and to administrate His Father's plans. He exercised oversight over the church, which is His Kingdom.

Human leaders are usually gifted more strongly in one area than others. They might be stronger as prophets, as priests or as kings. Still, they oversee needs in each of these categories. Prophets shepherd people spiritually and practically. They put forth a vision, as did the apostles in Acts. They devise plans to meet the needs of the people. The apostles did not say that serving tables was unimportant; they merely said they were called to the tasks of prayer and preaching the gospel.

Other people lead as priests. Priests serve the needs of the people. The seven men were chosen to care for all the people fairly. Our elders are called to care for the people of Village Bible Church. We recently gained eight new elders and divided our church into "flock groups." After a person comes to our church for a time, they'll be placed on a list of regular attenders and will be put in a flock group which is overseen by an elder. This elder becomes a pastor to his group. In a church our size, one pastor can't take care of the needs of everyone in the church. Thus we now have 18 elders who share these responsibilities as they shepherd their flock groups.

Some leaders lead as kings, who envision certain goals and then make the organizational decisions to accomplish them. No doubt the apostles' decision was met with some criticism. I don't believe all the complainers were happy with the decision. Still, we don't hear about any lingering accusations, because we're told the whole of the church was pleased with the apostles' decision.

**Application: Listen to your leaders and make it a joy for them to lead (Hebrews 13:17).**

Your leaders aren't perfect, but they have been put in leadership according to the Lord's will. So when the issue is not a matter of blatant sin, give your leaders the benefit of the doubt and listen to them. Sometimes you might be part of the problem and you might have the opportunity to be part of the solution. This is what happened here in Acts 6. The solution was found in the camp of the complainers.

Some time ago, as our small groups were starting, I heard of a lady in our congregation whose care was being neglected. She had gone to the hospital for surgery and had to be out of church for a while. But that information fell by the wayside and the leaders were not informed. As soon as I found out, I called her to apologize. She was gracious and later joined a small group. She also decided that she wanted to be part of making sure other people didn't fall through the cracks. So now once a member has been absent for four consecutive weeks, she sends out a card to ask how they're doing. She tells them we miss them and asks how we can be praying for them. By the grace of God, this woman chose to be part of the solution rather than complaining and grumbling against the leaders.

The leaders have a great responsibility and will have to answer to God for their leadership. What's at stake? The souls of people. The gospel is being preached and taught, and our leaders are trying to follow the Holy Spirit's direction, not only regarding how to meet the needs of the people within the church, but also how to reach out to lost ones who need the forgiveness of Jesus.

## The Spirit-led church will grow.

Finally, the church that is led by the Holy Spirit will grow. 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.*” This is amazing. The early church continued to spread the word.

Three words in this verse speak of what’s happening in the church. The word of God continued to increase. The number of the disciples multiplied greatly. And a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. The church had weathered the storm that came from within, they dealt with the complainers and found a solution, then the Word continued to go forth in power.

The apostles were continuing to do what they were called to do—praying, preaching, teaching and speaking the mighty name of Jesus—and the Word was spreading. Some of you need to hear the word “continue.” You need to press forward as a testimony of God’s grace to those around you through what you say and how you live.

Secondly, the church experienced conversions. As the Word of God spread, people responded and conversions took place. What is a conversion? That’s when a sinner comes to acknowledge their sin and that their sin killed Jesus. If they will believe in His death and resurrection and put their trust in Him—accepting that He forgives them and is able to make them whole and put them into right relationship with God—then they are converted.

Then as they believe, their life is changed. The Holy Spirit comes to live in them. It’s not because of something they’ve done themselves. They might have thought they needed to work hard or do certain things or be a certain kind of person to be a Christian. But then they realize that while they were still sinners, Christ died for them (Romans 5:8). They believe, they repent, and they are changed by God’s grace. As the Word spreads, it converts sinners.

Finally, as the church spreads the word, culture is changed. We see here that some priests believed. This is a big deal. These were the priests that were in the synagogues. They were leaders, people who were influential in the Jewish society in Jerusalem. When they came to call Jesus the Messiah, that was a big deal.

Sometimes Christians seek to escape culture, wanting to get away, maybe wanting to protect their children. They want to hide until Jesus returns. But that’s not the answer. Others want to fight culture, standing up to speak against those aspects of culture they oppose. But when we’re preaching the gospel and living as the church called us to live, we actually change culture. The Holy Spirit does a work inside us and it spreads to other people. Lives are changed and new culture is created.

It’s an amazing thing to be part of a church, part of a movement, that can change history. We don’t just hide from our culture. We don’t just fight against it. We change it for the glory and fame of Jesus Christ. That’s what we long to do here at Village Bible Church. Amen?

Yes, we will experience conflict. Don’t complain. Trust the leaders to lead and pray that God will grow His church.