

Growing Pains

Acts 6:1-7

DT- Sound leadership moves the church forward.

As we have moved through this book of Acts we have seen the church begin, and we have seen the church grow. We have seen this early church deal with opposition from the outside and opposition from the inside. Things are going well. The church is growing, but with that growth comes a challenge. Anytime a church sees measured growth there will be some sort of growing pains that come along with that. Sometimes it's a lack of staff. Sometimes it can be a lack of volunteers. Other times it might be a lack of physical space. For this early church they are about to experience their first major growing pain. Let's pray and we will see how the Apostles deal with it.

PRAY

For years I have had this wonderful luxury. I have thoroughly enjoyed this luxury. I may have enjoyed this luxury too much at times. I've probably had this luxury for well over half my life. But now this luxury of mine is under attack. Now I have to fight and scheme for this luxury. Abby doesn't really enjoy this luxury like I do so we've rarely had any issues with it, but now I have what is called a teenager. Not just a teenager but a growing teenager. Which means my luxury of eating the leftovers is under attack.

And he toys with me sometimes. He leaves the container in the fridge with one meat ball left in it, or two chicken wings. What I am supposed to do with that. The worst is when the box of pizza looks untouched, but when I go to open it all my hopes are dashed when I find it completely empty. I think he puts it back in there just to mess with me.

I may be overexaggerating a little or a lot. But the issue of the leftovers gathered for the widows in the early church was no exaggeration. There was a serious issue in the church. It was a growing pains kind of issue, but how it started really doesn't matter at this point. What matters now is how will the Apostles deal with it. It's a very different issue from the one we saw last week with Ananias and Sapphira, but it's an issue all the same, and the problem was beginning to take away from what the Apostles needed to focus on the most. It all begins with the complaint.

1. The complaint.

People in a church complaining, can you imagine such a thing. I say that jokingly but it's a good thing they came to the Apostles because this was a big deal that needed attention quickly. Here's how Luke records this complaint in Acts 6:1, "But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food."

There was a system of benevolence among the Jews where a group of men would literally go door to door and collect leftovers. It could be leftover bread, or beans, or even rice. They put that into baskets then distributed the food to each widow. The Greek speaking believers complained that the Hebrew speaking men passing out this food were not giving anything to the Greek speaking widows. That's a really big deal in a culture where you only got one meal a day. This is a serious problem. These widows are quite literally starving. This oversight was a real threat to the unity of the church.

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Perception is reality. This was creating serious disunity in the church. It was the first time this young megachurch dealt with an issue that could cause a major split, where all the sudden you have 2 churches in town instead of one. I sometimes wonder what God thinks of all the denominations we've come up with. Our movement, the Restoration Movement of Christian Churches was started with the hope of not being a denomination at all. One of the phrases we had at the beginning of the movement was "We are Christians only, but not the only Christians". The idea was that each church stand on the truth of scripture as it's own autonomous organization.

It was and still is a great movement, but even within our brotherhood of churches we have a 3-way split. There is the Christian Church, the Church of Christ, and the Disciples of Christ. The last place I served was in a town of about 20,000. There was a Church of Christ right behind our house, a Disciples of Christ in the older portion of town, and then our Christian Church which at some point had split because less than a mile away was another Christian Church called Christ's Church of Yukon.

Churches have spilt over some pretty petty things, but the complaint against this early church in Acts was a much bigger deal than the color of the walls, or the style of music; this was life and death for these widows. In fact, some have wondered if there is a hint of subtle racism here.

- A hint of subtle racism?

The Greek speaking Jews were called Hellenistic Jews. They were full blooded Jews, but they had lived in areas outside of Israel where the common language of the day, Greek, was spoken. There were probably way more Aramaic speaking Jews in this early church but there were some Greek speaking Jews as well. Perhaps there was some animosity between the two. The NIV says that these widows were overlooked, but the NLT says they were being discriminated against. Overlooking something is different than discriminating against. The main reason some people think this could be discrimination is because the word for "overlooked" or "discriminate against" in the original Greek is intense and it means it happened repeatedly.

We don't know for sure what is behind this distribution issue, but if perception is reality then the Apostles have a big problem on their hands. They might be one board meeting or congregational meeting away from a church split. Some complaints in the church are warranted. There is a major issue to deal with. There may be some disunity boiling up. And some complaints are unwarranted. They come from a heart that needs to put others first instead of themselves.

I'll never forget when we were just beginning the remodeling of this worship center. Jim Erwin pulled me and another elder aside and said "Whatever you do; build this for the next generation. Don't build it for guys like me, build it so that young people will find it inviting." Every Wednesday morning when I hear nearly 100 kids from GCA worshipping at the top of their lungs, so loud we had to stop having our devotion time on Wednesday morning, I think of what Jim said. Jim had a heart that put others first. Did the Apostles in the early church have that kind of heart? Let's see the solution they came up with.

2. The solution.

Acts 6:2-4 says, "So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, "We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program. And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility. Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word."

The Apostles came up with a brilliant solution and they kept their priorities in order. The Apostles needed to spend their time in prayer, and then preaching and teaching the Word. That's what our elders and I should be doing as well. God has called me to be a minister of the Word and prayer. If I neglect the preaching and teaching of the Word, I've failed. If I neglect to pray, I have failed.

These Apostles, who were functioning as elders, knew what they had been called to do. They knew what was most important. They understood what the highest priority was for them. They also understood this situation was a big deal. If they didn't handle it well and quickly, division and disunity was a real threat. Their plan was to delegate this issue to 7 men. Those men would handle the distribution of food. The phrase "running a food program" or some versions say "waiting tables", is the Greek word diakoneo which is where we get our English word deacon. It simply means to serve.

It wasn't that the elders did not want to serve, but they needed to serve in a specific way because that's what was best for the church. The Apostles gave them parameters for who these men should be. They must be well respected and full of the Spirit and wisdom. They needed to have a heart for this situation. If you place someone in a ministry that they don't really have a heart for things will not go well. If you're going to serve then you need to have wisdom in how to do that. You need the Spirit's help to guide you. There is no ministry in the church so small that you can just neglect the spirit or wisdom and think it will go well.

The Apostles set the qualifications and a miracle occurred; everyone liked the idea. I say that jokingly but I'm not sure it wasn't a miracle. It's hard in a church our size to get everyone to agree on something, imagine a church of 20,000+ trying to agree. Acts 6:5-6 says, "Everyone liked this idea, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (an earlier convert to the Jewish faith). These seven were presented to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them."

There's something about this list of names that is not obvious to most people reading this text. Remember it was the Greek speaking widows who were being overlooked. All 7 of these names are Greek. They were all Greek speaking men who probably had a heart for these starving widows. This church was getting ready to split over this issue and it was more important that the church be unified than the Jerusalem, Aramaic speaking Jews, win the argument and be part of the 7. The unity of the church was of most importance.

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In the last decade since we left Oklahoma I saw a growing healthy church in that area split. One of the associate ministers on staff left the church and then started his own church in a nearby area. Shortly after that the church he left closed its doors for good. I don't know that we fully realize how blessed we are to have reached 150 this last year. It is better to be wronged than divide a church. The unity of the church is more important than your personal preferences. I'm not sure there is an uglier sin to commit against the Lord than to divide one of his churches.

The Apostles knew how critical this decision was and by choosing 7 Greek men the issue was going to be handled right away. Sometimes when a person comes to you with an issue, a problem, or a legitimate complaint; the best solution might be staring you in the face. They might be the solution. Not always, they might be the problem, but in this case the Greek speaking believers who brought this issue to the Apostles attention were the same people to solve it. Romans 12:18 says, "Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone."

That's precisely what these Apostles did, and it's what we must do as well. The church met the physical needs and the spiritual needs of its people.

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We must do the same thing. The Apostles knew that if the physical needs of the church were not met and met quickly, things were going to go south. But they also knew that if they neglected their God given call to meet the spiritual needs of the church, things would begin to deteriorate spiritual as well. For the church to grow it must be unified. That unity must be sought after and kept intact at all costs. That means some of our personal preferences may have to be put aside so that unity can be achieved. So that growth can take place.

Are you willing to do what is best for the body? Thankfully the people in this early church were. The Apostles lay their hands on these 7 men and give them the authority to do the job they were called to, and through this laying on of hands there seems to be a transfer of spiritual power as well. Stephen and Philip, two of the 7, will eventually perform miracles. There is more than just authority being given to these men with the laying on of hands.

We know how important physical touch is, especially to newborns and young children. That touch creates a bond that we can't truly measure. Occasionally the elders and I will lay hands on people and pray for them. Seeing how God moved in their life after laying hands on them makes me think we should probably do more of that.

The solution has been given. The Apostles have laid their hands on them and set them apart for this ministry of mercy and then we see the result.

3. The result.

Acts 6:7 says, "So God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too."

The church is growing so rapidly now that they can't even get a good count. Luke just says that the number of believers is greatly increasing. Things are growing so fast that many Jewish priests were converted. That word "many" actually means crowds. Crowds of priests are converted. Which means what? Whole synagogues where these priests serve are being converted. No wonder they can't keep a good count. This would be like a preacher converting. You don't just get the preacher and his family, you get the whole congregation converting to Christianity.

Back in John's gospel he tells us that some of these religious leaders, some of these priests did believe in Jesus but they wouldn't admit it. John 12:42-43 says, "Many people did believe in him, however, including some of the Jewish leaders. But they wouldn't admit it for fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue. For they loved human praise more than the praise of God."

Apparently some of them changed their mind. Either they became less afraid of the Jews or God moved in such a way that they realized they can't not follow Jesus.

We use this text often to talk about deacons and how this was the first time deacons were chosen in the church, and that's true and it's the right text to refer to when talking about that but what happens here is deeper than that. The growing pains of this early church were beginning to stretch to a breaking point. Starving widows is not a good thing. If not handled well, division is almost certain. Thankfully it was handled accordingly. Sound leadership moves the church forward. It always has and it always will. John Maxwell says that "Everything rises and falls on leadership". Here in Acts the church was unified, multiplied, and magnified because of sound leadership.

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They did all they could to stay unified. That allowed them to grow so much that they aren't even counting anymore they are multiplying. Because of that God would continue to magnify this movement of His. Sound leadership moves the church forward whether it's 33AD Jerusalem or 2023 Tonganoxie. Sound leadership moves the church forward.

In some ways this message is for the 6 elders of this church. It's also a message for our deacons who serve in different ministries across this church. No doubt it applies to our paid staff whose careers are about the ministry of the Word and prayer. This message and passage is also for each member of this congregation and even for those of you who are not yet members but regular attenders. Unity of the body must be protected and maintained. Sound leadership moves the church forward.

I want to share a passage that I recently came across that has effected the way I want to lead. The passage is found in 2 Samuel 23. These are the last words of David. He describes in verse 3 how a leader ought to lead, and how that should feel for those under his watch. I looked at several translations because they each use different language to try and get across the original Hebrew text.

The NLT describes it like this:

2 Samuel 23:3, "The one who rules righteously, who rules in the fear of God, is like the light of morning at sunrise, like a morning without clouds, like the gleaming of the sun on new grass after rain."

The Message version says it like this:

2 Samuel 23:3, "Whoever governs fairly and well, who rules in the Fear-of-God, Is like first light at daybreak without a cloud in the sky, Like green grass carpeting earth, glistening under fresh rain."

If leaders in the church will lead well. If they govern fairly, justly, with righteousness, and in the fear of God; the people they lead should be able to sit under their leadership and feel protected and pastored well. They should feel like the light of morning at sunrise. Like the glistening of green grass after the rain. We all know that feeling and have had that experience haven't we. When you've woken up early and your outside just as the sun is rising and it begins to warm your skin. Then you look out over your lawn or your property and the heavy dew or rain from the night before is just glistening off the green grass. It's warm, it's comforting, it's inviting.

That's how I want people to feel who sit under my leadership. I want to serve justly, and in the fear of God so that this is the result. For you leaders in this church; this ought to be your same desire. For those of you who have placed yourself under our care, this ought to be the experience you have. I don't think David always led like this. I know that I don't always lead like this, but I will try to make this the heart of my leadership. For this to happen we all must do what Ephesians 4:3 tells us, "Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace."

That's the key. United in the Spirit. Sound leadership moves the church forward. Pray for your leaders and pray that we find unity not because we have similar interests, or similar tastes in music, or similar seasons of life; pray that we find unity because we all have the same Spirit inside us.