

The Cure for the Edifice Complex

Acts 6:107; Romans 12:6-8

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For every person sitting in a sanctuary like ours today, there are two or three others out there sipping Starbucks, chuckling over the comics, or raking leaves in the front yard. Over half of our neighbors are not in church this morning, though if you asked, many would call themselves Christians, believers in Jesus Christ. Then why aren't they in church, here or elsewhere?

Some used to be. They were active members of a local church, so active that they burned out and gave up. They grew weary of petty politics and of meetings that seemed to go nowhere. Others simply dislike the institutional side of Christianity, the budgets and bylaws, the structures and traditions. Why, they ask, can't we enjoy God without the weekly ramblings of a boring preacher? And why can't we worship without paying for the upkeep of an edifice like this one?

They have a point, don't they? Christianity thrived for three centuries without sanctuaries. Yes, but believers always gathered somewhere, and some kind of order undergirded their ministry. So today, could we worship half so well without this sanctuary? Could we teach nearly as effectively without classrooms? Could we support missionaries without someone to write the checks and keep the books? Could we carry on a fraction of our ministries without clear goals and good management?

The episode in Acts 6 represents the very first attempt to organize the church, and it should not surprise us to learn that IT SPRANG OUT OF CONFLICT. The problem in a nutshell was this: the foreign-speaking widows weren't getting their fair share of the food. So the whispering campaign began. "The Hellenists complained against the Hebrews." The Greek word is "gogusmos." "The Hellenists 'gogusmos' against the Hebrews." Can't you hear the bad temper in that word, the grumbling and the crabbiness? And when the "gogusmos" reached the ears of the Apostles, they pioneered church management by (are you ready for this?) APPOINTING A COMMITTEE. I'm sorry, but there it is: "Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task." (verse 3) Up to that moment the Apostles were trying to do it all. Twelve men were doing all the preaching, leading all the prayer meetings, teaching all the confirmation classes, collecting the food, sorting clothes, and, at the end of the day, doling out soup and bread. So it's obvious to me that the injustice against the Hellenist widows was totally unintentional. The apostles could not possibly keep their eyes on every aspect of the church's rapidly escalating ministry. And when conflict erupted, the Apostles behaved like good Presbyterians. They formed a committee.

But not just any committee. "Select men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom." (verse 3) J. B. Philips translates it, "men who are both practical and spiritually-minded." On the practical side they were wise. And on the spiritual side they were persons of good standing and full of the Spirit.

Last month you elected thirty-seven persons to serve on the major committees of this church. Those thirty-seven, along with others who are already serving, are the cure for what I call the edifice complex. If they were simply practical persons, wise in the ways of the world, their first priority might be the preservation and safeguarding of this building. This is a magnificent building, and we are grateful to those who built it. But your officers know better than to deify the edifice. They know it is what goes on inside this edifice that matters to God and to God's people. So we keep our buildings in good repair because they are sites where people can encounter God in worship, prayer, and communion. We keep our policies up to date because they facilitate the preaching and teaching of the Gospel. We set a budget and ask you to give money because in the alchemy of God, money turns into compassion and caring. We attend countless meetings because our committees are conduits for the Holy Spirit to inspire, educate, and move our wills in the service of Jesus Christ. We aim to be practical, but above all, to be spiritually-minded.

Last Monday night I attended a meeting of the Personnel Committee. There is no committee in the church

more business-like than the Personnel Committee. They oversee the hiring of employees, they write personnel policies, they set pay scales and give performance reviews. Last Monday's agenda took us right up to ten o'clock, and just as I was pulling my papers together to go home, the chair pulled out a large envelope and passed it around the table. Inside were the names of every staff member of this church. Each of us took a name out of the envelope and before we left for home we prayed for those staff members. In addition, we were asked to take the name home and pray for that staff member every day for a month. Then, next month, different names will be pulled out of the envelope, and the round robin of prayer will continue. That is a practical committee, but above all, spiritually-minded, because for those officers people, not policies, are primary.

Note, thirdly, that the Apostles CONSECRATED THE COMMITTEE: "They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them." These men were not consecrated for their preaching ability (though Stephen and Philip turned out to be able communicators of the Gospel). They were chosen and consecrated because the church needed their management skills. Someone had to reorganize the food bank. Someone had to see to it that the food was shared equitably, without bias to Hebrew or Hellenist. And because these seven possessed what Paul, in Romans 12, calls "the gift of administration," they were consecrated, set apart, to administer the church's relief agency.

You elected thirty-seven persons last month because they too possess the gift of leadership. Over the next few years they and the rest of us will attend countless meetings and make hundreds of decisions. We will accumulate reams of paper and answer scads of e-mail. And we will be judged not only by how efficiently we preserve these buildings and monitor our budget, but by how effectively we feed the hungry, comfort the sick, give hope to the dying, and get the Gospel to the lost.

That, you see, was THE WONDERFUL CONSEQUENCE back in Acts 6. Spinning off the management of the food bank freed the Apostles to get on with their preaching, while feeding the hungry was itself a testimony to the redemptive power of Jesus Christ. So Luke writes, "The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."

When godly women and men lead this church, when they offer their talents, give of their time, and work diligently at their assignments, this church cannot help but grow. Our worship will attract seekers, our evangelism will win converts, our classes will develop disciples, and our outreach will say to the world, "We aren't here to wait on ourselves, but to serve at the side of our Savior, and to welcome you into his family." And from where I stand, that makes even a lifetime of committee meetings eminently worthwhile.