

# ***They Watch Over Your Souls IV***

A teenager came home after driving his dad's new car for the very first time.

He enters the front door of the house and makes his way downstairs to the den finding his dad relaxing in the recliner. "I've got some good news and some bad news," he announced to his dad. "Which one do you wanna hear first?"

"Hey, let's start off with the good news," his father replied.

"Well, the good news is...the air bag works."

I, guess, sometimes, good news isn't really good news. But one thing's for sure. When it comes to the Good News in the Word of God...Good news is REALLY GOOD NEWS!!! Right?

Let us pray:

Let's turn to Acts chapter 6, verse 1...we're continuing our series on elders and eldership, and as you turn to Acts chapter 6, let me give a bit of historical and cultural background to the scenario we'll be reading and how it affected the lives of different groups of people...

## **Cultural Impact on the Apostle/Elder**

The Old Testament passages had been written down and were known to the Jews who went to synagogue to hear them read, but as of this point in history, in Acts 6, no New Testament passages had been written down yet. There was no Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts was being lived out. There was no Romans, 1 & 2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians. There was no 1 & 2nd Thessalonians, 1 & 2nd Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2nd Peter, 1 & 2nd & 3rd John, Jude or Revelation.

Thus, a church was birthed in Acts chapter 2 and was in need of the milk of teaching and exhortation...a church that was growing, and these believers were continually devoting themselves to the apostles/elders teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. Now, just imagine the difficulty of not having the New Testament Scriptures that we have today, and the apostle/elders are limited to having only the Old Testament passages to use in explaining who Jesus was and is, and teaching about the Kingdom of God.

The apostle/elders devoted themselves to seeking the Holy Spirit and hearing from God, out of great responsibility and necessity because there were thousands of new believers that needed to understand their faith and walk in their newfound faith, and have their faith grounded in the Scriptures. Imagine the tremendous responsibility upon the shoulders of these apostle/elders to equip these brand new saints in the faith...not only are they facing this tremendous responsibility of watching over the souls of their sheep, but they also are suffering from the persecution that had come to them from the Pharisees, scribes and Sadducees for following Christ. Not only are they watching over their sheep, and being persecuted for doing so, but these apostle/elders are moving in uncharted waters. Before Jesus ascended to heaven, for 3 years, the apostles could simply follow this Jesus, Spirit-led,

Messiah guy, who had skin on. But now, they were being led by the Holy Spirit themselves....no one with skin on to lead the way. Just the Old Testament scriptures and a soft gentle whisper in their hearts providing the direction they needed to offer this growing congregation...

Okay, now, let's look at another aspect of the historical situation...

### **Jewish Culture**

Long before the accounts recorded in this passage we'll be reading there was an animosity that had developed between Hellenistic Jews and native Jews. Most native Jews felt that learning and utilizing the Greek language was a compromise of their religious tradition. They didn't appreciate Jews listening to the Hebrew Scriptures that had been translated into Greek. And so out of this belief flowed a judgment in their hearts towards the Jews who learned and spoke Greek, and adopted some of their customs and cultures, as well. These Jews that learned the Greek language and culture were called **Hellenistic Jews**. Well, because of the judgment that the native Jews had towards the Hellenistic Jews, some of the Hellenistic Jews became spiteful towards the native Jews. So there were these 2 groups of Jews that were very, very hostile to one another.

Acts 6:1-7 1 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, **a complaint arose** on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, **because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.** 2 So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "**It is not desirable for us to neglect** the word of God in order **to serve** tables. 3 "Therefore, brethren, **select from among you** seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, **whom we may put in charge** of this task. 4 "But **we will devote ourselves** to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and **they chose** Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. 6 And **these they brought before the apostles**; and **after praying, they laid their hands on them.** 7 **The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.** NASU

## **I. Disorder, in any Community, is a Recipe for People Getting Hurt**

Acts 6:1-2 1 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, **a complaint arose** on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, **because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.**

What do I mean when I say "**disorder in any community**"? Disorder at the workplace. Disorder at the school. Disorder at the church. Disorder in the family. Wives wearing the pants in the family. Husbands not taking up the role of leadership in the home. Students assuming authority in the classroom. Teachers not establishing order in the class. Employees trying to be the supervisor or the manager. Managers and supervisors not providing strong leadership in the workplace. And here, a large congregation of believers and no one has been specifically identified to have the responsibility to serve food to needy

widows.

***\*Disorder here = Lack of well-defined, clearcut "Ministry Responsibilities"***

Now, simply because there were no defined roles or offices within this growing group of new believers, the Hellenistic widows were being wounded in their hearts by being overlooked by the body of Christ. Since no one really understood who's responsibility it should be to take care of these widows, it opened the door for the enemy to come in and create division in the body of Christ. No one really knew what their responsibility was or what was expected of them and so ***vital, life-affecting tasks were being left undone.***

The apostle/elders were not only seeking the Lord in prayer and ministering the word, they were getting overwhelmed to the point that people needing food weren't receiving the food they needed. Most of the apostles had families of their own to minister to as well and there were some able bodied, mature believers that had not been identified & recruited yet to minister to the body of Christ in a very practical and much needed way.

As a result, the widows who were Hellenistic Jews, who needed food to survive, were not receiving the food they needed. And now some leaders among the Hellenistic Jews complained to the apostles about their widows being neglected. As a group grows numerically it becomes more and more important for each group member to know without a shadow of a doubt what they are responsible for. The Bible is the best source for discovering that...listen to some of the horrible consequences resulting from people not fulfilling their responsibilities.

***Bystander Effect***

On March 13, 1964, a New York street, Kitty Genovese, a young woman from Queens was ***slowly and brutally stabbed to death.*** Her assailant chased her and attacked her three times on Austin Street in Kew Gardens. At least thirty-eight of her neighbors witnessed the attack and heard her screams. In the course of the 90-minute episode, her attacker was actually frightened away, then he returned to finish her off. Yet not once during that period did any neighbor assist her, or even telephone the police.

The implications of this tragic event shocked America, and it stimulated two young psychologists, Darly and Latane, to study the conditions under which people are or are not willing to help others in a crisis. In essence, they concluded that responsibility is diffused, or spread thinly.

The more people present in a crisis situation, the less likely it is that any one of them will offer help. This is popularly called the "bystander effect." (In the actual experiment, when one bystander was present, 85 percent offered help. When two were present, 62 percent offered help. When five were present, then it decreased to 31 percent.)

***A Rape Witnessed, A Rape Ignored***

article in the *Pioneer Press*, a Twin Cities newspaper, on Thursday, August 23rd

***As many as 10 people*** witnessed a man raping and beating a woman early Tuesday (Aug 23rd) in the hallway of a St. Paul, MN apartment building, police said Wednesday.

No one stopped it.

At one point, the 26-year-old victim knocked on a door, yelling for the occupants to call police. A man inside told police he didn't open the door or look out, though he said he called police. Police found no record of the call, according to an affidavit for a search warrant filed in Ramsey County District Court.

St. Paul police arrested Rage Ibrahim, 25, on suspicion of criminal sexual conduct Tuesday. He hasn't been charged.

"It was horrifying. I can't describe how it sent chills up my back, watching this woman getting assaulted and people turning their backs and doing nothing," said St. Paul police Cmdr. Shari Gray, who oversees the department's sex crimes unit.

She saw surveillance video that recorded the attack in the Highwood neighborhood. As the woman screamed, five to 10 people - men and women - peeked out their apartment doors to see what was happening or started walking down the hallway and retreated after witnessing the assault, Gray said.

When someone did call police to 371 S. Winthrop Ave., the caller reported drunken people in a hallway, not a violent assault, so the 911 dispatcher classified it as a "disturbance," Gray said.

The first 911 call came at 2:43 a.m. Tuesday, and police arrived at 3:25 a.m., she said. "That was a significant time lapse, but it would have been cut down significantly" had the caller described the attack differently, Gray said.

### **Crime Goes Up When Our Sense of Community Goes Down**

article in the *Niagara Falls Review* Monday, August 13th

Albertans were shocked last weekend to see news stories about a woman who was murdered in downtown Calgary after her cries for help were ignored.

Tara Ann Langraf, 37, was sexually assaulted and walked through a park, leaving a trail of blood behind her before she fell and died on an inner-city street. Her battered, partially clothed body was found early Sunday morning.

A Calgary homicide detective said her pleas for help were ignored. Early police reports said **at least three people had heard** but not acted upon Langrafs calls for assistance.

## **II. Apostles/Elders are Called to: Recognize an Opportunity, Receive Godly Wisdom for the Congregation, & Provide Clear Direction for the Congregation**

Acts 6:2-3 2 So ***the twelve summoned the congregation*** of the disciples and said, "***It is not desirable for us to neglect*** the word of God in order ***to serve*** tables. 3 "Therefore, brethren, ***select from among you*** seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom...

Some might look at these wounded, overlooked Hellenistic widows and see **a problem**.

To be honest with you, I don't see a problem here. Because I truly believe...people of faith don't see problems, they see opportunities. This situation that existed with the unfed widows was an opportunity for God to reveal Himself through His body as caring, an opportunity for God to reveal His wisdom through the leadership, an opportunity for God to reveal the order He desires in His church...**opportunity, opportunity, opportunity!**

Here's something that should intrigue you. Do a word study on the word, "problem". You know what? I challenge you to look in the Bible and look for the word, "problem"...you won't find it in the New Testament, and it exists only twice in the Old Testament in one book, in the same paragraph, where Daniel is described twice as one able to solve difficult problems.

Listen to this lesson...you should know this...that **the world has problems, but the world's problems are the Church's opportunity to bring Christ to their world!**

Notice how the twelve apostle/elders **recognized an opportunity for members of the congregation to utilize their spiritual gift**, to activate them and release them to minister to the vital needs of the desperate Hellenistic Jewish widows in their church family. Being a people that prayed continually, these apostle/elders received wisdom from God and then they gave clear direction to this group of Jesus followers, so that they knew what actions and tasks needed to be accomplished for the needs of the congregation to be met.

Notice how this clear direction included **providing a list of qualifications for the folks in the congregation to look for when identifying those that would be presented to the elders as prospective ministers to the needs of the widows**, they then encouraged the congregation to choose a specific number of people that met the qualifications to accomplish the mission of feeding the widows. The apostle/elders effectively taught the congregation how to mine for gold among themselves. What do I mean mine for gold....listen to this...

### **Andrew Carnegie**

At one time Andrew Carnegie was the wealthiest man in America. He came to America from his native Scotland when he was a small boy, did a variety of odd jobs, and eventually ended up as the largest steel manufacturer in the United States. Later in his life he gave away most of his riches to fund libraries, schools and universities in the U.S., Scotland and in other nations around the world. At one time he had forty-three millionaires working for him. In those days a millionaire was a rare person; conservatively speaking, a million dollars in his day would be equivalent to at least twenty million dollars today.

One day, a reporter asked Mr. Carnegie how he had pulled off the hiring of forty-three millionaires. Carnegie responded to the reporter that those men had not been millionaires when they **started** working for him but **had become** millionaires, as a result.

The reporter's next question was, "How did you develop these men to become so valuable to you that you have paid them this much money?" Carnegie replied that men are developed the same way gold is mined. When gold is mined, several tons of dirt must be moved to get an ounce of gold; but one doesn't go into the mine looking for dirt—one goes in looking for the gold.

No wonder on the epitaph on Carnegie's tomb read: **"Here lies a man who knew how to enlist in his service better men than himself."**

### **III. Godly Direction for a Congregation is Given to the Elders which is why they are Called to Devote Themselves to Seeking God for it in Prayer**

Acts 6:4 "But *we will devote ourselves* to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

The 12 apostle/elders recognized that *they were called to devote their lives to hearing the voice of God in prayer, so that they could minister the Word of God to the congregation*. This was their responsibility and their responsibility alone, before God, to serve and minister to the congregation in that way. These elders were ordained by God to provide Godly teaching and exhortation, and to communicate the direction of the Lord for the congregation as a whole, as well as, to equip these saints in the Word in such a way as to enable them to minister.

If these elders neglected their time in hearing God's voice in prayer and ministering the word of God to the congregation, each person in the congregation would suffer. Or, if the congregation didn't allow the apostle/elders to lead them, it would be like the congregation not having the very tool to provide congregational direction that God put in their hands for just that specific purpose....kinda like...

#### **Old Sailor**

An old sailor who repeatedly got lost at sea, so his friends gave him a compass and urged him to use it. The next time he went out in his boat, he followed their advice and took the compass with him. But as usual he became hopelessly confused and was unable to find land. Finally he was rescued by his friends.

Disgusted and impatient with him, they asked, "Why didn't you use that compass we gave you? You could have saved us a lot of trouble!" The sailor responded, "I didn't dare to! I wanted to go north, but as hard as I tried to make the needle aim in that direction, it just kept on pointing southeast."

That old sailor was so certain he knew which way was north that he stubbornly tried to force his own personal persuasion on his compass. Unable to do so, he tossed it aside as worthless and failed to benefit from the guidance it offered.

What's so important about these apostle/elders devoting themselves to seeking a word from the Holy Spirit? Because the Bible says in Romans 10:17, that faith comes from hearing the Word of God. So without the Word being preached, the people's faith would take such a severe hit that they would be overcome with doubt, unbelief, and doublemindedness. And that would result in their families breaking down, their livelihoods suffering, their personal health suffering and their social communities dividing and breaking up. Not only that, but the congregation as a unit, would head in the wrong direction and suffer from that, as well.

The same is true today. If the elders of this church, your elders, do not devote themselves to hearing the voice of God and ministering congregational direction, teaching and exhortation of the Word, your lives will suffer for it. And likewise, if you do not allow elders to provide congregational direction and teaching and exhortation for your life, your lives will be the worst

for it.

The body of Christ is desperately in need for elders who are absolutely devoted to hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit and providing the leadership required to equip our congregations to impact our communities with the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ. There is a tremendous vacuum of leadership throughout the world....what an opportunity lies before you, to step into this leadership vacuum! Listen to this editorial written about the leadership vacuum in South Africa, in the South African newspaper, *The Mercury*...

*What we need are people who are not afraid to lead. We need...more people...who are prepared to lead by example, to see what is actually happening on the ground, to follow their convictions and show us the way forward. We need leaders who will inspire us to believe when all are faltering around us. To give us hope and to keep us motivated in the pursuit of a better life for all.*