

Going Too Fast

By Phillip G. Kayser · Acts 6:1-2 · 2006-2-5

A number of years ago, the Navy was testing out a new cannon that was mounted on the wing of one of its fighter jets. The plane was flying at supersonic speeds, but the cannon shells were subsonic. And a disaster happened. The fighter actually ran into the shells it had fired just seconds before. And it shot itself down. The jet was simply traveling too fast.

In part, that was what precipitated some of the problems in this chapter. The church had been growing so fast that the apostles were not able to keep on top of things. They didn't even notice that the problems were there. Verse 1 says, "Now in those days, when the number of disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution."

Things were going fast. When you go fast, you tend to do things without analyzing them. And when you don't analyze, you tend to do the things that come naturally. And what comes naturally isn't always the right thing. And so this chapter has the church slow down, re-evaluate and make the corrections that need to take place. Every Christian organization has to go through this process from time to time. Sometimes they have to go through it because of the complaints of the people. Sometimes they go through it because the officers catch the problem before the people do. Sometimes they go through it simply because they have regularly scheduled times of re-evaluation, and during that process have realized the need to make changes. And our own church is in a stage of rethinking the question – "How do we do the work of ministry more effectively?" So pray for us. Pray for wisdom. I am excited to have elders who are willing and able to take pre-emptive steps needed for the health of the church. And so, that is all we are going to deal with today, is verses 1-2, and this issue of what happens when you go too fast.

One thing that happens is problems arrive. They are not always problems that will shoot the church down. Sometimes the problems are sin, and sometimes they are not – they just administrative. In this case, it was both administrative and sinful problems.

One of the things that is fascinating about the Bible is that it never overlooks the faults of its heroes, even when those heroes write the books. If you were to write a biography of yourself, you would probably be reluctant to write about all the embarrassing details that the Bible authors wrote about themselves. Whether we are dealing with a Jacob or a David, the weaknesses are highlighted right along with the strengths. And it is no different in this chapter. The Bible is refreshingly frank about sin. As my parents' generation used to word it, the Bible is willing to call a spade a spade. Too often you see books that look back to the New Testament period as being the church in its purity and innocence and they long to go back to the good old days. But let me assure you that the grass was *not* greener on the other side of the historical fence. All you have to do is look at the Church at Corinth, Thessalonica, Thyatira, Sardis and Pergamos to see that the New Testament church was *anything but* ideal. It was a mess. It had every sin that we have today. It had problems with teachers, with ruling elders, with the people

themselves. It had problems at the local level as well as the Presbytery level. It is simply naïve to speak of the New Testament church as being the church in its purity. No way.

And because of the realism of Scripture, we as sinners can relate to their struggles and find help when we fall into similar sins. In this case it was the sins of prejudice and murmuring which were threatening the progress of the church.

The Sinful Attitudes (1)

Note That There Was Sin In The Midst Of Vibrant Christianity

Let's analyze the sinful attitudes. The first thing that I want you to notice is that this sin cropped up in the midst of a vibrant Christianity. Sounds like a contradiction doesn't it? But the Bible nowhere presents the church as sinless. Vibrant Christianity is forgiven sinners who are seeking to put off the old life by God's grace and are seeking to put on the new life. A vibrant church is not a church that thinks it has got it made. *In fact*, in the book of Revelation that was the definition for the *lukewarm* church of Laodicea. John rebuked them in these words: "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'" [and he is speaking there in terms of spiritual riches – have need of nothing] "and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." Every one of us apart from Christ's grace are destitute and unfit to be God's children. So vibrant Christianity is not sinless Christianity, but it is *forgiven* Christianity, *and* it is a Christianity that is gaining the victory more and more over the world the flesh and the devil. So we should not be too harsh on churches that may not be as far along the road toward holiness as we think they should be. We should rejoice if they are struggling to grow. At least there is the struggle. Where you ought to be nervous is where people do not struggle and they are satisfied with sin. None of us will fully reach the goal until we get to heaven, right?

But why do I say that this was a vibrant Christianity? Three reasons: 1) it was vigorously growing church, and growing for all the right reasons.

2. It was a church that sought to practice the Word. 3) Third, it was a church that was willing to make corrections as soon as sin was brought to its attention. Let's look at those three reasons.

A Vigorously Growing Church (1a)

First, it was a vigorously growing church. "Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying." (v. 1a) This was not just addition. The Lord was richly prospering the church by causing it to grow exponentially or to multiply. And you see this language of growth just escalating as the book moves along. Verse 1 speaks of "multiplying," verse 7 adds that they "multiplied *greatly*," which later produces "multitudes" (8:6) and then "many myriads" – which is innumerable (21:20). It is no wonder that the unbelievers were saying that the Christians "have turned the world upside down." (17:6) Despite the persecution, the church was experiencing victory rather than defeat.

They were growing at a time when you would expect people to be bailing out left and right. I mean, think about it. Think of what would happen in America if any American newspaper started making reports about a mega church like these Sadducees were doing in these chapters. I think you would be having nervous people bailing out of the church left and right. Certainly a lot of people would stay. But think about modern Christianity that is pre-occupied with image, and imagine what people would do if every day in the newspaper and on TV and on the radio you had false accusations about the pastors such as these: "Pastors of First Presbyterian Church of Jerusalem arrested for a second time and found guilty of four criminal charges," or "Lawless pastors refuse to submit to lawful jurisdiction of the state," or "Insubordinate pastors refuse to stop engaging in slanderous and subversive propaganda," or "Church of Jerusalem found guilty of treason." I can almost guarantee you that most large churches would significantly dwindle in numbers. Maybe even our own church would.

And that would probably be good, because it would purify the church and make it stronger. The joke goes that a pastor from England and Scotland get together at a church conference and comparing stories. The pastor from England says, "We have experienced wonderful revival and the Lord has added 500 people to the church." Pastor MacTavish from Scotland says, "Wonderful brother. We too have had revival." Pastor Brown asks, "Well, how many additions have you had?" And the Scottish pastor says, "*Additions*, brother?! Nay. We have had blessed subtractions." That's what they call a Scottish revival. And sometimes the Lord does bring revival in exactly that way. Persecution frequently purges the church of chaff.

But here we have a situation where all the reasons for losing people exist, yet the church is growing anyway. It is growing for all of the right reasons: the Word of God is triumphing in their lives. I love the way Acts 19:20 words it. After describing the multitudes who were coming to Christ, Luke summarizes by saying, "So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed." It was a vibrant church *into which these sins came*. Never think that problems will not be present in a growing, vibrant church.

A "Doers Of The Word" Church

ministering to those in need (1-2; cf. 2:40-47; 4:32-37)

Another indication that this was a vibrant church is that the text describes the members as doers of the Word. It's easy to focus on the discrimination and to totally miss the wonderful mercy ministries that were going on in this church. Verse 1 goes on to say, "there arose a murmuring against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the" [note this phrase] "*daily* distribution. 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.'" So even though there were problems, this church had a vibrant diaconal ministry *without any deacons*. Now that is significant.

That's *very* significant. Most churches couldn't commit the sin of discrimination in their mercy ministry because they don't have *any* mercy ministries to the needy. All you have to do is remind yourself of the description of this ministry in chapter 2 and 4 and you will see that they practiced what they preached. Their love was demonstrated in a concrete way that was sacrificial. And this was one of the means that God used to cause

His church to grow. They were busy – almost so busy that they were going too fast to notice the problems.

those in need ministering to church (cf. 1 Tim. 5:9)

But let me give you a hint that it wasn't just the rich people who were ministering. I believe that even the widows who needed the food and help were involved in ministry. And I say this, because it was an apostolic rule that if you didn't work, you didn't eat – at least if you were capable of working. No matter how poor a person may be, *he can still minister to the Lord*, and Paul in several passages warned about extending long term charity without requiring responsibility for those who are being helped to minister. For example, in 1 Timothy 5, some of the requirements of the widows who were being cared for are listed out in this way. She must be

"well reported of for good works" (1 Tim. 5:9)

"if she has brought up children" (1 Tim. 5:9)

"if she has lodged strangers" (1 Tim. 5:9)

"if she has washed the saints feet (1 Tim. 5:9)

"if she has relieved the afflicted" (1 Tim. 5:9)

"if she has diligently followed every good work" (1 Tim. 5:9)

So this was no welfare handout that they were engaging in. Ministry was not considered to be the domain of only a privileged few. It was expected of the body as a whole. And the whole body was involved, just as they had been in chapters 2 and 4. This was a vibrant church. And as we'll be seeing shortly, it was a humble church that was willing to correct problems as soon as they surfaced.

My conclusion is that we should not give up on a church because there is sin. Rather, seek to promote its health by doing what you can do to overcome the effects and causes of the sin.

Note That There Was Sin On Both Sides Of The Fence

Hebrews should not have had prejudice

Let me briefly describe the two sins of this church. First, there was the sin of prejudice. It took several chapters before God finally broke the Jews of their ingrained racial prejudice. And by the way, the Old Testament did not authorize that. The Old Testament separation was a religious, not an ethnic separation. In fact, they were commanded to show love to foreigners, pagans and even their enemies. But over the past 100 years, the religious leaders had changed that into an ethnic prejudice.

Just so that you can get a feel for the strength of the prejudice, remember that these Hellenists who they are discriminating against are technically Jews. Some of them may have been converted Gentiles, and others may have simply not spoken Hebrew. But they were all technically Jews. They had gotten circumcised, ate Kosher food, followed all the Jewish regulations. In almost every other way they were identical to the Hebrews except for ethnic origin. Now if prejudice manifested itself amongst Jews who were not Jewish enough, you can imagine how hard it was for the church to overcome the prejudice

against full blown, uncircumcised, non-Kosher Gentiles. Peter appears to be just as grossed out by God's command that he enter a Gentile house and *eat* there as he was grossed out by God's command that he eat unclean animals in his vision. It was totally distasteful for him. As late as 11:19 Luke says this: "Now those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch," [get this phrase] "preaching the word to no one but the Jews only." OK? They are in Gentile lands, but they are preaching exclusively to Jews. They are the only ones they are evangelizing. It was an elitist club to some extent. There was racial prejudice.

When I was in Georgia I knew people that were so strongly prejudiced against blacks that they would break off a friendship with you if you befriended a black. I know Black pastors in this city who have had friends ditch them as traitors because the Black pastor was willing to be friends with me and to go out to lunch with me. He was called a Whitey. Prejudice is not unique to one ethnic group or one place. It can crop up anywhere. And such prejudice has been around as long as we have recorded history.

In this chapter, the Hellenists were second class citizens. And the interesting thing about it is that nobody had noticed. Not even the apostles had noticed that this was the case. We tend to be blinded to our own cultural sins. We can recognize everybody else's sins, but our cultures tend to make us oblivious to the problems that we ourselves have. And it is especially true when you are focused on ministry and you are busy. You are going too fast to notice how your actions impact others. I've had many blacks and Asians tell me the subtle ways in which we whites can unwittingly show prejudice against skin color, and just be totally oblivious to the fact that we are prejudiced. And it's something we need to think about and repent of if we find ourselves making statements such as this: "Yeah, Blacks tend to do such and such," or "The problem I have with North Omaha." Such statements lump everyone together based on skin color. We can do the same thing with Hispanics or with Asians, and they can do the same with Whites. We can stereotype. Even though this prejudice among Jews was solved in this chapter, the book of Acts shows us how the root of the problem lingered on for many years. OK? That was the first sin.

Hellenists should not have been murmuring

But there was a second sin in the church. And those who are rightly resisting racial prejudice, and who are even *sensitive* to racial prejudice many times fail to deal with *this* sin. It wasn't just the Hebrews who were sinning. The Hellenists were living in sin as well in their responses to the Hebrews. When verse 1 says that there was a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, the Greek word is *gongusmos*. It is never used of a legitimate complaint. The Greek word used here by definition is a sin. It indicates the kind of murmuring and complaining that God judged over and over again in the bible. It always refers to a behind-the-back or secret grumbling, murmuring or complaining that undermines and that is spread in a private way rather than in a public way. This word is used to describe the rebellious murmuring of a workgang that demonstrates an undercurrent of bitterness, revenge, gossip and plotting. In fact, it is a kind of sin that is almost impossible for leadership to nail down or discipline because it goes on behind their backs, and often has some legitimate basis, even though the complaining itself is ungodly. It's very hard to deal with because they felt that they've got

a legitimate gripe. This word "complaint" is not a positive word. It is the type of talk that harbors wounds and rancor inside and spreads that rancor without a positive or constructive dealing with the problem. In secular literature, it was used by a Roman emperor to describe the murmuring of the masses that he was fearful might lead to revolt. Scripture forbids such murmuring because it is destructive of the persons who are engaging in it and it is destructive to those who listen, because it draws others into its poisonous effects. So there was not just the presence of the sin of prejudice, but also the sin of murmuring. One sin led to another.

Scripture always gives two options for dealing with sins: 1) Love covers over a multitude of sins. In other words, you ignore it. It doesn't bother you. 2) The second option is that love confronts sins and seeks to see them biblically resolved. But those are the only two options. These people were doing neither. Rather than going to the people involved and then going to the elders in a public way if necessary, they were murmuring or complaining in private amongst themselves; getting each other bitter.

Have you ever had that happen to you? Someone can come to you to complain about the sin of another person, and it might be a legitimate complaint. But that doesn't mean they should be sharing it with you. The *process* of dealing with sin is just as important as sin itself – otherwise you have two sins.

We as Christians need to guard against both of the sins manifested in this chapter because both can be destructive to the church. Remember that Jesus said in Matthew 18 that the elders are not the first line of defense when sin arises in the church. You the people are the first line of defense. And this is true whether the sin was against you, or whether you were the one who sinned against someone else. Matthew 5 brings up a situation where you sinned against someone else. And in that chapter He says that you need to quickly go to that person so that the two of you can deal with it alone. Matthew 18 deals with a situation where someone else has sinned against you. But the process is the same: What does Christ say? Does He tell us to bring it up to our friends as a prayer request? Or to gripe about your brother behind his back? No. Jesus said, "if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him *alone*." "If he hears you, you have gained your brother." But you know what? You don't gain your brother if he finds out that you have been gossiping and complaining about him behind his back. And that is exactly what this word complaint or murmuring indicates.

Now I hope you have been noticing Satan's tactics in this book. He's a very clever enemy. He tries to hit us up from every angle. Satan initially tried to undermine the church through personal insecurity (chapter 3). The apostles were unlettered nobodies who could have easily been intimidated by the intellectuals. But they dealt with the insecurity in a godly way, and Satan had to flee. Well, when that strategy didn't work, Satan tried to undermine the work of the church through *physical* intimidation (chapter 4), then through the sins of lying, pride and stealing (chapter 5). Then when that didn't work, through physical persecution in chapter 5, then through legislation. Satan never gives up. Here he tries again to get at the church from the inside.

The Danger Of Such Sin

Now you may not think of racism or murmuring as being that serious, but God judged people for both. Miriam, Moses' sister was struck with leprosy for her comments about Moses' Ethiopian wife. Israel was judged numerous times for murmuring. Using the same word, Paul warns us, "Let us not murmur, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed by the destroyer." (1 Cor. 10:10). So, in dealing with the sin of prejudice, let's not forget about the sin of murmuring. If you have things that are bothering you and you do not believe that you can in love cover them over and ignore them, then seek to resolve the problem by going to the ones involved. In a sense the elders were responsible for this problem because they had gotten themselves so busy that things were not getting done efficiently. Another way of saying it was that they were flying so fast that they lost sight of both sins and were in danger of having the plane shot down by its own bullets.

Thankfully, when the murmuring and the sin of prejudice came to their attention they tried to remedy the problem. We as elders want to be open and receptive to problems that we might be blind to, but which are bothering you. Rather than ignoring destructive behavior, lovingly deal with it. Rather than complaining to each other about sinful behavior, lovingly confront it. We'll be a stronger church if we do so.

The Proposed Solution (2-4)

What the Solution Was Not

Not Making A Contrast Between Spiritual And Secular

Let's look at the solution very briefly. Verse 2 says, "Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples..." It's easy to focus on the apostles and the new deacons who would be elected, but I want you to notice that the elders did not act unilaterally. The solution came from the body – from the congregation. It is very easy to assume that when there are needs, that the pastor or elders will provide the solutions to those needs. But the session here would like you to realize that many of the solutions come from the body itself. In this case, it is choosing leadership, but it is important to remember the active role that members played in all the work of the church. These deacons were not going to do the work of mercy ministries. They would head up and organize the work. But the regular church members were already active and would continue to be active. And in the New Testament you find men and women engaged in various types of mercy ministries.

Verse 2 goes on to say, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables." This was not meant to demean the work of mercy ministries. Rather, it was to enable the apostles to engage in what they were most gifted at. There was specialization and division of labor. This needs to occur in our church as well as the church grows and the ministry burdens grow.

But the other thing to notice from that phrase is that it implies that the apostles were heading up the mercy ministries at this point, and obviously not doing a very adequate job of it. To me this means several things: First, there is no task which is beneath the dignity of a pastor. If apostles could wait on tables, any one of us should be willing to. I

have willingly engaged in every task of the church, have helped the music team set up chairs and equipment at 7:30 on Sunday mornings, have been secretary and plumber and cleaner. That is Biblical. In fact, I would say that a potential elder or potential pastor who is not willing to serve in menial tasks does not yet have the servants heart to be a minister of the word. Verse 4 speaks of the specialization of the apostles in the phrase "ministry of the word." But did you realize that that word "ministry" means service. It's *diakonia*, the word we get deacon from. In fact, in verse 2, the word "serve" in "serve tables," is the same word. You can't get away from servanthood. And the apostles were good servants of the Word because they had already shown that they were willing to serve in any capacity. So the first thing I want you to notice is that there is no task that is beneath the dignity of a pastor. Did Jesus not wash the disciples' feet? He did.

But the second thing implied from verse 2 is that there does come a time when pastors, associate pastors and elders need to become more specialized. That doesn't mean that they won't still pitch in and help on any kind of project, but it does mean that specialization is Biblical and at a certain phase in a church's life it becomes inevitable. He didn't say, it is not possible, but it is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. There's a better way for the church to efficiently function.

The third thing that we notice is that prayer and preaching the Word take precedence over mercy ministries. I think that's important to keep in mind because I have seen an over-reaction in some churches. Because they have seen so little mercy ministries in the past, they have made this the top priority. It is an important priority, but it is not top. The apostles clearly indicate that "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables." There was a priority of the Word.

Next week I want to look at the fact that mercy ministries and the role of deacons is incredibly important. It may not be neglected. That's why when there were no deacons, the apostles, as busy as they were, had to lead this area. Even if it was done poorly, it had to be done. In fact, it is so important God mandates similar qualifications for deacons as He does for elders. He requires that they be Spirit-filled. And we will look at what that means. So the fact that the Word takes priority over serving tables does not make serving tables unspiritual. Leaving mercy ministries is not an option either. But the process for dealing with the needs must be carefully thought through.

So let me just summarize what we have covered today:

First, we have seen that it is possible for us to go so fast that we fail to analyze and can easily miss important details. Have mercy upon the elders if you see problems in the church. Busyness can make us overlook them just as the apostles completely overlooked major problems in Acts chapter 6. It wasn't deliberate. They simply were not aware that certain widows were being neglected.

But secondly, don't think that the busyness of the elders can excuse you from ignoring the problems. You citizens of the kingdom have a role to play as well. Just as that jet was shot down from going too fast, the whole church can be shot down when it goes so fast that it can't evaluate. Our elders wisely are seeking to evaluate the ministries of the

church. But if we miss something, let us know. We may have blind spots that we simply are ignoring.

Thirdly, seek holiness. Racial prejudice may not be your besetting sin, but whatever your sin may be, ask God to open your eyes to it, and seek holiness.

Fourth, when sin is hurting others in the church, it can't be ignored. It needs to be confronted. But don't confront the way the Hellenists did – by murmuring, complaining, gossiping and stirring up dissension. It never wins a brother. It does not produce the righteousness of God. It only divides and gives Satan an opportunity to tear the church apart.

Fifth, don't be perfectionistic with the church. If even the church of the first fifty years had problems in both people and leaders, you can expect that both leaders and people will have problems today. Do not be longing for a first century church. The church should always be advancing from age to age according to Ephesians 4. A marvelous chapter! We can look back to the early church to learn, but not to envy. We need to be pressing forward.

Sixth, just as this reminds us once again that we must have an every-member-is-a-minister attitude, let's commit ourselves to each other in ministry. Every one of you is called by God to be part of the solution when we are going too fast.

Seventh, there are two responses to sin that we are allowed: one is let our love ignore and cover over the sins of others and the other is to let our love confront the sin in another. Ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom as to when to do each.

Eighth, rebuke gossip, and have nothing to do with it. On occasion I have found myself engaging in the sinful complaining of the Hellenists over the past 20 years of ministry, and it has never benefited anyone. It has only given Satan an advantage. So rebuke gossip.

Ninth, pray that your elders (who do have servants hearts) would be freed up to serve more effectively by having deacons. I want to thank you for your willingness to free me up to do more ministry of the Word both inside and outside the congregation over the next years. But pray that increased specialization would make us more effective without in any way isolating us from the people. And may God receive all the glory. Amen.