

## GROWING PAINS Acts 6:1-7

As a farm kid raised on a mostly dryland wheat farm, there's a couple of words that make me cringe: Canadian thistle and rye. How many of you know what rye is? Rye is really similar to wheat. It looks a lot like wheat. It grows with the wheat. But it isn't until the wheat has grown quite and is getting ready to head out that you really start to notice the rye because it outgrows the wheat in height. It's typically a foot taller than the wheat. And it's not good because if it is found in your wheat at the grain elevator, they will dock you for it. We didn't use Clearfield wheat where you can just spray it and keep your fields clean, so we would have to go out and pull out those pockets of rye try to keep it from spreading or I'd use a 30' weed wiper that I'd pull behind the four wheeler if there was a lot of it.

As any crop grows, based on the conditions that year, there is going to be different challenges that have to be addressed in order to bring in a harvest (fungicide, pesticide, fertilizers). You might have to go to an agronomist who can give you advice and supplies to meet that crop's need. A place I used to go to was Simplot which ironically enough was in Berea, NE. They were close to our farm. Their company tag line was "Grower Solutions". You get **grower solutions** at Simplot.

That's what our next passage in Acts 6 reminds me of. We're making our way through the book of Acts where author Luke has recorded for us the history of the early, early Church. The Church is growing rapidly, probably around 10,000-20,000 people at this point. But as any church grows, just like crops grow, so do the **inevitable challenges** – what we might call **growing pains**. Church growth is probably the hardest things for church leadership to manage for that reason. So far, we've seen problems from within with hypocrisy, and from without by persecution. Today, Luke gives another glimpse within as we witness a **potential division** occurring a necessary, structural reorganizing that takes place to keep the church on track and disciples to continue to be made.

Luke uses the word **disciple** for the first of 28 times in Acts and we're going to see some "**grower solutions**" for how a church can continue to grow and make disciples through growing pains.

**Verse 1:** *"Now at this time while the disciples were increasing [growing, NET] in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food."*

### I. THE CHALLENGING SITUATION IN THE GROWING CHURCH. (V. 1)

So far neither hypocrisy nor persecution can stop the Church. But now, there's a **wedge** developing on the inside that has the potential to cause a split if it's not dealt with and we're starting to see that consistent challenges and difficulties will be the Church's lot in this world. Satan, by the way, knows a house that's divided against itself cannot stand and a wedge is his favorite weapons. He works tirelessly to divide churches over things that really don't matter.

You had **two main groups** in the predominantly Jewish church at this time. The **native Jews** who spoke Hebrew, read Hebrew Scriptures, and kept the Hebrew cultural customs. Then you also had the **Hellenistic Jews**. That word Hellenistic basically just means Grecian, or Grecian influence.

Hellenistic Jews were just as Jewish by birth and bloodline but weren't as customarily rigid because they had adapted to some of their Gentile neighbors' ways. Remember, Jews had been dispersed all over the world during various enemy invasions and many of them now lived away from Jerusalem. Just like today, there were Jewish communities around the world from Iraq to Rome but they were still very Jewish and made regular pilgrimages back to Jerusalem. They were still very Jewish but socialized with Gentiles (unlike Pharisees). **Greek** had become many of their primary language. They used the **Septuagint** for their Scriptures, which was a Greek translation of the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures (abbrev. LXX). It was given that Roman numerical "70" because it was translated by 70 Jewish scholars in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C. It was very popular since Greek was the dominant language and even our New Testament quotes the LXX.

But you can see how there is a potential **cultural fracture** that might occur between the more conservative Jews and the Greek-influenced Hellenistic Jews at this point. The common spiritual bond in Christ had welded them together but the human friction seemed inevitable and I'm sure Satan was there whispering, *"let's just complain a while, then start a Hellenistic church"*. Someone said, *"Our murmuring is the devil's music."* It's hard to tell if these Hellenists were a bunch of rabble-rousers with a spirit of entitlement or if there was a holier-than-thou attitude by the native Hebrews. Maybe both, and we should learn from it.

Friction is inevitable anywhere people are coming together with various backgrounds and beliefs, but as God's people we need to learn to handle friction well. If there's an issue or problem in the church that needs addressed, let's address it like those who are citizens and representatives of God's kingdom. Paul reproved the Corinthians for taking their disputes before the ungodly secular courts, saying, *"don't you know we will judge the world someday? And angels? How much more matters of this life?"* (1 Cor. 6). We should operate now in light of our future position and roles. We should be able to handle concerns without the **murmuring** and **grumbling** type of complaining. That's what got OT Israel in trouble. (Num. 11). Quail meat and snakes ring a bell? They became an example for us (1 Cor. 10:10). It is kind of a funny thought though that in the OT and NT complaints arose concerning food! What do we do when restaurants get our order wrong?

Paul said, *"Do all things without grumbling or disputing"* so that we are like lights in a dark and crooked world. We come to the situation with godly wisdom and patience and discretion. Is there a problem? A dispute? It's no surprise. Let's discuss it and solve it, not point fingers and murmur. Those who complain are typically those who won't lift a finger except to point the blame.

I keep reinforcing this in Acts, but we've just got to remember what is important. the churches that are going to continue to grow are those who focus on the mission, the vision, and the commonality.

**A growing church focuses on their common bond and mission in Christ.**

They focus on what they have in common like being **baptized by the same Spirit into the same body of Christ** (1 Cor. 12:13). That's one of the neatest elements about the Church – no matter what someone looks like or what they do or where they're from – we have a **deep, spiritual connection in Christ**. We can all come together and worship the same Savior. That **unity** along with all of our **differences** actually becomes a **very powerful testimony** to the world. The New Jerusalem will be a place where all nations represent and bring their glory into it (Rev. 21:26).

Another vital truth relevant to the context is something I've mentioned a lot the past year or so with all this talk of racism and that's how **we're all made in the image of God**. Every person is inherently valuable no matter what stage of life they're in (in the womb, in widowhood, in the wheelchair). Many ancient cultures valued people based on the extent that they served the community. They were performance-based oriented. So as you can imagine, many older women and **widows** who couldn't bear children anymore or do hard labor and had no family would live a very bleak existence. They needed **community care** because there was no social security or disability or anything like that. 1 Timothy 5:3-16 actually gives instruction on caring for widows because many would end up in the streets. It was a sad situation.

But one of the differences that was supposed to make Israel stand out among the nations was their care for **widows, orphans, babies, and poor**. And today, a community, nation, or church's character and credibility is often developed by how it treats these folks. So it's interesting to ask: how does the church respond to these widows being overlooked?

**Verse 2:** *“So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the Word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to the ministry of the Word. The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.”*

## II. THE TWELVE'S SOLUTION TO THE SITUATION. (VV. 2-6)

The twelve come up with a plan to which everyone approves. The congregation, both sides together, choose the men that would serve. The apostles themselves understand their primary calling before God is to lay a foundation for the Church through their preaching and teaching and others can meet this need. The apostles are not too good for serving tables. It just wasn't desirable for them because the people needed the spiritual food they had to offer even more.

There's no lesser-than's and more-than's in this passage. We can tell because the qualifications for this first deacon-like task is high. As the NT develops instruction for church leadership we learn there are **elders** (*episkopos*; Pastor-shepherds/overseers) and **deacons** (*diakonos*; servants). Both have almost identical qualifications but elder- shepherds must be **able to teach** the Word and they exercise spiritual oversight. Deacons serve in more practical ways (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1:5-

9). Some Bible students consider these men to be the first deacons, but as we'll see, at least 2 of these men are great preachers and teachers too.

I think it would have been tempting for the apostles to just step in and handle the situation personally – to just micro-manage everything. But they're wiser than that. They stay focused on their role in the mission and properly delegate this task. DL Moody said, "*Better to hire ten men to do the work, than to do the work of ten men.*" They **lay hands** on them to signify a passing of intangible **authority** on them for the task. Let's summarize 3 grower solutions here:

**A growing church prioritizes the teaching of God's Word.**

**Christian community is built on Scripture** and the instruction in it. That's why the apostles and elders (pastor-shepherds) must give themselves to the teaching it. Making disciples is impossible without prioritizing God's Word. We grow in Christ by studying God's Word. "*Like newborn babies,*" 1 Peter says, "*long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation.*" Any church that starts to marginalize the Word of God will cease to really make disciples and will turn to entertainment to keep people coming and occupied. They'll be distracted from the mission with other competing worldly efforts and "gospels" and movements.

**A growing church prioritizes prayer.**

A church needs prioritize prayer because it's through prayer we receive God's strength and wisdom and insight and guidance to lead the church and be the church.

**A growing church delegates tasks to qualified people in the body.**

This passage shows us there's no menial task in the body and every member of the body serves an important function and it's important for us to be genuine. The men chosen are exemplary men that both sides would approve of. Let's look at the **3 qualifications** briefly:

**1. Above Reproach.**

They have the reputation for being blameless. They have long-term consistency in their spiritual walk. You could talk to their co-workers and they would agree, "*This person loves Jesus.*" You could look at their Facebook or Instagram or Snapchat over the past year or so and say, "*that person walks with Jesus.*" If they share memes too, that's a plus. Humor and laughter should be a qualifications! (just kidding)

**2. Full of the Spirit.**

They're someone who walks by the Spirit and whose life displays the fruit of the Spirit (See Galatians 5). That's important because if they're not in the Spirit, they're in the flesh which means immorality, selfishly ambition, they're divisive, they have a short fuse.

**3. Wise.**

They are skillful at handling life's situations because they know God's Word and are serious about applying it.

These qualifications don't just describe a convert. That describe a **disciple**. Someone who is serious about Jesus and following Him. They're qualifications that are necessary for the sensitive situation in the church. Both sides must approve them. The question we should ask is: *Do these qualifications describe me?* Because they should describe all Jesus' followers.

This text really is a **bridge-text** to what is coming down the road in Acts because out of the 7 men, (who have Greek names by the way which tells us they're likely Hellenist) **Stephen** and **Philip** will become major players in the next couple of chapters. Stephen becomes the first martyr. Philip an evangelist. **Nicolas**, a non-Jewish **proselyte** from Antioch, gives us a taste of what's coming in Acts 11 as **Gentiles** start to flood into the Church. **Antioch** is also an important locale as it is an apostolic missionary hub and center for the early church. This is a lead in for what's coming.

But let's just **think about local church structure** for a bit. Some folks think the church should be just a loosey-goosey type of **organism**, that just sort of wings it and is informal. The comment is often made that the church is so organized, the Spirit can't work. And there may be some legitimacy to that in some cases, but the NT also teaches that it is to be **organized**. It has appointed leadership, it has qualifications for leadership and membership, instruction for when disciplinary action is necessary. It talks about holding services properly and in order (1 Cor. 14:33).

I like to think of the local church as an **organized organism**. The present tense is even better: **a continually organizing organism**. We want to be organized but we also don't want to be so set in our ways like some churches are that we can't make proper organizational adjustments when necessary (which in some churches is even harder than making a doctrinal adjustment). Each church has been and is being composed differently by God and it wouldn't be wise to set an unbending form of organization – say, 7 elders and 7 deacon positions and they all must be filled. In that case you will likely end up appointing unqualified leadership. We don't just organize to be organized. We organize ourselves and pursue certain directions to bring about spiritual flourishing.

### **A growing church is an organizing organism.**

Last weekend I attended a large, multi-service church in Lincoln, NE. Whenever I go to a larger church like that, I'm always impressed by the amount of people and organization involved to pull off a church service. It made me think of Acts. It would require a lot of continual organization and restructuring to meet the needs of this church. New needs and opportunities require fresh structure. The larger the church, the more you have need of qualified men and women for various tasks.

If you've been with our own church over the past few years, you've tasted this a bit. We have more folks and more kids, and just a lot more going on than we did a few years ago. We've had to adjust a bit and people have stepped up. That's great! Growing adjustments can be tough, but they are necessary and exciting if we're looking to grow and make disciples. The church that refuses to be

flexible and just wants to maintain a status quo, will soon suffer steady decline so we've got to be okay with adjustments. You know the last 6 words of a dying church, right? "*But we've never done that before!*" Reminds me of Kodak – they used to be the leaders in photography, but they refused to embrace the digital age and now where are they?

### III. THE FRUITFUL RESULTS OF THE WISE RESPONSE. (V. 7)

*"The word of God kept on spreading [growing] and the number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith."*

So this is the **first of six summary statements** by Luke in Acts (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31). It's his way of **wrapping up the Jerusalem era** before showing us how God's work spread to Judea and Samaria (Acts 1:8). This era ends with **the gospel advancing** and God's Word and the number of disciples continuing to grow and they reap a harvest of souls all because the division was handled wisely. Some of the **priests**, probably originally opposed to Christ and the Church movement at the beginning of the chapter, came to faith (probably impressed by how the Church cared for her own). That's what can happen when God's community lives as an attractive light in the world. It tells us how important everyone's role is within the church.

#### **A growing church is a disciple-making church.**

In summary, we could say this historical account is really about how **a new structure for community care** came to be appointed and developed in the life of the Church and how God used it for good. It's a picture of the community using its own people to meet its own problems and needs. It's surprisingly relevant for us at Chadron Berean.

One of the things I'm excited about, that has been prayerfully in the works this year for our church, this passage I feel like is affirming it, is what we are going to call our **Care Ministry**. A few people approached me earlier this year with similar ministry ideas on their hearts that all involved caring for those within and without our church. And we began to pray about how God was working and felt led to start a **Care Ministries team** for our church. Soon, we'll put these care ministry boards up in the foyer area where we can organize needs to better the needs within our church (Gal. 6:10) and in our community.

We will have *interest forms* to fill out for potential needs that need met or you can fill out a *service form* saying you are willing to be the person they call when a certain type of need arises. Maybe you're not interested in giving rides, but you're interested in preparing meals for those who need it. Maybe you're not interested in cooking meals but you are a prayer warrior. This is something we look forward to explaining a little more in the weeks to come. But how great that we would come to such a passage as this as we are getting ready to launch this ministry!