

"Church Growth God's Way"

Acts 6

Luke is an excellent writer and has many creative Spirit-led ways to share the growth of the early church. It's interesting to note how often Luke makes mini-reports about the growth of the church. For example:

2:41 *"So those who received the word were baptized and there were added that day about 3,000 souls." (In Jerusalem.)*

2:47 *"And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." (In Jerusalem.)*

4:4 *"Many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to about 5,000." (In Jerusalem.)*

5:14 *"More than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women."*

6:7 *So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.*

And the next major one is after Paul's conversion in Ch.9.

The growth of the early church sometimes causes believers today to suggest that 'We need to get back to the early church; the way they did it.' But they often fail to mention that we should sell our homes to meet the needs of others. And they forget that God struck down liars like Ananias and Sapphira or that false teachers like Simon Magus in Ch.9 wanted to bring the occult into the church or that the church had a major conference in Ch. 15 to discuss divisive issues. So let's not try to mimic the book of Acts, let's just learn the principles as we try to grow Jesus' church here in our context.

But the early church had its problems too. Luke is highlighting them right now. After the healing of the lame man in Ch.3 the apostles are arrested, ordered to silence this Jesus talk in Ch. 4. In Ch.5 the church is threatened by the lies of Ananias and Sapphira but God removes them through death to keep the church as pure as possible. Another arrest in Ch.5 which results in the apostles being flogged. So, its not as ideal as we make it out to be. And then we have another problem in Ch. 6

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

So God is growing His church and His church is experiencing growth pains. As great as it is to grow spiritually and numerically let's not forget,

A Growing Church Encounters Problems Within **(6:1-7)**

We usually groan and get annoyed or upset when problems occur. While we know life is full of problems we don't act like we know it by our frustration with them. But if we're honest and reflect on life's problems that God brings our way, we sometimes see that they were needed to make us aware of something we needed to address. Like here in Acts 6.

Some problems are tests that exposes needs (v.1)

Part of this is a good problem because the gospel is spreading to Greek speaking Jews. [Called Hellenists]. We read in v.9 that they even had their own Greek speaking synagogues and while many of them were proselytes to Judaism they may not have been as meticulous about Jewish laws as the Hebrew speaking Jews. So a little bit of a culture clash within the church that seems to be causing a ruffle. Back in Ch. 4 when we read that some people sold lands and homes so that the needs of the church were met. However, there must have arisen a little bit of animosity between the Greek speaking Jews who moved there from outside Israel and born in and stayed in Israel Jewish speaking Jews. The Greek speaking widows were not getting treated properly at the Food Bank.

But this problem is a test for the early church. How will they resolve it? Will they set aside their differences? Who will settle this dispute? Who's going to look after these widows? Most likely some suggested the apostles do it themselves. They are in charge. Didn't Jesus teach them to serve others when He washed their feet? I think we can infer that this was suggested by the apostles' response in v.2

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.

It's obvious some suggested they look after it for them to say 'It's not right for us to neglect our main ministry of the Word and prayer'. Not that they were incapable nor even unwilling. Here's why this problem was a test because if problems are not handled properly in a church,

Problems can be detrimental (vv.2, 4)

I like the apostles response because they were very forthright and must have said something like 'Yes, we can do it but then the ministry of the Word will suffer because that's what God has called us to do.' There's 3 options here to solve the problem.

- 1) 'Drop everything and pour our energies into the most urgent problem'. The widows must be fed! And those who prefer those kinds of ministries would be happy.
- 2) 'Forget the widows! We need to get people saved!' And the really 'spiritual' believers are happy.
- 3) Appoint spiritually mature people to serve in the areas where the needs are. Both are important. Both are spiritual because meeting the widows needs helps them not worry about food and clothing which will help set their minds at ease and focus on growing spiritually and serving others too.

So this was a test that the apostles passed and the church moved on. Why? Because the church family agreed to the

Solution – more Spirit-led disciples stepped up (vv.3, 5-6)

The apostles said we need to stay focused on the Word and prayer but this is important too. We want everyone to feel they are equal in the body of Christ. So they we need men full of the Spirit and who are wise who can make sure this gets looked after. Notice they looked for Spirit minded people – maturing believers – to distribute the food hampers. Every ministry needs Spiritually growing believers to make godly decisions about everything that takes place in God's work. The New Testament qualifications for leadership are simply signs of spiritually maturing believers. These are

the things we should all be striving toward; growing in wisdom and the Spirit through our own personal obedience. And, when called to serve step up. Serve God and others through the gifts He has given you, so that more needs are met in the body and more people are helped to grow spiritually and reached for Christ.

The 7 men chosen were all Greek Jews. A wise choice. So they removed this 'us and them' attitude that was creeping into the church between Jewish speaking and Greek speaking Jews. And the result? (v.7) *'So the Greek speaking widows and the Jewish speaking widows all had their needs met.'*

No – that's not what we read. Instead we read,

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Wasn't the problem about people getting food? Not really. The problem was, will others step up and serve in this area so that the ministry of the Word will not be hindered? Every ministry in the church works together for the glory of God so that God's joy – the gospel – reaches and grows in people's hearts. The Word spread. And it spread rapidly and it even reached a difficult people group – priests! Priests? Wait a minute, didn't Luke mention priests earlier in Acts? Yes, back in 4:1

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. ² They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. ³ They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day.

Some of these priests were probably involved in arresting the apostles earlier and now they got saved! The Word spread because other maturing believers saw that they could serve in this area so that others were free to serve in their area. Some make cookies so others can pass them out with tracks. Some pack shoeboxes so that others can deliver them with the gospel. Some support missionaries so they can share the gospel. Some rake leaves or clean up a property because someone else from our church may have a gospel contact. Some clean the church so those who need to use it use their time more wisely. Etc. All ministry is spiritual and every part has gospel and spiritually maturing purpose.

Now Luke talks about one of these seven; Stephen. Stephen didn't only just help with food. Maybe that's how he got started in ministry. However he got started, someone saw he was more gifted for speaking ministry and God filled him with Holy Spirit power to do miracles. But now we encounter another problem: not a new one. The gospel is spreading – wonderful!

But Spreading Gospel Will Clash with the Culture **(6:8-15)**

The early church was Jewish and they were preaching the gospel in Jerusalem and Judea so far. Most of the people that heard the gospel were also Jewish, and as we see in Acts that they usually went to the Synagogues and shared the message of the Messiah already came and died for them, but He (Jesus) rose from the dead and now offers forgiveness of sins. Meaning, salvation is not based on good deeds or sacrifices or how much Torah you can recite, etc. It's based solely on the grace of God which we must accept by faith. Many people struggle with that message so there's strong disagreement. But that helps us understand that

The gospel is rejected because grace is unaccepted (vv.8-10)

We live in a works/reward world. We work for a living we get paid for it. We get good marks, we get awards and better opportunities for education and jobs. We succeed at a competition we are rewarded. So, it must be the same with God. We do more good stuff than bad, we must be rewarded. That's how everything under the sun works, but not God.

God says, I require perfection. I require sinlessness. Therefore give me a sinless sacrifice. But He created a system of sacrifices that was insufficient because animal sacrifices can't pay for human sins. So, He did it Himself. He sent His Son to die in our place. That's called grace because in accepting Jesus as our Lord and Saviour by faith as payment for our sins, we are forgiven for our sins without trying to earn it. We get eternal life which we don't deserve.

Not surprisingly Stephen goes to a synagogue full of Greek-speaking Jews, shares the good news of the Messiah's offer of forgiveness and they "*rose up and argued*". If your translation doesn't have 'rose up' that's too bad because in the Greek it's the first word. It means rise up in rebellion. And argued doesn't always mean angry but here it probably did. It means to debate. The Jews rose up and debated the Torah with Stephen. But v.10 says they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. The Spirit was doing as Jesus says He'll do for all us, give us the words to say at the right time based on what we've got tucked away from reading and studying. And when they can't win an argument with us then

The messenger is attacked to silence the message (vv.11-12, 15)

So they lie about what Stephen said. That he had spoken words of blasphemy against Moses and the Law. They call the Sanhedrin, the same folks who tried the apostles twice before and now claim that Stephen

speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

Notice they secretly persuaded some men to say these things and they produced false witnesses who testified they heard Stephen say something similar to what Jesus said regarding the temple. Lying is a lot of work. They had to do it secretly, find the right /wrong people who would be willing to do it. Probably for money. And they have to find the right things to lie about which will get everybody in an uproar. So he says he's blasphemed against the temple and wants to change the customs.

Like all lies there's some bits of truth to it. But the enemy's tactics haven't changed much today. Make the messenger look bad through his character or twist his words to make people afraid. And that's really what's going on. The Jews were afraid because of the things he said. They claimed Stephen said Jesus will 'destroy the temple and change the customs Moses handed down.' The reason why the gospel clashes with our culture is because people won't accept grace and therefore attack the messenger if they can't out argue him because the gospel hit home.

The gospel is rejected because people's foundations are shaken (vv.13-14)

If you grew up being taught that your good deeds will get you to heaven, or your character will or that everyone does or that none of us go anywhere, we all cease to exist, and someone comes along and tells you from the Bible that you know what happens to people after they die and that Jesus wants to forgive you of your sins by faith, then that shakes what you've always believed. And for the

Jews at this time the foundation of their belief system was the sacrificial system in the temple and the Mosaic Law.

Stephen obviously must have quoted Jesus' words from John 2 when Jesus said,

¹⁹ Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." ²⁰ The Jews then said, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and yet You will raise it up in three days?" ²¹ But He was speaking about the temple of His body.

Jesus never said He would destroy the temple so neither would Stephen have. Jesus says when 'you' destroy this temple – referring to Himself, His body dying on the cross. The Jews always remembered this because they jeered him when He hung on the cross, 'You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in 3 days, save yourself and come down from the cross.' (Matt. 27:40). And that was the charge at His trial too, to which he never answered.

And the Mosaic customs were changing because there was no longer any need for the sacrificial system. That would have been Stephen's message. And you know this scared the religious leaders? Because v.7 says some priests were now leaving the temple to follow Jesus!! Now Stephen's going to defend himself in Ch. 7 and it won't end well but we'll see how God is going to use even Stephen's death to grow his church.

We don't like problems in the church and we don't like clashes with our culture but they are inevitable. If we're all sinners saved by grace and needing to grow gracefully, sometimes we'll have our own problems. But God sometimes uses our healing and reconciliation to make us stronger much like a broken bone that heals properly can be stronger than it was.

And as we grow numerically, we'll encounter needs and issues we haven't had to discuss. God uses these to mature us and raise up our spiritual commitment level too. This is why we need to grow spiritually so we can be ready to meet a new need or give someone a break from their ministry or start something new. Which is exciting.

Sharing the message will produce fruit – that's God's job. But it will also clash with our culture. Nothing new. So we need to remain firm in our faith as Stephen did and trust God to use His message in His time and His way to grow us. He only calls us to be available to help His church grow.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at olivet@rideau.net.