

**“Your Table is Ready”**

Acts 6:1-7

*Series: Living Outside the Box Week 5: Living Outside Conflict*

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Here is an interesting news item. The headline reads: “Latest Church Split Breaks Presbyterian Record.” The small community of Centerville, Georgia - population of just over 5000 – holds the record for the most number of Presbyterian Churches in a small town: 48. This high density of Presbyterian congregations is the result of multiple splits since the first congregation - the Centerville Presbyterian Church – was founded in 1899. The first division came in 1911 when a dispute arose over whether the offering should be before or after the sermon. The dissenters went off and formed the "Centerville Reformed Presbyterian Church."

In 1915 the Centerville Reformed Presbyterian Church split over the issue of whether or not to have flowers in the sanctuary. 25 members left and organized The Trinity Reformed Presbyterian Church of Centerville. Several more splits took place over the next decades. For example in 1931 one of those churches – The Third Reformed Presbyterian Covenantal Church of Centerville divided over the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. 9 people left to form the Third Westminster Trinity Reformed Presbyterian Covenantal Church of Centerville.

A big battle arose in 1983 when the Southern Presbyterian Denomination planned to merge with us evil Northern Presbyterians. The Eleventh Westminster Reformed Presbyterian Covenantal Church of Centerville voted to remain in the denomination while fifteen members broke off and formed St. John's Presbyterian Church. One week later, St. John's Presbyterian Church split because some members disliked the word "Saint" in the name of a Protestant Church.

The most recent split occurred this past weekend, when a dispute arose among the Second Street First Ninth Westminster Trinity Reformed Presbyterian Covenantal Church over whether or not you could check your email on the Sabbath. Those who objected have now left to form The Totally Reformed Presbyterian Covenantal Westminster Charismatic Sabbatarian Fundamental Amillennial Purpose-Driven Church of Centerville. "I think we've finally got it right now" said Paul Davis, Pastor at TRPCWCSFAPDCC. "We now have a church with 100% doctrinal purity and we are ready to reach out to the community and show the world the love of Jesus."

To all of you who will ask me, “Did that really happen?” the answer is “No” and tragically, “Yes.” There are not 48 Presbyterian churches in Centerville. Yet in the long history of the Church, there are so many debates, dissensions and divisions it makes the fights in Centerville look like a Sunday School picnic. On the night before His crucifixion Jesus prayed

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:20-21).

Are we one? No. The Church is fractured into too many tiny pieces to count. Unity was the last request of the condemned man we call Master. We are the ones who prevent His prayer from coming to pass. When we break apart a church we break our Savior's heart. When we battle with each other, why should anyone outside the church believe our message? Now Jesus did not pray for His Church to be one big super denomination. Every denomination is a human creation and therefore imperfect. God did not intend for us all to worship and act alike. We know the Lord loves variety – just look at the multiple colors of leaves on the trees this fall. Unity is not uniformity. It is not compliance under a central authority. The unity Jesus prays for is cooperation and collaboration with the Holy Spirit. It's not acting alike but acting together. Instead of warring with one another we work together in Jesus' name despite our differences.

Why are there so many divisions in the Body of Christ? One word: conflict. Now conflict is not always bad. Your high school English teacher taught you conflict is essential for a story. There will always be differences of opinion and differences inevitably lead to conflict. The problem is not conflict – it's the poor way we handle it. In too many cases church conflict leads to divorce. Sometimes the two factions separate. Sometimes they stay together in a silent stalemate like Simon and Chana Taub. This couple in New York could only agree one thing: *The house is mine*. Despite the fact they cannot live together and want to divorce, both refuse to move out of their home. To solve the matter, the court ordered a sand-colored wall built through the middle of their living room.

Simon can only get to his dining room by going up a neighbor's outside stairs, stepping over a balcony, and climbing through a window. Chana has easier access to the second floor, but she complains that Simon still makes her life a nightmare by yelling, banging on walls, and turning off her heat when it's cold out. They each vow to stay in the house until the other moves—but it doesn't look like that'll be happening anytime soon.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus once said,

If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. If a house is divided against itself, that house cannot stand. And if Satan opposes himself and is divided, he cannot stand; his end has come. (Mark 3:24-26).

A house of God, a congregation, divided against itself will not stand. Jesus came to invade and break Satan's hold over this world. He said, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not be able to stand against it" (Matthew 16:18). Yet Satan's main strategy is to break up the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Erika Hayasaki, "Far Apart Under One Roof," The Los Angeles Times (2-10-07).

In the first book of *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien tells the tale of a small, diverse group who go on a mission to destroy the power of an evil Dark Lord. The Fellowship of the Ring is a band of two men, a dwarf, an elf, four hobbits and a wizard. Though they represent different races, they are united by their opposition to the Dark Lord. Yet their unity is tested. In one scene, which didn't make the movie, an intense conflict breaks out between the members. Harsh words fly. Axes are raised. Bows are bent. The mission is almost lost just as it is starting. When peace is restored, one member of the party says, in essence, 'The Dark Lord shows his greatest power when he can divide those who oppose him.' Satan is most effective if he can get us to waste our energy fighting each other instead of him.<sup>2</sup>

That was his plan when the Church was first born. The devil is so cunning he attempted to use something good to split the Church.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. (Acts 6:1).

In a short time the Church grew from 120 believers to 3,000 to 5,000. That is wonderful, miraculous news. Yet growth brings growing pains. As resources are stretched the cracks and fault lines start showing up at the weakest point - usually some difference between two people or groups. At this stage in church history the difference was very tiny. It wasn't an ethnic or racial difference - they were all Jews. It wasn't a difference of religion - they were all Christians. It wasn't an economic difference - they all had poor widows to feed. The only difference between them was their native tongue - some Jewish Christians spoke Aramaic and the others spoke Greek. This just proves Christians who love the Lord and who are alike in almost every way will still find something to fight about. Conflict is inevitable and unavoidable - whether it's a marriage, a family, a business, a community or a church. So how do we live outside this box?

Begin by **Facing Instead of Fearing Conflict**. So often we are conflict avoiders. I like the story of the monks who lived in a monastery which observed a strict vow of silence. Their vow could only be broken once a year - on the Feast of All Saints Day - by one monk who was allowed to speak one sentence. When it was Brother Matthew's turn to speak he said, "I love our delicious porridge." Then he sat down and there was silence for 365 days. The next year, it was Brother Michael's turn. "I think our porridge is lumpy and I despise it!" Once again, silence ensued. A full year later Brother Paul rose and said, "I am fed up with this constant bickering! I'm leaving."

When conflict comes up too often we give each other the silent treatment while we talk to those not involved in the argument to gain their support. This separation into divided camps usually stokes the fires of resentment instead of putting them out. When the complaints started to fly among the first Christians, the apostles faced it right away. "So the Twelve gathered all the disciples..." (Acts 6:2). Let's not kid ourselves - conflict is painful. We can fight it. We can fear it. Yet in most cases the better course is to face it

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<sup>2</sup> Bob Clanton, Monroe, Louisiana.

and find out what caused it. In this situation there was an injustice. A hungry group of widows was not receiving the food they needed. Avoiding the problem would split the Church. Facing the conflict opened the door to a solution.

Next, **Listen and Learn Before Speaking.** The disciples heard the complaints of the Grecian Jewish Christians. They took time to understand the breakdown in communication. Listening is a lost art. We are quick to present our case but slow to understand the other person's position. How can you restore a connection with each other if you don't know where they are coming from?

Constructing the Chunnel – the tunnel under the English Channel – was nothing short of a miracle since the two nations, France and England, held vastly different points of view. Even beyond the obvious differences of language and culture and the fact that these two nations fought and hated each other for more centuries than they'd been friends, the two countries had different standards and business practices. The French ran on 380 volts and the British on 420. Instruction manuals had to be bilingual. They used two different methods for measuring sea level. And they drove on opposite sides of the road. Two mammoth companies, one to handle the finances and the other to build the tunnel had to be headed by equal numbers of French and British executives.

No one was allowed to take charge. Leadership, more times than not, was reduced to the management of conflict. Said a high-ranking executive, "The project...created a lot of tension because it was not geared to solving problems; it was geared to placing blame." The English yelled at the French, and the French yelled at the English. Said another executive, "There were nervous breakdowns galore. "When you have people coming from two different nations," said one of the engineers, "each believes that only their regulations are right."<sup>3</sup>

How, in the end, were they able to build the Chunnel? They had to listen and learn from each other. It required them to put the project above their personal points of view. When we face conflict as followers of Jesus we must love the person more than our position. So long as we take our stands and refuse to budge we will never be able to bridge the gap as the Chunnel did or, more importantly, as Jesus did.

Third, **Take Responsibility for Your Part in the Solution.** What the apostles say next sounds a little stuck up.

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group. (Acts 6:3-5).

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Lewis with Rob Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence* (Zondervan, 2001), pp. 205-206

Your first impression of the apostles may be they think waiting on tables is beneath them. Yet they are wise enough to understand a few people, even the leaders, cannot cover all the tasks of a growing Church. From the very beginning, the Holy Spirit makes it clear He gives spiritual gifts to everyone in the Body of Christ, all the gifts are equally important, yet they are different. The whole Body of Christ cannot be healthy and growing if each person is not doing his or her part. Everyone should pray yet some have a special gift of prayer. Everyone should share the Good News yet some are especially gifted at it. Everyone should serve and wait on tables, yet some are excellent at that.

Notice, however, the apostles did not tell the Grecian Jewish Christians what to do. Instead, they asked them to be part of the solution. "You choose the leaders," the apostles said. They gave them guidelines – choose people who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom – and then let them go. Pastors ask me, "How is it that your church is involved in prison ministry, homeless ministry, nursing home ministries, housing ministries, food pantry ministries, mission trips and projects in the US, Dominican Republic, the Bahamas, Haiti and Africa?" I reply when people come to us with a mission or ministry idea we ask, "Is it about Jesus, is it full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom?" If the answer is "Yes" then we don't say, "Please fill out these forms in triplicate and we'll get back to you in 60 days." Instead, we say, "What do you need to get started?"

We are doing a lot for the kingdom of God. But we could do so much more. In fact, I believe we are just getting started. Yet we will not be able to share the Good News more and do more Good Deeds outside this box unless we are willing to go beyond what we are giving now. Unless we are willing to give our time and give more, unless we are willing to give our talents and give more, unless we are willing to give our treasure and give more, we will stop, stagnate and even start clashing with each other. It does no good if we almost give. The Ad Council ran an ad of an older woman sitting alone in a room staring out a window. The narrator says,

This is Sarah Watkins. A lot of people almost helped her. One almost cooked for her. Another almost drove her to the doctor. Still another almost stopped by to say hello. They *almost* helped. They *almost* gave of themselves. But *almost* giving is the same as not giving at all. Don't almost give. Give.

Today you will have the opportunity to go beyond almost giving by committing and investing a portion of your financial blessings in the work of God's kingdom in the coming year. If you think about it, we are the Hebraic Jewish Christians. As American Christians we have more food and resources than the Grecian Jewish Christians, our brothers and sisters, in the developing world. Those Hebraic Christians had to part with some of the food so the Grecian widows could have some. We have certainly struggled with a difficult economy. But in 2009 author Philip Yancey put it in perspective

The same week the global economy shrank by \$7 trillion, Zimbabwe's inflation rate hit a record 231 million percent. In other words, if you had saved \$1 million Zimbabwean dollars by Monday, on Tuesday it was worth \$158. This sobering fact leads me to pray and ask God's help in taking my eyes off my own problems

in order to look with compassion on the truly desperate. What a testimony it would be if, in the coming year, Christians resolved to increase their giving to build houses for the poor, combat AIDS in Africa, and announce kingdom values to a decadent, celebrity-driven culture. Such a response defies all logic and common sense — unless, of course, we take Jesus seriously.<sup>4</sup>

If only those who professed to be “strong” or “very strong” Christians would tithe, Dr. Ron Sider estimates there would be an *extra* 46 billion dollars a year to do kingdom work. Just as an example:

- 150,000 new indigenous missionaries.
- 5 million more micro loans to poor entrepreneurs.
- The food, clothing and shelter for all 6,500,000 current refugees in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.
- All the money for a global campaign to prevent and treat malaria.

Today you can make a commitment to make that difference. And next Sunday you can make a commitment of your time and talents to help people in our community. We have over twenty projects you can do. You can even help an elderly person like Sarah Watkins. The one thing I hope you will not do is almost give.

The Grecian Jews were pleased with the solution the apostles gave them. Their table was ready and they went out and served the widows. The conflict was resolved. And what was the result?

They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:6-7).

When unity was restored the church grew even more rapidly and a large number of the most potentially hostile audience, the priests who had the most to lose, became followers of Jesus. Why? They believed in the love of Jesus for them because they saw how the Christians shared the love of Jesus with each other.

The hardest thing you need to do to resolve a conflict and restore a relationship is to take responsibility for your part in the break up and your part in the solution. When people conflict, each party is an expert about what the other one should do. It’s always harder for me to see where I am wrong. Yet unless I do, I will stay in the box of this conflict forever.

Pastor Paul Yonggi Cho was in a box of conflict and hatred. Yonggi Cho is pastor of the largest church in the world which is in Korea. Several years ago, as his ministry was becoming international, he told God, "I will go anywhere to preach the gospel—except Japan." He hated the Japanese with gut-deep loathing because of what Japanese

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Yancey, "A Surefire Investment," [www.christianitytoday.com/ct](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct) (2-3-09)

troops had done to the Korean people and to members of Yonggi Cho's own family during WWII. Mark Buchanan tells the story:

Through a combination of a prolonged inner struggle, several direct challenges from others, and finally an urgent and starkly worded invitation, Cho felt called by God to preach in Japan. He went, but he went with bitterness. The first speaking engagement was to a pastor's conference—1,000 Japanese pastors. Cho stood up to speak, and what came out of his mouth was this: "I hate you. I hate you. I hate you." And then he broke and wept. He was both brimming and desolate with hatred.

At first one, then two, then all 1,000 pastors stood up. One by one they walked up to Yonggi Cho, knelt at his feet and asked forgiveness for what they and their people had done to him and his people. As this went on, God changed Yonggi Cho. The Lord put a single message in his heart and mouth: "I love you. I love you. I love you."<sup>5</sup>

Why should I seek forgiveness and why should I offer it? Because my Master already paid my bill in full. He also paid yours. He served you at your table. He washed your feet. His body and blood were given on your table. And He has set the table for you to serve someone else, to make peace with someone else, to put an end to a conflict. Your table is ready.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Buchanan, *Your God Is Too Safe* (Multnomah, 2001) p. 47.