

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Growing Pains

January 15th, 2023

Acts 6:1-7

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 6.

Thus far, Luke has alerted us to two dangers that threatened the early church: Persecution from without, and scandal from within. Luke has drawn our attention to these stories to inform us of our past, but also to prepare us for our future.

This morning, we learn that in addition to those dangers, *even the health* of the church was making life complicated! Today, we're going to learn about the challenge associated with *growth*. Now, it is a glorious thing when a church grows from 120 people to 3,000 in a matter of months! Amen? It is! And yet, we're reminded in this passage that it is also WILDLY complicated! To that end, look with me now to Acts 6:1-7. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:1-7 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Our passage this morning is not particularly complicated. As the church grew seemingly overnight from 120 to 3,000, their system for providing benevolent care for widows was overrun. They couldn't keep up with the need, some vulnerable people were falling through the cracks, frustration was building, and a solution needed to be found. We'll talk later on about who the Hebrews and Hellenists were, and we'll unpack some of the underlying issues there, but the overall point of the passage is relatively straightforward: The church experienced massive growth, and that growth required the church to adjust its approach.

Now, not all churches grow from 120 to 3,000 – though some do – but whether growth is exponential or slow, all growth requires a measure of change, and change is a frightening thing. As I mentioned earlier, Luke didn't simply record these stories to inform us of our past – he wrote them to set an example for the future. So, to that end, let's make our way through the passage before us and learn how a healthy church navigates growth.

Lessons In Navigating Growth

I want to draw your attention to six lessons from this story. First, we learn that:

1. Growing churches should expect growing pains

In the same way that we have learned that we should not be surprised by persecution, and that we should not be surprised by scandal, here we are reminded that we should not be surprised by *growing pains*. Luke draws a straight line from the exponential growth of the church to the complaints that arose. He wants us to see that the two are related. Look again at verse 1:

Now in these days **when the disciples were increasing in number**, a complaint by the Hellenists arose (Acts 6:1a ESV)

So, the problem in Jerusalem with the widow support program was subsequent to and the result of the wonderful explosive growth! Which is a reminder that growth is amazing! But it is also complicated! How will the church minister faithfully to the massive number of widows who have now placed their trust in Jesus? That's a good challenge, but a challenge nonetheless.

We're going to consider their solution in a moment, but first I think it would be worth giving some thought to our own context. What growing pains might we experience in the days ahead?

Well, for starters, this congregation appears to be slowly crossing the often-discussed 200 threshold. Studies have shown that a church's culture experiences a massive shift when the regular attendance surpasses 200¹. People come to a smaller church because they appreciate the intimacy. The pastor visits every house for dinner. Everyone knows everyone's name. We call it the "small church feel" and it has been a big part of who we are. And I'm not just speculating here. When we put out the congregational surveys back when we were still a branch of Cornerstone, the **number one reason** why people were attending the Redeemer campus as opposed to the Cornerstone campus was because they liked the "smaller church feel." This has long been a treasured aspect of our DNA.

But what happens if God grows the church? Suddenly, there are faces that you can't put names to. Suddenly, the pastor can't realistically have dinner in every home. And that process – that growing pain – can be really awkward, and even painful. People can slip through the cracks. Needs can be missed. Longtime attendees can harbor a grudge against newcomers. Maybe you're already feeling some of that.

Our passage this morning reminds us that we shouldn't be surprised by growing pains.

This is worth exploring, so give me permission to camp here for a moment. I hope that we can all say that we have never set out in search of growth for growth's sake. We've never set attendance goals – we've never restructured our gatherings to be more attractational. Our goal has always been to be faithful to what God has called us to.

¹ For one example, see Tim Keller's article *Leadership and Church Size Dynamics*, <https://seniorpastorcentral.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Tim-Keller-Size-Dynamics.pdf> Accessed, January 10, 2023.

We strove for faithfulness when there were 40 of us, and when there were 80, and when there were 150, and now we're potentially in a new chapter. If God continues to grow us, how will we minister faithfully at 200? Do we eventually lock the door? Do we allow our love for "small church feel" to keep us from adapting to whatever it is that God is doing? What will faithfulness look like in the days ahead?

I suspect it will require some change. We will probably – unfortunately – make some mistakes along the way. But, like the example that we see here in Acts, let's remember that growth comes from God! He gives it when and how He pleases. And, if He chooses to give it here, let's resolve not to be surprised or unsettled by the growing pains that come with it.

The second lesson we learn here is that:

2. Good congregations communicate and good leaders listen

Gary often repeats an old German saying that goes: "I can't smell it!" Now, he says it in German with the kind of intensity that only Gary can muster, but the motto still holds true. The point of the expression is that, if you have a problem, you shouldn't assume that others will intuitively see it and solve it. If you don't say something, it may never be dealt with because "I can't smell it!" This is increasingly important as the church grows.

If these offended brothers and sisters in Jerusalem had silently allowed this to fester, it could have ripped the church in half! But they spoke up. And because they spoke up, the Apostles were afforded an opportunity to find a solution before real damage was done. Good congregations communicate.

To that end, on a practical note, thank you for filling out your congregational surveys in November! I know that it feels like a trivial thing, but it makes a world of difference for us to see the church through your lens. Every single year somebody notices something and the whole leadership team stands back and says, "How did we miss that?!" Keep talking to us, and don't feel like we only want to hear from you in November.

But we also learn here that it takes two to communicate. A congregation can raise concerns but that ultimately won't accomplish anything unless the leaders listen. I so appreciate the example that the Apostles set in this passage! When they heard the complaint, they didn't issue a statement about how the Hellenists were really the ones to blame. They didn't post a vague, passive aggressive tweet about being underappreciated. Refreshingly, there was no blame shifting, no "woe-is-me-ing", none of the responses that our sinful hearts so often gravitate towards.

They listened. They considered the complaint. They agreed with the assessment. They proposed a solution. They prayed for the new team. And then they carried on. As one commentator notes:

Leaders with the right priorities focus not on their prestige in the congregation, but on God's word... They will not be defensive, defending the status quo, but offensive, looking for creative solutions.²

I want to grow in this area. Pray for your elders – that we would model this well. And we, in turn, will pray for you – that you would feel safe to share your concerns. Because good congregations communicate, and good leaders listen.

Third, we learn here that:

3. Biblical priorities produce lasting solutions

Having received the complaint, the Apostles discern that it is valid. There is a legitimate problem, and it needs to be solved immediately! But before they brainstorm a solution, they establish their priorities. Look again at verse 2:

And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. (Acts 6:2 ESV)

Now, don't hear that the wrong way. The Apostles are not saying that they are somehow *above* the task of serving widows. In fact, up until this point, they have been the main overseers of this ministry. In chapters 4 and 5 when the church was selling their possessions to share with the

² Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 338.

needy, they were laying the money *at the disciples' feet*. The Apostles had been teaching, praying AND administrating the mercy ministries of the church.

But it was too much. As the church grew, the administration of benevolence required more focus. However, they had no more focus to give. If they chose to maintain control of this responsibility, then they would need to downsize their teaching ministry.

So they pulled back, assessed their priorities, and they determined that whatever the solution might be, it couldn't come at the expense of the teaching. A church is not a church if it is not ministering the Word of God.

Priorities matter.

If the church is like a car, then word ministry – that is, preaching, teaching, prayer, and corporate worship – is in the driver's seat. The Great Commission tells us that our charge in this life is to go and to make disciples. We do that by sharing the message of the gospel that we have received. Therefore, NOTHING should ever displace word ministry from the driver's seat.

However, I suspect that WE will face a temptation to OVERHEAR that. The Apostles did prioritize the word, but that doesn't mean that they let go of mercy ministry. They could have! They could have throw up their hands and said, "Well, then I guess the widows are out of luck because we've got a sermon to prepare!" But they didn't do that! No faithful church will ever do that! I love this quote from Amy Carmichael. I've shared it before, but it's worth repeating. She wrote:

*... one cannot save and then pitchfork souls into heaven... Souls are more or less securely fastened to bodies... and as you cannot get the souls out and deal with them separately, you have to take them both together.*³

Amen. And so, the Apostles refused to displace the ministry of the word, but they proposed a solution. They commissioned the church to set apart seven men of good repute who were full of the Spirit and of wisdom. Essentially, as one commentator summarizes:

³ Amy Carmichael as quoted by Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 241.

They were to be men of sanctified common sense.⁴

These men weren't officially "deacons" – that office didn't exist yet, and Luke never refers to them with that title – but Bible scholars often identify them as the "proto-deacons" – a general template of what would follow. As the church grew and spread, they wisely set apart an office of people who would give their focus and attention to the mercy ministry of the church – the deacons. We can trace that development back to this story in Acts 6.

The lesson in this passage is that both word AND mercy ministry are necessary in the church. And yet, one is primary. If we don't have that straight in our minds, then we will quickly find that the most urgent issue of the day will always be grabbing the steering wheel and changing our direction. But biblical priorities produce lasting solutions.

Fourth, we learn in this story that:

4. Diversity can complicate growth... but it's worth it!

I know that's a clumsy heading, but I think it faithfully captures the lesson we learn here.

Our passage this morning refers to the "Hebrews" and the "Hellenists." So, who were they? The "Hebrews" were Jews whose first language was Hebrew. They lived with fellow Hebrews and were raised in a thoroughly Jewish context. But the "Hellenists," however, were Greek speaking Jews who grew up in the Gentile – or non-Jewish – world. So, the Hellenists were Jews, but they spoke Greek, and they spent most of their lives living in a Greek culture, rather than a Hebrew culture. Some of them may not have even known how to speak Hebrew. There were *significant* cultural differences, and history suggests that there was some underlying tension between these two Jewish subcultures.⁵

Yet, within the church, there was UNITY in the diversity! The previous friction that existed between these groups had been overcome by the gospel! And that is how it should be!

⁴ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 175.

⁵ See Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 329.

But the unity was threatened when the Hellenists noticed that the Hebrew widows were receiving more support than their widows. In that moment, all the hurt from the past was likely bubbling to the surface.

The Apostles quickly recognized that this wasn't your run of the mill complaint. There were deep-rooted, cultural undercurrents behind this complaint. They wouldn't have had this issue if this were only a church for Hebrews. But it wasn't. The church was growing in diversity. That diversity was beautiful! But, as we see here, it did add an extra layer of complexity.

So, what did they do? Did they break into groups with a Hebrew church and a Hellenist church? No, the church landed on a solution that is far more beautiful and profound than most of us realize. Look again at the seven names listed in verse 5. We already observed that the seven were men of good repute, full of the Spirit and wisdom, but I want to draw your attention to one more significant detail. All seven of the men who were set apart had Greek names, meaning, all seven were Hellenists!

Why is that beautiful? Because, in the complaint, the Hellenists were essentially saying, "We're afraid that you don't value our widows the way that you do your own." That's a big deal. So, how did the church respond? They surrendered COMPLETE control of the ENTIRE widow support program and appointed seven Hellenist representatives. As one author notes:

The Hebrews in the church apparently prized unity so much that they bent over backwards to care for their Hellenist sisters - even to the point of entrusting their *own* widows to these brothers from an unfamiliar Greek culture.⁶

Why? Because it wasn't the Hebrews' church. It was Jesus' church. The congregation wanted to ensure that the Hellenists understood that they belonged too. They were willing to surrender positions of power to communicate that the church did not belong to any one particular culture.

And if twitter existed at the time, I suspect some Pharisees would be ranting about how the young church had gone "woke."

⁶ Matt Smethurst, *Deacons* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 54.

Listen: As our city grows in diversity, our church should as well. And we would be naïve to think that there won't be an added layer of complexity in that diversity. But we are reminded here that the church of Jesus Christ is not reserved for any one culture, and that we must do the work to ensure that we maintain our unity even in our diversity.

And that leads naturally into the fifth lesson which is that:

5. Growing churches need to be faithful AND flexible

This is an important lesson, and it's one that is often missed. Remember, Acts is *descriptive*, not *prescriptive* meaning – it describes how the church responded to *this* particular problem, but it doesn't mandate that we adopt the same solution for *our* particular problems. For example, if we were to walk away from this story saying, “We need to find seven Hellenist men to support the widows in Orillia” then that would be an example of missing the mark.

Well, what *is* the lesson then? One of the lessons that I believe Luke meant for us to learn from this story is that the church both *needs to be* and is *permitted to be* flexible. There was no system in place to solve this problem. The church had to leave behind an old approach and build something new to meet their pressing need. As one Bible scholar observes:

Luke's narrative here suggests that to be fully biblical is to be constantly engaged in adapting traditional methods and structures to meet existing situations, both for the sake of the welfare of the whole church and for the outreach of the gospel.⁷

That's a helpful – and a controversial – statement! “To be fully biblical is to be constantly engaged in adapting.” Now, don't hear that wrong. We're not talking about adapting new *theology* but adapting new *practice* and new *structures* to solve new *problems*. If the Apostles had dug in their heels and said, “No! This is the way we've always done this. WE oversee the administration. That's OUR job!” Then the ministry in Jerusalem would have ground to a halt.

⁷ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 331.

Sadly, the ministry in many congregations over the last 2,000 years has ground to a halt. They encountered new problems but refused to adapt. They had opportunities for gospel ministry, but they had a pastor who needed to micromanage every detail. They adopted a posture of unwavering commitment to their traditions and their systems because they falsely equated those traditions and those systems with the Bible itself! But there is more freedom in the Bible than many seem to recognize! As John Piper observes:

The New Testament shows a **stunning indifference** to the outward forms and places of worship.⁸

Listen: Where the Bible is clear, we will be clear. Amen? But where the Bible leaves room for freedom, let's recognize and celebrate God's WISDOM! One church has 60 kids, one church has 50 seniors, one church is reaching out to the Sikh community, one church has a rental facility that is only open on Friday evenings, one church has to meet in secret, and ALL of those expressions of Christ's church will face their own contextual challenges. They will need to be faithful to the gospel once for all delivered to the saints. But they will also need to be flexible as they adjust to their unique circumstances and contexts.

All that is to say, we have systems and structures in place today at Redeemer that we find to be helpful. Good! But they're not the Bible! Therefore, in the same way that the early church was willing to drop their old approach when it wasn't working, let's resolve to be willing and able to adapt if and when the need arises. Growing churches need to be faithful and flexible.

Because, as we conclude, we learn here that:

6. When the system is fixed, the Word of God increases and the congregation flourishes

The church identified the problem, restructured the system, and then, we read:

And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:7 ESV)

⁸ John Piper, *Expository Exultation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 28.

When the system was fixed, the Word of God increased and the congregation flourished!

If I could disarm you for a moment, I'm not priming the pump for a massive change that's coming down the pipeline. I didn't pick this text to soften you up for some looming announcement. This is just what's next. But my soul was helped and challenged as I meditated and studied this week.

I confess that I – like most people – struggle with change. I am predictable, and boring, and a creature of habit. I am not overly ambitious, nor do I seek after new adventures. I'm a plodder.

And, I LOVE this church! I love it the way that it is today! I suspect that many of you feel the same way, or else you probably wouldn't be here.

But, as I studied for this week, I was struck by the realization that not only are we tempted to make idols of fame, or money, or sex, but we can even make an idol of our own ideals of church.

I love “small church feel,” but what if God grows us?

I love worshipping next to my old friends, but what if God calls us to plant again?

I love the way things are, but what if it becomes clear that change is needed?

Will I plant my heels and protect my preferences even if my way of doing things has clearly been exposed as deficient?

It's good for us to wrestle with those questions now because sometimes, as we see in this passage, God overwhelms our current systems and forces us to change. If and when that day comes, let us resolve to be more committed to God's agenda than we are to our own. If and when that day comes, let us resolve to adopt a posture of faithful flexibility. If and when that day comes, let us resolve today to be willing to tell the truth, and to do the hard work of setting things right.

Because, when the system is fixed, the Word of God increases and the congregation flourishes.

Let's pray together.