

More People More Problems

Devotional

Someone has said, "If you ever find the perfect church, don't join it because you will spoil it!" I often tell the new members class, "I promise that if you join this church, we will at some point offend you." Or, as someone put it, "To dwell above with the saints we love, O that will be glory! But to dwell below with the saints we know, well, that's a different story!"

To have been in the early church would have been a wonderful experience. God was working in powerful ways. Daily there were reports of new people coming to faith in the risen Savior. It was an exciting time. But the early church was not a perfect church. We've already seen the problem of hypocrisy, with Ananias and Sapphira. Now Luke shows us another problem that occurred in the midst of this phenomenal growth: a complaint arose that threatened to split the church.

Luke has followed a pattern from chapter one that alternates between a picture of the church alone and the church in relation to the world (James Boice, *Acts* [Baker], pp. 103–104, develops this). In chapter one, the church is alone, gathered for prayer in the upper room, where they elect an apostle to replace Judas. In Acts 2, we see the church in the world. Peter preaches and 3,000 souls are saved. At the end of Acts 2, Luke gives another picture of the church life. In Acts 3 through 4:22, we see the church again in the world, with the first instance of persecution. For the rest of chapter 4 and through the first part of chapter 5, we again get an inside view of the church. They gather for prayer, and we learn of their unusual generosity and care for one another. But we also learn of the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira. Then (5:12 ff.) Luke again turns to the church in the world, describing the apostles' witness before the Sanhedrin, resulting in their being flogged. Now Luke again turns inward, showing us this problem that occurred within the church at this time of unusual growth. By introducing us to Stephen, he sets the stage for the next outward scene, where Stephen is stoned and the church is scattered.

By this alternating pattern, Luke seems to be showing us that the church must maintain a balance. Some churches are so outwardly focused that they fail to attend to problems within. If those problems are not addressed, the church may grow at first, but eventually the internal problems will result in discord and disintegration. Other churches are so inwardly focused that they forget their mission in the world. If they do not recover their sense of mission, they will be consumed with bickering and self-centeredness, leading to demise. Healthy churches maintain the balance of dealing with internal problems, but also staying focused on the task of taking the gospel to the world.

Our text reveals to us some principles for solving problems that arise in the local church. To sum up: **To solve problems in the local church, both leaders and people must be spiritual people in submission to God's Word.**¹

Open it

1. Describe a time when you were dissatisfied with a meal in a restaurant. What was your response? (Tell the truth 😊.)

Read it

Acts 6:1-7

Explore it

2. What complaint was brought to the apostles?
3. What task did the apostles not want to give up?
4. What was their plan to address the situation?
5. What was the response of the people?

¹ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-16-solving-problems-church-acts-61-7>

Apply it

THEY ARE ALL ABOUT NUMBERS

People react to church growth differently. Some find it easy to celebrate because their ministries are aiming for just this: more and more people. Others, however, have a negative opinion of growth because many are obsessed with it, and some feel many will sacrifice core principles in order to welcome growth.

This passage helps us understand church growth sensibly. The early church experienced a particular type of growth here, and it's this type of growth that must be sought: gospel-centered growth. **It came as a result of passionate gospel preaching and compassionate ministry.** There were no gimmicks behind it. The apostles weren't offering watered-down sermons. They weren't handing out gift bags. Yet the Lord blessed the church with a multitude of converts. This reminds us that while today's congregations can expand a crowd in a variety of ways, a church is built only through people embracing the gospel. Let's make sure we keep the gospel primary. In 5:42 the church kept teaching and preaching Christ every day. If this is happening, and your congregation is growing, then rejoice. **Church-growth critics often complain, "You guys are all about the numbers."** They are skeptical of growth because they associate a big church with an unfaithful church. But Luke doesn't have this aversion to seeing new faces joining the church. Luke, in fact, brackets the narrative with the subject of increasing numbers. In verse 1 he says, "Increasing in numbers"; in verse 7 he says, "Increased greatly in number." **So, is Luke all about the numbers? No.**

Dr. Luke counted people because people count. People matter to God, and they should matter to us. We should long to reach more and more people. And by the way, we have a book of the Bible called Numbers! Further, no good parent would dare say, "We're going on a weeklong trip, but we aren't going to count the kids before we get on the plane or in the car because I don't want to be all about the numbers!" People actually appreciate being counted (Driscoll, "Empowered by the Spirit to Fail")! **Not all growth, however, is good.** One can be all about building a crowd or one's own kingdom. That's why we must reject church-growth idolatry. **But when the gospel is front and center, we must rejoice when the church grows.** Luke has at least ten summary statements in which he mentions the growth of the church (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 9:31; 13:49; 16:5; 19:20; 21:20).²

6. Why is it important for a church to know their numbers? How can knowing the size of the church help ministry take place?

7. How does a church balance the need for a strong first impressions/assimilation ministry and the idolatry of church growth?

² Merida, Tony. Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary) (Kindle Locations 2193-2198). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

8. What about a growing church is exciting, and what things about numeric growth can cause consternation?

COMPLAINTS IN THE CHURCH

Verse 1 highlights the reality that when there is multiplication in the church there is almost inevitably the accompaniment of murmuring in the church: **“Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.”**

The Jerusalem church experienced expansion but this was accompanied by exasperation. Numbers increased, but as they did so a degree of neglect entered the assembly. Conversions were accompanied by complaints, growth by grumbling. With multiplication there was also the accompanying manifestation of a carnal nature. Of course, this is natural in a fallen world. As a family grows, so grumbling increases.³

9. What are some common church complaints by American churchgoers?

10. What do these complaints say about the church and individual Christians?

The word translated “complaint” is an onomatopoeia in the Greek. It is a translation of the Greek word *goggusmos*. **The word itself sounds very grumbly.** We are not told who grumbled, or how long the grumbling lasted, or how it came to the ears of the apostles, only that there was grumbling because the Hellenistic widows were being neglected in the daily provision. As Robertson notes, however, “It is the secret grumbings that buzz away till they are heard.”⁴

11. How do we know if our complaints about the church are valid or not? Is it ever right to leave a church because of your concerns? If so, when?

³ Minimising Murmuring (Acts 6:1-7) by Doug Van Meter found @<http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/minimising-murmuring/>

⁴ Ibid.

We might think everybody would have been so occupied with each day's new blessings that there was no room for murmuring. Not so! In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food (v. 1).

Jerusalem had a large minority of Hellenistic (Greek-speaking) Jews—Jews who, though they spoke no Hebrew because they had lived abroad for centuries, returned to Jerusalem because it was their holy city. Many of these Jews had returned so they could spend their final days in Jerusalem—much like modern-day Zionists. As a result there was an abundance of Greek-speaking women who had outlived their husbands. **Resentful, the native Aramaic-speaking Jews discriminated against the Hellenistic Jews**, whom the Pharisees held in utter contempt, considering them second-class Israelites.

Then came Pentecost, and thousands of Aramaic-speaking Jews plus hundreds of Hellenistic Jews became one in Christ. **However, conversion (wonderful as it was) did not erase all their prejudices.** The Greek-speaking widows soon felt they were being shorted. When the other widows received two loaves of bread, they only got one. At least that is the way they saw it. So they “complained” about it. “Our Hebrew-speaking brothers are favoring their own people.” **The offense may have been more imagined than actual, but that made no difference to those who felt overlooked.**⁵

12. In what ways does discrimination rear its ugly head in churches today? What can a church do to foster an environment that fights against all forms of discrimination?

13. How does the gospel combat the issues of race and class discrimination among Christians?

A PLAN OF ATTACK

The church did not for a minute consider copping out on care of the poor. It never entered their heads to choose between feeding hungry mouths and feeding hungry souls. **Jesus said to do both!** But it was clear that twelve mere men could not handle both (Acts 6:2). If church unity and outreach were to continue unhindered, the work must be shared.

Four things about the way they solved their problem are worth notice:

- **No defensiveness.** Problems do not require finding someone to blame. God uses problems to help his church grow up.⁶

⁵ Hughes, R. Kent. Acts: The Church Afire (Preaching the Word) (Kindle Locations 1629-1632). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Girard, Robert C.. The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series) (Kindle Locations 1561-1563). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

14. What would have made it tempting for the apostles to become defensive regarding this particular complaint?

15. When is it right to be defensive when a complaint is lodged against you? How should we go about defending ourselves against unsubstantiated critiques?

- **Admission of human limitation.** Widow care was not just a leader problem—it was a problem for the whole church. Nobody can be everything the church needs. God’s purpose is fulfilled by a wide diversity of people serving with their gifts.⁷

16. Read Acts 6:2. How could this remark from the Apostles be misconstrued by the congregation? What does this verse teach us about the roles each one plays within a church?

- **Those chosen to serve met high spiritual qualifications.** The seven were not chosen because they were rich, popular, too dumb to say “No,” or because they looked good in dark suits! Three qualifications for “table servers” were laid down: **(1) They must be known** (“men ... whom everyone trusts”); **(2) full of (directed and controlled by) the Spirit;** and **(3) full of...wisdom (“good sense”).**⁸

17. Why was it important that these men be qualified if their role was just to distribute food to the widows?

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

- **They bent over backward to restore trust and peace.** All seven chosen represented the group that charged discrimination—all had Grecian names! The care of all the widows—Hebraic and Grecian—was entrusted to members of the neglected minority. As Leader of the church, Jesus does more than talk about how problems should be handled. He shows how by the way he himself handled problems in his life on earth. Part of knowing what Christ wants done is looking at His model and doing it His way.⁹

18. While the problem involved the people, it was the leaders who came up with the solution. Why is this approach more effective than the entire congregation coming up with a decision?

19. Once the church leaders had decided on a plan, they shared it with the entire congregation. Why is it important for a church to be informed? How much information is necessary for the larger church body?

To sum up all of these principles: to solve problems in the local church, both leaders and people must be spiritual people in submission to God's Word. Verse 7 shows the result of this problem being solved: God's Word kept on spreading, the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and even a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. Humanly speaking, they would have been the most difficult to reach. They would have been entrenched in the Jewish ceremonies and customs. They would have been prone toward salvation by works or because of their Jewish birth. They would not have seen that they were sinners in need of a Savior. Yet God worked mightily through the gospel to bring them to salvation!¹⁰

20. How can the way a church deals with its problems allow it to be a better testimony to the world around it?

Take a moment and pray about these three requests.

- Pray for the church leaders to have wise and understanding hearts when it comes to the flock under their care.
- Pray for the congregation to respectfully and lovingly speak up when problems arise.
- Pray that the relationship between church leaders and members will honor God and be a good testimony to the watching world around us.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Sermon by Steve Cole found @ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-16-solving-problems-church-acts-61-7>

Note: This study guide was compiled and questions written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.org/smallgroup