

## *Conflict Management*

All right, class, ready for today's English lesson? Our word for today is: onomatopoeia. How many of you know what that is? Onomatopoeia is what we call a word that sounds like what it means. For instance, zoom has a swooping sound—and swoop is onomatopoeic too. Other examples include words like click, hiss, oink, sneeze, croak, thunder, and roar. The sound imitates what it describes.

The word *grumble* is onomatopoeic. It sounds like the undercurrent of complaining that it described. Curiously, grumble is the word we most often choose to translate an ancient Greek word that is also onomatopoeic: *gongusmos*. They both sound like the murmuring of discontent.

The Bible takes a negative view toward grumbling. It commands us, for instance, to do everything without complaining [grumbling] and arguing (Philippians 2:14). Grumbling is something that invites God's judgement. An undercurrent of grumbling can suck the life right out of a church. It can have the same effect on a friendship, a home or a marriage.

Grumbling is nearly always problematic. It overshadows the main issue when the main issue isn't dealt with forthrightly.

The early church had a run-in with grumbling. It was the third significant crisis they faced in their brief existence as a community of the Spirit. In the incident with Ananias and Sapphira, they had faced the possibility of moral contamination born of deception. Before the Sanhedrin they had boldly stared down intimidation born of persecution. Now, in Acts 6 they faced the possibility of distraction born of dissension—grumbling. Turn with me to Acts 6:1-11.

Before we can come to terms with the situation in Acts 6, we have to understand something of the ancient culture. Three centuries earlier the Greek King Alexander the Great had conquered all the countries of eastern Mediterranean and all the kingdoms inland between Greece and western borders of India. He subdued Egypt to the south. And everywhere he went, Alexander exported Greek culture. The term for that is Hellenization. *Hellas* is the name by which Greeks identify themselves. Greek became the common language of the entire region, from Mesopotamia to Egypt to Rome.

The Greek language was to the ancients what English is today. Commercial airline pilots all communicate in English. And if you are going to do business internationally, English is the common tongue. That's why so many peoples of this world learn English along with their native tongue, and Americans get by knowing only English.

When Israel went into captivity by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, they were forcibly resettled throughout the known world. Later generations of Jews migrated to other prominent commercial centers to do business. As a result, ethnic Jews were sprinkled throughout the entire Mediterranean region. They were religiously Jewish, kept the law and observed Jewish festivals. But after Alexander's conquest, they were also deeply affected by their immersion in the surrounding Hellenized cultures.

Some of these Jews migrated back to Israel. Some moved back because they wanted to retire and be buried near Jerusalem. Others returned for other reasons. In the time of the early church, it is quite likely that some of the Grecian Jews who had come for the Feast of Pentecost got saved under the preaching of the apostles, and stayed to be a part of the newly-birthed church.

Hebraic Jews were native bred and born in Palestine. They would know the Greek

language but their mother tongue was Aramaic. They were culturally Jewish with deep roots in the land of Israel.

These native-born Jews treated their Hellenized cousins with barely concealed contempt. The Pharisees led the way with their passion for the Torah. They viewed Grecian Jews as comparatively lax, less observant, second-class Jews.

Something else we need to know. Widows in Israel did not have access to American style retirement benefits. There was no social security and whatever inheritance rights they might have enjoyed were easily contested by male relatives. Unless she had family to care for her, a widow's prospects were grim.

As a result, observant Jews provided a safety net out of their own generosity. Synagogues had teams of men who regularly collected and distributed money to care for widows and others who had nothing.

When the church burst upon the scene, they were zealous about caring for their own people. Members, like Barnabas and others, sold personal and real property and gave it to the church to care for the needs of those, like widows, who could not care for themselves.

But existing cultural prejudices insinuated their way into the process. Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked. Native, Hebrew-speaking widows received preferential treatment. And inevitably, grumbling erupted.

Wisely, the apostles didn't react to the grumbling, but responded to its root cause. And in their response, they embodied enduring wisdom that serves us well today.

Remember that Acts 6 is *descriptive*, not *prescriptive*. Luke describes what happened. He doesn't tell us—prescribe—what should happen in every case. Their response gives us an example from which we can glean practical insights for crisis management.

First, the apostles discerned the real issue—they got to the heart of what was happening. They didn't react to the emotionally-laden messages that inevitably accompany grumbling. They saw hungry women who were helpless, and who were being neglected.

Second, they kept their sense of priority: "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables." Jesus had called them to a specific ministry. He had personally trained them and commissioned them to take his message everywhere. They were the living, authoritative repository of truth for the early church.

It was inappropriate for them to abandon their calling to serve meals.

And meals needed to be served. Their clear sense of priority did not diminish the need or the value of other kinds of service—like providing means for needy persons to be cared for. That too was a high and holy calling. But it wasn't the apostles' calling. They handed it off to the church so they could maintain their focus on prayer and the ministry of the word.

By the way, our English translations miss a delightful nuance in verses 2-4. When the apostles identified the food distribution program, they called it *waiting* on tables. They used a word that described what servants did when they served meals: *diaconeo*. We get our word *deacon* from this. We also believe that this passage contains the origins of this office.

The apostles said they weren't called to *diaconeo* tables—to serve meals. They would give themselves to the *diakonia* of the word of God. That was their proper sphere of service. Both served—both the ones handing out food and the ones proclaiming God's message. Both needed to be done. But the apostles' service was rooted in telling God's story.

It's been two-thousand years and we still need to be reminded of this lesson. When crises pop up in churches, what do congregations instinctively do? Call the pastors. "You need to take

care of this...” That’s what we pay them for, right?

So when the air-conditioning stops working, or the nursery smells, or someone’s car breaks down and they can’t afford to fix it, who you gonna call?

The apostles refused to be sidetracked.

Third, they offered wise direction. They gave the church a proposal by which the church itself could solve the problem. That’s leadership.

And notice something embedded in their proposal. If you’re going to pick people to distribute food, who would you look for? Someone with organizational skills. Maybe some folks with enough critical thinking skills to discern who might be abusing the system. Someone with a big truck—donkey cart—who can pack the food around, or a large enough storage space to keep product.

What qualifications did the apostles give? Our NIV makes it sound like there were only two. Luke actually mentions three. They needed to have a good reputation. These had to be men people already respected. They needed to be full of the Spirit, giving credible expression to the Spirit’s obvious presence and influence in their lives. And they needed to be wise. They needed to have good common sense about what needed to be done.

When we select men and women to serve us in operations management, the people we choose as deacons and deaconesses, we have had to resist some suggestions by well meaning people. They offer names of people, for instance, who “need to get involved.” Let’s make them a church officer so they will be more faithful. Or they suggest people who are very nice, but otherwise not qualified.

The qualifications suggested by the apostles are rudimentary for anyone we ask to serve as a deacon. Have they earned the respect of the congregation? Do they reflect the active presence of God’s Spirit in their life and conduct? Do we trust their wisdom? Paul gives us other things to consider in 1 Timothy 3, but if we’re picking deacons, we start here.

The apostles did something else. They gave away power easily and responsibly. Some guys in leadership can’t do that. Everything has to go through them. They have an inordinate need to be needed. Nothing happens in their church they don’t control. Which means that even if they are extraordinarily gifted, the church is limited by what they can accomplish.

The apostles empowered the church to select a group of men to whom they entrusted the entire responsibility for this ministry. The apostles kept hands off so they could be hands on with the ministry of prayer and word. They refused to be distracted by a very real issue they didn’t personally need to fix.

Notice how the church responded—verse 5-6.

There’s something we miss in these verses from our historical and cultural distance. Every one of the men chosen to manage this ministry had a Greek name. One of them, Nicolas, was a proselyte, an ethnic Greek who had converted to Judaism.

What’s the implication? The church empowered the neglected, offended minority to lead the fix.

How undemocratic! We would have gone to great lengths to make sure both sides were represented. And since they were only choosing seven men, we would have weighted the composition of the food management team to reflect the majority culture: four or five Hebraic Jews and two or three Grecian Jews. After all, it’s the American way!

They were more interested in doing the right thing than making sure their interests were represented.

You see, that's how *love* responds. It surrounds the most vulnerable with preferential treatment and protection.

The seven, by our understanding the first deacons, took over the management of this ministry, and the problem disappeared.

Not only that. The gospel advanced unimpeded: "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." The apostles sustained their public preaching and teaching ministry in the temple where ordinary priests and Levites came to serve at their appointed times. And as a result, many of them came to faith.

That would not have happened had the Twelve taken on the responsibility to make sure everyone got a fair share of food. The apostles might have come up with a crackerjack system of social welfare, but the gospel would have stalled; the church would have become ingrown. The seven faithfully assumed that task so the apostles could be free to fulfill the purpose for which Jesus had appointed them.

In this internal crisis the apostles:

- discerned the real issue.
- kept their sense of priority.
- offered wise direction
- gave away power and responsibility.
- empowered the neglected and offended.

And they did all of these things out of a heart of love. They incarnated the love of Christ in such a way that the gospel was unhindered and needs got met.

This isn't a template we can apply to every church crisis. And often grumbling is the more significant problem that needs to be addressed. But it does give us a model for responding when grumbling and dissension over some real offense threatens to distract our church family and leadership from fulfilling the purposes God has for us.