

SCRIPTURE STUDIES

SERIES: A SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS**ACTS CHAPTER 6****“GROWING PAINS”**

The days of the apostles were wonderful days. I am always thankful for the book of Acts for various reasons, among them, because it takes away the false impression that some people have, that the early church was absolutely perfect. The Bible uses the plainest of speech and its writers do not hesitate to record both sides of the story, whether bad or good. The author, Dr. Luke, did not hide the warts.

There is a problem recorded in Acts chapter 6, and we also have the solution recorded as well. If we learn anything from history, when we find the same problems developing within our churches, we should know how to solve them. Let us look and learn from the early church activities as recorded in this chapter.

I have heard it said that, "We need to get back to the good old days like it was in the book of Acts." It is a great deal of comfort to me to know that in the days of the apostles, there were also difficulties. In their days of success they also had their setbacks. And remember, that these people were still living in the afterglow of Pentecost. Yet, they were growing and growing; multiplying and murmuring!

Let us investigate Real-Estate Gate that took place in the first church located in Jerusalem. The setting was as follows:

MEMBERSHIP BOOMS.

"In those days when the number of disciples was increasing..." (Acts 6:1a)

The church started small - 120 in the upper room. In chapter 2 we read that on the day of Pentecost 3,000 were added. In the 4th chapter we read that the number had increased to 5,000 (Acts 4:4). Later in chapter 5 we read that "*multitudes, both of man and women*" were added to that number.

When we come to the 6th chapter we see that addition and multiplication were still going on. The church was gathering momentum. What was the secret of the growth of the early church? The answer is in two parts: First, The Cause, and second, The Effect.

A. The Cause.

Church Growth Seminars for church leaders are conducted somewhere almost every day of the week. Leaders are seeking ways to cause church growth. There has never been a book written about church growth principles that is better than the Book of Acts! Here is God's "How To Do It Book"!

There Was Divine Activity.

God was at work. During this series of studies, I have repeatedly referred to the Book of Acts as "the book of the Acts of the Holy Spirit." The events in this book cannot be explained apart from divine intervention. Acts 2:47 puts this in clear focus: *"And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."* (or *"were being saved."*) And Acts 4:31 records: *"And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit."*

Unless the power of God is upon the ministers and the ministry, growth in attendees will be the result only of man's machinations. A crowd is not necessarily a church. There are crowds at ballgames, night clubs and wrestling arenas!

There Was Human Activity.

The second part of the answer to the question: "What was the secret of the early church's growth?" involves human activity. We have the divine and human elements coupled together in Acts 4:31 – *"And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness."*

They prayed and the Holy Spirit shook the place; the Holy Spirit empowered them, and they spoke. Peter put it like this in chapter 5 - *"And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Spirit..."* (v.32)

"And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ." (Acts 5:42)

This is the divine - human cooperative. Paul said, *"We are laborers together with God."* (I Cor.3:9)

B. The Effect.

When we come to chapter 6 it is no surprise that we read: *".....the number of disciples was increasing...."* (Acts 6:1a)

God's plan for His church is always progress, increase, addition, growth, and yes, multiplication! A caution must be stated: growth in numbers is not necessarily indicative of spiritual growth. Quantity is not proof of quality.

However, the first church had both quantity and quality and it was because of the quality that they had quantity! These people were born again, they were filled with the Holy Spirit, they were holy in their lifestyles, they were people of prevailing prayer, they were not ashamed of the gospel but were bold and willing to witness with life and lip everywhere they went.

The early Christians were actively involved in advancing the early church. They were witnessing everywhere. They covered every area of society with their witness. Look in chapter 5 for a good example of their effectiveness:

- Verse 12 -- they were in Solomon's porch;
- verse 15 -- they were in the streets;

- verse 18 – they were in the prisons;
- verse 21 -- they were in the temple;
- verse 27 -- they were before the court;
- verse 42 -- they were in every house.

Let us penetrate and permeate our society as these early Christians did theirs. Jesus said, *"You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its savor, wherewith shall it be salted?"* How do our communities become salted with heavenly salt if we are isolationists?

Summation: The early Church gathered momentum and grew because of divine activity and human activity. God is working today. Are we?

Illustration. A man who worked in a large railroad repair shop was telling about the arrangement for supplying power to the machinery in the shop. There was a long steel axle running overhead the entire length of the shop. There were pulleys on the shaft intermittently and each pulley had a belt connecting the shaft above to a machine below. The overhead shaft was turned by a huge engine that spun the shaft all the time. There were different machines down below connected to the shaft by the belts. There was a grinder, drill, saw, sander, lathe, etc. all operating on the power from above.

The church is God's shop with many workmen doing various tasks. We must be connected to the power overhead in order for the church to operate by God's power!

MUMURING BLOOMS. v.1

"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." (v.1)

Wherever there is progress, there are problems. Satan will see to that! During the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus, Satan tried to turn Him aside from the divine plan which mandated His going to the cross. And since our Lord has triumphed upon the cross, Satan is now working in the church trying to divert our attention and energy from the number one priority which is to spread the Good News about Jesus Christ.

So we find that immediately upon reading about the multiplication, there arose the murmuring. This was part of Satan's strategy to hinder the progress of the church. There is multiplication and murmuring. Multiplication will not continue if the murmuring remains. What caused the grumbling in the midst of growth in the Jerusalem church?

A. Who Murmured? *"the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews"* (6:1) There were two groups of Jews in Jerusalem: the Hebrew speaking Jews were one group.

They were the descendents of the Jews who came back with Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild the walls - they were the native Jews or the insiders. Those in the other group were Greek speaking Jews. They had been raised in the Greek culture outside of Palestine and had moved back to Jerusalem. You might call them the foreigners or the outsiders.

There were Christians from both groups in the first church, and unfortunately, prejudices between them persisted even after they were saved. This squabble began when the foreigners complained that the natives were neglecting them. But what was the problem?

B. Why Murmuring? “...because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.” (6:1)

How could that be in view of the following record: “All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.” (Acts 2:44, 45) and “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.” (Acts 4:32)

I do not believe that there was any deliberate intention to neglect anyone. But because of the rapid growth and the size of the church, some were overlooked.

It is possible in any church to unintentionally neglect members and even to overlook visitors. It may not be that people are unfriendly but perhaps the friendliness and concern just needs a bit of aggressiveness and organization to see that people are not inadvertently left out.

Here in Acts 6 we have a problem. There is great potential in problems. There is a great negative potential for sure, however there is also a great positive potential. The church grew in numbers. Whenever a church grows in numbers it necessarily grows in need. There are new problems which need to be solved; new arrangements need to be made; new care and control needs to be exercised. These conditions demand business attention.

There is a negative potential if the problem is not solved. There is positive potential if the problem is properly solved. We will see that there was positive potential as a result of the settlement of this argument by the spiritual leaders.

MINISTRY IS BORN. Vs.2-6

“Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.”³ Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;⁴ but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”⁵ And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch,⁶ whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.”

There was a positive outcome from the problem occasioned by the overlooking of certain widows in the first church. What was the positive outcome? A new ministry was born! The Greek word “*diakonos*” is used in 6:1 translated “distribution” or “ministration” and “*diakoneo*” translated “serve” in 6:2. It is from these Greek words that the word Deacon comes, which means “servant.” Although these men were not called “deacons” in this passage, this is the

model that is later referred to as “deacons.” This is the beginning of the ministry of deacons which we have to this day.

The most beautiful thing in this whole episode is that all 7 of the men chosen to serve the church had Greek names. In other words, the church chose seven men from the group that had been neglected. This is a wonderful illustration of Romans 12:10 in action: *“Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another....”* It takes the grace of God to do that! No wonder great blessing followed in the church.

There are several principles inculcated in the development of the office of Deacon which we would do well to imitate when problems arise in our churches today that call for the development of new ministries. They are:

- Administration – pro-active leadership;
- Initiation – a vision of the operation;
- Qualification – prescribed criteria for personnel;
- Delegation – delegation of responsibility;
- Organization – a method of procedure;
- Authorization – public and official approval;
- Supervision – continued monitoring.

As the result of the internal problem that arose in the first church being handled by Spirit-filled leadership, the problem was solved and we read: *“Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.”* (Acts 6:7)

When a church is constantly focusing upon internals, there is little or no external ministry. People problems are solved by spiritual people who get involved in helping other people. When little is invested, little is received.

Illustration. Many years ago there was an evangelist named Gypsy Smith. A woman who was interested in Christian work in London, England wrote to Gypsy Smith on one occasion and said, "I have a meeting I want you to come to and speak. It is only a small meeting, and will take nothing out of you." Gypsy Smith answered: "I cannot come, and it would be of no use if I did come. If it takes nothing out of me, it will do nobody any good."

It is service rendered for the Lord that costs us something that blesses others! Are you giving out your self to help others in the church?

Illustration. A professor in a theological seminary, addressing the freshman class on opening day, said, "Gentlemen, you need three things if you are to be successful: you need gifts, grace and gumption. I believe God has given you gifts; we are going to help you gain grace but if you do not already have gumption, neither God nor man can help you. I advise you to go home."

God gives gifts to Christians and gives grace to those whom He has gifted, but if you don't have “gumption” you will utilize neither! Gumption means “initiative, intestinal fortitude.”

*“Shamgar are had in ox goad,
Rahab had a string;
Gideon had a trumpet,*

*David had a sling,
Sampson had a jawbone,
Moses had a rod;
Dorcas had a needle,
All were used of God!"*

MARTYRDOM BEGINS. Vs. 8-15

Here we have the beginnings of what will be the first martyrdom in the Christian era. Deacon Stephen is to become that martyr. His name in the Greek is "*stephanos*" which means "Victor's Crown." It is more than interesting that Stephen's name originates from that Greek word "*stephanos*," and, he was named, of course, at birth, suggesting that his name was prophetic.

A. Stephen's Testimony. v.8

"And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people."

What a testimony Stephen had in that first church! The word "*deacon*" is first used in Philippians 1:1 where we read Paul's greeting to the church in Philippi: "*To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons....*"

In I Timothy 3 Paul gives the qualifications for the office of deacons: "*Likewise deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. Likewise, their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.*" (I Tim. 3:8-13)

Stephen is the perfect model for deacons today. Notice the characteristics that Stephen had:

A good reputation – 6:3

full of the Holy Spirit – 6:3

full of wisdom – 6:3

full of faith – 6:5

full of power – 6:8

Let us pray for deacons like that and uphold them in prayer as they serve the Lord Jesus in His church.

B. Stephen's Treatment. Vs.9-14

"Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not

cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us."

The adversaries were not be able to resist his testimony, but neither did they desist in their opposition. Stephen was on trial because of his devotion to Jesus Christ. The critics had been silenced by his arguments and confounded by the Christlike attitude he evidenced. They hated him so much that they resorted to bribery and perjury in order to destroy him.

C. Stephen's Transfiguration. v.15

"And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel."

As they looked up on him, their faces angry and her eyes flashing, they saw Stephen's countenance glowing as if reflecting the very presence of God. Here was an angel-faced deacon!

The way they treated Stephen reminds us of the way they treated the Lord Jesus Christ. They hired false witnesses to testify against him, they accused him of attacking the Law of Moses and finally they crucified him. Stephen faced the same spiritual blindness that Jesus faced. Stephen could have yelled, "It's a frame-up!"

The members of the Sanhedrin should have recalled Moses' shining face and realized that they were talking to a holy man of God. We read in Exodus chapter 34 the following: *"....when Moses came down from Mount Sinai he did not know that the skin of his face shone so when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him."* (Ex. 34:29, 30)

These were the supposed spiritual leaders of Israel, yet they were blind to the truth. If they crucified Jesus, they would not hesitate to destroy Stephen, which they did, as we shall see in Acts chapter 7.

CONCLUSION

Testifying can be terrifying unless we are Holy Spirit filled and led. In Acts 15, Barnabas and Paul are referred to as *"men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."* (v.26) Stephen not only risked his life, he gave his life for the cause of Jesus Christ

C. T. Studd (1860-1931) was an English missionary to China, India and Africa. His motto was: "Forward ever; backward never!" He said, "If Jesus Christ is God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him." One of his famous sayings is:

**"Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell;
I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell."**

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