

Gospel Growth Pains

Acts 6:1-7

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I know many of you planted gardens this year. I have planted tomatoes in the past but never planted a garden. Some of you even took spots over by the Office Building to have a garden. I got the wild idea to plant a garden this year. The derecho blew down two trees that were preventing sunlight in my backyard, so now I have plenty of sunlight for a nice garden spot. Also, I had been composting for the last few years, but I had not used any of it, so I had plenty of compost ready to go. With everything in place, Stacy and I made our decision; we would plant a garden. To be specific, Stacy decided I would plant a garden.

In May I rented a big tiller. Tilled up a spot and then added the compost and tilled it again. Finally, by the first of June, I was ready to plant. I put in tomatoes, peppers, and two long rows of purple hull peas.

I knew that what I planted would grow but what I did not plan on was it growing at the rate and volume it grew. Before long, I had to put in structure for my tomato (trees). My peas took over the garden. Then it got dry, and I had to water, and that kept things growing even more.

This was kind of what happened in the early church. Jesus had planted the seeds of the gospel. The apostles came in after Jesus and *kept sowing seeds* through their preaching, teaching, and prayer, and then the Holy Spirit *watered* the seeds of the gospel and *gave light to the seeds*, and before long, three thousand were added to the church. Then two thousand were added, and people kept professing faith in Jesus Christ.

What began with a few disciples now was at least five thousand and probably more. The church that was birthed in Jerusalem and had spread out into the surrounding Judean countryside.

What we see in Acts 6:1-7 is that as the church grew, so did the needs within the body of the church. The disciples (the church) had pooled their money in order to meet needs, but now the apostles were struggling to keep up. They could not give time to preaching and teaching the gospel and prayer and distribute food to the widows in the congregation.

Gospel growth had created a dilemma for the early church. Much of the organization of the church that we see later in Acts and Paul's letters had not been put in place. The church, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, was learning how to get organized, but it was not there yet. The church was having *gospel growth pains* because as the number of the disciples increased, so did the ministry's needs.

What we learn in Acts 6:1-7 is that there is one ministry purpose of the church that must be kept central—the ministry of the word and prayer. I will talk about the ministry of the word and prayer as one purpose because they go together. They are like two wings of a plane. The church cannot fly without the ministry of the word and prayer.

Everything flows from the word of God and prayer. It is critical that a church be united around the ministry of the word and prayer.

Here is the main point of our text and the sermon: *A local church's mission is the ministry of the word and prayer.*

Remember, as we work through Acts, we will see texts that are *prescriptive* and *descriptive*. *Prescriptive* are texts that teach us what we should be doing, and *descriptive* are texts that simply describe what happened. Not all *descriptive* texts are *prescriptive*, but all *prescriptive* texts are *descriptive*. *It is prescriptive that churches make the ministry of the word and prayer its main mission.*

When we unify around the ministry of the word and prayer, the Spirit of God works mightily and moves that church in the direction of healthy gospel growth.

Let's work through our text. I have three points to help work through these seven verses.

I. Gospel Growth Can Threaten The Unity of The Church (Acts 6:1)

Look at v. 1. Verse 1 sets up the problem:

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.

We have not heard anything about the daily distribution of food until now. If you remember, at the end of Acts 4, they were sharing everything, but there is no mention of distributing food.

What we do know is that food distribution is in keeping with the biblical teaching of biblical justice that is seen in the care of widows and orphans. The Old Covenant is clear about the importance of the care of widows and orphans. When you read the Old Testament, you will learn that was one of the reasons Israel and Judah were judged by God. The Jews were neglecting the widows and orphans. The New Covenant community, the church, was not going to neglect this important ministry.

However, the rapid growth of the church was beginning to threaten the unity of the church. As the unity was threatened, so was the witness of the early church.

What we see in v. 1 is that the Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jewish widows were complaining. So, in Jerusalem, there was a large minority of Greek-speaking Jews who didn't speak Hebrew because they had lived in other parts of the world. Many of these older Jews had returned to Jerusalem so they could live the last days of their lives in the holy city. Then, if the wives outlived their husbands, they were left all alone.

Here is the situation. The Aramaic-speaking Jews discriminated against the Hellenistic-Greek-speaking Jews. The Pharisees considered the Hellenistic Jews second-class Israelites and treated them as such.

Then Pentecost came, and thousands of Aramaic-speaking Jews and hundreds of Greek-speaking Jews came to faith in Christ. As a result, they were now one-in-Christ and all in the same church.

Now, friends, we all know that when you are born again, you will never sin anymore—correct? Nope! As wonderful as being a new creation in Christ is, it does not immediately erase all prejudices or eliminate the old sins we are prone to commit.

What we find in v. 1 is that the Hellenistic-Jewish widows felt like they were being overlooked. Perhaps they were, or perhaps they weren't. What we do know is that they complained about it and their complaint reached the apostles.

Now keep in mind, while unity is not the main purpose of the church, it is still a very important component of church life. Unity comes as a result of the work of the gospel, not because we have made unity a goal.

Here is what we have to keep in mind, unity is an important witness for the church. Jesus told His disciples in John 13:34-35:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. ³⁵ By this, all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Unity around the gospel of Jesus Christ is a powerful witness. But unity is something that is easily lost when we sin against one another.

Let's face it. There will be things in the life of a church that will rub you the wrong way. It might be something I say, or Pastor Eric says or something an elder does or something in your Gospel Life Group or some other ministry or how a greeter failed to speak to you when you came in the door or that your coffee was too cold or too hot.

Whatever it is, let's be a church that strives to resolve our issues in love. For example, if there is an issue, ask a question in love instead of making a complaint. Seek words of reconciliation instead of harsh words or confrontation. There are ways to preserve unity and still resolve a conflict or complaint.

As the Apostle Peter charges, in 1 Peter 4:8:

Above all, keep loving one another earnestly since love covers a multitude of sins.

II. The Priority of the Gospel Keeps the Church Unified (Acts 6:2-6)

In vv. 2-6, we see how keeping the ministry of the word and prayer its mission keeps the church unified around the gospel. Look in vv. 2-6:

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. ³Therefore, 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. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵And 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. ⁶These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

The apostles did what good leaders do—they listened. *They realized that they were in danger of getting off mission and that the corporate witness of the church was at stake.*

Verse 2 tells us they called a congregational meeting. Look in v. 2:

And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples.

Then at the meeting, they reminded the church *what their priority was as leaders and that the main mission of the church is—the ministry of the word and prayer.* Four times in these seven verses, we see that when the ministry of the word and prayer was identified as the mission of the church, the number of disciples increased.

Listen to how Luke drives this point home. In v. 1, Luke tells us:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number¹

Then in v. 2, Luke says:

It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

Next in v. 4 says again:

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

Finally, v. 7 sums up the main purpose of the church:

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.

When you see a theme repeated four times in seven verses like this, you had better pay attention. The Holy Spirit is trying to teach us that the *prescriptive priority* for the church is *the ministry of the word and prayer.*

Everything in the church should serve the mission of the proclamation, preaching, and teaching of the word of God and prayer. What we find in vv. 2-6 is that when the gospel is kept the main thing, then the Holy Spirit uses the gospel to find a gospel solution so that the church will continue to thrive.

I want to make three observations and applications of gospel solutions that the apostles put forward.

First Observation: *Church leaders should serve in the spirit of the gospel.* The apostles didn't just run rough shod over the church and start barking out orders. That would have been inconsistent with the gospel.

Instead, they called all of the disciples together. This would be what we now call the congregation. Then they explained the problem to the church: *The Hellenist Widows said they were being neglected in food distribution.*

Bottom line: Good leaders listen. They don't get defensive or ignore people. They listen. They may not give you the answer you are seeking, but they listen.

¹ The number increased because the preaching of the gospel was the main purpose of the church.

Second observation: *Church leaders must remind the church of their mission as a church.* The apostles listened to the complaint, and then they added waiting on tables to their list of things to do. Is that what happened? No. They listen, but then they said, *“It is not right that we should give up what we are supposed to be doing to wait on tables.”* So, what did they do?

They reminded the church of its mission. The apostles were supposed to be preaching, teaching, and spending time in prayer. It is not that other ministries were not important for the church—they were. However, the apostles could not do it all. They had their role, and they needed to keep the church on mission, or the ministry of the word and prayer would be sidetracked.

It is the same way at Grand. Neither Pastor Eric and I, nor our elders, can do all our important ministries of Grand. So, when someone has an idea or a complaint about a ministry is made, or something is neglected, we listen, and then we have to remind ourselves of our mission and seek a solution that keeps us on mission. This leads us to our third observation.

Third observation: *Church leaders lead by offering gospel-centered solutions of problems to the congregation.* Look in v. 3 at the solution the apostles offered:

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.

Then we see in v. 5 that the church was pleased with this solution:

And what they said pleased the whole gathering.

Then the church picked out seven men to begin distributing food. These men are not called deacons, but we can see the early beginnings of the office of deacon in these seven men.

As the church began to mature, over time, it needed to develop some structure in order to manage its growth. Later the church added the offices of *elders* and *deacons*. What we learn is that as the apostles died out, the office of *elder* replaced the *apostles*. However, the office of *deacon* remained the same—*servant to the church*.

Do you want to know how important the role of deacon is to a church? Just consider the problem and solution in this text.

- The problem: *the unity of the church was threatened along with the church’s witness.*
- Solution: *servants to serve the needs of the body in order to protect you and, therefore, the witness of the church.*

Deacons are the people who grease the gears of the church. Often, they are working behind the scenes where no one sees them. They are like shock absorbers on a car. They smooth out the ride. They preserve the unity of the church. It is a very important office.

Let me summarize what we have learned so we can think about our church. The apostles listened to the complaint and recognized the need. They didn’t ignore the problem. They gathered the congregation and explained the problem. They reminded the church of the mission of the church and what they, as leaders, needed to be doing so that the church could stay on mission. Finally, they offered a solution that was consistent with the gospel. The apostles began to share ministry with the congregation.

Brothers and sisters, I do not know what Pastor Eric and I and the elders would do if we had to carry out every ministry of the church. We are not a large church, and we do not have tons of ministries, but the ones we have would be overwhelming to both him and me. Even if the elders stepped in, we could not do it all.

It takes all of us working together to stay on the mission of making the ministry of the word and prayer central. As elders, we strive to work with our leaders to see the right teaching of God’s word and the gospel as the main thrust of every ministry at Grand. We even take our *budget* and strive to make sure it reflects gospel ministry and gospel priorities.

When the right ministry of the word of God and prayer is the heartbeat of a church, that church will be a healthy gospel church that will grow. It does not mean it will add thousands, but it will have gospel growth.

That church will put deep roots in God's word and bear gospel fruit. It will gradually and steadily increase in numbers.

Finally, let me cast some vision for the ministry of the word and prayer right here. We still need workers to serve in the GROW and the nursery and preschool. We want to see our children disciplined in the word and prayer. If you can serve in one of these areas, please let Debbie Martens or Sarah Fierro know.

We are not simply trying to fill spots. We want to disciple our children in the gospel of Jesus Christ. As we do, they will grow, and their growth will lead to the next generation sowing, planting, and harvesting the souls for the Lord Jesus Christ.

III. Gospel growth will continue as the church unifies around the gospel (Acts 6:7)

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.

When the church stays on mission with the ministry of the word and prayer, the word of God grows. The phrase "*continued to increase*" can be translated as "*was growing*." It is an agricultural phrase for a seed that has been sowed and is being harvested. When God sends forth the seed of the word, He directs its growth and sees that it bears fruit. His word does not return void.

Verse 7 says that people were getting saved. It says that "*a great many priests became obedient to the faith*." This had to be alarming to the Pharisees because it is estimated that there were at that time about eighteen thousand priests in Jerusalem.

The gospel of God was on the move. The Jewish people were coming to faith in Christ by the thousands.

Let's consider what happened. Satan, through the Jewish religious leaders, mounted a frontal assault to stop the gospel. But He could not stop the gospel when the Jews arrested Peter and John.

After that, Satan attacked from inside. He tried to stir up division and get the church off its mission of the ministry of the word and prayer, but he did not succeed there either. Sadly, he does succeed in many churches.

Brothers and sisters, let's not be one of those churches that gets off mission. Let's be a church that is unified in love around the ministry of the word and prayer. If persecution from the outside comes, let's stand firm in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. If our enemy seeks to divide us through disunity by a critical comment or jealousy or recognition or COVID or the wearing of masks or whatever it is—let's strive in love to be unified and stay on mission.

May God grant us to have the mind of Christ, as the Apostle Paul said in Philippians 2:5-11:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

May we serve in the humble Spirit of our Savior who wrapped a towel around Himself, washed His disciples' feet, and then carried His cross to the Golgotha, was nailed to the cross bearing our sin and shame. Then by His death and resurrection, He washed us clean. May we serve in that Spirit.