

Navigating Growing Pains

I had a conversation with a couple last week at church who is expecting their second child. I made the comment that going from one child to the second can be a hard adjustment. At least in my memory it was the biggest adjustment for us. Although, when we had our third child it did mean that we could no longer play man-to-man. We had to go to a zone defense. Each child that we had required changes and adjustments in how we did things. There were growing pains that had to be navigated.

A similar thing is true in the church. As a church grows, inevitably there will be growing pains that must be navigated for a church to stay healthy and on mission. New needs and opportunities arise. Problems pop up. Ministry structures that worked in the earlier days no longer serve the church well.

Today, we are looking at Acts 6:1-7 where we will see how the early church navigated one of their growing pains. They face an internal issue created from growth that threatens the unity and the mission of the church. The principle that we are going to see in this passage that a **growing, healthy church will adapt and change to meet needs and stay on mission.**

This is transitional passage in Acts. Up to this point the church has stayed in Jerusalem. But Jesus commanded his followers to be witnesses in Jerusalem AND Judea and Samaria and the remotest part of the earth (Acts 1:8). And so, Luke will introduce us to a couple of men who will be part of the movement of the gospel outside of Jerusalem.

At the end of chapter 5, Luke told us that after the apostles were beaten and commanded to not speak in Jesus' name by the religious leaders, they continued to preach that Jesus was the Christ. They refuse to be intimidated by the external threat, but now there is an internal threat.

¹ 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.

As they kept preaching, the church kept growing – *the disciples were increasing in number*. It was *in these days* that a new problem arose. One group in the church (the *Hellenists*) had a complaint against another group in the church (the *Hebrews*).

The *Hebrews* were those who were native-born. Their conversational language was Aramaic. They read the Scriptures in Hebrew. The *Hellenists*, on the other hand, belonged to families of the dispersion – Jews born and raised outside of Palestine. They spoke Greek. They read the Scriptures in the Greek version of the Old Testament (i.e., the Septuagint). They were influenced by Greek culture. Some had to returned to Palestine over the years because they wanted to die in their homeland. Others were recently arrived because they had come to celebrate Pentecost (2:1). We read about that in chapter 2.

Luke tells us that this young, growing church, is made up of Jewish Christians who have come to Christ from two very different cultures. And a *complaint* arose from the *Hellenists* (the group that would have been smaller and more the outsiders) against the *Hebrews* (the predominate group.) The Hellenists complain that their widows are *being neglected in the daily distribution*. They were not receiving the daily provision for food. Both groups would have had a commitment to care for widows. This was part of their Jewish faith. The Old Testament speaks a lot about this. But with the rapid growth of the church, the Hellenistic widows are being neglected.

It's possible that prejudice from one group towards the other might have been part of this, but Luke uses the word, *neglect*. It seems likely that it was an oversight or ignorance. We don't really know. But it was a problem that arose because of a fast-growing church and the apostles' inability to keep leading as they had in the early days.

Up this point the apostles had overseen this ministry of meeting needs. In chapter 4, we saw how people would sell land or houses and bring the money to the apostles so that they could distribute it to meet the needs of the church? At that time it worked. Luke wrote in 4:34 that *there was not a needy person among them*. But this could no longer be said. There were needy people among them – the Hellenist widows. This problem threatens the unity of the church. If this is not handled with wisdom and in a timely fashion, this problem could blow up into a rift between these two groups in the church. They were experiencing growing pains.

We can expect that as we grow there will be growing pains that we must navigate as well. We know this from the Scriptures. We know this from church history. And we know this from our 36 years of experience as a church. As much as we wish that we could grow without any difficulties or challenges, that just isn't reality. Growing pains should be expected. It's true in families. It's true in organizations. It's true in the church. **A growing, healthy church will need to adapt and change to meet needs and stay on mission.**

Luke tells us how the apostles respond. Verse 2:

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."

When we hear, *serve tables*, we tend to think of a server in a restaurant, right? But the ministry that is in view here involved receiving financial gifts and then wisely dispensing them to meet practical needs including the care of the widows. It involved organizational and administrative skills. The apostles had been doing both of these things – teaching and meeting needs. For a time, this had worked. But now the demands of *preaching the word* to what is now a large church had caused them to fail to give appropriate attention to meeting practical needs.

When the complaint comes to the apostles' attention, they don't ignore it. They lean into the problem and call the church together to work out a solution. When they say that, *"It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables,"* they aren't saying that meeting practical needs is beneath them or that it is less important or less spiritual. This is

about staying true to the core thing they know God has called them to do. They know it would not be acceptable in God's eyes for them to neglect the *preaching the word of God*. But they also know that meeting practical needs is equally important. And so, they adapt. They develop a new organizational structure.

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."

They are clear on what God has called them to. They were to lead in prayer – prayer at the temple, private prayer, and gathering the church for prayer. And they were to lead the *ministry of the word*, which involved teaching and equipping of the church, and the proclamation of the gospel to those who did not yet believe. These were the things they knew they were called to while at the same time knowing that practical needs must be met.

They call the church to develop a new structure to meet these needs. They ask the church to select *seven men* that they can *appoint to this duty*. They will give away leadership responsibility to these men. These men must be of *good repute* – people have seen their lives and respect them. They must be *full of the Spirit* – spiritual men surrendered to and led by the Spirit. Finally, they should be full of *wisdom*. These are the kind of men that they would *appoint to this duty*.

Serving tables was primarily administrative in nature, but it was still spiritual work. And so, the apostles don't say, "Hey, church, we just need some people who are good at organizing. It doesn't really matter if they are spiritually-minded or not. We just need some dudes who can count and get things where they need to go." They don't do that. They didn't see this is non-spiritual work. All serving is spiritual and so they want the church to find godly men, led by the Spirit, and full of wisdom to put in charge of the task. **We would be wise to think the same way – all serving in the church is spiritual serving.**

Well, how did the congregation respond?

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.

The church chose seven spiritually qualified men to serve in this role. All these men have Greek names. Even though native Hebrews often also had Greek names, it seems likely that these men were chosen from the Hellenistic part of the church.

We don't know much about these men except for Stephen and Philip. In Acts 6:8, Luke will describe how Stephen, this man who was *full of faith and of the Holy Spirit*, not only served tables, but he also had a powerful ministry of proclaiming the word. And we will see in chapter 8, how Philip was used by God to take the gospel beyond of Jerusalem.

⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

The church chooses these men and then the apostles commission them for the work to which they are called. The act of laying their hands on them is a visible way to express the authority that they are delegating to these men.

Luke doesn't go into any details about how these men served in this role, but with the statement in verse 7, it is clear that the wise leadership of the apostles and the responsiveness of the church to a new way of doing things, preserves unity and allows the continued growth of the church. They navigate this growing pain. Luke writes:

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.

This is another of Luke's summary statements, which concludes the first section of Acts. Clearly, unity and the health of the church is preserved. The church meets practical needs and stays on mission. The word of God keeps spreading and the number of disciples multiplies greatly in Jerusalem. It even begins to make inroads among the priestly class. **A growing, healthy church will adapt and change to meet needs and stay on mission.**

Sometimes people will say, "I wish we could just do church like the early church. Let's just copy what they did." Well, is that when the apostles oversaw the ministry of the word AND meeting practical needs, or when the apostles delegated meeting practical needs to other leaders? Certainly, there are things we want to copy, but I believe that if we want to follow the early church, one way we do that is by adapting and changing to meet needs. **A growing, healthy church will adapt and change to meet needs and stay on mission.**

In the remainder of our time, I want to consider a couple of implications of this principle. First, **we need to be willing to let God lead us to adapt and change.** We need to have a willingness to innovate, change and adapt. Sometimes this is hard. Sometimes we don't like change. And yet it is necessary if we are going to stay a growing and healthy church.

This has been part of our history as a church. Just think of how we have changed ministry structures over the years to meet needs and care for each other. When Cindy and I first showed up in 1987, Faith was small enough that everyone knew everyone. If there was a need in the church, people knew, and the church could respond. The whole church was sort of a small group. But as the church grew eventually not everyone could know everyone. There was a need to adapt and change our structure to make sure needs were met and people were cared for. And so we developed a small group ministry. It wasn't possible for everyone in the church to know everyone, but through this new structure it was possible to be connected to at least some people where you could be known, loved, and cared for. We adapted and changed.

Or think about our Stephen Ministry. This is a ministry structure that was birthed out of the need to adapt and change. There was a time where the pastoral staff and the elders could show up and be present to anyone who was going through a challenging season. But as the church grew that was no longer possible. All the needs for care were no longer being met and so we adapted. We now have a team of highly trained volunteers who meet with people and walk with them as they go through difficult seasons of life. They do amazing work in caring for needs.

These are just a two of the ways we've adapted and changed our ministry structure to meet needs and stay on mission. We expect that if we are going to continue to grow and stay on mission, we will need to continue to adapt and change. And that takes a willingness to let God lead us to change. Leaders need to be willing to change. And often that means a willingness to give away leadership. But it's not just leaders, the whole church needs to be willing to change. In this passage, the whole congregation was willing to let a new group of leaders step into this role of organizing meeting practical needs. There was a willingness to let God lead this change by both the leaders and the whole church.

Let me mention a couple of other implications that are more heart-level when it comes to change. This one didn't make your outline. First, **we need to change our expectations of what it means for the church to show up and meet needs.** The early church could have said, "If the apostles aren't the ones in charge of this, then I don't think the church is really caring for me." But they didn't do that, right?

Sometimes there can be the thought that if a pastor doesn't show up then the church really isn't showing up to meet my need. But here's the thing, if a pastor is required to meet all the care needs, we'd be just like the church in Acts 6. There would be all kinds of needs that would not be met. We believe that a right understanding of the church is that God calls and gifts many to be part of meeting needs. And so, yes, there are times a pastor shows up to meet needs, but there are plenty of other times when an elder, a group leader, a Stephen Minister, or some other leader shows up to meet needs. And that is the church being the church. That's the body of Christ functioning in the way that God designed it to function.

Here's a second heart-level issue. If we are going to remain a growing, healthy church then **"insiders" need to be willing to adapt for new people.** Until this appointment of new leaders, all the leaders in the church are from the Hebrew part of the church. But with the appointment of these seven men, leadership is now delegated to a group from the Hellenistic part of the church. The "insiders" were willing to adapt for new people.

This is not easy. Most of us commit to a church because we like how things are right now. We like the way children and youth ministries are run. We like the adult ministries. We like the style of worship. We are here because we like things the way things are. And yet, if we are going to be a growing, healthy church, we need to be willing to adapt to new people and new needs.

If you know the history of the EFCA, you know that it's roots go back to Swedish, and Danish-Norwegian Free churches that were planted in the US . . . many in the 1800s. Where I'm from in

Nebraska there are a number rural Free Churches that were planted in the 1800s by Swedish settlers. When they first met, they conducted their services in Swedish. But over time as they sought to reach people not from a Swedish-speaking background they had a decision to make. Would they adapt and begin holding services in English or would they stay with what was most comfortable to them and keep services in Swedish? They made the tough choice to begin holding services in English. Can you imagine what that was like for founders of those church, the “insiders,” to no longer sing and hear the Word of God in their heart language? That could not have been easy. And yet that’s exactly what they did so that they could meet needs and stay on mission. The “insiders” adapted for the new people.

For those of us who are “insiders” we need to be willing to adapt for new people. We need to die to any kind of thinking that this is “my church and I don’t want to change for new people.” I’m thankful we have had this spirit. But as we continue to grow there will certainly be more need to change. Our growth may introduce multicultural differences that require change. Or those who are older may need to adapt to meet the needs of those who are younger.

Let me give one example. Either of these issues might lead to change in how we do worship, right? It might mean giving up our preferred style of worship so that worship can be done in a way that connects to younger people or people from other cultures. I like how we do worship now. But likely there will be a need to adapt and change our worship forms to reach new people and connect to a younger generation or people from other cultures. I hope that I will be the kind of person who as I get older can take joy in those changes even if it means a that I’m making a sacrifice in terms of giving up my worship-style preference. **“Insiders” need to be willing to adapt for new people.**

A growing, healthy church will adapt and change to meet needs and stay on mission. This is the kind of church we want to be. A church on mission to make disciples of Jesus who love God, one another, and our neighbors. A church that is active in sharing the Good News with all who will listen and meeting practical needs. May we let God lead us to navigate our growing pain that we might meet every practical need that we should and still firmly be engaged in our mission of making disciples.