

Part 12: Minsitry That Neither Divides Nor Distracts

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You've heard of Big Pharma. Perhaps, you've even heard of Big Eva. But I wonder if you've heard of Big Cupcake? As of 2003 *Crumbs Bake Shop* was the largest cupcake vendor in the world. They were one of the fastest growing companies in the nation, opening bakery, after new bakery. But in a few years the company collapsed, closing its final store in 2017.

So what lead to the crumbling of Crumbs? Business experts said the answer was obvious: they grew too fast. Everyone loved their cupcakes, but in an effort to meet the demand, they were consumed by their own consumers. Too much of a good thing, they say, is a bad thing.

The world has seen businesses and movements go this way for millennia going all the way back to the book of Acts. Last week we were introduced to a Pharisee named Gamaliel, and he referenced two such rise and falls in his own day: Theudas and Judas. They attempted a religious movement, gained steam, and then imploded. So as the enemies of the Christian church failed to silence their preaching, Gamaliel suggested they wait for the church to crumble just as Crumbs did. He said, **Acts 5:38-39**, "So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God you will not be able to overthrow them."

Our passage today picks up immediately following Gamaliel's advice and he seems to be prophetic. The church, carried by rapid growth, began to fall apart from the inside. Upon further review, all that glittered didn't seem to be real gold.

I'm sure you've spoken to people, or you've been someone with a similar experience. Maybe the church seemed wonderful to begin with. The people were kind, the music was nice, the chairs weren't too soft or too hard. But then it happens: No one talked to you that day, your seat was taken, and the cupcakes were all gone.

The church is after all, human. We have limits, we have blind spots, and we are sinners. But what happens when this supposedly supernatural community feels the pull of its humanity like butter spread too thin on a piece of toast? Do we walk away? Does the church fall apart? Does it change its mission? How can a growing community survive when it's often the community itself which is the problem?

What Acts 6 shows us this morning is this, our main point: **The growth of the gospel grows gospel people** (or--How to grow and not die). To help us understand that we are going to look at three parts this morning. First, we will see in verses 1-2 we are going to see **The Growth of Good Problems**, then in verses 3-5 we will see **The Growth of Better Ministry** and finally in verse 7 we will see **The Growth of God's People**.

If you're joining us, the book of Acts outlines the continued work of Jesus through his church. And thus far all of the religious officials have set themselves up to stop Jesus' church. They've tried imprisonment, threats, and even beatings to stop the church from preaching about Jesus. But this is how chapter five concluded: **Acts 5:42**, "And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus."

But during those days—there came a new threat: **Acts 6:1-2**, "Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenist arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 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.'"

Charles Dicken's famously opens the *Tale of Two Cities* saying, "It was the best of times, and it was the worst of times." And that's certainly the sense we Luke paints in our first point: **The Growth of Good Problems.**

The church was growing, and with that growth came the potential for problems. When my wife and I were dating, it was easy to pick a movie. As we had more and more kids, it became harder and harder to agree on a movie.

If you're familiar with such tension, then you understand what is going on in Acts 6. The gospel is adding to the family of faith. As more and more people were brought out of sin through faith in Jesus they were added to his church. But the more people added, the more potential there was for what we see today, what Luke calls, "a complaint."

The word Luke used would have immediately struck a chord in the Jewish readers because it's the same word the Septuagint uses in Exodus 16 when it says Israel began to "grumble," or "murmur," against Moses and Arron because they were hungry.

As Luke has done so often in Acts, he shows how the new people of God in the church still struggle with the same problems. The powerful work of God in Acts 6 and in Exodus 16 would have made these grumbings look silly. Delivered out of oppressive and deadly slavery in Egypt by the mighty hand of God they whine about bread? In Acts 6, the resurrected Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit is performing miracles and adding many to salvation, and yet they are grumbling because some people aren't getting bread?

This is where the church is not like the world. If we were running a Fortune 500 company, we'd keep moving. One pastor was once quoted as saying that the bus of his church was going forward and it didn't matter how many bodies were behind the bus. It would be easy to make such threats here.

After all, the people who are being neglected are minorities in two senses. First, they ones being neglected were Hellenistic Jews. Because of the dispersion of the Jews throughout history, some of the Jews grew up with Jewish religion, but they did so inside of Greek (Hellenistic) culture. On the other hand there were Hebrew Jews, Jews who grew up with a predominantly Hebrew culture. You could think of it as a church filled with believers, all of whom are American, and yet some who have the culture of a rural town and others the culture of a big city. The majority culture at this time was Hebraic Jews in Jerusalem.

But secondly, it wasn't just the Hellenists who were being neglected, but it was their widows. It was the minority of the minority. The first challenge the church faced was whether they would address the issue at all!

"Look at all the good that's going on! How can you whine about a few widows who aren't getting their daily handout of bread?"

But the church isn't run by worldly metrics of growth, its lead by biblical metrics of faithfulness. Writing to the church in Philippi he says, **Phil. 2:4**, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others." There will always be a majority culture in a church, but that majority culture shouldn't be an oppressive culture.

This potential division was so serious that they had to address it, they couldn't sweep it under the rug. In fact it's so serious that all of the twelve apostles, and the whole church are gathered to discuss it in verse two.

The first problem the church needed to navigate was that of potential *division* but the second, and perhaps greater problem they needed to navigate was that of *distraction*.

So if they couldn't just ignore the issues, would they then drop everything and make the equal distribution of bread the ministry of the church?

Now the distribution of bread was a good thing. We saw how this started back in Acts 2. When the Holy Spirit fell on the church, they were immediately moved to two things: 1. The teaching of the apostles, and 2. The generous care of one another.

On this they were given no command by God, nor order of the apostles, but instead the generous outpouring of love and grace they church experienced from Jesus and the Holy Spirit overflowed into their desire to meet the needs of their fellow church members.

This was a practice that continued early and often in the church. Justin Martyr, writing only a few decades after the book of Acts described how the church would do a special offering after they took the Lord's Supper to care for the poor and vulnerable in their midst, and as much as they could, their neighbors.

But at this point the church was getting so big that logistical problems were presenting themselves. The word of God was getting out, but the bread wasn't. So were to Apostles, to stop what they were doing and pivot. They grew the church with the word of God, would they sustain the church by meeting other needs? Good needs!

I've seen many churches whose express mission of the church is to eliminate poverty, to crush racism, and to feed the hungry. All of those things are good things. In fact they are things God has commissioned every individual Christian to play a part in caring for. But the question is: are these issues the primary ministry of the church? Should the ministry of the apostles pivot to waiting tables, to opening teen centers, to starting credit unions, or building hospitals?

And here we see what the Apostles said in light of this in **Acts 6:2**, "It is not right that we should give up the preaching of the word of God to serve tables."

The danger of good things is that we have a tendency to make them the ultimate thing. The church can often pivot to doing really good things in the world as their primary purpose, but the primary purpose of the church is to offer the one thing that food pantries, equitable laws, and hospitals cannot: to offer the gospel of Jesus Christ which saves souls from eternal damnation through the work of the cross.

You can feed every belly in the world and people can still suffer for all eternity. When the disciples said, "it is not right," it's more literally translated, "pleasing." The Apostles realize that it would not be pleasing to God, nor right regarding their mission to make this exchange.

The mission of the church is not up for debate. In Matthew 28 and Acts 1, Jesus makes it very clear: Preach the gospel, be a witness for Jesus, baptize the Christian, and continue to teach and care for them through the Holy Spirit in the church.

What you need from the church more than anything else as a non-believer is to hear the wonderful message of what Jesus did to save you from sin and win you back to the Father on the cross. What you need from the church more than anything else as a Christian is the word of God that sanctifies you unto glory preached continually into your life.

So what would the church do? Would it divide? Would it become distracted? Here we see the solution: **Acts 6:3-4**, "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. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

This is our second point this morning: **The Growth of Better Ministry.**

One early church pastor said of this text: "The needful must give precedence to the more needful. But see, how they take thought directly for these inferior matters and yet do not neglect the preaching."

In other words, what we see here is that the church would get its cupcake and eat it to! How? By realizing that the Lord protects the primary ministry of the church by creating many ministers in the church. The apostles were not the only ones capable of ministry!

If it was up to the professionals to do the work of the church they would be spread thin, there would be division, there would be distraction, because there's only so much a few professionals can do! But here we see how God compliments the teaching ministry of the church with the service ministry of the church!

So their solution is what we call at Sovereign Hope *saint-sourced ministry*. Everyone loves locally sourced produce, well God has so designed the church to operate with locally-sourced saints. The Apostles had the Holy Spirit, but they were not the only ones who had the Spirit. God gave it to the whole church so that the business of every believer was the business of ministry. The word translated as "distribution" in verse one regarding the bread is the same word translated "ministry" in verse 4. The church needed ministers of the word, and the church needed those who ministered in light of the word.

This was not the apostles "punting." While they delegated, they didn't diminish it saying, "Figure it out, it's not our problem." But instead as good gospel leaders they knew their own boundaries while also providing clear boundaries for others.

They were to appoint seven men of good repute. And here we see how seriously the church viewed positions of service that the world views as lowly. It's often easy when we have needs in the church to find the Jr. High who can fix it. Where's the college student who can manage our kids. But this position of service was one of high honor. This is what Jesus spoke of to these very disciples in **Luke 22:26**, he

says the Gentiles lord their honor over people, "But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as the one who serves."

One famous body builder once said, "Everyone wants to be a body builder, but no one wants to lift no heavy weights!" The same is true in our modern conception of ministry: "Everyone wants to be in ministry, but no one wants to serve as ministry." But the word for ministry and the word for service are the exact same: diakonia.

In this case the ministry was so important that the men needed to meet certain qualifications. There were to be: men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.

Skill and professionalism would be needed, but skill and professionalism alone wouldn't cut it. But when qualified servants ministered with care in the church and when qualified preaches ministered with the word in the church--the assumption was that those growing pains would be overcome. Gospel people were going to meet gospel needs without compromising the gospel message!

And notice the consensus with which this was met by the church: **Acts 6:5-6**, "And what they said pleased the whole gather, 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. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them."

And here we see the privilege of being an apostolic church. I always tell people that I have an apostolic church. The often look at me confused as if I'm talking about rapid growth and miracles. I tell them, we are an apostolic church in that we have problems. We've got limits, and weaknesses in ourselves, but together we've got the gospel that guides us forward.

Here the church didn't wince at the weight the 12 seemed to put on them, but instead it pleased them. They saw that this was what they were there for. This was the nature of what it meant to be the church. There were those who were members in charge of appointing and selecting, these leaders who would be in charge of administrating and facilitating, and apostles who were in charge of confirming and preaching.

This is the beauty of gospel ministry and a gospel church. Gamaliel was wrong. By all human measures the church should have fallen here. The members could have become disaffected with the apostle's and said, "Jesus picked you not me--you need to figure this out and give us what we need." The division between the Hellenist and the Hebrews could have turned into a power struggle with each group attempting to select the right amount of representatives so that they would have control of the committee. But instead they appointed seven men, all of whom had Greek names--hinting that at least the majority if not all of these men were of the Hellenist background. Why did they do this? Not because they trusted in the democratic polity of the church but because they trusted God working through the church. They didn't need to fight for their power when they trusted God's power.

They didn't entrust themselves to men--they entrusted themselves to God working out the gospel in the lives of his people. Humans naturally come to complaints with priorities, preferences and competing desires. But when the church comes together as a gospel people we vet all of those through the priorities of the gospel. Gospel people come to human problems with gospel priorities.

This was better ministry, it was ministry that grew with needs because the ministers grew alongside of it.

What we see in Acts 6 is the pattern and paradigm for the office of deacon that would later come to be developed in the New Testament. The word deacon, is simply the proper noun for servant: *diakonos*. In Acts 6 there are three groups of people: church members, apostles, and these seven men appointed to service. But by the time of Paul's writing to the Philippians we see this three part division was described this way: **Philippians 1:1**, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons."

The office of apostle rolls over to the ongoing role of elder or pastor. The qualifications for this role is given in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 indicate that these men must be morally qualified, but they must also **Titus 1:9**, "Hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine to those who contradict it." Moreover, in 1 Timothy Paul instructs Timothy regarding the qualifications of elders but lists a charge for him and his fellow elders in **2 Timothy 4:1-2**, "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom, preach the word..."

The role of Apostle transitioned to the ministry of pastors in the local church, and the role of these seven men set the pattern for the ministry of deacons we see in the local church.

Their qualifications are given in **1 Timothy 3:8**, "Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." Paul goes on to mention that deacons ought to be faithful if married and if they have a family they must be able to manage it well.

Further, it would appear that the office of deacon was not reserved for men but was open to women. Paul gives instructions to women deacons, or wives, in 1 Timothy 3 and that Paul calls Phoebe a deacon in the church in Romans 16. When the office of deacon is upheld in a biblical way, facilitating and meeting needs under the direction of the elders, it is a place in which both men and women can serve while upholding biblical gender roles.

But, I do think it is important to note that the Apostles set an important pattern in calling seven men. The history of the church is rich with females in the role of deacon. In fact when Pliny wrote to the Emperor Trajan in the year 112 he said he had captured two women called "deacons." And while we want to see our sisters flourish in those roles it ought not to be because men see service as something too low for them.

Often times it was the unmarried virgin or the widow who served as a deacon because they had time--but the men chosen to be deacons accepted this position with great honor, and were presumably working men. Men should serve, men should lead in serving.

It's been said before that elders serve the church by leading, and deacons lead the church by serving. And here we see the principle in full in this text. When division and dissention arose--who met it but the body selecting deacons to care and serve.

This is not because the pastors wouldn't have been able to solve it, but because it takes more than a select few gifts to lead the church. And believe it or not--elders are generally gifted in specific ways--but the body is often more gifted than elders in other ways.

This doesn't mean that elders shouldn't take out the trash and wait tables, and neither does it mean that deacons don't minister with the word in appropriate ways. But it means that together we compliment the weaknesses of one another with the gifts of grace.

As a church we are in a pinch point that feels much like Acts 6. While God seems to be choosing to grant our church a level of growth--we feel murmurs at different points. We feel the pressure of why we have this ministry and why we don't have this. Everyone wants things for good reasons, and at times the elders haven't lead as clearly as we should have.

But because of the mistakes we've made in our own history, we are working in such a slow way to make sure that we do not become distracted from the primary ministry of the word. To be honest, the elders are willing to let everything fail if it means the preaching of the word continues.

But we are in a point now where the growth of the church in number is leading us to grow as a church in the quality of service. We are attempting to figure out how to lead as the apostles did and put the body in places where they can use the gifts God has given them. Not every need needs a deacon, but there are ones that are best filled by people who we hope you tell us about. At our next congregational meeting we will be presenting at least one deacon candidate to our members and members please come to that!

Every congregational meetings is an Acts 6 moment where we get to together communicate and plan around our priorities and just as the apostles couldn't solve this issue on their own--and didn't know the perfect people themselves--so too do we need to body of members to be the body of members.

But in all this we need to hold up the priorities and qualifications of deacons. Elders, deacons, members, and the mission of the church are only effective to the degree that they submit to God's design and not our own hurried sense of urgency or pragmatism.

Good ministry is often done by a few--better ministry is done by all the saints working together for the same end ministering for needs and ministering the word.

This is (in a very brief way) our last point this morning: **The Growth of God's People.**

Luke tells us this: **Acts 6:7**, "And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."

The church did the work of rightly defining ministry according to God's pattern, and God brought the growth. The numbers of disciples were increasing before this complaint, but when gospel people grew to meet gospel needs with gospel priorities, the number of disciples multiplied and some of those priests who put stock in Gamaliel's words were converted as well.

And here we see that all ministry is word based ministry. Whether we are preaching Christ from the pulpit, sharing Christ across a coffee table, welcoming people to the body of Christ as greeters, reading the word of Christ as scripture readers, teaching the word of Christ to 1st graders, or contacting

volunteers so that elders can spend more time teaching and raising teachers--gospel ministry is always word based ministry.

All the varied gifts that God gives in the end yield to the increase of the word of God. This is our hope as a church! May God help us grow in this area, may he give us eyes to see, eyes to serve, and eyes to lead so that as Paul prays, "We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every join with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."