Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing
Acts 6:1-7

Now if you go and see a doctor with a problem, they'll take what they call a history, the History of the Presenting Complaint: and that consists of asking you some questions: when did this problem start, has it been getting better or worse, does anything make it better or worse? And in taking the history, the doctor's trying to work out, 'ok what's going on here, and what's causing this problem?'

And this book of Acts is interesting, because the man who wrote it, Luke, was a doctor, but rather than trying to work out the history of a disease and what's gone wrong, Luke is telling us the history of something that went remarkably right, how the Christian faith, from a very dodgy start, spread across the Roman Empire. And he's interested in how and why it went so right.

And you can tell that's one of Luke's aims by the number of times he punctuates Acts with what we could call 'health updates', where he tells us how the faith is growing and spreading, and there are at least 10 of them throughout the book. But interestingly, two of them occur in this short passage: verse 1, 'Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number'; v7, 'And the word of God continued to increase and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.' But sandwiched between those two statements, Luke tells us about something that could have derailed the whole thing.

You see, whilst Luke wants us to catch something of the vibrancy and life of the movement, Luke was a realist. He knew that the church was anything but perfect, and he never tries to hide the difficulties they faced. And in in telling us these things, it's as if Luke's got his doctor's eye on the diseases that if allowed to get a foothold in the body, could kill it, or at least threaten its health and hinder its growth, those things that could have stopped the spread of the Gospel.

So sandwiched between v1 and v7 that tell us how the gospel and the church were growing, is a danger. And Luke wants us to see that the reason the gospel continued to spread was because they dealt with that threat and nipped it in the bud.

So, let's look at what the problem was, how they dealt with it, and how the gospel continued to increase in its impact.

Identifying the threat
Now, back in Acts 4, Luke made what by any standards is a pretty startling claim: 'Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common… There was not a needy person among them' (4:32, 34).

And we can read that sort of passage and get all misty-eyed, and think the early church was perfect, and why can't our church be perfect like that. But of course, as Charles Spurgeon the famous 19th century preacher said, there are no perfect churches, and if you ever find one, don't join it, because you'd spoil it.

But instead of trying to show us a church through rose tinted spectacles, Luke shows us here a church having to deal with strains in the very two areas he

highlighted as strengths back in chapter 4: their unity and their care for the needy. And sure the church was growing, but it also struggled with growing pains, and the problems that come with growth. And Luke identifies two threats that could have derailed them from doing the very thing Jesus had told them to do, which was get the gospel out to the world. And perhaps not surprisingly, they are two threats that churches, including ourselves, and even individuals, continue to face.

The Threat of Conflict

Verse 1: 'Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews.'

So, one group within this growing church has a complaint against another, and there are murmurings, and grumblings going on. Now, I'm not so stupid as to look at our church through rose tinted spectacles, but so far I think we've been mercifully spared this kind of thing, but how often can what's going on here in Acts be the case in churches? Not full blown church splits, but grumbling, and murmuring, and that kind of atmosphere or culture within a church, if it gets established, can be a real threat to a church's ability to keep spreading the good news of Jesus as the number one focus; because relational discord, or when there's a breakdown in trust, or a kind of deficit of love and longsuffering just saps people's inner life. And these grumblings inevitably draw attention on to themselves and off the gospel. And I don't think any of us would want to be responsible for that.

And yet it's almost inevitable that you'll find yourself in situations where you might be tempted to start or join the grumblings. Think about your team at work, or your team at home, your family. Whenever we as individuals rub up against one another, there is the prospect of relational discord that can threaten what we're trying to achieve. I don't know about you, but I've come to the stunning conclusion, that everything would be fine if everyone was more like me, or did what I said, but they aren't and they don't, and so there's this potential for conflict.

And here in Acts 6 it seems that the fractures and fissures in relationships were forming along ethnic lines. And on one side you've got the Hellenists. Now, at various points in Israel's history, as a result of wars and invasions, Jews ended up scattered around the Middle East and the countries surrounding the Mediterranean. It was called the Dispersion.; and they adopted the language and the culture of the Greek world they were living in. And these were the Hellenists. They were Jews, but they spoke Greek, and they lived like Greeks and they went to Greek speaking synagogues, and obviously many of them had become Christians. The problem was not many of them would have spoken Aramaic, which was the language of the much larger group that Luke mentions, the Hebrews. And these would have been native, Aramaic-speaking Jews who grew up and lived in Palestine and were soaked not in Greek but in Hebrew culture, and went to Aramaic speaking synagogues; and whilst they would have spoken some Greek, not many of them would have been exactly fluent.

So in this one church you have two groups: one, the Hebrews, considerably larger than the other, the Hellenists, and whilst they had much in common, there are these issues of language and culture just waiting to become a problem, if they let them. Now, just imagine for a moment, how each side or individuals from each side, might have spoken about the other: 'you know, he's just so different from me, we don't speak the same language,' 'It's like we're from two different worlds, I say something and she just doesn't seem to hear, I'm not even sure she wants to hear.' 'We just talk past each other, and our values are so different.' Does that sound familiar? Because whether it's at church or at work or at home, relational conflict is not far away, is it?

But what's interesting is what lay at the root of this friction, because it wasn't an important area of doctrinal truth, or the moral failure of one of their leaders. Their conflict arose out of something very practical. Verse 1 again, 'A complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.'

Now, what's happening is that Jews from the dispersion, the Hellenists, when they grew old and they knew their time was short, would often return to Jerusalem to die. And so if an elderly couple returned and the husband subsequently died, the widow would be left in Jerusalem, a foreign city, speaking a foreign language she didn't understand, with no-one to support her, with her family hundreds of miles away. A Hellenist widow lost among Hebrews. And among all the thousands becoming Christians in Jerusalem are some of these Hellenist widows. But they are greatly outnumbered by the Hebrew majority in the church. And as the church grows, they just get lost and overlooked in the distribution of food and money to the needy.

So this was a practical issue – not a doctrinal one, not even really a moral one, that was enough to sow the seeds of this murmuring and the potential for a breech in their unity. And how often is that the case? I mean just think about marriages – it's the nitty-gritty stuff of life, like finances and where the money's going that can cause friction. And in churches, it can be worship or buildings, or the kids program, or who is or isn't being care for, practical stuff, that can do it.

And it wasn't even intentional. There's no suggestion the Hellenist widows were being deliberately neglected or the Hebrews favoured. It's just that the administrative system in the church was creaking. Their systems hadn't kept up with their growth. But it was enough to trigger the beginnings of conflict.

But before we look at the second threat, just ask yourself, why does any of this stuff about widows matter? Because to many in the ancient world, the poor didn't matter. And if you adopted a good evolutionary perspective on this you could just say, 'so what?' couldn't you? I mean, this is survival of the fittest, and it's a dog-eat dog world. And yet something tells us, as it told the early church, that it's wrong that people who have no one to advocate for them get lost in the system; that it's wrong that someone suffers because they fall on the wrong side of an ethnic divide. But why is it wrong? And one answer the Bible gives to that is that we have been made in the image of God, and God is a God of justice, who

identifies himself as the defender of widows and orphans, regardless of ethnicity or power or wealth.

And yet it's in facing this very practical problem of defending widows and caring for the needy that the church faced its second threat:

The Threat of Distraction
And this is *the* major threat – not just for the early church, but for every church. You see, up to this point it looks like the apostles were trying to do both jobs: administering the poor fund, and preaching the gospel. But as the church has grown, they're just not managing to do both.

And maybe, just maybe, someone had suggested they should spend less time on preaching about Jesus, and more time on helping the poor in the church. And that's the danger of distraction. Because if they were to give their time to this problem, it would consume their time and keep them from doing the very thing that Jesus had told them to do.

So, having come through Judas' betrayal, having endured outside persecution, and internal moral failure in the Ananias and Sapphira incident, the latest threat was distraction. But not distraction by something that was bad, but something that was good, by something that absolutely mattered, by something, the defense of widows, that is very close to God's heart.

It's the threat of failing to keep the gospel, the good news of Jesus the main thing, and not get distracted from it. Those of us in home groups this week looked at Colossians 1 – this incredible description of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. It's the mind-blowing gospel of God's grace. And the threat they faced was to get occupied and caught up in something other than proclaiming that good news.

So, how did they handle these threats?

Staying on Task
Now, I know that many of you are leaders in your own right. You lead teams at work, and if you're a parent you lead your kids, and if you're a husband you lead your family. And leaders are funny things in terms of how we handle conflicts and grumblings. So first off, as a lesson to us all, let's just consider how they *don't* handle this.

They don't pretend the problem's not there, do they? They don't just steam-roller and use their apostolic authority and say these Hellenists are just imagining it. They don't try and sweep it under the carpet, or use their skill at words to attack the complainants, and criticize their bad attitude, suggesting they should be grateful for what they do have. They don't try and turn the criticism around and pin the blame on the Hellenists. They don't even attempt to suggest that if only these widows had more faith and trusted God more they wouldn't be in this predicament in the first place, or that what they really need is to think less about food and instead study the Bible more, and get the real meat, because what they

really need is another series on Romans! And finally, they didn't suggest a church split, one church for the Greek speaking Hellenists and one for the Aramaic speaking Hebrews.

You see, they know that God is the God of widows and orphans, and so this problem matters. And they also know that he is the God who has commissioned them to spread the good news of Jesus beyond one narrow people group. As Jesus said to them right at the beginning of Acts, 'You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria and to the end of the earth' (Acts 1:8), and that means that when Christ died, he didn't just die for the Hebrews but the Hellenists as well, and that at the cross there is this breaking down of these ethnic barriers that divide.

And in v1 Luke says, 'in those days when *the disciples* were increasing' and that's the first time Luke has described these new believers as *disciples.* Now ask yourself, how did Jesus say people would know Christians were his disciples? What was it that would mark them? Wasn't it their love for each other? John 13:35, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

So rather than ignore the situation, or get defensive, or criticize, the apostles want to sort this. But they also know that their first priority is to keep telling people the good news of Jesus. For the apostles, the gospel is priority number one. Verse 2, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables." They recognize the threat of distraction, and they don't want to fall for it. It's proclaiming what God has done for us in Jesus that has to stay center stage – because if that goes, what basis is there to their community anyway, and how will others get to hear it and believe it and be cared for if they stop telling it?

But they also know that caring for the needy is vital, which is why they organize the seven to take on that role. If the apostles were to do it, everything would stagnate, and less people would hear about Jesus. If others take it on, both get done.

And Luke uses the same word to describe 'the daily distribution' the daily service or ministry, of care for the needy as he does in v4, when the apostles say 'But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to *the ministry* [the service, the distribution] of the word.' So one is the ministry of tables, and the other the ministry of the word. So it's not that serving tables is somehow beneath the apostles or a lower form of service. And there's definitely no sacred/secular divide here. Both require people who love Jesus and are walking with Jesus and are full of the Spirit. And these seven had to be men of cast-iron reputation, so no one could accuse them of bias, who were full of the Spirit and the Spirit's wisdom, because they were sure going to need it.

Rather, this was about each one doing what God has gifted and called them to do, to ensure that the gospel kept going out.

So, for a local church like us, this kind of attitude can be challenging can't it? Because it's possible for any number of good things to distract from the number one task of proclaiming Jesus. And as a church grows, programs multiply, and people need caring for, but somewhere along the way the vision of the gospel, and reaching people for Jesus gets lost. And this passage tells us that whatever we do, that needs to stay our focus, while making sure that people get cared for along the way.

But without wanting to stretch this too far. I wonder if there are some lessons here for us as individuals and families as well. Because these men are handling their conflicts, and organizing their priorities, and deciding on very practical things based on the gospel. Their thinking and behavior is being shaped by what Jesus has done for them.

They don't split, because they know that Christ died for all, whatever your ethnicity. They don't fight back, because they know that Christ has loved them and they must love in return even when it hurts. But their practical decisions, how each one is spending their time and resources, are equally shaped by the gospel, they want to serve because they know Jesus came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many, and everything and everyone is coming together in all their different roles to make spreading that good news the number one priority, even if they're not the ones actually doing it.

You see, neither the seven, nor you and I are apostles are we? And yet the great purpose of God to make Jesus known didn't just depend on the apostles, it also needed other guys, like Stephen and Philip and their friends, to step up to the plate. And that tells you that you don't need to be an apostle to find your place in helping get the gospel out. That whilst our roles might differ, each of us has a role to play, to serve the purpose of Jesus, just as he has served us.

So, when facing a decision, like, how do I allocate my money, or should I go for this job or not, or what should I do with my time, just consider the question: ok, how does this enable the gospel to go out, how does this help keep the good news of Jesus the main thing for me, for us as a family, for others?

And the church's decision, and individuals' decisions, to make that their outlook, to keep the gospel main and centre, and not get distracted, was vindicated by God: v7, 'And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly.'

May that be true for us here.