

Main Idea: In Acts 6:1-7 we learn that there’s no such thing as a problem-free church. We also learn how to deal with growing pains in the church. The account involves three scenes.

- I. The church faced a problem (1).
    - A. There was growth.
    - B. There was grumbling.
      1. The surface problem concerned distribution of food.
      2. The underlying problem was division in the fellowship.
  - II. The church dealt with the problem (2-6).
    - A. Step #1: Establish priorities (2).
      1. It’s important to meet material needs.
      2. It’s more important to meet eternal needs.
    - B. Step #2: Establish a plan of action (3-4).
      1. Let the church members serve (3).
      2. Let the church leaders give spiritual direction (4).
    - C. Step #3: Put it into practice (5-6).
      1. The church chose qualified men (5).
      2. The leaders commissioned them for service (6).
  - III. The church saw God work through the problem (7).
    - A. The Word kept spreading.
    - B. The disciples kept multiplying.
    - C. The hard cases came, too.
- Let’s make it personal: When problems come our way...
1. We must see God in them.
  2. We must seek God in them.
  3. We must serve God through them.

*Scripture Reading: John 15:1-8*

I read the story about a certain Dallas church that split, after which each side filed a lawsuit to claim the church property. The judge finally referred the matter to the higher authorities in the particular denomination. The church court assembled to hear arguments, and finally awarded the property to one of the parties. The group that lost started another church in the area.

Ironically, during the hearing it came out that the whole conflict had actually begun at a church dinner. The offense? A certain elder had received a smaller slice of ham than a child seated next to him. What was even worse than the squabble over the ham was the fact that the incident made it into the Dallas newspapers. The people of Dallas got a laugh, and the name of Jesus Christ suffered great reproach.<sup>2</sup>

There is no such thing as a problem free church. Even the best of churches have problems. Problems are not a bad thing, per se. Problems keep us dependent upon God. Problems give us opportunities to see God work.

If you’re looking for a problem free church, you will look in vain. As Paul put it in his counsel to the Corinthian church, “No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval (1 Cor 11:19).”

God’s goal isn’t for us to be problem free. That’s true for us as individuals and as families, as well as for us as a church. Rather, God’s goal is that we respond to our problems in a way that honors Him. There will be times when you get a smaller piece of

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

<sup>1</sup> For an earlier development of this text, see the Acts series preached at WBC in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Story told by Kent Hughes, *Acts*, p. 93.

ham than you think you deserve. That's out of your control. What is in your control is your response to the problem.

Know this. When a church grows, it will have problems. It will experience *growing pains*. Is growth good? Sure. It's a good indicator that we're accomplishing our mission (Acts 1:8). But growth also creates new challenges.

Some prefer the status quo. "I don't like changes," they say. "I want the same seat, the same friends, the same clothes, the same music, and the same classroom. I want the church to be the *same!*"

But that's not God's intent, as we'll see this morning in Acts 6. In Acts 6:1-7 we learn that there's no such thing as a problem-free church. We also learn how to deal with growing pains in the church. The account involves three scenes.

### I. The church faced a problem (1).

The account begins, "In those days." What days? In the early days of the history of the church. Those were days of rapid growth. The last figure Luke gave us was in Acts 4:4, which indicated the church in Jerusalem had swelled to 5,000 men. By the time we reach Acts 6, there must have been more than 20,000 in the church counting the women and youth that had joined.

That's quite a difference from the 120 that first met in the upper room! Talk about growing pains! I know the wonderful administrative challenges of pasturing a church our size, especially during a season of growth such as we're experiencing. I can't fathom the logistical concerns the explosive growth created for the First Church.

In a congregation of any size, but especially one experiencing growth, it's inevitable that somebody's needs will be overlooked. And that's what happened in Acts 6.

"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 (1)."

Luke mentions a twofold problem in the First Church.

**A. There was growth.** The number of disciples "was increasing," according to the text. The KJV uses the word "multiplied." Several times throughout the first five chapters of Acts Luke said people "were added" to the church (such as 2:41). The church had grown by addition. Now it's growing by *multiplication!*

You might be wondering, "Why do you call growth a *problem*? It's not a problem, is it?" No, it's not. Living organisms are supposed to grow, not stagnate. Jesus said He would build His church (Matt 16:18). Ephesians 4:16 says, "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, *grows* and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

Yes, growth is good. It must not be our god, but it's good. Henry Ward Beecher called success "a last-year's nest from which the birds have flown." We mustn't live in the past by clinging to yesterday's successes. We're in trouble when we start coasting.

However, know this about growth. When a church grows it reaches new people. But the people it reaches aren't always *like me*. Have you noticed that? In fact, sometimes the people we reach are very different from us—and that's the way God intended. Such was the case in Jerusalem.

Here's where problem two entered. First, there was growth. Then...

**B. There was grumbling.** Luke says, "The Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food."

Luke mentions two groups of people that comprised the First Church. There were Hebraic Jews and Grecian Jews. We need some background if we're to appreciate the severity of the challenge that confronted the early church.

The Hebraic Jews (called the "Hebrews" in the KJV) were Hebrew (or Aramaic) speaking Jews. They had grown up and lived in Israel. They maintained exclusive separation from the Gentile world—and often looked down upon Jews who failed to maintain this separation. In terms of background, the apostles were Hebraic Jews.

Then there were Grecian Jews (called the "Grecians" in the KJV), also known as the Hellenists. They, too, were Jews, but unlike the native Hebrews they spoke Greek, rather than Aramaic or Hebrew. They lived outside of Israel, and had absorbed some of the Greek culture. Instead of using the Hebrew Bible, they used the Greek translation known as the Septuagint.

In Acts 2 many Grecian Jews came from all over the world to Jerusalem for Pentecost. And some of them got saved that day. So did many Hebraic Jews. Both types became Christians. Both types became part of the church. And no doubt, both brought their baggage with them. We all do.

Apparently, many of the Grecian Jews who converted to Christ at Pentecost chose to remain in Jerusalem rather than returning home. They wanted to learn more about Jesus.

Think of the differences that existed in the First Church in Jerusalem. For starters, they spoke different languages. They used different Bible translations. They wore different clothing styles. They came from different cultural backgrounds. And these differences were minor compared to the ones the now *Jewish* church would confront in a few years once they began to reach *Gentiles*—which happened in Acts 10.

Let this sink in. The first church reached people that prior to Christ had huge differences! They talked differently. They dressed differently. They enjoyed different kinds of entertainment. They didn't even agree on the same Bible version.

Can people from such different backgrounds experience unity? The answer is not only that they can, but *must*, and here's how. Listen to Colossians 3:11, "Here [that is, in Christ, in the church] there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

When God saves people, He makes them *new* in Christ. In the new man, race doesn't divide us (Jew/Gentile). Ceremonial acts don't divide us (circumcision/uncircumcision). Culture doesn't divide us (barbarian, Scythian). And social status doesn't divide us (slave/free). In God's sight, if we are in Christ, we are *one*.

If that's true, we need to act like it. Is unity in the church natural? No. In Christ we have unity, but Ephesians 4:3 says we need to "make every effort to *keep* the unity of the Spirit." Threats to the church's unity will come in all shapes and sizes.

In the book of Acts, Satan tried to stop the church first through persecution (Acts 4)—but that only made it grow faster. Then he tried to snag the church by filling Ananias' heart with deceit (Acts 5:3)—but God eliminated that problem. And so Satan tried a third tactic. He created *dissension*. He knows a divided church is no threat to his kingdom.

There was grumbling. The Greek term for "complained" is *gongusmos*. The word can mean "displeasure expressed in murmuring" (the KJV actually translates it as "murmuring"). Sometimes it's translated "secret talk," or "whispering." There were actually two issues that contributed to this complaint, one obvious and one not-so-obvious.

1. *The surface problem concerned distribution of food.* The Grecian Jews said the Hebrew Jews were "discriminating against" their widows (as the *New Living*

*Translation* puts it). According to the accusation, their widows weren't getting the same treatment as the Hebraic widows were in the food distribution.

William Barclay explains the background, "In the synagogue there was a routine custom. Two collectors went round the market and the private houses every Friday morning and made a collection for the needy partly in money and partly in goods. Later in the day this was distributed. Those who were temporarily in need received enough to enable them to carry on; and those who were permanently unable to support themselves received enough for fourteen meals, that is, enough for two meals a day for the ensuing week."<sup>3</sup>

Apparently, the church followed this custom. And apparently, the Grecian Jews felt they were being slighted. Was the mistreatment real or perceived? And if real, was it intentional or not? We're not told. All we're told is that there was a problem, actually a *surface* problem which concerned the distribution of food.

Actually, there was a more serious problem, an undercurrent...

2. *The underlying problem was division in the fellowship.* There were two groups in the church. And there was tension. This issue could easily have split the church. And maybe that would be best, anyway. You can't expect people with such different backgrounds to get along. That's unrealistic.

WRONG! WRONG! WRONG! God's way is so much better as we'll see.

There's an Ozark story about a hound sitting in a country store and howling as hounds do. In comes a stranger who says to the storekeeper, "What's the matter with the dog?" "He's sitting on a cocklebur." "Why doesn't he get off?" "He'd rather holler."<sup>4</sup>

Quite honestly, some people would rather "holler" about problems. That's not what the First Church did in Acts 5.

## II. The church dealt with the problem (2-6).

Here's where the problem solving started: "So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together (2a)." Notice who took the initiative. *The Twelve* did, the apostles. You don't solve problems by running, or by dividing. You solve them by pulling together.

By the way, you'll notice no mention of divine revelation this time as there was in the situation with Ananias and Sapphira. Here we see the apostles working together to make an administrative decision.

It's worth noting what the apostles *didn't* do. It's what often happens in churches in our day. They didn't throw the complainers out. The result would have been horrendous. The Grecian Jews would have gone down the street a few blocks and stuck a sign in the ground, "Second Church of Jerusalem."

Which reminds me of the following story. A ship at sea happened to discover a man who'd been stranded on an island. The man was all alone on this deserted island, and had been there for some time. The captain of the ship went onto the island to greet the man. He noticed the island was empty except for three buildings.

"Where'd the three buildings come from?" the captain asked. The man replied, "I built them."

"What's the first building?" he inquired. "It's my home," came the reply.

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<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *Acts*, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Bits and Pieces*, May, 1990, p. 20.

“Well, what’s the second building?” the captain responded. “That’s my church,” the man responded.

“What about the third building?” he asked. And the man said, “That’s where I used to go to church.”

The members of the First Church could have parted company. They could have said, “Since we’re different, let’s separate.” Or at least they might have started two benevolent funds, one for the Hebrews, and the other for the Hellenists. But no. Refusing to run from their problem, they addressed it head on.

Since we all have problems, we can learn from their example. They followed three steps.

**A. Step #1: Establish priorities (2).** “So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.”

I believe it was Lee Iacocca who said, “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” There were two ministries calling for the attention of the apostles. There was the ministry of the Word, and there was the ministry of benevolence. Both were valid ministries, but they couldn’t do both.

It’s certainly not because they felt they were too good to work in the soup kitchen.<sup>5</sup> But they knew something we tend to forget. It’s not just sin that can distract us from doing God’s will. Good things can distract us, too, if we let them.

Is it good to spend time with your family? Sure. But is God pleased when we miss Sunday worship so we can have family time?

Is it good to work hard in school? Yes. But what about spending so much time studying that we fail to carve out daily quiet time with God?

The apostles established a twofold priority grid. In essence they said...

1. *It’s important to meet material needs.* But...

2. *It’s more important to meet eternal needs.* It wouldn’t be right to neglect the ministry of the Word to wait on tables. The word translated “tables” (*trapeza*) is related to the Greek word for “bank.” It can refer to money matters as well as an eating table.

Is collecting and counting money valid church ministry? How about visiting widows and making sure they’ve got food? Should churches do such ministries? The answer is, *sure*. But the apostles said, “It wouldn’t be right for us to do them.”

Why wouldn’t it be right? Because the apostles knew the Lord chose them to be His witnesses. To them He delegated the ministry of the Word.

A church that abandons the centrality of the Word for humanitarian efforts will soon die. If you doubt that, consider a lesson from history. In the early 1900’s Liberal theologians invaded seminaries and churches in America, promoting their social gospel. The churches that bought the lie began to die.

Is it important to meet material needs? Yes. But it’s more important to meet eternal needs. What good is it to fill a person’s belly and fail to save his soul from hell? It’s true that Christ fed the hungry. Christ healed the sick. Christ met physical needs. But while He didn’t ignore physical needs, He made it clear man’s greatest need is spiritual.

“What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?” Jesus asked. That’s why He went to the cross, to save *sinners* from their sins. And that’s why He conquered the grave, to reconcile us to God.

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<sup>5</sup> The present tense verb indicates continual action. They weren’t saying they would never serve tables, but rather do it regularly and continually.

So step #1 is vital. We need to establish priorities.

**B. Step #2: Establish a plan of action (3-4).** “Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them <sup>4</sup> and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

D. L. Moody used to say that it was better to put ten men to work than to try to do the work of ten men. Once the apostles clarified their priorities, they devised a practical plan to address the problem, a twofold proposal. Again, we can learn a lot from it.

1. *Let the church members serve (3).* Notice that the apostles delegated this matter to the church. The apostles devised a basic plan to address the “soup kitchen” problem, and then told the *brothers* to find qualified people to implement it.

Why did they propose choosing *seven* men? Apparently, the number coincided with the Jewish practice of setting up boards of seven men for particular duties.<sup>6</sup>

But not just any men would do. They had to meet qualifications. They had to be “men,” first of all. Certainly, women filled an important role in the ministry of the New Testament church. Ladies such as Dorcas, Lydia, Priscilla, and Phoebe were greatly used by God. But they did not lead the church, a role God designed for qualified men (1 Cor 11:3).

Next, these men had to be “full of the Spirit.” They couldn’t have a personal agenda or axe to grind. They couldn’t be self-sufficient, self-seeking men, but had to be men who lived in full submission to the Holy Spirit and His agenda.

In addition, they needed to be men “full of wisdom.” They weren’t to search merely for men with the most Bible knowledge, but for men who knew how to *apply* Bible knowledge to life. That’s wisdom. It takes tact and common sense to work with people.

Church growth specialists suggest that to be a healthy church at least 60 percent of the people should be involved in some type of church work. I don’t know about that figure, but I do know the apostles refused to rob people of the joy of ministry. Here was phase one of their proposal. Find seven men who meet these qualifications, and we’ll delegate the benevolent ministry to them. In other words, let the church members serve. Here’s phase #2...

2. *Let the church leaders give spiritual direction (4).* “We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

According to a *Christianity Today* survey, the average pastor today spends only three minutes a day in prayer. Maybe that’s because it’s so easy for pastors to see themselves as *shopkeepers* rather than *shepherds*.

I must be at every meeting. I must participate in every ministry. I must contribute to every decision.

I sat under a pastor one time who did everything in the church. He led the singing, gave the announcements, offered the Sunday morning prayer, did ministry in music at times, as well as preached the sermon. He was a godly man, that’s not in question. But his view of pastoral ministry wasn’t healthy in my estimation.

It’s easy for leaders to think, “If you want something done right, do it yourself.” I’m impressed that the apostles didn’t buy into that notion.

Here’s a key principle. *Push ministries down.* Get the right people in place, then delegate. That’s the church leader’s job according to Ephesians 4:12ff., to equip the

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<sup>6</sup> I. H. Marshall, *Acts*, p. 126.

saints for the work of the ministry. Let the church members serve. Let the church leaders give spiritual direction.

There's the plan. But a plan is just a plan until it's what?

**C. Step #3: Put it into practice (5-6).** “This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup> They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.”

Here's what happened.

1. *The church chose qualified men (5).* Notice that *the church* did the choosing. The apostles gave direction, but then the people did the work. They looked, found potential candidates, interviewed them, and finally brought them to the apostles. They brought *seven* men as instructed, seven qualified men.

2. *The leaders commissioned them for service (6).* The apostles prayed and laid hands on these men. Not only did this indicate the seven men would be accountable to the apostles, but it also unleashed them for ministry.

What's interesting is that all seven men chosen had Greek names. That probably indicates they were Grecian Jews, that is, Greek speaking Jews.

Remember, the Greek-speaking Jews were the ones who were complaining about their widows. And even though there were probably more Hebraic Jews in the Jerusalem church than Grecian Jews, the church decided to elect Grecian Jews to head up this ministry.

That's impressive, isn't it? As James Boice observes, “They might have said, ‘There should be a few Greeks on this board to represent the Greek point of view. But we are the majority. At least four of the seven, maybe five of the seven, should speak Aramaic.’ But they did not operate that way. Either they deliberately picked the Greek-speaking leaders, or else they just picked out the seven best men.”<sup>7</sup>

It's a beautiful thing when church members humble themselves before the Spirit.

### III. The church saw God work through the problem (7).

“So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” We see three evidences of God's blessing here...

**A. The Word kept spreading.** That wouldn't have happened if they'd refused to deal with their problem. But they did. And God blessed.

**B. The disciples kept multiplying.** In fact, they “increased rapidly.” Growth led to growing pains. But once the church worked through the problems, they experienced more growth. And eventually more challenges would come, but God's grace would be sufficient for them all. A third evidence of God's blessing...

**C. The hard cases came, too.** Not just *some* priests, but a *large number* of priests became obedient to the faith.

By the way, there's an excellent way to describe a true Christian. It's not just a person who's made an intellectual decision. It's a person who's experienced the life change that results from faith in Christ.

It's been estimated that there were 8,000 Jewish priests involved in the temple ministry in Jerusalem. Luke says “a large number” of them converted to Christ.

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<sup>7</sup> James Boice, *Acts*, p. 114.

Think of the implications. To become a Christian these men put their jobs on the line. What did the priests do? They performed sacrifices and other duties associated with the Levitical sacrificial system.

But when a person becomes a Christian, he is saying, “I believe the sacrifice of Christ alone is sufficient to save.” Do you see the tension? Yes, God can save the hard cases, too.

Beloved, let the message of Acts 6 sink in. There is no such thing as a problem free church. In Acts 6, the church had a problem, as all churches do. But the church dealt with the problem. And consequently, the church experienced God’s blessing.

Ken Taylor relates the following story in his *Romans for the Family Hour*:

“One hot day a family traveling down the highway between Johnstown and Jamestown stopped at Farmer Jones’s place to ask for a drink of water, which he gladly gave them.

‘Where are you headed?’ he asked them.

‘We are moving from Johnstown to Jamestown to live,’ they told him. ‘Can you tell us what the people there are like?’

‘Well, what kind of people did you find where you lived before?’ Farmer Jones asked.

‘Oh, they were the very worst kind!’ the people said. ‘They were gossipy and unkind and indifferent. We are glad to move away.’

‘Well, I am afraid you will find the same in Jamestown,’ replied Farmer Jones.

The next day another car stopped, and the same conversation took place. These people were moving to Jamestown, too.

‘What kind of neighbors will we find there?’ they asked.

“Well,’ said Farmer Jones, ‘what kind of neighbors did you have where you lived before?’

‘Oh, they were the very best! They were so kind and considerate that it almost broke our hearts to have to move away.’

‘Well, you will find exactly the same kind again,’ Farmer Jones replied.”<sup>8</sup>

There is no such thing as a problem free church, any more than there is a problem free town, neighborhood, family, or workplace. We need to learn to deal with our problems in a God-honoring way.

People who refuse to deal with their problems are in for misery—and so are those around them. Kent Hughes is right, “Christians who were unhappy at their last church or town or job are probably unhappy where they are now.”<sup>9</sup>

That being the case, let’s make it personal. What should we do when problems come?

#### Let’s make it personal: When problems come our way...

Based on the example of the early church, we need to do three things...

1. *We must see God in them.* God is at work. He is sovereign. Do you see Him?
2. *We must seek God in them.* He has the answers. And He will guide us.
3. *We must serve God through them.* We mustn’t run from our problems. Rather, after seeing God and seeking God, we must seek to serve God through our problems.

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<sup>8</sup> Taken from Kent Hughes, *Acts*, pp. 98-9.

<sup>9</sup> Hughes, p. 99.