

*Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, a complaint arose from the Hellenists against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily service. The twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not appropriate for us to forsake the word of God and serve tables. Therefore select from among you, brothers, seven men of good report, full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will continue steadfastly in prayer and in the ministry of the word." These words pleased the whole multitude. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch; whom they set before the apostles. When they had prayed, they laid their hands on them. The word of God increased and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem exceedingly. A great company of the priests were obedient to the faith. (WEB)*

When we lived in Central Arkansas, we had several tornadoes touch down very near us. They did a lot of damage to businesses, schools, and houses. I worked with a non-Christian named Denver who couldn't understand how anyone could believe in the goodness of God, given all the bad things that happen—even those caused by creation itself like the weather. He believed like the main character in the play, JB, "either God is not good or God is not God..."

When he found out that one of things destroyed was the sanctuary of a large church, he really went on a roll. "see I told you..." "God doesn't care..." "God isn't powerful enough..." "God sent the tornado because all religion is false..."

I let him go on and on—and I didn't say much. Really, I didn't have much TO say. I didn't know how to answer him. I knew that such things didn't change MY faith but I didn't know how to answer his questions.

Now that I've been to seminary and now that I have been a pastor for going on 10 years total and now that I've served as a chaplain in ICU's and in emergency rooms—well, now that I've cleaned up after hurricanes and floods and now that I've held the hands of family members—and even those who were dying—the truth is that I STILL don't know how to answer him.

Except in one little area. He kept talking about tornadoes destroying churches, but he was technically wrong. He had the wrong definition.

In this area, it isn't just tornadoes that can be a problem. We can even get hurricanes, can't we? It has happened in the past and it will probably happen again. Last week when we were looking at Arthur form, I wasn't afraid for us—for Zion Christian Church. I wasn't afraid because I know that no hurricane nor any tornado, no matter how powerful, can destroy this church.

How can I know that? Y'all may think that I have a bright red God-phone on the bedside table, but I don't. Do I think that we can pray away the storms (and onto someone else?) Have I traveled into the future and still see the church standing? No, no, and no—though one of those little red phones WOULD come in handy.

I know because I know that a church cannot be destroyed by a storm from the outside.

What about that church Denver kept talking about? Wasn't it destroyed? No, actually it wasn't. Only the building was destroyed. The church was and is alive and well. The church is the people of God, not the building. I am absolutely certain that this church, Zion Christian Church, cannot be destroyed by tornadoes or hurricanes or even fire. If something gets this building, we will find a place to meet and worship and serve. And we will rebuild, just like that church did.

Back in the beginning of the Christian religion, the young church was prodded and pushed and persecuted and attacked from the outside—but instead of being destroyed, they thrived. They didn't even HAVE buildings, but they were a powerful force for God and for the Kingdom of God.

No wind or fire or outside attacks can destroy Zion Christian Church, but it can be destroyed by a storm or a fire from the inside.

It was the same with the early church of Jerusalem. They were strong enough to withstand anything that came from the outside. Yet, as they grew and as they served, a storm started to brew inside the church. Not out of tropical air and low pressure—but out of jealousy and gossip and back-biting and discontent. There was a problem—either real or imagined—with how they were taking care of the widows and orphans and others in need. Some thought that the Greeks weren't getting their fair share.

I don't know if it was true or not. Maybe the Apostles didn't know either. There were hundreds or even thousands of people being ministered to at this point and the Apostles or ministers may not have known everything that was going on. As small as we are, I don't always know everything we are doing at Zion—nor do I need to.

I love you every one and I care about what we are doing but I also have other important responsibilities—and I'm not talking about my other work. I have the responsibility to grow in spiritual knowledge and wisdom. I have the responsibility to seek God's face always. I have responsibility to my family. I have the responsibility of looking at an ancient writing and trying to figure out that it says and even more importantly, what that means to me, to you, and to this church. I have responsibilities to the ill in this group and in this community. I mean “ill” in the physical sense, but I guess I also have responsibilities to those of you who are just plain “ill” :)

I won't go further, but I will say that my job is literally impossible if there isn't anyone there to help. It was impossible for the Apostles in Jerusalem and when the storm started brewing there was a real danger to the church.

The Apostles' response to this trouble—to this need—was to appoint others to work along side them and to administer some of the services of the church and to serve the congregation. This improved the situation and improved the weather report inside the church.

There were five reasons for the appointments and I want to look at each one briefly.

(1) They were elected to free the Apostles to spend more time in prayer and in ministry of the word of God. It wasn't so much that they were set free from “waiting tables” and serving widows and orphans as it was that they were freed to do other important things—to do their God-called jobs. They were freed to pray and study and seek God's face and to prepare themselves. If pastors are not careful, the administration part of a church will absorb all their study time and ministry time and counseling time and visiting time. The leaders were elected to free the ministers to better live up to their calling.

(2) They were elected to promote harmony in the church. This is the main reason the first servant leaders were elected—to handle problems as they came up, before they became destructive storms. They were elected so that their personal attention might promote harmony in the church. They were intended to meet the needs and eliminate the murmuring. It is God's intent that church leadership promote harmony and fellowship in the church. Many church splits, hurt feelings, and broken lives can be eliminated when church leadership realizes they have no right to participate in the problems and the murmuring. By taking a position of leadership and taking it seriously, you have given up those “rights.”

(3) They were elected to provide for the welfare of the church. In the Jerusalem church, they were to administer the welfare and feeding program for the widows and orphans. That function still exists in the church—in some form—but it has been expanded. Now it might include clearing downed trees or mowing or other kinds of community service. Personally, I believe they we should make little or no distinction between community members and church members when it comes to helping. The church and her leadership should promoted the welfare of all.

(4) They were elected so that the church might have a more effective witness. This is, to a degree, connected to the last point, “providing for the welfare of the church.” If we take care of one another and if we promote harmony and fellowship and if we take care of our neighbors—we will have a more effective witness outside these walls. This reason is more of a by-product. If we do the others—if free the ministers and if we promote harmony and if we provide for the welfare of the church and community—this one will happen. We WILL have a more effective witness. Church leadership can improve that witness by praying and by visiting and by don't God's work.

(5) They were elected to strengthen the leadership base of the church. By promoting harmony, by providing for the welfare of the church and community, and by freeing up those who ministered—by doing these things, they were strengthening the leadership of the church. They were leading by example. By word and by deed and with the hearts of servants.

The earliest elected leaders did their jobs well enough to squelch the storm that was brewing and to help the Apostles be more effective in their ministry. They were—and you still are— simply different parts of the same body of Christ, doing their part, based on their own talents and abilities.

Many of you have served before or are continuing in your service. I challenge you to focus on the work God has for you as never before.

I pray that I might be more free to honor God's calling through your efforts.

I pray that harmony in this body will be increased because of your work.

I pray that the needs of this church and community might be met better than ever before.

I pray that we, as a unified church, might have the most effective witness we have ever had before.

I pray that our sense of direction and leadership might be clearer and stronger than it ever has been—through my work, the work of your elected leadership, and through the God-ordained work of every person in this congregation.

Through God's hand and leadership and empowerment—I pray that the coming year surprises you and me and the community because of what GOD has done.