

Cultural Accommodation and Transformation

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Catherine. Acts 6:1-15

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, brothers and sisters, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and 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.

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.

Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and others of those from Cilicia and Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit^[b] with which he spoke. Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." They stirred up the people as well as the elders and the scribes; then they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. They set up false witnesses who said, "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us." And all who sat in the council looked intently at him, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Justo. Acts begins with the account of Pentecost. There, the cultural variety that the Spirit could include in the community of faith—especially by overcoming barriers of language—was

dramatically shown. Now, in the sixth chapter, the church in Jerusalem has to deal with the practical and administrative aspects of such growing pluralism.

It is not all that clear what is happening in the early section of this passage. Obviously, there is a problem with one of two groups of widows. The groups are a major division in the Jerusalem church: Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians and Greek-speaking Jewish Christians. The first group were mostly natives of Judea. The second most likely Jews from the diaspora who were living in Jerusalem, at least for a while. Language was a division. The miracle of the preaching at Pentecost had not continued in the small church.

Yet something had continued, for what must have been originally an Aramaic-speaking church now included those whose language was Greek. Surely there were some bilingual people among them, and a permanent bridge had been built. But now the community, growing rapidly, included people whose cultural backgrounds meant that they could not easily understand each other. Yet all were part of the same community.

Catherine. The widows—who were they? Not simply all the women whose husbands had died. There may well have been some widowed women who were supported by family or who had some other means of support. The widows meant here were those who had no such support and needed the help of the church. This was common in Judaism: both a general policy of giving financial assistance to widows as a charitable act of a synagogue and a specific policy in

Jerusalem to assist widows from the diaspora to come and finish their days in the holy city. So there were Greek-speaking widows in Jerusalem, receiving alms from the Jewish community, and these alms were administered by the official religious structure. When some of these women became Christians, the church continued the same policy of support. Aramaic-speaking widows also became Christians and needed assistance. The church may well have given assistance to a variety of people who needed help. But the widows provided a special case and did so for several decades. There was no counterpart of widowers. Men had their livelihood whether married or not, but women generally were economically dependent upon their husbands. Being widowed often left women without resources. Furthermore, when the church was in a first-generation situation, the continued involvement in the life of the church on the part of a widow might require that the church support her. The alternative of support by a son or of remarriage might well make it very difficult for a woman to continue participating in the community of faith.

The church therefore supported such women. A few decades after this account in Acts, we know of widows who formed a significant part of the ministry of the church, in return for their support.

Exactly the form the support took is also not clear. The RSV speaks of a daily distribution and then indicates that "serving at tables" was the way this distribution was carried out. There is an ambiguity in the passage. The distribution could have been of money—as Judaism practiced—or

of food and perhaps other necessities. Later practices included both. "Serving at tables" can mean either assisting in food distribution or working at a money table. It, therefore, can mean that the need was for an administrative structure that would take care of financial concerns, especially in regard to the poor widows.

Justo. It is not at all surprising that a dispute should arise when people of two language groups—both needy—must rely for assistance on a leadership that speaks only one of those languages. A major quarrel is not described here, only murmuring of unhappiness, a sense that something was unfair. Rather than focus on the disagreement as a sign that all was not well in that early church, we need to look at what the church did about the disagreement, which may give us some directions for our own time.

Let us look more clearly at the dynamics involved in these brief opening verses. The Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians were the leadership. That is not surprising; they were the natives of the area. They were the inheritors of the original proclamation of the gospel. The Greek-speakers were the newcomers. That much is clear. Within the earliest church, the Hellenists were at a disadvantage.

However, in the world outside Israel, that was hardly the case. There, the Greek-speakers were at home, and the Aramaic-speakers would reveal their more limited cultural exposure. But the

events of this passage took place in Jerusalem, not in that wider world. Here the Hellenists, even though Jewish, were at a disadvantage.

We know that at this time there was increasing nationalistic feeling among Jews. Thus, as conflict with Rome increased, the Greek-speaking Jews found themselves under suspicion on the part of native Jews as being less firm about strict orthodoxy than those who spoke Aramaic. Any laxity about the Law might hinder God's granting of victory over Rome, if it came to actual battle. It is also clear that these sentiments spilled into the reaction of many Jews over into Christianity. If all Christians were suspect, those of a Hellenistic background, with their Greek names, language, and customs, were even more so.

So the Greek-speaking portion of the congregation was somewhat marginal within the Jerusalem church and also within the religious structure of the city as a whole. Their widows did not feel they were being fairly treated in receiving support from the whole congregation, as fairly as the Aramaic-speaking widows were being treated. It was the language that was the barrier, not their status as widows.

So what did the leadership do? They called a meeting of the whole congregation. It would be interesting to imagine whether the Aramaic-speaking Twelve had an interpreter—exactly how this meeting was conducted. They did not downgrade the problem. They took it seriously and decided something needed to be done. The "something" would involve a new administrative

structure. The Twelve had the charge to proclaim the Gospel—evidently largely in Aramaic—and could not in good conscience spend the time organizing the relief work for the widows. It was important that someone do that, however, and the present arrangement was unsatisfactory.

The congregation was to choose seven men to carry out such tasks. Here again, the picture is muddy. The men who were chosen all have Greek names. Some might have been natives, but chances are most were not. At least one is listed as a proselyte from Antioch, a Gentile who had become a Jew. So the congregation chose leadership that empowered those who had been more marginal.

What were the tasks of these seven? We are accustomed to calling them "deacons," but that term is not used as a title for them in this passage. There is some thought that they were actually a separate structure of leadership for the Greek-speaking portion of the community. We know that both Stephen and Philip preached to other Greek-speaking people and carried the gospel to them. Their responsibilities did not end with their charitable work within the church.

Catherine. The preaching of the Twelve was effective. Growth continued. Even some Jewish priests were added to the community. That may have upset the religious power structures in the city even more. Nor was Stephen simply a functionary within the Christian congregation. He was at work in the city. He was healing and showing great power among the people. He was

also at work in the mission of the church. At least one synagogue of Greek-speaking Jews was very upset with him.

Why? Were they afraid that, as a fellow Hellenistic Jew, he might bring questions upon them as well? They might have wished to make clear to the wider society their orthodoxy. What does it mean that in their debates, "they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which [Stephen] spoke"? Was Stephen making converts at the Greek-speaking synagogues? It was in such places that Paul, in the future, would normally begin his preaching. For whatever reason, they have Stephen charged, inciting complaints and false witnesses. The vulnerability of the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians in Jerusalem is made very clear by this episode. We should hardly be surprised that Stephen was the first martyr.

The chapter concludes with Stephen before the council. Blasphemy was the charge. Changing the laws given by Moses was the charge. The text says that, "Gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel." This is parallel to the statement about Moses himself, "The people of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone" (Ex. 35:35). Stephen was proclaiming God's word with as much authority as Moses had. This is probably included in the text as a sign that he was orthodox—teaching that which comes from God—even though it may differ from that which Moses delivered to the people.

Justo. Given this political situation, empowering the Greek-speaking segment of the congregation was a courageous thing to do. It implies a sharing of leadership with a new part of the community. It gave leadership to those whose very presence might have raised even more questions about the church in the wider city. It would lead to strife and conflict that could possibly have been avoided if the Apostles had refused to expand the leadership beyond their own small group.

Had they done so, however, the miracle glimpsed in Pentecost would have been undone. But the miracle continued. The language barrier remained, but love and trust found ways to overcome its impact. Love and trust found ways to share leadership and empower new groups within the church. It caused trouble but the kind of trouble the gospel is always causing in this sinful, divided world. It presaged the even greater diversity that the addition of Gentiles would make, under the leadership of Paul.

It is important to note also that the empowerment of this new group led to mission. As we continue reading the book of Acts beyond this sixth chapter, we see that at least two of these Hellenists, Stephen and Philip, soon had the opportunity to witness to their faith. Stephen's witness, sealed with his death, was connected in some mysterious way with the career of Paul and with his own witness. And the eighth chapter of Acts tells us of Philip's witness to the Ethiopian eunuch and in the region of Samaria.

Catherine. The early church took a serious risk in giving these seven Hellenists positions of authority and responsibility. First of all, there was the inner question of the authority of the twelve over against the authority of the seven. The twelve represented the old guard, the old culture, the old traditions, those who had been with Jesus himself. The seven represented new directions, a new cultural background, people who either had never seen Jesus or had not been his close followers. Indeed, the twelve may have tried to retain "the ministry of the word" for themselves. But the succeeding chapters in Acts tell us that that didn't happen, and that at least Stephen and Philip took up that ministry by the power of the Spirit.

Then there was the outer pressure. Hellenistic Jews were suspect in Jerusalem. Christians were also suspect. To give leadership to Hellenistic Jewish Christians would make the church doubly suspect. (We know that persecution would soon break out and that the Hellenistic Christians would bear the brunt of that persecution.) But, despite all this, the twelve saw the justice of the demand coming from the Hellenistic widows and agreed to grant positions of leadership to these seven chosen by the congregation.

Justo. The issues posed in this passage continue to this day. They continue at the level of the local congregation, and they continue at every level of the world-wide church. The issue is simply, are we willing to see leadership in the church going to groups who have formerly been excluded from such leadership, or whom the rest of society does not consider apt for leadership?

We often think of this issue in terms of what has traditionally been called "the mission field." It is not necessary to belabor that point here. There are voluminous treatises on the process of indigenization and on the need for self-government on the part of the younger churches. In any case, although the process has often been painful, in recent decades the world-wide church has made great strides in that direction.

Therefore, it is probably more important that we ask the same question in a context that comes closer to home. Have we learned for ourselves the lessons that we speak of in far-away places?

Allow me to illustrate what I mean with a personal experience. Some three or four years ago, I was listening to a distinguished theologian—indeed, one of the best known theologians of his own denomination—speaking about the uniqueness of his denomination. In the course of his speech, he boasted "for our denomination, our theology and our form of government are so important, and so refined, that it is virtually impossible for anyone who is not born into it to fully appreciate them, and to attain positions of leadership in the church."

My reaction? I am not surprised that there are so many complaints among members of that denomination about its lack of evangelistic zeal. I would have a hard time inviting other people to join an outfit in which they will forever remain second-class.

The fact of the matter, however, is that many in my own denomination feel the same way. And many of them are among those who complain most vociferously about our lack of evangelistic zeal and our loss of membership. The problem is, many who wish to stress evangelism apparently hope that the new members will be like the old ones. No new groups will be part of the congregation. No leadership will be shared. They are unwilling to risk their status in the wider community by increasing the number of members and leaders who are not recognized as significant by that wider community.

There is also the risk that such shared leadership will mean mission—successful mission—to that same previously excluded group and upset the balance of power even more. Precisely at the time when many of our churches in this country are facing the problem of changes in populations—decreases in the traditional ethnic composition in the churches and increases in new ethnic groups, the issue of bilingual and multilingual churches, of shared leadership and new mission is important. It often appears that the new people are needed in order to help meet the bills in a situation in which the older congregation is dwindling. But no shared leadership is anticipated or desired.

Catherine. Finally, it is interesting to note that the whole change in structure leading to the election of the seven stemmed from the experience of injustice within the church itself. (One wonders what would have happened if they had named seven widows to the new posts, but that apparently was not either the expectation or the option of the time!) The murmurs of

discontent were heard, however, and dealt with. Out of that experience came a new empowerment for mission to non-Aramaic-speaking Jews, and eventually to Gentiles. The multicultural situation was seen as desirable, as positive, and therefore the unhappiness was willingly dealt with.

For congregations in multicultural situations today, it does not always seem that unhappiness is dealt with rapidly or easily. Often it is left to fester and tear down the communities rather than being an opportunity for growth or such situations are avoided altogether. Perhaps it is well understood that really dealing with such unhappiness might mean sharing power, and those who already have it are unwilling to do so.

Without the recognition of injustice within the church—especially that which is caused when various cultural groups live together—there is little chance for renewed mission. Without shared leadership and power, there is little chance that such injustice can be overcome. The Jerusalem church dealt head-on with the injustice—and therefore opened up its mission in unexpected ways: to the Samaritans; to the Ethiopian eunuch, to Cornelius, and ultimately to us. But it was a church prepared for surprises, a church that had experienced Pentecost and kept itself open for the renewed miracle of Pentecost in its life.