

GROWING PAINS ACTS 6:1-15

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Children are a blessing from God. The Bible confirms that, and personal experience for many of us confirms that. But life also becomes more complicated and challenging when family additions come along. Babies mean sleep-interrupted nights and doctor bills and more money spent on groceries. They mean a drain on time and energy. They mean new clothes and messy diapers. They can interrupt career paths. So those of us who have had children can both rejoice with and sympathize with the younger generations who are going through the experience. The challenges involved are partly why the birth rate in our country and most other parts of the world has fallen so dramatically.

We have one set of friends in New Hampshire who have ten children. We had multiple expressions of sympathy from them at the passing of Suzy. At one point we were designated in their will as the family that was to take over their kids if something happened to mom and dad. Fortunately that did not happen.

Imagine the growing pains which this family experienced. They had to make additions to their house. They bought a used school bus to transport the whole family around. Then they bought an old Greyhound bus. On top of all of that they chose to school their children at home. What an exciting family they had!

Churches also can experience growing pains. Our numerical growth in recent days has largely been limited to our youth contingent. But we are happy to have some other relatively new adults around also.

The early church that we have been studying in our sermon series on the Book of Acts was experiencing not only a lot of spiritual growth in individuals but also considerable growth in numbers. There were growing pains that came with that. We want to look at those growing pains this morning and learn something about how the church leaders handled them, with an eye to looking for lessons that might have relevance to us.

We have seen thus far in our study that the Lord Jesus Christ was building His church through the Holy Spirit, who was especially at work in the apostles. These apostles were performing miraculous signs and wonders in Jerusalem. This attracted the attention of lots of Jewish people. Peter and the other apostles got to preach their message.

That message was that Jesus was God's Son. He became a human being and died on the cross to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. Anyone who will put his or her trust in this Jesus will have eternal life and go to heaven some day. That message still

applies today. The Holy Spirit was also at work in convicting that first century audience of their sin and their need for Jesus. So many were coming to faith in Christ.

This provoked a strong reaction from the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism. The Jewish leaders tried to clamp down on this Jesus movement. But because of the high regard that the Jerusalem residents had for these miracle-working Christian leaders, the Sanhedrin felt unable to do too much. So the church kept right on growing.

I.

Eventually this continued expansion produced growing pains. In #6 of Acts we see several of them. First, in v. 1, we encounter THE CHALLENGE OF FACTIONALISM. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE CHALLENGE OF FACTIONALISM) The author Luke writes, **“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.”**

There was a need involved here. But the underlying problem was factionalism. There were two distinct groups in this early church in Jerusalem. There were Hellenistic, or Greek, Jews, and there were native Jews. The native Jews were born and raised in the land of Israel. Their first language was Aramaic, which is closely related to Hebrew. All of the top Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were native Hebrews, as were the apostles of Christ.

The Hellenistic Jews were born and raised in other parts of the Roman Empire. So they were ethnically the same. But they were culturally somewhat different. They are called Greek--- or Hellenistic--- Jews, rather than Roman Jews, because the culture in many ways reflected Greek influence more than Roman influence. Roman law and politics were dominant. But the most common language was Greek rather than Latin. Roman art, literature, and religion were largely Greek in their origins. Even most of the Roman gods were Greek gods with Latin names.

Most Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem had moved to the city for religious reasons. They wanted to finish their lives in Jerusalem and be buried near the temple, the focus of their religious faith. So they were very religious Jews. But they spoke Greek rather than Aramaic. They used the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible rather than the original Hebrew. And they brought with them perhaps a bit more cosmopolitan view of life, given their foreign background.

About 600 years earlier many of the Jews had been carried off to Babylon as captives. With no access to the temple in Jerusalem, which had been destroyed anyway, their worship system was greatly affected. It was in exile in the Babylonian Empire that synagogues developed. Even when the Jews were allowed to return to their homeland, they retained the synagogue as a place of worship and as a center of social and religious life. One source, which most regard as exaggerating the facts, says that there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem alone.

Apparently, then, when Jews from various parts of the empire moved to Jerusalem, they tended to form worshipping communities with people from similar backgrounds. There might be the “Synagogue of Egyptian Jews.” Maybe there was “The First Italian Synagogue.” If you study the history of Christianity in America, you will find that a similar thing happened here. Among Baptists the denomination that was called the General Baptist Conference was originally a group of Baptists from Sweden. Our previous church in Connecticut hosted a Brazilian Free Methodist congregation and a Korean group from a Presbyterian background.

I have mentioned before that the Pharisees were the religious party which had the most influence with the people living in Israel. In their writings they regard Greek Jews a bit like second class citizens. These Greek Jews were kept out of the highest positions of power. So you can imagine that there were probably some tensions between the two groups of Jews.

When we looked at the story of Pentecost, I noted that the text said that a lot of the Jews who witnessed the miraculous coming of the Holy Spirit were Hellenistic Jews. Many of them responded to the gospel that Peter preached on that first day. So right from the beginning of the church there were converted Hellenistic Jews numbered among the Christians.

Unfortunately, old prejudices and attitudes are sometimes carried over into the Christian life. Then we also have our own cultural and family traditions and personal preferences. Now these differences and attitudes surface in regard to a practical problem in the church. In many local churches today divisions don’t arise over matters of theology. They involve practical problems and non-doctrinal issues. That is what happened here.

There are various sources of these practical problems. Factions in churches can arise from several different sources. Tensions can arise between the old-timers in the church and the newcomers. The old guard may be threatened by the new people who have come into the church. Tensions can arise over music preferences and money expenditures and perceived slights and offenses.

Fortunately I don’t sense that we have any factionalism in our church. That is a great blessing, especially since we have some diverse backgrounds represented in our congregation, and most of us have come from other parts of the country. Let’s make sure that we keep factionalism from creeping into our church.

II.

The second growing pain that is associated with a growing church is identified in vv. 2-6. It is **THE CHALLENGE OF MEETING PHYSICAL NEEDS**. (II. THE CHALLENGE OF MEETING PHYSICAL NEEDS) It was the presence of a physical need in the congregation that surfaced the problem of factionalism. The way that the apostles dealt with the problem of factionalism is related to the way in which they decided to meet the physical need.

According to the Talmud, the collection of early Jewish writings, there was a daily distribution of food to needy people in Jerusalem. Then there was also a weekly distribution in which clothes as well as food were passed out to those in need. Some needy people also begged for alms.

When Jews became Christians, the Jewish religious leaders were no longer interested in supplying the physical needs of these followers of Jesus. So the church leaders had to get involved. At the end of #5 we saw that wealthy Christians were selling at least some of their property and giving the proceeds to the apostles, who in turn distributed aid to those in need. Exactly how they did that we are not told.

But after a while complaints arose that the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in the distribution of aid. Whether this situation was real or exaggerated, or intentional or accidental, we are not told. But there was a real physical need. As the church had grown in numbers, people--- including widows--- came into the congregation who had need of basic support. These physical needs had to be met, and they had to be met in a way that was regarded as fair.

One option would have been for the apostles to do the distribution themselves. But notice what v. 2 says, **“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.’”** The “tables” mentioned here were probably a reference to the manner in which aid was distributed to widows and other needy people. Apparently tables were set up somewhere to distribute food and clothing and whatever else was needed.

Unfortunately some pastors and churches in our country have reversed the priority that the apostles established. They have decided that “It is not desirable for us to neglect serving tables for the sake of the word of God.” So these churches get involved in soup kitchens and homeless shelters and other social projects, which is good and commendable by itself. But when the study and preaching of God’s inspired word are neglected because of time and energy spent on these other causes, God’s priorities are out of order. Too often in these churches there is little time spent in studying and explaining the meaning of the Scriptures.

Look, then, at what the apostles say in v. 3: **“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.”** We aren’t told exactly how the selection was made. But the congregation was given a role in the process and had to come up with the distributors of aid. The apostles established the criteria that were to be used in the selection. The candidates were to be Spirit-filled, wise, and of good reputation. Why were the standards so high? These men were not dealing just with food distribution, they also dealing with perceived prejudice and unfair treatment. Wisdom and maturity were needed to deal with this touchy situation.

Then in v. 4 they say, **“But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”** Notice again the priorities of the spiritual leaders of the congregation. The

apostles had many spiritual gifts. They were able to do miraculous acts of healing. But was their focus on works of miracles? Was it on holding healing services? No, their focus was on prayer and ministry of the word.

Prayer, especially for church leaders, is not intended to be an afterthought. It is intended to be a central matter of concern and devotion. In that regard you should know that all of our elder meetings begin with prayer and occupy about a quarter or a third of our meetings.

The congregation in Jerusalem recognized the wisdom of this proposal. In v. 5 we find the names of the seven men that the Christians proposed. The interesting thing is that they all have Greek names. This would seem to suggest that they may all have been Hellenistic Jews who were chosen for the job. Whether the apostles had suggested this arrangement or the congregation at this time was primarily composed of Hellenistic Jews, we don't know. But it would seem that there would be no more grounds for complainers to say that Hellenistic widows are being overlooked if the distributors are themselves Hellenistic Jews.

So the community of Christians as a whole selected the candidates for the job. Verse 6 tells us that they prayed for these men, and then the apostles laid hands on them. In the New Testament the laying on of hands often signifies the granting of authority to someone or some ones.

The physical needs of the Christians were thus met. The apostles got qualified men involved. They relieved themselves of additional work. They got other people to be involved in ministry in a leadership capacity. The problem of factionalism was dealt with and taken care of--- at least for the time being.

We are blessed to have a lot of capable people around here who serve on the various committees of the church. But we are always on the lookout for more. We have various outreaches which are also happy to have additional volunteers. Some of our church positions require people to be church members. If you would be interested in becoming an official church member, let me know.

III.

The third growing pain comes in vv. 7-15. It involves THE CHALLENGE OF POPULAR OPPOSITION. (III. THE CHALLENGE OF POPULAR OPPOSITION) First, in v. 7 we have a reminder of the source of growing pains. It is continued growth in numbers. Luke says that the church was increasing greatly. There is also the fascinating little note about priests coming to faith in Christ. Why were they attracted to the gospel? One authority says that there were about 8000 priests who served in the temple at this time. Other estimates go higher and lower.

The priests served for a week at a time twice a year. The ordinary priests were not part of the high priestly families, and they weren't really part of the power structure. They did their religious thing twice a year and then went home. They did not necessarily live right

in Jerusalem. So their separation from the power structure may have meant that they were more open to the gospel.

Their work in the temple may have exposed them to the miracles and teaching of the apostles. A few of them must have witnessed the tearing of the huge veil in the temple that separated the holy place from the holy of holies. When they learned that Jesus had died at about the same time, some of them recognized the spiritual significance which this pictured. The way into the presence of God had been opened by the death of Christ.

A few of the priests had lepers healed by Jesus come to them and offer for their cleansing what was required by the Old Testament law. No priest since the time of Moses had ever had someone come to him with that offering for the cleansing of leprosy. That kind of healing was evidence that Jesus was the Messiah. These exposures to the truth apparently had an impact on some of the priests, and they were converted.

The opposition to the Christians until now had come from the political and religious leaders of Israel. It was the apostles who were the focus of concern of the Sanhedrin because of their miraculous powers and powerful preaching. It was this same power and preaching that made them popular with the residents of Jerusalem. How could people get too upset with fellow Jews who were freely healing friends and relatives of various diseases?

But with the passage of time the number of Christians grew. No doubt members of the various Jerusalem synagogues got saved. Over time people began to see that there were differences between what these Christians believed and what they were taught by the rabbis. Financial giving in the synagogues probably dropped. Attendance numbers may have dropped. All of this had to produce some divisions.

Then also with the passage of time other Christian leaders developed. They started telling about Jesus in their synagogues and in their own spheres of influence. Some responded. But others would have opposed their message. So popular opposition grew.

One of these new leaders was Stephen. He is listed as one of the seven who were chosen to help in food distribution. Verse 5 notes that he was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. Verse 8 adds that he was full of grace and power. We are also told that he **“was doing great signs and wonders among the people.”** This is the first person outside of the circle of the apostles who is said to have such miraculous powers. There will be two others mentioned in the Book of Acts.

Verse 9 describes the conflict that develops with Stephen (CYRENE): **“Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.”** Cyrene was in North Africa. (ALEXANDRIA CILICIA)

Alexandria was the leading city of Egypt. Cilicia was the Roman province in Asia Minor from which the Apostle Paul came.

Freedmen were descendants of Jews who had been taken captive as slaves to Italy by the Roman Emperor Pompey in 63 AD. The grammar of v. 9 is difficult. So some have suggested that there are as many as five synagogues that are mentioned here. Some have also pointed out that Cilicia was the province in Asia Minor where the Apostle Paul was born and raised. The thought is that Paul might have attended this same synagogue and maybe even argued with Stephen. That is possible. But there were many synagogues in Jerusalem, and Paul as a student of Gamaliel was probably fluent in Aramaic. So he may not have even attended a Greek-speaking synagogue.

(PROJECTOR OFF)

As for Stephen--- with truth and the Holy Spirit on his side--- he was good. Verse 10 says that the unbelieving Hellenistic Jews couldn't defeat him in debate. We don't know exactly what he was saying, but #7 contains his speech before the Sanhedrin. Probably Stephen used the same kinds of arguments with the Greek Jews. In vv. 48-51 of #7 he argued, **"...the Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands, as the prophet says, 49 'Heaven is my throne,/ and the earth is my footstool./ What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? 50 Did not my hand make all these things?' 51 You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you."**

Perhaps Stephen was familiar with the statement of Jesus to the Samaritan woman that the time was coming when the place of worship would be insignificant. Rather God would be interested in those who would worship Him in Spirit and in truth. Stephen seems to have understood better than anyone else at this point the implications of the death and resurrection of Jesus for temple worship. He was apparently suggesting that worship at the temple wasn't so important any more. To Hellenistic Jews who had moved to Jerusalem to live and die near the temple, that did not go over very well. These guys were really getting upset.

So these Hellenistic Jews set to work to get rid of Stephen. They got some people to accuse him of blasphemy against Moses and against God. The penalty for blasphemy according to the Old Testament law was death by stoning. The understanding of blasphemy at this time was fairly broad. The Jews seemed to understand blasphemy as "speaking evil of something that God calls holy." To blaspheme against Moses probably meant that the Jews believed that Stephen was speaking against the Mosaic Law, against the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Probably Stephen was arguing that Jesus Christ had fulfilled the Law and that certain aspects of it were now obsolete by virtue of His death and resurrection. Back in #4 v. 12 Peter said that there was salvation in no one or no thing other than Jesus. People committed to animal sacrifices may have taken offense at that.

Blasphemy against God, in the mind of the accusers, probably referred to Stephen's statements suggesting that worship in the temple was no longer essential. Notice that v.

13 says that false witnesses came forward to charge Stephen with speaking against the holy place and the law. There was a true basis for some of these charges. But the witnesses were twisting much of what Stephen said. For example, in v. 14 these witnesses claim that they heard Stephen say that Jesus would destroy the temple. Jesus had said that His body would be destroyed and that He would rise again three days later. In that context He called His body a temple. He also prophesied that the Jerusalem temple would be destroyed. But Jesus did not say that He was going to destroy it Himself. So they twisted His words.

The setting for these accusations was a session of the Sanhedrin. Notice that v. 12 says that these Hellenistic Jews **“they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council.”** This meeting occurred at least a number of months after the hearings that the Sanhedrin had with the apostles. This time the religious leaders are not initiating the proceedings. Some members of a local synagogue or several local synagogues are involved. So opposition to this Jesus movement is increasing, even as the number of Christians continues to increase.

The Sadducees were really angry in the previous hearings with the apostles. The Pharisees were more moderate in their attitude toward the Christians. This time the Pharisees seem to be equally upset. For v. 12 specifically says that the scribes were involved in hauling in Stephen, and most of the scribes, or rabbis, were Pharisees.

In the face of this overwhelming opposition v. 15 tells us, **“And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”** Keep in mind that the Sadducees didn’t believe in angels. How his face was like an angel, Luke does not tell us. But if it was radiant in the way that Jesus, Moses, and Elijah appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration, there was additional irony. For the only other human in Biblical history who is described as being radiant is Moses. One of the charges lodged against Stephen was blasphemy against Moses.

People may persecute and even kill God’s children. But the Lord has a way of vindicating His servants. He raised Jesus from the dead. In this case He makes Stephen’s face appear as that of an angel. In your case he may use other means. If you live your life with integrity, if you live by God’s Word, if you try to share the gospel with others, you will at times take flack for it. But the Lord has his ways of vindicating His servants.

As a youth pastor in Massachusetts I took flack from one set of parents in the church who were frequently criticizing me for being too strict with their children. It was unreasonable for me to keep their kids from making out on youth group trips. Their kids were trustworthy. My standards of conduct for youth activities were just too unreasonable, in their opinion. These parents criticized me to other people.

But eventually their darling daughter got pregnant when the girl’s parents left the young couple alone at home unsupervised. Their son became a real mess. It became clear to

everyone in the church just where the real problem was. The Lord always in the end vindicates those who strive to do the right thing, those who promote and live by the truth.

Growth in churches and Christian groups often presents challenges from factionalism, physical needs, and popular opposition. The key to dealing with growing pains is maintaining the spiritual unity of the church. When unity is maintained, factionalism, physical needs, and popular opposition will all be dealt with and Christians will be able to maintain their witness.

During the Last Supper (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 17:21) Jesus prayed for His disciples, saying, “[I ask] that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” Historian Edward Gibbon in his famous work, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (DECLINE AND FALL), identified five reasons for the success of the early church. Number one on his list was “their unity and mutual affection.”

Some of us may have come from churches which experienced painful challenges to unity. (PROJECTOR OFF) When we came here 23 years ago the church was emerging from a painful time of factionalism. Sometimes factionalism is tied to growing pains. Sometimes there are other causes.

There is no growth without pain. But if we maintain the unity of the body, we will experience growth. The primary thing we should do to contribute to the unity of the church is to work on our individual spiritual lives. If we are committing ourselves to a regular intake of God's Word, if we are praying regularly, if we remain receptive to the Lord's correcting work in our lives, then we will keep growing.

(BENJAMIN FRANKLIN) At the signing of the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia on July 4, 1776, Benjamin Franklin reportedly remarked to John Hancock, “**We must all hang together, or most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.**” Let's hang together. Let's do it by keeping our spiritual lives in order. (PROJECTOR OFF)