

THE BIG IDEA: Horizontal problems can't be solved without the right vertical priorities.

The Take-Off

Believe it or not, but on this journey through the book of Acts - which is really just the history of the early church - we have yet to find any hint of horizontal problems in the church.

If you've spent any amount of time in church during your life, you've got to admit how amazing that is, because lots of times churches seem to be nothing but horizontal problems, don't they?

"So and so said this and now I don't speak to her anymore."

I actually worked for a pastor who told me about hearing 2 ladies give "prophetic words" in a church service one time: the first lady said, "God says if you love Him you'll return to the owner what you've borrowed" which was followed by another "word" that said, "The word of the Lord says that if you love Him, you'll forgive."

Honestly, for so many of us, that sums up our church experience, doesn't it?

In fact, if you're just now venturing back into church after a long time away, it probably took a few weeks or months to work up the nerve to give it another shot just because of how we've seen supposed Christians act toward one another.

So, 5 chapters in to the history of the early church and we've not seen any horizontal problems: until now.

Of course, we did see a few weeks ago where a couple was killed for lying about their offering, but that was a vertical issue between them and God.

But in Acts 6, we run smack dab into a full-on church fight, and I think we can learn a lot about ourselves by looking at how the early church dealt with their first potential church split.

Think about it: the entire history of the church as you and I know it - for better or worse - would have been drastically different if the leaders had responded the way many in church today normally do.

Thankfully, they didn't. Let's read it and then we'll walk through the 3 main sections of the story: the PROBLEM, the PLAN, and finally, the PAYOFF.

1. The PROBLEM.

In the very first sentence we find a principle that we can all agree on. You don't even have to love Jesus, the Bible or the church to nod yes about this one, and here it is:

- ▶ **Problems show up when the numbers go up.**

You know this is true, just from living. If you don't want any horizontal problems, then living alone is the only solution, and that won't really work because you've still got yourself!

But once another person is introduced, problems show up. Marriage proves that. And the more the number of people goes up, the more the possibility of problems goes up.

The early church saw this, too. As their numbers went up - surprise! - a problem showed up.

- ▶ There were Greek Jews and Hebrew Jews
- ▶ Both groups loved and followed Jesus
- ▶ But one of the groups - the Greek Jews - found that their widows were being "overlooked"
- ▶ Now, at best they were simply missed, and at worst they were chosen last in comparison to the Hebrew widows
- ▶ In fact, that Greek word for overlooked can mean "to compare"

But realistically, it doesn't really matter, does it?

I mean, this verse feels a lot like Junior High PE class, doesn't it?

Were you ever picked last? Sometimes intentionally because neither captain wanted you, and sometimes because it just went that way and someone got you by default. But the end result is one jacked-up heart, right?

It hurts to be left out, and as the numbers go up, the likelihood that you or I could be left out goes up, too.

What happened when they got left out? The same thing that happens with most of us: they complained.

Now the word for "complain" means "murmuring" and it's kind of this under-the-radar type of complaint

Not loud, not screaming, just this slow, simmering

Just kind of remember that for later, okay? Because the leaders could have taken a different approach than they did, and probably would have been justified to do so.

2. The PLAN.

Imagine you're a leader in the early church, you've walked with Jesus and seen him do the miraculous and now you're hearing people complain because they aren't getting fed fast enough.

What do you do?

Lots of times we find ourselves saying things like “just pray more” or “if you really loved Jesus, you wouldn’t complain about getting less food” or my personal favorite...”there’s starving children that aren’t getting anything, so be thankful!”

But they didn’t respond that way, did they?

The Big Idea? **Horizontal problems can’t be solved without the right vertical priorities.**

If we don’t understand today’s Big Idea, we’re likely to make a huge error that can be like throwing gas on a fire. But because they understood that God’s perspective was critical, they did some pretty important things:

- ▶ **They didn’t stop seeking God in order to start pleasing man.**
 - It would have been easy to drop the vertical in order to fix the horizontal, but they didn’t.
 - It’s not that they were above waiting and serving (some would say vv. 2-4 sound like it), but rather that they knew there was one thing leaders can’t delegate, and that’s prayer.
- ▶ **They didn’t minimize or magnify the problem. They heard it and addressed it.**
 - They gave the complainers a voice, and didn’t make them feel bad for feeling overlooked.
 - They understood that when people are left out, they often speak out or act out, and so they didn’t get offended by it.
 - That only happens when we keep the vertical our top priority, because God gives us His heart for others
- ▶ **They chose fired up people over warm bodies.**
 - Look at the requirements the leaders gave the people before they selected potential problem fixers.
 - Men who are not just full of the Spirit and wisdom, but are also KNOWN for it (reputation)
 - In fact, they put the best men on the problem so that they could continue to elevate prayer and the ministry of the word.
 - These men had to be on fire and passionate about loving Jesus and the people following Him
 - Contrast that with today’s qualifications: breathing.
- ▶ **They trusted the relationships the people had built by being together daily (The Other Six).**
 - From everything I’ve studied, when verse 2 says that they gathered all the disciples together, it means everyone in the church
 - So they all get together and are told to pick 7 men who meet the qualifications
 - What if we asked our church to do the same?
 - Would we know each other well enough to be able to nominate anyone or would we have that same feeling most of us have in the election booth looking at names of people we don’t even know?
 - When our vertical priorities are right, we’ll give our time and energy toward knowing those who are following Jesus with us
 - The early church did, and that helped them work through this plan
- ▶ **They trusted God’s power instead of fearing man’s.**
 - It’s worth noting that all the names of the 7 are Greek names.
 - That means that the people who were ultimately entrusted with the responsibility for this ministry were from the group that had been overlooked.
 - Why trust men who could abuse that power? Simple. You trust God’s power to lead His church more.

3. The PAYOFF.

So they faced the problem head on and had a plan.

Their plan, in a nutshell, was to solve the horizontal problem with vertical priorities, and verse 7 shows us what happened as a result:

- ▶ **The word of God spread.**
 - Don’t miss the fact that what they kept the main thing is what spread.
 - Sometimes the church spreads all the wrong stuff - gossip, hurt, division - because they focus on the horizontal more than the vertical.
 - What we focus on is what will spread.
- ▶ **The church continued to grow.**
 - Not just grow, but grow rapidly.
 - This could have been a speed bump for the church, but by handling it by keeping prayer and the word elevated actually propelled them to greater growth.

- ▶ Priests became obedient to the faith
 - Don't miss the power of that one statement.
 - Men who were already dedicated to spiritual things saw something different in how the church handled this
 - Instead of the typical religious, man-centered solution (horizontal), these leaders saw the church focus on a Jesus-centered solution (vertical) and it broke through their cold religious hearts and brought them into the faith

Now that is a payoff!

The Landing

Let's talk through a few takeaways from this section of Scripture:

- ▶ **As we grow, problems will come up.**
 - This shouldn't surprise us, and it should drive us to have God's heart more and more.
 - The lack of problems doesn't prove our spirituality. Rather, how we handle them does.
- ▶ **The vertical fuels the horizontal.**
 - It's easy to forget this because, quite honestly, the vertical is invisible.
 - But there is no horizontal problem that can ever be fixed without keeping the right vertical priorities
 - Pray. Study the word. Spend time hearing God's voice and receiving His heart.
 - Then - and only then - are you ready to handle the horizontal problems that are sure to come your way.

Let's pray.