Growing Pains

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[0:00] Amen. This is where we will be.

We'll read in Acts chapter 6 verses 1-7 tonight. We'll cover the rest of chapter 6 verses 8-15.
So if you have your Bible, you want to follow along with me. Beginning in verse 1. Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose among the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.
And the twelve summoned the number of the disciples and said, Is it not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables? 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.
But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. And 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 Nicholas, a proselyte of Antioch.
[1:24] Those they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Okay, so a lot going on here. I want to begin by asking you a question. See, we'll test your sports knowledge here. Does anybody know who Anthony Davis is?
Anthony Davis. Anthony Davis. All right, we've got some basketball fans in the back. Anthony Davis is a power forward for the New Orleans Pelicans in the NBA.
He's 6'10". He's an all-star. He's one of the best big men in the game right now. What's interesting about him is between his sophomore and senior year of high school, he grew 8 inches.
So as a sophomore, he was 6'2", and the only scholarship offer he had received was from Cleveland State University. I don't know if you've ever heard of them.
[2:27] Every once in a while, they make the NCAA tournament as like a 13 or 16 through 16 seed. And then he grew over that period of time to become 6'10", and became the number one basketball recruit in the nation his senior year.

And unfortunately, he should have, right? He should have stuck with the team that originally showed interest. Now, he went to Kentucky, unfortunately for him, and unfortunately for me because his one year of college, he won the national championship, and that came over my Kansas Jayhawks.
So his growing pains caused me a lot of pain. Well, his growing caused me a lot of pain, I should say. But why I bring him up is because he talks about that time where he was growing so much about his parents.
You know, they were constantly having to buy him new clothes and new shoes, and so it got expensive, you can imagine, especially if you have to buy big shoes and they're hard to find.
So there are pains that go along with growing. Growth is good, but it can result in unintended consequences that create pain, especially when we're talking about growth in the church.
[3:53] And so in Acts 6, Luke describes the blessings and the challenges facing the rapidly growing body of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem.

In this chapter, we see that gospel growth always brings blessings, but it also brings problems. And with that, it also creates opportunities for the church.
And so we see this playing out right here from the very get-go in verse 1. The good news is that the church is growing, but the bad news is that their growth is creating problems and discomfort for some that is leading to complaints within the church that need to be dealt with.
So Luke goes on to describe how the church handled these problems, that their growth created, and how their handling of that issue enabled them to continue on mission and actually enabled

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them to continue to be growing.
So there's four lessons about church growth that we will see tonight. And the first lesson is this. We should celebrate gospel-centered church growth.
[4:58] We should celebrate gospel-centered church growth. In the beginning of verse 1 there, again, it says, Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, so we see that they are growing.

And then at the end, at verse 7, it says, 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.
So we see that the church is growing in the right way because it's gospel-centered growth. And we'll get into that a little bit more here in a minute. But first, let's understand that people in the church react to growth in different ways.
Some find it easy to celebrate when a church is growing, and others find it hard to celebrate. They get a little bit more uncomfortable when they see the church growing.
Dangers, there are dangers that come with being too obsessed with church growth. It leads to maybe preaching another gospel, or watering down the truth, or making worship more about entertaining the people in the pews, and then ultimately the church becomes self-centered.
[6:10] And it's all about the people in the pews, and what do we got to do to make them happy? And they treat the people who come to their church as consumers, and not as disciples.

And that's something that must be avoided. For this reason, there are many Christians who then think negatively about church growth because of how many churches they've seen who've been willing to sacrifice their core principles in order to draw a crowd.
So sometimes we can look at those churches who seem to be drawing large crowds, and they're doing it all for the wrong reasons, and then that causes us to think negatively about all kinds of church growth, which isn't good either.
I encountered this not too long ago. There's a guy who is a pastor, and I enjoy his messages. I've enjoyed some of the books that he's written, and his messages were very deep, very thought-provoking. You could tell that he had done his work. And then I had an opportunity to visit his church, and I was disappointed because it seemed like he had abandoned some of those ways, those ways that he was teaching to do something that was a lot more light and fluffy and easier for people to swallow, I guess.
[7:27] It was definitely self-centered, and just everything about it was very inauthentic. And you could tell that he had bought into what a lot of these other seeker-sensitive churches have done.

You've probably heard about those where they try to make everything so easy, easy-believe-ism, and they're just trying to draw a crowd. And that was really disappointing for me to see that. And so we certainly need to avoid doing that and pray for the churches that are trying to draw a crowd. They're more interested in drawing a crowd than they are actually discipling the people within their pews. For those who have that negative feeling about church growth, this passage helps us to understand church growth in a sensible way.
The early church grew, not as a result of seeking to give people what they thought they wanted, but giving people what they knew they truly needed. Not as a result they grew, not as a result to seek to give people what they thought they wanted, but by giving people what they knew they truly needed. Their preaching and their ministry was passionate, it was compassionate, and it was Christ-centered. Remember, they were highly esteemed by even the unbelievers. Remember in chapter 5, we saw that even the unbelievers who were not a part of their church looked upon them with esteem.
[8:49] They highly esteemed them because they knew that these people practiced what they preached. They weren't hypocrites. They were true and authentic to their faith. The apostles weren't watering down their sermons so as not to offend anyone.

They weren't spending their time trying to teach people how they could make every day seem like it was Friday. They didn't have a ball pit for their children's ministry, right? They didn't care about those things.
What they cared about was people's eternal souls, and whether or not they were saved, and whether or not they were going to be spending their eternity in heaven, or apart from God forever in eternal torment.

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That was important to them. And so they had a need to share the gospel with people and not try to water things down so that they could simply draw a crowd.
Again, they didn't employ any of the gimmicks that many churches use today to draw a crowd. However, the Lord was blessing this church, and large amounts of people were being converted by the good news of Jesus Christ.
[9:51] So church growth is a good thing if it's growing for the right reasons and in the right ways. Again, we don't want to become a church that is primarily focused on the numbers.

However, as we've seen, verse 1 and verse 7 provide a bracket for this text. And in verse 1, we see that Luke is pointing out the growth of the church, the numbers that the church were growing by, and he does so in verse 7.
Well, why does he do that? I think he's counting people to tell us, to show us that people count. People do count. And it does matter that we are reaching people for the Lord and being used by him to do that.
We should hope to reach more people with the gospel. Again, Matthew 28. Isn't this exactly what Jesus commanded us to do? To go and to reach out and to make disciples of all nations and to baptize them and to disciple them so that then they will go out and do the same.
Take the good news out to their neighborhoods, to their communities, to their families. Secondly, second lesson we see is that we should expect problems when the church grows.
[11:01] We should expect problems when the church grows. Turn in your Bible to Matthew chapter 13. And we're going to read verses 47 through 50.

This is one of Jesus' parables. And through it, we learn an important lesson, I think, about church growth. Matthew chapter 13, verse 47 through 50.
This is the parable of the net. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers, but threw away the bad.
So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.
And so I think this parable also serves as a good reminder to us that as the church grows, the growth isn't always necessarily pure.
[12:08] You know, as we're going out and reaching people and we are fishing for men, we will probably catch some bad fish, if you understand what I'm saying.

Okay? We've seen that truth played out already, haven't we, as we've been through the book of Acts? Can you remember a couple of bad fish that the disciples reeled in?
Ananias and Sapphira. We weren't there all that long ago. In chapter 5 and then again in chapter 8, we'll see another. Simon the sorcerer or Simon the magician is another example of a bad fish that was caught.
And when that happens, when the church grows, inevitably we may catch some bad fish. And so we've got to expect that when that happens, problems will arise.
The early church dealt with false converts and they dealt with their own human limitations. This was a great church, but we shouldn't seek to make some kind of idol out of this church.
[13:12] They had their failings too, as we have seen. There was a group of widows here who were not being attended to. And this was a big deal. If you remember, James 1.27 says, Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this, to visit orphans and widows in their affliction and keep oneself unstained from the world.

So this church was in violation of that. These widows were not getting the equal treatment that the Hebrew widows were. The church, though great, was failing to live out this commandment, this treatment of their widows within their own congregation.
Things were out of whack. It wasn't that the apostles didn't care for these ladies. That's not the case. Their failure wasn't intentional, right? They weren't saying, I forget those Hellenistic widows, you know, serve them last.
That wasn't the case at all. They were men, and men and women are limited in what they are capable of doing. And these guys were doing a lot, a lot.
And they weren't capable of doing everything. And so there was an issue here. The truth that a catch a fish will sometimes bring a mess with it, and that even good churches fail in some ways should make us adjust our own expectations.

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[14:34] We will face challenges. We will also face our limitations. There will be messes to clean up as we serve Christ in a broken world. So let's face these realities with grace and confidence that Jesus is able to build his church in spite of our imperfections.

So when problems arise in the church, unity is threatened. And that was the case right here. A complaint arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.
The Greek widows, the Hellenistic widows, were complaining something, again, that Paul tells us not to do. We're in Philippians, and we'll be in Philippians 2, verse 14, where we hear a whole passage about how, as Christians in the church, we aren't to be complaining.
But they had a right to be upset. There was truth to their complaint. They were being neglected in the distribution of food. But they shouldn't have complained against the Hebrew widows, as we see there.
They complained against them. Well, what should they have done? Well, they should have gone to the leaders of the church and said, hey, you know, we're upset because this is going on. And they should have taken their complaints to the right source instead of complaining about another group within the church.
[15:59] And so this is a good reminder to us that there will be times when people in the church will be justifiably offended, but they won't always handle that in an appropriate way.

So we can expect that that will be the case at times as well. So let me give you a little bit more background to the issue that's taken place here in this text. I think that this issue had more to do than merely just the distribution of food.
The Hebrew widows were Hebrew speakers and they were purists, right? These were women who grew up most likely right there in Jerusalem.
And if you remember, there was a couple of exiles. There was the dispersion of Jews throughout the Gentile communities. And so there was another group of women who belonged to that group. They had most likely spent all of their lives growing up outside of Jerusalem in these Greek communities. And, you know, if you know anything about world history at that point in time, that was the common language that people spoke.
[17:07] That's why it was a perfect time for Jesus to come and for the gospel to spread, because there was a common language that people communicated with.

And so the word of God was able to spread a lot faster than it would have otherwise. And so as a result of this, their synagogues and their Greek communities would become Greek speaking synagogues with the Pharisees looked down upon because they thought that that was, you know, beneath what it meant to be a Jew.
And so there was a little bit of snobbery going on here. And so you can imagine that there was some tension that these Hebrew widows maybe did feel this way.
Maybe they didn't. And it was all in the minds of the Hellenistic widows, widows, right? They were so used to being treated like second class citizens that any slight to them, they they blew it up into a big deal because they were just expecting that they were going to be hated.
So we don't really know. But that this tension was real and that this was a real issue that threatened the church. Now, we have we have seen churches split over less less tense things, haven't we?
[18:21] You know, it's a joke to talk about the carpet of the church or the painting of the walls. But tragically, that happens. But, you know, that's not that's hardly ever, if ever, truly the reason why that's just the reason on the surface.

But there's something down underneath it all. And so this is what was down underneath it all is that they felt like they were being treated as second class citizens in the church and nobody should feel that way.
And so they they felt like they were getting shorted with the meal. And so they made their complaint. And so that's the underlying issue here is we feel like we are second class citizens.
And again, that's a justifiable complaint that the leadership in the church should deal with. As we see, that's exactly what the apostles do. One felt one group felt neglected in those bad feelings led to divisions.
The apostles didn't turn a blind eye to what was going on. The issue, though minor, threatened to undo the church. And so they addressed it themselves. Problems in the church must be dealt with in a way that honors the Lord.

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[19:29] And that's exactly what we see this church doing. They are dealing with a legitimate problem and concern, and they're going to handle it in a way that honors the Lord.

So how do we do that? Well, first of all, we face the music. I seem to remember my dad telling me that a lot growing up. You got to face the music. The apostles couldn't do it all.
They were great men for sure, but they were limited in their time and ability. And they couldn't be all things to all people. They couldn't do everything that the church needed done.
Right. It had grown to a large, a huge size. And it was it was irresponsible of them or the church to think that they could do it all for everybody.
Also, they couldn't just sweep this issue under the rug because it would create a bigger problem. You know, when we do that, it doesn't really eliminate the problem. It just grows and it festers until it blows up in some other way.
[20:29] And so we've got to face the music. They were willing to admit their need for help and they were willing to allow others to take on leadership responsibility within the church.

So they weren't trying to hold on to everything on their own, but they were willing to raise up other leaders within the church to help them out.
Sometimes we we can think that admitting our need for help means that we aren't good at what we're doing, especially when it comes to being in a position of leadership.
I think a lot of times there's a temptation from leaders to feel like if they admit that they can't do it all, that the people who are following them will think that, well, that means you can't do any of it, which isn't the case.
Remember another example where there was a leader who was stressed out by how much he was doing in the Old Testament? Moses, Moses. Remember, Jethro, his father in law, saw him and he was judging and he was dealing with all of the people.
[21:28] And, you know, they were stiff necked, stubborn people and they were driving him crazy. And Jethro saw it. But Moses felt like, well, I'm the only guy who can do it. And then Jethro said, no, what you need to do is you need to you need to pray.

You need to raise up some other guys who can who can provide some organization. And so you can be the guy who oversees everything. But if you keep doing all this, you're going to you're going to wear yourself out.
So thankfully for Moses and the people of Israel, he followed his father in law's advice and it proved to be successful as a result. So we've got to face the music when there's an issue.
Also, we've got to learn to be flexible. This was a new plan and new plans means change. And not everybody is comfortable with change.
The apostles weren't going to serve the tables anymore. So you can imagine if you are one of these people and maybe Peter was your waiter. And now all of a sudden you have somebody like Prochorus and you Prochorus.
[22:32] Who's that? You know, I want Peter. I want one of the real guys. I want one of the true disciples to be the one who who waits on me or whatever, you know.

So it meant that that things were going to change and the people needed to be flexible with that change. There's a temptation to be critical of changes when they are made.
However, we see that the apostles handled the situation with care and grace, didn't they? They involve the people in the decision making, right? They gave the people the opportunity to present members within the congregation to come forward and to lead and to serve in this role.
And as a result of that, we see in verse five that it says that they were pleased all who were in the gathering. They thought that this was a good decision because the apostles, right, they met with the people.
They came up with a plan. They presented it to everybody and they explained, you know, hey, this is why the changes. Why don't you guys dominate some people from the congregation who can serve in these roles?
[23:39] And so the result of their they're handling it with grace, treating it as a true concern. They're they're handling it with wisdom and including the congregation. The decision made it a a change that everybody learned to be flexible and accept.

Thirdly, got to keep your priorities in order. The apostles knew that this issue, if left unchecked, would create disunity within the church.

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And they knew that changes needed to be made. They also knew that their greatest priority was as leaders in the church to be devoted to prayer and to the ministry of the word.
And so they knew that that was their greatest priority and they needed to spend the bulk of their time doing that. They kept their priorities in order. And then fourthly, they shared the ministry.
They realized that the church is a body and that as a body, the church is made of many parts. And so they were willing to delegate responsibility. Again, that didn't show a lack of ability, but a willingness to maximize the full potential of the church body there.
[24:51] Conversely, there are some people who want who want to share their ministry. But people in the church are content to let them have it all to themselves. You know what I'm saying? There are some people who they are in a position within the church and man, they would love to share that responsibility.

But then there's other people in the church. Oh, you do such a good job. And I don't I think you should just stick with that, you know, and I won't look at any. But, you know, we'll just leave it at that.
So if we see somebody who is in a who is in a position for a long time and maybe you think, you know, they do such a good job. But I'm sure that it would be a nice reprieve for them every once in a while to be able to to be out in the pews and amongst the people or whatever the case may be with whatever they're doing.
You know, it's good as a church body that we share in in the responsibilities. One thing that I'm really happy was happy about with coming here is how this church is organized, organized with the elders and the deacons.
I was really impressed by, you know, how much the men in the church and the women in the church are involved in ministering to one another. And so that's definitely a good thing that I think we need to commend our our leaders within our church.
[26:10] You know, you know, you're deacon, you know, your elder, your elders, you know, thank them for what they do. And also think, you know, the Sunday school teachers and the people who work in the nursery and the people who work behind the scenes.

I mean, there's a lot of people doing a lot of stuff and a lot of times we take it for granted. And so we need to express our thankfulness to them often so they know that we're not taking it for granted. We're really thankful for what they do. OK, the third lesson. We should handle church growth and growing pains in a spirit of love. Handle it in a spirit of love to make changes and to show grace to one another requires that we have a spirit of love about us.
We don't see a big church fight here or a big church split in Acts chapter six. Instead, we see the church gathered in in which the truth of God's word leads them as a group.
And the love of God soothes the disagreement that came up between these two groups of people within the congregation. When when conflict arises in the church, it must be dealt with in a timely fashion in an appropriate way and with a loving spirit.
[27:38] So we shouldn't say, well, you know, who cares what they think? They're they're just a small group within the church. You know, if they don't like it, then they can just go somewhere else.

Or we shouldn't think that, you know, we have more important things to do. And so they can just take care of that issue on their own. Because we see that it's little issues like this that can blow up into big issues.
And if we don't deal with it in a timely fashion, then guess what will happen? Those people will deal with it themselves. And often when that happens, it creates a bigger problem and a greater headache that you wish you could have just avoided in the beginning.
If you would have dealt with it in a timely fashion. This also, though, is important for the church to remember that there's people in leadership positions for a reason.
And that while they may be a little bit more delayed than you would like, that you've got to trust them to fulfill the ministry and and what and the responsibility that they have been given.
[28:47] And it's a difficult position to be in. So that's why I also encourage you to not only thank your deacons and your elders, but also pray for them, because it can be really hard, especially when you're dealing with conflict.

That's not a fun thing to deal with in the church. I don't think the apostles had any fun when they were dealing with this. They knew that it was an important issue, but a potentially sticky issue that could derail them off mission.

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And so pray for the leaders in your church as well, because it's not an easy job that they've been called to do, but very rewarding when they when they do it.
The fourth lesson, growing pains results with greater gospel centered growth. So we see that the church has solved its problem.
And so since they've solved it in a timely fashion, they've handled it in a way that honors the Lord. As a result of that, they are able to get back to work.
[29:53] And as a result of their being able to get back to work, that meant that the apostles could continue to be praying along with the church. And they together were able to reach more people and more people were converted to the gospel of Jesus Christ because this was not a matter that did not go unresolved, that was not unattended.

They handled it. They dealt with it in an appropriate way. And as a result of that, they were able to continue on and continue to reach. Have you ever been in conflict with somebody and you had that moment where you just had a conversation with them?
You're like, hey, I know you're a man and I'm mad and there is a little bit of distance. But eventually you came back together and you worked out your differences and the relationship was stronger as a result of that.
Have you ever? Man, I have. I can think of a couple of instances where there was conflict. And then after we dealt with it and we realized, you know what, because when you're when you have conflict with somebody and you're willing to work it out with them, I think it shows to them that you love them, that you care about that relationship, that you don't want this issue to prevent you from having a good relationship.
And so you're willing to work it out. And as a result of that, in my experience, it creates a stronger, more lasting relationship. And you're able to be more honest with one another whenever a similar kind of conflict arises.
[31:19] So some of the issues that we experience in our church, God can use them to create a greater strength and a deeper unity within the body there so that they can go out and continue to do what they've been called to do, even with greater success.

And we see that they are having greater success because we have this great news here contained in the last couple of verses here. In the last verse, actually, that as a result of their ministry, priests were becoming obedient to the faith, Jewish priests, enemies of the Christian faith were hearing the gospel and they were believing it.
So we end on this high note that that's this God is able to save anybody. God is able to save anybody. Here were these Jewish priests. They were enemies, right, of the church.
And yet God was able to bring them to saving faith in Jesus Christ. We see that with the Apostle Paul. I mean, he's the supreme example of somebody who set out to be enemy number one of the church.
And yet God was able to melt his heart and God was able to bring him to saving faith in Jesus Christ. And so we got to keep that in mind as well, especially in our culture, as we've talked about tonight with what's going on, these school shootings.
[32:44] And, man, it's it's tragic because, you know, it seemed like there was a time not that long ago where when one of these things would happen, I mean, everything would stop.

And we we'd think, how could this happen? You know, who are these people? What? But unfortunately, like today, it's just it seems like it's just a part of the the news cycle.
Now, you know, oh, there's another school shooting. OK, where was this one at? Oh, unbelievable. But, you know, that's tragic that we live in a world where now we have kids bringing schools to guns to school and they are intentionally killing their their classmates and their teachers premeditatedly. Right. They they plan this up. And and we are so used to it now that we're kind of numb to it. It's just it happened again. And so right now, our society is in desperate need of the church to be the church of the church, to be the loud voice, because, you know, they want to blame all these other things. Why is it happening? Well, it's because we need stricter gun rules. No, it's because, you know, the kids are playing violent video games or they're watching violent movies. And I'm not to say that some of those things aren't adding into it, but the issue is sin.
[34:02] That's the issue. And right now, what our culture needs is the church to stand up and say, you know what the issue is, is sin. And it's sin not just in that individual who brings the gun, but it's sin in all of us.

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You know that this these kids have parents. Where are the parents? What kind of instruction are they getting in the home? Where are they? What kind of attention are these kids getting? We're not asking the right questions.
And so the church needs to fill that void. We need to be the one who who who speaks the truth in a loving way. Hey, things are broken. And let us tell you why they're broken and and pray that, you know, God would bring reformation back to his church, that God would bring revival to our country. It's not impossible. It's happened before. And I believe that it either will happen again or Jesus will come back. Either way, we are we're we're in the right group.
You know what I'm saying? Right. And we want to pray that others be in the same as well. Thank you.

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