

# Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”  
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

*“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)*

## **Managing Growth**

**February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2023**

**Acts 6:1-7**

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### **Introduction:**

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 6:1-7; that's on page 914 in the pew Bibles. We've been doing a slow walk through the Acts of the Apostles in order to re-evaluate everything we think we know about church. These stories have been carefully selected. Luke was a historian. He had a front row seat for a lot of the stories we are talking about, but he also interviewed other sources who saw and experienced things that he didn't and then like any historians, he made selections. This story appears to have been selected because it tells us some important things about how the early church managed growth. Back in Acts 5 we saw the church OBEYING GOD UNDER PRESSURE and we talked about how every time you step forward in faith against opposition and persecution you receive further help and filling from the Holy Spirit. There is a spiral effect. By the grace of God, you obey in some sort of costly way. You step out. You choose Jesus even when it hurts. You say no to a temptation. You press through a spiritual barrier. You pay a price to keep on preaching. And God gives more of the Holy Spirit to those who obey him.

And your ministry takes a great leap forward.

Now how do you manage that?

Because growth is AWESOME and also COMPLICATED and so here in this story we see a number of principles illustrating how the church managed the explosive growth that God gave.

Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 1:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. <sup>2</sup> And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” <sup>5</sup> 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 Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. <sup>7</sup> 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. (Acts 6:1–7 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Now, if you’ve been tracking with us for the past couple of weeks then this passage may feel like a pretty dramatic departure from the sorts of things we were talking about in Acts 5. In Acts 5 it was all about the Holy Spirit. Last Sunday we were talking about how at the end of the day, what we do isn’t the most important thing, what MATTERS is the Holy Spirit whom God gives to those who obey him.

Last week was all about the SPIRIT – and now this week is about institutional structure. That seems like an odd transition.

But is it?

Is WISE leadership unspiritual?

Is good STRUCTURE unbiblical?

And the answer of course is no. Just like our physical bodies are BONE and SPIRIT so too are churches. And as we all know, what happens in the BONES can influence what happens in the SPIRIT and so it is actually very like the Bible, to follow up a chapter on the Spirit with a chapter on leadership and structure – and that’s what we have here. In this short little passage I think we can identify 5 helpful principles for managing growth as a church.

## **5 Principles For Managing Growth**

And the first one is this:

### **1. Diversity is beautiful but complicated**

As the church GREW it became more diverse. If you go back to the start of the story, the church was small and very homogenous. In Acts 1:15 we are told that the church, before the Day of Pentecost, numbered about 120 people. The church was made up mostly of the Apostles and their families, so the leaders were all young men, probably between 18-30, along with their wives, a bunch of young kids and a few moms and widows. They all knew each other, half of them were related, they were all Hebrew speaking Jews – most of them were from Galilee. It was arguably the least diverse church in the history of the universe.

And then Pentecost happened.

The Holy Spirit fell on them, they all started speaking languages they didn’t know, they ran out into the city streets and started preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all the various pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem from all over the Mediterranean world for the Feast of Pentecost.

According to Acts 2, about 3000 of those people converted and joined the church.

Stop and think about that.

All of the sudden – this group of 120 largely inter-related Galilean, Hebrew speaking youngish Jews is now responsible for overseeing a MEGACHURCH made up LARGELY of Greek speaking pilgrims.

And apparently – according to this story – many of those pilgrims STAYED in Jerusalem. That's what caused this problem. It was a good problem – but it was a problem. The text says that a complaint arose from the Hellenists – that word refers to Jews who only speak Greek. The language of the Mediterranean world at the time was Greek – so Jews who grew up outside of Israel – and that was most of them – spoke GREEK and only a little bit of Hebrew. About the same amount of Hebrew as Jewish boys in New York City on the eve of their Bar Mitzvah. And so the problem was essentially linguistic. These people stayed in Jerusalem because they wanted to be a part of the church – there was no church for them back in Athens or Rome or Corinth or Parthia or wherever they came from. The church in Jerusalem was the only church in the world – so of course they stayed. But they had no jobs. They ran out of money. And they needed to eat.

So a huge food distribution program sprung up basically overnight. It was funded by CRAZY GENEROUS GIVING like we talked about in Acts 4. But eventually the language barrier became a real problem. Greek families were having a hard time communicating their need. Hebrew leaders were having a hard time understanding need – and so growth stalled and fractures began to emerge.

That's what this story is about!

Now – notice that the solution was not to divide into two churches – a Greek church and a Hebrew church. Rather the solution was to develop new leadership structures. Obviously the early church understood the beauty and value of diversity.

I wonder if we do?

Very often pragmatism seems more important to us as Christians than diversity. There is nothing easier than growing a monolithic church. Many of you know I started out in the Seeker Church model back in the early 90's. The church I worked at self-identified as a church for Baby Boomers and their kids. We were targeting a specific demographic. It was so much easier. You didn't have to do the worship war thing – you just played the songs that Baby Boomers liked. You didn't have to provide a variety of programs, you just did what Baby Boomers liked and what their kids liked – it was so easy.

But it was wrong and warped and weak – and so it died.

Good!

We weren't called to EASY we were called to beautiful. The church is supposed to be the most diverse community on planet earth. Old people, young people, men, women, boys, girls, rich, poor, white, black, Gentile, Jew – that's the call.

Listen, this text is reminding us that diversity is worth fighting for. It is complicated, but it is beautiful and it is biblical and that's why we see the leadership of this church doing what they needed to do to maintain it – and we need to pay attention to that. Brothers and sisters, we've all been hearing about how more and more people are going to be leaving Toronto in order to move to smaller communities an hour or so away from the city so that they can buy houses and yet still get to the office once or twice a week. In other words, everyone and their brother is moving to Orillia.

Are you ready for that?

Are you ready to make STRUCTURAL CHANGES to welcome and accommodate newcomers – newcomers who aren't related to you – like everyone else in this church. Newcomers who may not look like you or who may not talk like you or have the exact same hobbies and habits as you.

Can you imagine the day when Cornerstone Baptist Church has an “All Nations Pastor” or a “New Canadians Outreach Oversight Committee”. I hope you can, because that day is coming.

Diversity is complicated – but it is beautiful and biblical, so by the grace of God, we’re going to do it.

The second thing we notice in this story is that:

## **2. Certain priorities must always be maintained**

When the food distribution ministry began to break down due to the complexities we’ve just discussed, the disciples could have said: “Let’s just forget the whole thing! It’s taking too much time and it costs too much money, let’s just pull the plug.”

They didn’t say that.

And neither did they say: “Alright fellas, we’ve just got to buckle down here and focus all of our efforts on solving this problem. Peter, you’ll take the breakfast shift, Andrew you’ve got elevensies, John, you’ll do lunch”.

They didn’t say that either. Instead they said:

“It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.<sup>3</sup> 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.” (Acts 6:2–3 ESV)

They said: “It’s got to get done, but it can’t be done by us. We were given a specific task. We were told to teach and preach the Word of God.”

Good leaders FIGHT to maintain proper priorities.

You've heard the expression: "The squeaky wheel gets the grease"?

Well in a church of that size, there are an awful lot of squeaky wheels and so the Apostles understood that this ministry – the benevolence ministry – as important as it is – would absolutely and utterly consume them if they allowed it to. And they saw what that would lead to. If they stopped preaching the Word to oversee this ministry, then the church would become a Soup Kitchen – and soup doesn't save souls.

But that's not to say that soup doesn't matter – of course it does. But it isn't ultimate. What we see the church doing here is sorting out front and back seat issues. Word ministry and benevolence ministry BOTH BELONG IN THE CAR - but one has to be in the front seat and one has to be in the back seat - and the moment you get that wrong, your church begins to die.

A few years before he passed, R.C. Sproul commented at some length on the disturbing trend of pastoral resignation. He wasn't just talking about older pastors retiring – he was talking about pastors of all ages giving up the ministry – and he shared his opinion as to what he thought the problem was. He said:

"Today a minister is expected to be the CEO of a corporation. He is expected to do the administration and the work of development; he is expected to be an expert in counselling and pastoral care. As a result, we have raised up a generation of pastors who are jacks of all trades and masters of none, and one of the reasons why they do not open the Word of God for the congregation on Sunday morning is that they do not know how. They have spent their time learning everything else but the texts of Scripture."<sup>1</sup>

According to Sproul too many pastors are being asked to do too many things and they are ill equipped to do the one thing that matters most.

I think he's right – and to be perfectly honest with you, that's one of the main reasons that I am here. One of the reasons I took this job was because one of the Elders who was on the search

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<sup>1</sup> R.C. Sproul, *Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Sanford: Ligonier Ministries, 2019), 99.

committee said that in this church they expect the Pastor to spend at least 50% of his time every week on Word ministry.

And I do.

I preach the Word once a week here on a Sunday morning, and then I have a small group mid-week – right now it’s the B1 Leadership Group, last semester it was Cornerstone U – and preparing for that stuff takes time and the leadership here gets that. And then a few years ago we stumbled upon another way to do Word ministry – through the Into the Word podcast and radio program, and through that medium we reach thousands of people every week with Bible teaching and all of that takes time. I started here spending about 50% of my time on Word ministry – but in the last 5 years it’s grown to about 70% - and I have asked the Board on numerous occasions if they continue to support the way I’m using my time and every time they say the same thing: Word ministry is the main thing. Everything else needs to support and adorn that.

That’s why this church continues to grow – because the Word of God is POWERFUL. Soup is good, sandwiches are good, all of that is good – but only the Word of God preached, taught, discussed and applied SAVES SOULS.

So in a good church, they keep that in the front seat, even while they stock the back seat and the trunk and the roof rack with OTHER important but sub-ultimate things.

Those are the two main lessons in this passage, but there a couple more that I want you to see.

The third lesson is this:

### **3. Ecclesiology should be characterized by wisdom and flexibility**

I realize that “ecclesiology” is a big, fancy word, but it is a good word, so we might as well just learn what it means. It means “what we believe about and how we practice church” – and the point here in this story would seem to be that there is plenty of room for us to be FLEXIBLE with



respect to FORM. You get the impression in the Book of Acts that the theology of the church was entirely INFLEXIBLE – but the methods and the forms were subject to change based on principles of wisdom and prudence.

A few weeks ago I referred to a John Piper quote without actually showing it to you, so I'll show it to you now. In his book on preaching and worship he says:

“What we find in the New Testament is a stunning degree of nonspecificity for worship as an outward form and a radical intensification of worship as an inward experience of the heart.”<sup>2</sup>

He says that there with respect to WORSHIP forms but I think the same thing could be said about STRUCTURAL forms. The Bible doesn't say how many committees a church should have; the Bible doesn't provide a set of rules for how to run a congregational meeting – there is a stunning lack of specificity in the Bible with respect to the DETAILS of institutional governance – and so we can't be DOGMATIC about such things. Obviously, we have to land somewhere on all these questions; we have to adopt FORMS and make use of them, but we shouldn't be excommunicating other churches because they adopt different FORMS, and likewise, as we see in this text, we shouldn't be so committed to our preferred FORMS that we fail to adapt and modify our structures so as to respond to new challenges and opportunities.

The reason this church in Acts 6 continued to grow, humanly speaking, was because the Apostles were wise enough to realize that the new situation – with the church being much bigger now and far more diverse - required a new approach to leadership. Previous to this, all the decisions and oversight had funnelled through The Twelve. But that's not going to work anymore – so they create “The Seven”. They invent a new level of leadership, seemingly, out of thin air!

Now who are these guys?

We sometimes think of this story as depicting the birth of the deaconate – but that really isn't what's happening here. I. Howard Marshall explains, he says:

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<sup>2</sup> John Piper, *Expository Exultation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 26.

“Although the verb ‘serve’ comes from the same root as the noun which is rendered into English as ‘deacon’, it is noteworthy that Luke does not refer to the Seven as deacons; their task had no formal name. The choice of seven men corresponded with Jewish practice in setting up boards of seven men for particular duties.”<sup>3</sup>

The function of the Seven in Acts is actually much closer to that of elders than it is to deacons. Remember, the money for this project had originally been “laid at the Apostles’ feet”. They were responsible for overseeing the funds and the distribution of what the funds were given for. The fact that the funds were given for FOOD didn’t turn the Apostles into deacons and it was the Apostles doing this job for the last two chapters – but now here, when the job got too big, they appointed an oversight board. An oversight board is what we typically call a group of elders – and it is elders that we see in Acts overseeing church money. So in Acts 11:30 when the church in Antioch wanted to send money to the church in Jerusalem it says:

“they did so, sending it **to the elders** by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.” (Acts 11:30 ESV)

So actually, it seems that what is happening here is that the church in Jerusalem is setting up an oversight committee to manage the food ministry, specifically, the food ministry to Greek speaking Jews – and given that later in this chapter we see Stephen – one of the Seven – debating with other synagogue leaders on behalf of the church, it would appear, that unlike deacons, the Seven WERE recognized teachers. So the Tyndale NT Commentary says here:

“It would seem rather that the two groups were in close contact, even if they worshipped separately in their own languages, and that the Twelve had a general authority over the whole church, while the Seven were leaders of the Greek-speaking section.”<sup>4</sup>

So they were one church – but there were certain ministries that had to be carried out in different languages – and so an oversight committee was formed to manage that.

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<sup>3</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/ Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 135.

<sup>4</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/ Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 133.

Now is that commanded anywhere in the Bible?

Did Jesus say something about that, somewhere in the Gospels?

Is there some kind of Old Testament precedent that authorizes that kind of innovation?

No.

But there is nothing that forbids it and doing it reflected principles of wisdom and prudence.

Again – on the other side of Pentecost, with our new hearts and with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the Word of God taught accurately and authoritatively by Jesus, it is almost as if God trusts us to handle some of these decisions relating to method and form.

If you don't understand that then you will find yourself fighting Holy Wars over all kinds of things that don't really matter. Churches that grow permit a fair degree of flexibility with respect to form.

The fourth thing that I think is worth noticing here is that:

#### **4. Major change requires collaboration between congregants and leaders**

The creation of this oversight committee was clearly a collaborative effort between the Apostles and the people. The Apostles identified the need and established the criteria and then they said to the people:

“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.” (Acts 6:3 ESV)

That is wise and prudent PROCESS.

Again, friends, GOOD PROCESS is not unspiritual – and I can tell you this, BAD PROCESS impacts and impedes the spiritual. When leaders are dictatorial, the Spirit tends to leave the building. That’s been my experience. It’s one thing to be firm about doctrinal matters – I’m all for that – but a leader who has opinions about every matter of form and preference and who imposes those forms and preferences as if they are the Word of God delivered from on tablets of stone from Mount Sinai is a burden to the people and a barrier to the movement of the Spirit.

Thank God for leaders who know when to insist and when to include!

And that’s what we see in this story. The Apostles say: “We need an oversight committee. The people on it should have wisdom, and should be born again, Spirit-filled believers. Find people like that and we’ll get this thing done.”

That’s good process. Any major change on matters of form and structure should be a collaboration between leaders and congregation. When people are included, they tend to stay invested – and that helps a church continue to grow.

The fifth and final thing we should see here is that healthy things, freed from obstruction tend to grow.

## **5. Healthy things, freed from obstructions, tend to grow**

That’s the punchline of the story. They encountered a problem due to explosive growth, they were careful to protect their primary mandate, they made a decision based on principles of wisdom and prudence, in collaboration with the congregation as a whole:

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. (Acts 6:7 ESV)

Luke is making a not-so-subtle point here: you don't have to manufacture growth; when it comes to the church of Jesus Christ; you just have to get out of the way.

If you are doing what you were told to do – if you are preaching the Word and loving one another, then by and large the church is going to grow! We have the life-giving Word of God – which is sharper than any two edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intentions of the human heart. And we have the Holy Spirit of God – who is able to raise the dead, dig ears and open eyes so that people can see, hear and believe that the Christ is Jesus – so all things being equal, brothers and sisters, the church of Jesus is going to grow!

So if it doesn't grow, identify the obstruction and cast it off.

And the church should grow again!

Isn't that a wonderful truth to settle under?

We don't have to be super cool; we don't have to have put on a smoke and lights show. We just need to preach the Word and build a loving community of people. We need to respond to change and complexity with wisdom, prudence and appropriate collaboration – and if we do that, then the Holy Spirit – whom the Lord gives to those who obey him – will take care of the rest. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.