

Fellowship in Service

By Paris Reidhead*

Let us turn again, please, to Acts, Chapter 6. We are concerned about God's best for our lives. We serve this present generation, and minister to those who live while we live. But we must enter into the fellowship of believers of all ages by drawing from the experience of others, both through the Scripture, and since the Canon of the Scripture was completed, those lessons that we need to serve Him adequately.

And we are very grateful this morning that the Spirit of God gave to us this exact account, even though it represented problems. You see, first in this 6th chapter, the arising of a problem. It was a personality problem; almost invariably problems in any business, or the home, or the church, or any activity, or any organization, are personality adjustment problems.

Years ago at Mahaffey Camp Meeting I made the statement that probably 95% of the problems on the Mission Field were personality adjustment problems. When I finished, and at lunch, the then area secretary for the Far East, now Foreign Secretary, Rev. L. L. King, said, "You know, I have to take exception to your statistics offered this morning." And I said that I wasn't surprised, that I had been in error so frequently that I was prepared to correct them, but in what particular, in what statistic. And he said, "You said 95% of the problems were personality adjustment problems." And I said, "Yes and this I would affirm again. Can you correct me?" He said, "Yes, I would tell you that in my estimation it is probably 99 and 44/100 of the problems that are personality adjustment problems." And that is what we have here. Fellowship is disturbed. There is breaking up.

We have seen the glory of God upon the fellowship; they shared a problem facing them of outside persecution. Then there was the crisis that arose when one of their number sought to use the fellowship for his own aggrandizement and lied to the Holy Ghost. Ananias and Sapphira were slain by the Lord, indicating how important He considers the fellowship, and how desirous He is that almost any price of protecting it and keeping it blessable.

But you see, this was deliberate. This was malicious on the part of Ananias and Sapphira. They agreed together. They decided that they would keep back part of the price. This was a determined course, and God could visit this with judgment. (See Acts 5:1-11)

I believe the problem in this 1st vs in the 6th Chapter was not deliberate. It grew up because of nationality differences. It grew up because of financial differences, problems that had their rise in circumstances that were not deliberately set and fixed. Let me read it for you: "In those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations" (Act. 6:1). This tells us several things. It tells us first, that there was a great increase in the number of adherents to the testimony, and this with itself create problems. Numbers are not always the blessing. If we can increase, without assimilating, our growth is the cause of our failure. And so they were having the problem of assimilation, of adjustment. Here there was great blessing, but there wasn't appropriate provision for it, and so there was daily ministrations. Some of these were poor that had come to Christ, some were disenfranchised; Rabbis and others were driven from their living, and their means of livelihood. They were cut off from their families and their business, and they were in need. And so there was a daily sharing, a daily ministrations. And it was also for those that had no other means of support. It speaks of the widows, those that were utterly dependent upon the love of the group for the supply of their needs.

It teaches us further that there was a certain economic factor in the fellowship, that one's burden was the burden of all, and one's need was the need of all. And they were concerned about it. This is good. But the problem arises when the Greeks, that is, the Grecians, the dispersed if you please, the people that had been out in Greece and elsewhere, the Jewish people, for they were all Jews, but some had lived in Jerusalem, and others had come in from areas where they lived.

We find today that among the Jewish people there is a great deal of difference of feeling. Jews all, but some from Spain look down upon others from Russia; and some from Morocco feel a little inferior to those that come from Germany. And there are

nationality differences. I was with a Hebrew Christian brother this past week, and who spoke of a Jewish man who had come from India as though he were Indian instead of being a Jewish brother. There was nationality difference because of culture and language and certain things that had been fixed to them.

So here these Jews that had lived in Greece and in other parts of the Empire felt that the ones that lived in Jerusalem and were the old timers, so to speak, had taken advantage for themselves, and that consequently their widows were overlooked. I say it is a personality adjustment problem, because it is based on traits, it is based on reaction, and of course we understand that in God's normal relationship for a Christian our lives should never be on the basis of reaction. We ought to act, always to act. We ought to think our way into our living instead of sort of living our way into our thinking.

I read some time ago an article in the Readers Digest about a certain Quaker gentleman in New York that decided he would live his life, and would not allow others to determine the kind of a person he would be. In the company of a friend he went to the corner where he purchased, as was his custom, his evening newspaper. The man – he spoke to him, "Good evening, Paul. How are you?" And the man responded with a surly grunt. He said, "And I hope you have a good business tonight," and a second repetition of the grunt. And obviously discourteous, and unconcerned. And as they walked away, his friend said, "It seemed so strange to me that you could be so polite to one who has treated you this way. Do you buy your paper here often?" "Oh yes, every night." "Well does he do this often?" "Why, every night." "Well how come you are so courteous to this person?" And he looked at him and smiled, and said, "You see, I have determined long ago that I would not let anyone else decide the kind of a person I was going to be. I am not going to go through life being shaped by those whom I meet. I am not going to react. I purpose to act in accord to what I believe is right and proper." This is the tendency. Most of the times we get into difficulty and problem it's because we have reacted. We ought to be prepared for it. We ought to know what to do in certain circumstances, and instead of just emotionally reacting. After all, the number of experiences into which we can come after a few years of life, is known to us and it is rather limited. And we are not going to have too many surprising things happen after 25 or 30 years of life. We ought to know something of what we are planning to do when certain things happen rather than just emotionally respond over and over again. We all do, and when we get into trouble and difficulty it is probably going to be that we have failed to act.

And this is what happened here, and so strife is growing up, unconsciously – not deliberately. They are not seeking to ruin the fellowship. Ananias and Sapphira, as we said, did. But there must be a solution. Well, the apostles are responsible. They have to consult together. When the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them they had something to present. Usually a solution is found when some give their minds to the problem and dedicate their efforts and their thought to it.

You ought to be the committee of one to dedicate your life to the matter of living triumphantly for the glory of Christ in the area that He has assigned to you. It is not going to – your problems are not going to be settled by the church. Your problems are not going to be settled by a group as large as this. Speaking of large groups meeting, one man said, that when twelve of my people get together we have 18 opinions; part of them have two. And this is often the case. You are going to have to make up your mind that the problems that you face in your home with your family, that problems that you face in your business, the difficulties that you encounter in social relationships are entrusted to you. And they are not going to be settled from the pulpit. The pulpit can give you principles, and give you direction, but the application of those principles is going to come to you.

Now you need not feel alone in this. There is the possibility of your having a smaller group, someone in whom you can confide, someone with whom you can have fellowship. This is the reason why the class meetings of John Wesley¹ served such a noble function, because groups of 12 would meet that would get to know one another. The difficulty we face here is when this service is over many of you are going to leave. You won't tarry long enough to speak. You forget that the people next to you are as much strangers perhaps as you are. I have people, all of them in the presence of strangers, going out and saying, My those folks are unfriendly. But you see the people that they thought were members and regular attendants at the church were just as new and strange as they were. And so you are going to hurry out, you are going to go to your home, some other,

1 John Wesley (1703-1791) Anglican cleric, Christian theologian, and founding the Methodist movement

interest is going to come in, and the problems that have been faced this morning and exposed this morning, are going to be submerged through other activities, and they are not going to be met.

If it were possible for you to have fellowship with other Christians in the days of the week, or the afternoon hours, so that you could honestly and openly just frankly face your need, possibly in that smaller fellowship of united prayer there could be some solution. The apostles were twelve. They met together. What are we going to do about this problem among the widows? An answer was presented. They presented it, to receive it as from the Lord and presented it to the people. Will the people respond to it? Well, the solution had to be faced on this basis. You see, they didn't understand that they were going to have such a big dining room, that the church was going to be so concerned about food. They preached Christ, but they recognized they were not dealing with souls. Perhaps one of the great errors of our present day evangelism is that we haven't wanted to get involved with people and we have been trying to win souls, as though souls were a kind of an excrescence of personality.

The Indians you know on the western plains used to take scalps, and they could put these scalps on a scalp pole and dance around the fire. But you say, Where are the people that wore the scalps? Well their bones are bleaching in the desert somewhere. And I am afraid too many times our evangelism has been in terms of souls, something apart from the person. It is very difficult to become involved with people, and they have. And the apostles, of course, being responsible had assumed all of the duties. At first it was possible for them to carry it. But something happened. As they took this task and that, and accepted this responsibility and that in behalf of the group, they were not able to do the thing God had set them apart to do. And thus the failure really was to point out the fact that there was something amiss in the relationship that the apostles had to the entire group.

And in the second vs you read their statement, "It is not reasonable," (it is utterly foolish, it is beyond the point of reason) "that we should leave the Word of God, and serve tables" (Act. 6:2). They had done it, I am sure. They had administered by the accident of development. But they look at what they are doing, and they say, We cannot keep up with these problems. We are not able to take care of the difficulties. What are we going to do? It is too much for us. Is God calling us now to become administrators of the benevolence of the congregation? Is it our responsibility to solve all these difficulties? And so they said, the first thing God showed them was this. It was not reasonable that those that had given by the church for the purpose of ministering the Word should leave the Word to minister to tables. That was the first thing. They had to recognize responsibility.

Then they said, If God wants us to do this, if God has set us apart to do this, there must be others that he wants to take the tasks we cannot carry. So the word came from the apostles to the multitude of the disciples, "Look you out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business" (Act. 6:3). They said to the people, You know those among you that are honest — of honest report, whose lives are above reproach, men that are full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.

Now to whom do these qualifications apply? You say, Oh, it must be to the apostles. Look at that, of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost, and of wisdom. No, these are deacons. These are the deacons in the congregation. No man should be a deacon, according to the Scripture, unless his life is above reproach, unless he is full of the Holy Ghost, and wisdom, being practical, prudence and common sense on the one hand, and I would think the gift of wisdom on the other. These are the Biblical qualifications for the office of a deacon. You see, every office in the church, every ministry in the church, all function in the church, presupposes that they have been filled with the Holy Spirit. This is true. "Full of the Holy Ghost; but of honest report and full of wisdom." So there was a basic minimum qualification, full of the Spirit of God, and then these other practical matters which would indicate that they would be able, since they could administer their own household well, they would be able also to administer the responsibilities of the church. "Look you out among you... decide who among you are qualified for this task, present them to us, and we will appoint them for the task."

This was God's solution. Every responsibility in the fellowship had in the plan of God a person. God's plan is always a person. When God wanted to establish a ministry in China, He found a person in Hudson Taylor. When He wished to reach India, His plan was a person in William Carey. God's method is a man, invariably. When I say man I am not excluding women. I am using

the term generically. God's answer to the need is a human being, a person, a person whose life is committed to Him, a person filled with Him, and a person that is prepared to accept the responsibility that the task involves.

Now obviously these men would have had other plans. There is no question in my mind but what they were busy men. They had responsibilities. They were working. They made their own living, undoubtedly. They all had their tasks, and they were men that would have to accept this as being from God, and commit themselves to it, adjusting their lives to fulfill this responsibility.

This is exactly the manner in which God proposes to work today. Every ministry, whether it be in missions at home or abroad, in the church depends upon a person, some person, and others as well. For this is a multiplied ministry. But I will go further and say this, that in the plan and economy of God, every member of the body of Christ, everyone in the fellowship, has a task that has been given by the Lord. The idea that a few were to do the work for the many is Roman and not Biblical. The Biblical idea is given in I Corinthians 12, where we are told, The Spirit of God divides gifts severally to every man as He wills. First, He gives gifts to men. He divides severally to every man. There is equipment in the provision of God's grace for you. Now He will not give all the 9 gifts of the Spirit to you I am sure, nor to me, because He wants us to be mutually dependent upon others. But God will give you that supernatural equipment and enabling that you need for the task that He has for you. If you are prepared to meet Him on His terms, namely that of surrender to His will and appropriation of His presence, God will give you some gift, some ability, some ministry that is essential for the church, and without it there will be as much a gap in what is being done as a gear with teeth missing. There will be a grinding and a breakdown. It is imperative therefore that you realize your importance. If you are in Christ and part of a fellowship there is spiritual equipment that God has for you. No one just goes along for the ride in the Christian life. No one is just there to occupy space.

You must recognize this. This is why the Scripture says, "But covet earnestly the best gifts," recognize that God has for you, and that gift is best which is His will for you (I Cor. 12:31). And Paul said to Timothy, "Stir up the gift that is in you by the laying on of my hands" (II Tim. 1:6). I do not believe the gift came because Paul laid his hands on him, but I believe that by this act of consecration and ordination, and dedication it was stated by the Lord through Paul the gifts that Timothy had to be used in behalf of the church. And there is some ministry God has for you. And there is not only equipment, but there is task.

A careful reading of Romans 12 will reveal to you that there are many ministries. There is the gift of ministry of helps, and of administrations, and of exhortation, and of giving, and of teaching. Every member of the body of Christ is to have a ministry. We see it here when the apostles' hands are tied by the perplexity of the problem.

It carries us back in the Old Testament to the time when Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, saw this man trying to settle all the problems in that great people – 2½ million people. And he said to his son-in-law, to Moses, you cannot do this. It is utterly impossible for one man to serve all the multitudinous needs. Look you out among you men that can hear complaints, and can make decisions, wise men and good. And it is therefore extended into the church. When the apostles find themselves incapable of dealing with the multitudinous of responsibilities and details, and then look among you for servants. For that is what the word deacon means.

But we must not stop there. In Ephesians, Chapter 4, he says, "He gave some to be apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and pastors and teachers for the perfecting of the saints into the work of the ministry" (Eph. 4:11-12). We have stated in the past, the work of the ministry was to be done by the saints. The fellowship in service is this, every member of the fellowship has a responsibility, just as for every member of the fellowship there is spiritual provision. And it behooves us to recognize this.

Now part of the problem of 20th century Christianity is this, that we are following Rome more diligently than we are following the Word of God. We are in mortal conflict with an international conspiracy known as communism. And I related to you the first of the year what I repeat now, just briefly, how that in Minneapolis in 1935 I talked to the Director of the Communist Worker's Training School, the school being located directly opposite the front doors of the First Baptist Church. I asked him some 20, or more, questions concerning their methods, and he answered very candidly. Then he pointed to me and said, pointed to my brief bag on the floor, and he said, "Do you have a Bible in there?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Do you read it?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Do you believe it?" And I said, "Yes." Then he said, "Why have you wasted my time?" I said, "What do you

mean?" He said, "When we found out that a small group of people, without educated leadership, without political influence, and without wealth, were able to conquer their generation and their world in two generations, and they left an exact record as the means they had used to do it, we studied that book." He said, "I presume that in some respects I know the Bible better than you do. Every principle I teach is either taken from the Bible or related to it." He said, "The difference between us and you is this, we reject the theology of the Bible as mere superstition, but we accept the practicality of the Bible, its methodology, its principles, its policy of operation." And he said, "With these, what you have rejected we will use to wipe you off the face of the earth." That was in 1935 or '6 and now we are down in 1962, and we are appalled at the progress that has been made in these years. But it is to be understood that this is the case. There is a discipline. Every member of the party has responsibilities amenable to those above him, and the work depends upon tried and trusted individuals. "Look you out among you men you can trust."

"Look you out among you men that are full of the Holy Ghost." "Look out among you men that have wisdom," and realize that the extension of this work is going to come by the multiplying of the hands doing it. It is not going to be in the apostles. It is not going to be a one man ministry. But it is going to be every member of the fellowship finding his place under the headship of Christ and fulfilling that place. We understand of course that it is much easier to aggrandize a man, to glorify a man, and to build a work around a man. But the unfortunate part of this is that this has been done in the Christian church for 2 or 3 hundred years, and as soon as the man is gone the work evaporates. What God is looking for in the 20th century is not so much great men that can build great monuments like inverted pyramids to rest upon their shoulders, but a return to the Biblical principle of the significance of every individual. And it is my firm conviction that if we are to be blessable to the degree which God is waiting and willing to bless us is when you as a member of this fellowship or whatever fellowship you may be part of elsewhere recognize your responsibility. First, *to maintain a relationship with the Lord described here as full of the Holy Ghost, to maintain a relationship with the world which is described here as of good report, and to maintain a relationship with practical common sense called wisdom.* And then, having done this, to so present yourself to the Lord Jesus that you can work in conjunction with and in cooperation with the fellowship, the Body, and each complement the other, and each recognize the utter dependence upon the other, and work together in harmony. The very contrast to what you had here was a personality division and strife that broke the fellowship and caused it to lose the blessing of God, and is to be utterly refuted by us, absolutely repudiated by us, and we are to then realize that God used the problem to point out a principle, and the principle was that everyone had a place to fill, and a responsibility to carry. It isn't given to us in its fullest extension here, but it is given to us throughout the Word, that every member of the Body of Christ fulfills a function, just as your finger, your tongue, your ears, your feet, each have place and function in the body, no member more honorable than the other. And when one suffers the body itself is in pain. And when we come to that concept, and you are prepared to realize that you will not know your place in the Body until you are filled with the Spirit, you cannot take your place in the Body until you are filled with the Spirit, until the Cross has come in and cut right through all other aspirations, all other purposes, all other desires, and you remain amenable to the Head, and submissive to Him as your hand is to your head, then the Body itself can be blessed.

Now we will discover from the latter part of this chapter that out of seven deacons there was one that God was pleased to use in a special way. I am confident that the ones who rejoiced the most in this were the apostles, and the other six of the deacons. I cannot for a moment imagine that there was such a thing as jealousy, or criticism, that God could have been pleased to have taken Stephen and so worked on his heart that he could be said to be a man full of faith. It was not necessarily true that the others did not have faith, but here is a man full of faith. You may be that man. But should you be that man you will be the first to recognize others who may have greater gifts and liberty and anointing than you have in this regard. He was a man not only full of faith, but he was a man full of the Holy Ghost, a deacon, not worthy, or not chosen to be among the apostles, but one who was among the deacons. And we find here that this man Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. I am confident, again I say, that the whole company rejoiced, that God was pleased to use Stephen.

Now why He did not take Philip, or why He did not take Timon, or Nicanor, I do not know. But He chose Stephen, and Stephen was equipped for the task. But I know if I understand the text correctly that these others rejoiced that here was one that God was using. I am sure they supported him with prayer. I am sure they stood by him with joy, because they had now learned that, God was not restricting His ministry to the apostles. In the previous chapter, they put their stick out so that Peter's shadow

might fall on the stick, and they might be healed. Now it is Stephen, and God is saying that the privilege of service is in direct proportion to your obedience, your submission to your faith, and that you where you are have the privilege of being everything God would make anyone. How strange it should be that some should say, Well I did not have the privilege of college education, or, I did not have the privilege of Bible School education, or I was saved late in life, or I am a layman, or any other excuse. My friend, you are just as holy as you want to be today. You are just as Spiritual as you want to be, and you are just as useful as you want to be. There is no limit to your spirituality imposed because of your station, your nation, or your rank. There is no limitation at all. Anything that God has done for anyone He is prepared to do for you. God has no stepchildren. He is quite willing to meet you, and to satisfy your heart, equip you, and use you.

For with this text before us, we have eliminated once and for all sacred hierarchy in the fellowship, and we have opened the door saying that the least among us may be the greatest in terms of God's willingness to use you. The best remembered person in this fellowship for years and years and years, whose testimony encircled the globe, was a washerwoman by the name of Sophie that loved the Lord Jesus Christ supremely, and was prepared to bring to Him all that He had given to her in utter abandonment to Him.

So what we find is this, there is a fellowship in service. You are needed. You are important. God's work will fine or fall in the local assembly upon your obedience. Your being disgruntled, and your murmuring and complaining can be the reason why everything has to stop. But on the same token, your abandonment, and your submission, and your yieldedness can turn you into a vessel and an instrument that can be used in unmeasured manner to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Oh, the wonderful privilege of being part of the Body of Christ and part of a local body of believers. Fellowship in service. What is this? A complete abandonment to the Head that as members one of another we recognize the right of the Head to use each member in the way, the manner, the place, and the degree that He desires. Oh, that God might give to us understanding of what it is to have sharing, to have participation, to have koinonia, to have fellowship in service.

As we come now to the Table of the Lord, can it be that you are saying as you take the Bread, and as you lift the Cup, that the whole purpose of my heart this morning is to let the Cross go through all ambitions, and plans, and place. I want only God's will for my life. If this could be the purpose of our hearts, expressed as we come to the Table of the Lord, here to take of the emblem of His death, His poured out life, His given body, and then you are preparing yourself spiritually to find your place in the Body of Christ.

Shall we bow our hearts together in prayer? Our Father, we thank and praise Thee that Thou hast given us principles, explicit, clear, simple principles. We know that problems are allowed of Thee, because they will be the means, the wedge, and the lever to drive us into principles. We know that the solution always is to fulfill the mind and will of Christ. We know, our Father, that Thou hast place, and point, and purpose for every life. And so we would ask Thee that from what we have learned today there might come a new submission, a new abandonment, a new surrender to our hearts as we tell the Head of the Church, our Lord Jesus, that we are prepared to be what He wants us to be. If there be those among us, Lord, that are to fulfill ministries as elders and as deacons, some as teachers, each in our place, each with our ministry, some with the gift of helps and administrations, and exhortations, help us to find our place and fill it, filled with Thy Spirit, equipped to serve Thee. Bind our hearts now into this unity of Fellowship in Service. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

* Reference such as: Delivered at The Gospel Tabernacle Church, New York City on Sunday Morning, November 4, 1962 by Paris W. Reidhead, Pastor.