



WORD ALONE CONFERENCE

APRIL 28, 2002

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DISCIPLESHIP: CALL TO RENEWAL

ACTS 6:1-7

I'd like to share with you some conversation based on a remarkable text in the sixth chapter of the book of Acts. If you have your Bibles I'd like to invite you to take them out. The sixth chapter of the book of Acts, verses one through seven. I'd like to read it to you, and then I'm going to weave it within this outline and the remarks I'd like to share with you this evening. What a privilege and pleasure it is to be a part of what God's Holy Spirit is doing.

I heard the drum beats, felt the drum beat, a couple times in worship. I just stopped singing so I could hear you. The Holy Spirit is orchestrating renewal and wherever and whenever that happens, glory be! Glory be! The glory of Jesus Christ.

Acts 6:1-7. "Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."

Let's pray: Almighty God pour out your Spirit on your people gathered here, gathered

in the four corners of the earth declaring your name in the strength of the word of God in languages we can't even imagine. Create your church again and again. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Firefighters had been dropped off well in front of the advancing flames. It was a forest fire that was raging in Montana many years ago. They were outfitted with backpacks. They carried rubber boots, shovels, axes and supplies all on their back. It was quite a wait. They were dropped off, these smokejumpers, and they began to deploy along a line and dig when suddenly the winds began to change. Now if you know anything about forest fires, the heat generates winds that are unexpected. The winds took off, and the smokejumpers looked up and saw the advancing wall of flame. They panicked, turned and looked to the far ridge and began to flee, running for their lives. They had been taught, had been drummed into them, not to let go of the backpack or any of the equipment, so they ran with all of this stuff on their back toward that ridge. The crew chief saw they weren't going to make it. So he did something that had never been done before, he stopped, took off his backpack, took out some matches and set the grasslands afire in front of him. The winds took it and moved that fire. Then he stepped into the middle of that burnt out section and called for his crew to come and join him, because he thought the flames would go around. Well, it had never been done before. The crew heard him call to them, saw the flames coming and then looked at that far ridge and began to run again. The crew chief stood in the safety of that burned out section. The fire went all around him, and he stood firm. Tragically, only one of the other members of that crew survived. They couldn't think about doing things differently. They didn't know where to stand.

Truth of the matter is, from crisis comes renewal. There are many sources of crisis. In this interesting text, for example, we see what precipitates the action in the sixth chapter of the book of Acts is a crisis. Let me remind you of it: "Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food." There was a crisis in the early church, but please notice this crisis had positive causes. The church was growing. The church was expanding; these positive causes put pressure on the church and created difficulty that hadn't been anticipated. So there was grumbling in the church of Jesus Christ. Doesn't happen today, but it happened very early.

The first thing I want to share with you is that when there is a crisis, it's not always because of negative causes. Your outline has positive causes first and negative causes second. The truth of the matter is that often God uses a crisis to create a place to stand. Positive causes here are that the distribution of food, the ongoing daily business of the church, was beginning to get stuck. The infrastructure wasn't in place. Now we live in a time of crisis. I know I don't need to convince you of that, but I'm going to share some data with you. It's not on your outline; it's what I like to call a "freebie."

Alan Klaas did a study two and a half years ago of clergy in the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod. Many of you as pastors have seen the study. He found twenty percent of clergy were in the advanced stages of burnout, twenty percent were well on their way

to the advanced stages of burnout, only thirty percent loved their work and thirty percent were ambivalent. That is, it didn't just matter what time of the day or the hour you asked them how they felt about their business, their work, most of us pastors get that, it's that they weren't sure that they were fulfilling their calling. Thirty percent ambivalent, twenty percent moving to burnout quickly and twenty percent in the advanced stages of burnout. He then went and said, "What would happen if things just remained the same?" In 1987 the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod had sixty seven hundred pastors. If things remained the same, in the year 2017, that's fifteen years from now, they will have slightly two thousand. I talked with Alan after the study was published. He shared with me that this data holds true across nine denominations, the ELCA is one of them. How many of you are aware that of available calls for pastors graduating from seminary roughly one out of three was filled? Thirty five percent of calls available last year were filled. Now there's a crisis in the church! By the way, you ought to know that this is across the evangelical spectrum as well. I have other data we're not going to go into, but it shows that it's a crisis in the church. I can't stand here tonight and talk to you about this crisis without thinking about the Roman Catholic Church. Are they in a crisis or what? My prayer is they will make decisions that will help that church rise from the ashes.

The negative causes of our crisis, if you will, lack of leadership and unwillingness to talk about Jesus. Well, what it takes is courage. Courage as a spiritual resource. I had a young man come who is part of a different denomination. He came and was planning a church. He had heard about our ministry, he had worshiped with us and wanted some time. We spent forty-five minutes, at the end of which, he said, "Well, Mike, could you tell me two or three reasons why ministries most often fail?" I think there are two. The first is lack of focus. We try and do everything all the time. Part of what you folks are about is focus, knowing where you can stand. The second reason is related to the first; lack of courage on the part of leaders to keep focus. Can you hear the drum beat? If you know where to stand, stand there and be of courage.

Renewal as invitation to spiritual growth is what I really want to talk about tonight. My passion is for the growing of God's people deep, because I believe, if we grow deep we can grow out. The first thing I want to share with you is when we think about renewal. Some of the suggestions have been reform, renew and reflect.

Renewal is the first. I want to look up and see the sources. Whatever the sources of the renewal are, let me share with you, it's always about the Holy Spirit acting in the crucible of history. Take a look around here. I hope you have a chance to connect with one another. We have people from Washington State. That's my home state. I was born and raised in eastern Washington. I sat on the top of Grand Coulee Dam once as a little boy. All I knew is that it was a long way down there. God is doing something. Last weekend it was my privilege to speak on discipleship before the Northern Texas, Northern Louisiana Synod Assembly. Now, I shared this with Bishop Kevin Kanouse, his staff and some pastors there. If anybody had asked me ahead of time, "Is God's Spirit causing renewal in Northern Texas and Northern Louisiana?" I would have said, "I don't think so." They were on fire! The source of renewal is always the Holy Spirit

acting in the crucible of history. That's what is going on in Acts 6.

You won't get it by simply thinking outside the box, you see, God wants you and me to redraw the box. Redraw the box so it includes and welcomes those whom the Holy Spirit would send, those whom the Holy Spirit would stir up, and that's exactly what happens here in the sixth chapter of Acts.

Redraw the box to be as big as the promises of God. When the church draws the box smaller than the promises of God, the Holy Spirit, like the fire that came upon that crew chief, simply goes around the box. There is a crucible happening here, there is a crisis. We've got early disciples and members of the early church complaining things aren't going well at the church. Listen to what happens, "And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables.'" Well that's interesting. We've got a group of pastors who said, "No, this isn't our job. Our job is to focus on prayer and the word of God. No, we need to be praying, and we need to be about the word alone." What I find fascinating about this text is how in the midst of a crisis born out of intense growth the twelve have such a non-anxious response. You know why? They knew who they were. If you and I are going to be a part of the renewal of God's church, we need to know who we are.

It's a marvelous story, one of my favorites, about a man who refereed and umpired for a living. After having refereed a basketball game, apparently at the end of that season, he came across the Colorado Mountains and the snow began to fall. He put the pedal to the metal and took off. He wanted to get home before the snow really got him caught, and no sooner had he done that than he got nailed. The radar, the state patrolman was right there, lights flashing, and pulled him over. He sat there. The state patrolman came and asked for his license. He handed his license and he said, "You know officer, I know I was speeding. I'm a referee. I umpire for a living. I put a lot of miles on my automobile every year. If you would be kind enough just to give me a warning, rather than a ticket, I would appreciate it. If you give me a ticket, well, with all the miles I put on my car, my insurance is going to go sky high." The state patrolman just looked up at him and said, "Tell it to the judge." and he wrote him the ticket. Well, it was a few weeks later, and this man was umpiring a softball game. The batter came to the plate to bat. He looked up and the batter looked at him, and there was an instant recognition. It was the state patrolman who had given him the ticket. The patrolman recognized him. The umpire recognized the patrolman. The patrolman stepped into the batter's box, hit his cleats (there wasn't any dirt on them, but he had to get loosened up) and then, in order to resolve the situation, he said, "Well, how did it go with the judge?" The umpire put the mask back on and said simply, "Swing at everything."

If you know who we are, you know we are Christ's church. The church doesn't belong to you or me; it doesn't belong to this or that bishop. With all due respect, it belongs to Jesus Christ. If we're Christ's Church, it's bigger than all of us, isn't it? Anyone that wants to seek to stop the renewing action of God's Holy Spirit, we can just prayerfully say, "Swing at everything." You can't stop it. Finke and Stark, in their great volume, THE CHURCHING OF AMERICA, undid a number of assumptions about Christian

renewal in the United States. (The CHURCHING OF AMERICA 1776-1990 Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy, Finke, Roger and Rodney Stark, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1992) They showed that whenever renewal got blocked in one group of Christians, it simply began to pop up all over the place. Can you hear the drum? You can't stop the renewing of God's Holy Spirit and God's church.

It reminds me of Luther's comment on the Lord's Prayer when we pray, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Luther says we don't pray that God's will will be done. Of course it will be done. We pray that it will include us. Here is the deal. Renewal is happening. The question is, will we be a part of it? Will we be included in the work of God? I think that's incredible Christian confidence for you and me. The one thing I want to share with you tonight, if you don't hear anything else, is that you can be confident about this renewal that God is doing. That you are, at least tonight, invited into that and encouraged to continue in what you are already doing, and nothing can stop it. Jesus Christ said, "not even the gates of hell will prevail against my church." Incredible! God is at work. That's the first place of confidence we have; this isn't about us.

I told Jaynan (Clark Egland) that I really appreciated her sermon, and she said, "God is good." Indeed. It's God's work.

Secondly, I want to ask you to be open. Be open to redrawing the box to include where God is going to take God's church. That's what comes to the power of call. You see, the twelve knew that they didn't have to get upset about this, because it didn't threaten their call. They were called by Jesus Christ to be in prayer and to serve the word. The word, Scripture in which we meet the living word, Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified and Risen One. The church today only has one source of authority before the world. I don't mean internally. But if we're going to stand before the world, we need to know our source of authority. It's only Scripture, and if you didn't know that, surely the news in the Roman Catholic Church over the past few weeks would make that clear. No one is going to assume that just because you and I are in a church, we have integrity or authority. Word alone. Scripture.

I have a marvelous thing! I love to collect old Bibles, and this is one I collected. I was in Stillwater, one of the great antique places. I went in, and I looked and found this. It was published in 1890. What I really like about this little book is it says, "The new testament of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, translated out of the original Greek and with a former translation, diligently compared and revised by his majesty's special command (King James version), approved to be read in churches." The owner of this Bible took his or her pen and wrote underneath that and added, "and home." Approved to be read in churches and at home. At Prince of Peace, one of the things we lift up is the power of daily living in God's word. We have what are called the Marks of Discipleship; they are practices of faith. One of them is praying daily, another is reading the Bible daily, worshiping weekly, serving in the ministry and in the community, in the world and the last, being in relationship for spiritual growth and giving. And, yes, we teach a tithe. We commit to one another that we are going to read

God's word daily. Not just as a pastor to prepare for a Bible study or a sermon, but for my own spiritual growth. Pastors, how many of us were called to this incredible ministry that we share because God had awakened within us a hunger that the Word of God fills?

One of the real dangers of being a pastor in the church is that our business can overcome our faith. Do you read the Bible just for you? You can't be on staff at Prince of Peace unless you're willing to commit to that. I can't go to bed at night without thinking, "Have I read the Bible just for me?" It's a personal thing. Sooner or later, Pastors, you and I are going to play the role of John the Baptist. We're going to step off the stage of our ministry and by God's grace say, "There is one greater than I that comes after me." Then it would be us, the Savior of the world, the power of the Holy Spirit in the word, but it has corporate authority as well. We say that the Bible is the source and norm. The source and norm of all we do. It's essential. Now, one of the things I found about this was interesting. They said we can't do this because it's not what we're called to. I'd like to simply lift up that renewal, discipleship renewal, can't be ours unless we can differentiate between role and value. You see, role is what you do; value is whose you are. No one is valued more before the throne of God than anyone else is. Your role, my role will change. My value is as sure as the promises of God.

We have a Growing Deeper Bible Study that I have the privilege of leading most of the time on Monday night. After one of those, Sharon came up to me. She was wearing a caftan, a turban, because she was undergoing chemotherapy treatments. Her husband, Dale, a good friend, was undergoing chemotherapy treatments for leukemia. She was feeling pretty good. Dale was home and not well at all. So, she came up, and I hugged her. She started crying, and I said, "How are you doing?"

She said, "Well, I'm doing OK. It's Dale; his numbers are way down, so I just want you to pray with me."

I told her I would do that as she had so touched my heart. I don't get to make many house calls and I said, "Sharon, why don't you let me come and pray with and anoint you and Dale with oil. We can pray for God's healing presence."

She said, "Oh, Pastor Mike, that would be great."

I said, "What night this week would work?"

"Well," she said, "Wednesday night won't work."

I said, "Oh, why is that?"

She said, "Wednesday night we have the prayer team from Prince of Peace coming over, and they're going to anoint us with oil and pray for us."

I said, "Sharon, you don't need me; you've got the prayers of God's people."

The difference between your role and your value, a discipleship community is created when we recognize that our value is set in eternity and the roles change as God calls us and equips us. That's what they did here. "Therefore friends select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the spirit and wisdom whom we may appoint to this task while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to the serving of God's word." That's it. They turned them loose. But notice it wasn't just anything and anybody, seven of good standing. "Seven of good standing, full of the spirit and of wisdom." In other words, they had a shared commitment. A shared commitment to the church of Jesus Christ, to the ministry of God's word.

Secondly, they had a common service; they were in mission before the world. Thirdly, they were empowered people. What happened was the twelve turned them loose. God's calling different ones with different gifts and turning them loose. The renewal of the church today takes us back to a great reformation principle. It's called the priesthood of all believers. I want to ask you a question. Who's responsible in your congregation for the pastoral care of your congregation? Everyone! Most pastors here would agree with me. There are few things that cause me as much personal pain as to know that someone has been in tragedy or difficulty and no one called them, no one cared. This doesn't happen in a discipleship community where everybody takes responsibility to reach out and care. It energized the church. Listen to what happened. "What they said pleased the whole community and they chose. These stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them." The church exploded. It was a renewed church. Listen to what happened in verse 7. "The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem and even the clergy became excited." Well, that's a rough translation of the Greek here. The ministry belongs to all. In discipleship communities we understand everyone is a follower of Jesus Christ, everyone practices the faith and engages the world in the name of Jesus Christ. All are involved.

Dr. David Messner, CEO of Park Nicollet, one of the largest health providers in the twin city metropolitan area, gave an address, and he said, "There is no hierarchy in medicine today."

Do we have any physicians or nurses here? You think the church is in crisis; health care is in crisis. There is no hierarchy anymore. He went on to say, "Knowledge is available to anyone with the time to pursue it. It's not uncommon for patients to come into an examination room with a stack of paper they've gotten off the Internet that talks about their diagnosis and possible treatment plans. They have more information than the physician has coming in."

There is no hierarchy in medicine. So it's about gifts not credentials. How has God gifted you? Are you turning loose the gifts of God? You see, I don't believe anyone is here just because it worked with your schedule. The Holy Spirit called you here, planted you in that chair, and is helping you stay awake tonight. What are your gifts?

Here is the deal. If you are gifted, anyone else in the church of the Savior Jesus is

gifted. Let's turn it inside out and by the power of the Holy Spirit set us loose.

I had a remarkable invitation; I think I was one of three or four across the country. I got the letter. It was addressed to me personally, and it said Michael W. Foss. I opened it up. It said we want you to rejoin, to be another member, and they were offering an incredible deal. If I, Michael W. Foss, was willing to become a member I could have nine CDs for a penny, three videos for a dollar and a DVD for a dollar. The neat thing was, they went on to say, you can have all of this, and we'll never send you anything ever again. You can be a member and not do a thing. Many of us have come through a time when membership meant something. Many of us have come through a time in the church of Jesus Christ when membership meant not privilege but responsibility. The world has redefined it. At Prince of Peace, forty percent of our New Disciple's class came from people who had no church background at all. You know the question they asked? What's membership about? What do I get from it? Sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ, what in the world does that have to do with the Gospel?

So, I propose to you that we need to redefine our churches. They need to be discipleship communities. We need to move away from membership to discipleship, because disciples get both promise and the price.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer talked about grace and said it's costly. I have joined the not so exclusive, but wonderful club of being a grandparent. I had a friend who, after the birth of her first grandchild, came up to me and said, "Now I know why I had kids."

My daughter lost three babies before this one, and then we got the call. We jumped in the car, drove the three and a half hours to Des Moines, walked into the hospital room, greeted my daughter and my son-in-law and saw this beautiful little bundle that my wife received. Then, they handed little Emme to me. I just held her, and I went and sat in the rocking chair. My wife started looking at the pictures. You know they have pictures right after the birth now? These are blackmail pictures for when this daughter is seventeen. I sat in the rocking chair with Emmy, and I couldn't help myself. My thumb just kind of slipped up to her forehead, and I made the sign of the cross and said, "Emme Mikkel, you are marked with the cross of Christ, you don't belong to yourself anymore."

If you're a grandparent I'd like you to stand up. I have a question for you; it's a question I've asked myself. It's simple. If you would be willing to do anything, anything so that your grandchild or children would know Jesus Christ, you can sit down. If you wouldn't be willing to do that, you stand up. Some say we're not ready for change. We've lost three generations, the boomers, busters and Millennials. Whatever you want to call them, we've lost three generations. Grandparents, I want you to hold me accountable, because I'm going to hold you accountable. Let's find a way to bring our grandchildren to Jesus. I'm asking us to be effective not efficient. Caring for people isn't efficient, have you noticed? But, it's the only effective evangelism the Christian church has ever known. I'm asking us to consider rethinking how we do ministry so it's organic not mechanistic. So we don't have everything lined up just perfectly, so it's like an internal combustion engine that is absolutely working in time, the pistons going up

and firing. No, let's make it organic where people can be turned loose for the sake of our children and our grandchildren. Let's be relational.

I did the baptism of my granddaughter at Prince of Peace. I baptized her at the fountain of grace. I don't know why, but I lifted her high and said, "Emme, child of God, welcome to the church." It's about Jesus Christ, isn't it? It's about God's love for God's world that God so loved the world that God gave the Son for you and me. Frankly, if there is anything to call us to be a church in mission, surely that's it.

My friend Sharon, whom I told you about, died. I had the privilege of doing her funeral last week. Two nights before she died, her husband, Dale, with whom she had been married for just about thirty seven years, climbed into the hospital bed with her in the family room, put her left hand in both of his and he just held her. Sharon apparently tried to reach across her distended stomach, across that hospital bed to hold his hand, and she couldn't do it. Finally, she just held his hands with her left, and left her right hand out. Then she said, "Dale, I'm holding onto your hands with my left hand and with my right I'm holding onto Jesus."

There isn't an organization, an institution in the world that has that message except you and me. That's the promise. It's about growth in confidence in Jesus Christ internally. It's about growth externally. I don't think you can stop a church in mission from growing. You can't put a box around God's church. It's going to grow. It's about maturity, growing in the gospel, growing in God's word. You know what? It all comes down to the joy of Jesus Christ, because two nights later it was the Savior Jesus who came and took Sharon by the hand and welcomed her into forever. If that isn't worth your life and mine, nothing is.

We thank you, O God, that you renew your church. We're grateful to be a part of that. Make us disciples that we might invite others to be passionate followers of you. You've given us this gift of eternity, and you demand that we share it. Thank you. Nothing can stop your renewing. Amen.