



## GROWING PAINS

Acts 6:1-15

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The Bus Boycott in Montgomery, Alabama was one of the most important early victories of the Civil Rights Movement. And it was Rosa Parks, of course, who gained national attention when she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white person. Her courageous action eventually led to desegregated buses in Montgomery. For her heroism, Rosa Parks became known as the “first lady of civil rights” and received the Presidential Medal of Honor, the Congressional Gold Medal, was the first woman to lie in honor in the Capitol, and the first black woman to have a statue in statuary hall.

Did you know that there was another lady who fought for justice on this issue, years before Rosa Parks? Juliette Morgan was a white Southern belle with two earned bachelors and a masters degree from the University of Alabama. She was part of Montgomery’s aristocracy, yet also a Christian who was deeply incensed by racial injustice. Many years before the Montgomery Bus Boycott, in 1939, Morgan spoke out about the problem and was promptly fired from her job. For years, whenever she rode the bus, she advocated for blacks who were being mistreated, often to the ridicule of fellow white passengers. Many of her letters to the local newspaper were printed, resulting in constant threats and harassment. But still the injustice continued. It wasn’t until December, 1955, sixteen years after Ms. Morgan was fired for her advocacy, that her courageous Christian sister—Rosa Parks—refused to give up her seat, sparking the downfall of segregation.

These two women, born only a year apart, only a few miles away from one another, were nevertheless from different worlds. And if you had lined them up side-by-side in the early 1930s and said that some day one of them would have a statue in the US Capitol, nobody would have picked Rosa Parks, granddaughter of slaves, high school dropout, seamstress, over the educated, affluent Juliette Morgan. Yet it was Mrs. Parks who became the unexpected “mother of the freedom movement.”

Acts 6 tells a similar story of an unexpected hero. At the beginning of Acts, Jesus gave marching orders to his disciples: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Ever since then, Peter the Apostle has been the hero. Peter was among Jesus’ first disciples, and had been an insider throughout all of Jesus’ ministry. Since Pentecost, Peter has been clearly at the forefront, leading the early church as it has grown by the hundreds and the thousands, to the point that even a great many of the Jewish priests became Christians. And if you had asked anyone at the time whom they thought God would choose to lead the church on from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth, they would have told you Peter. But as we’ll see, it wasn’t Peter. God chose the new guy, an immigrant, who probably didn’t speak Aramaic very well. God chose Stephen, not Peter the Apostle, to carry the Gospel to the Greek-speaking world, and... to be the first Christian to follow Jesus all the way to death.

Thus far in our study of Acts, the church has been growing quickly and dramatically, even though it hasn't yet expanded beyond Jerusalem. There are a couple of reasons why it has been growing so fast. One that we've seen over and over is that the church was truly connecting people with God. The Jerusalem Temple had been and was supposed to be the place to connect with God, the quintessential "thin place" in our world, a portal between heaven and earth, where anyone and everyone could be taught by God, and healed by God, and forgiven by God. Instead, it was broken, so broken that Jesus had condemned it, promising that he would raise up a new temple when he rose from the dead. And after Pentecost, especially through the Apostles' Gospel ministry of teaching and healing and forgiveness, it was clear that God had moved house. His address had changed and he was living in a mobile home. Christian believers like Peter and John had become holy containers filled with the Holy Spirit. They were mobile 'thin places,' taking the Gospel to the people of Jerusalem. Wherever they went, anyone and everyone could be taught by God, and healed by God, and forgiven by God. And so as one person, filled with the Spirit, shared the Gospel with another person, that person also became filled with the Spirit, and there were unlimited refills! So that's one reason why the church was growing so fast. It was connecting people with God.

The other reason why the church was growing so fast was because of how they were caring for one another.

*And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:44-45 ESV)*

The early church was so generous that no one in the church was in need. Do you see the relationship between these two things, how believers cared for one another, and the Gospel ministry of the church? The one flowed directly from the other. Their amazing generosity toward one another was a direct result of their encountering God *through* one another. People used to give money to the temple, because that was where you were supposed to encounter God. But when they began to encounter God through one another, they naturally wanted to share their resources with one another. If your Christian brother or sister is truly a holy container, filled with God's Holy Spirit, then wouldn't you also share all of your stuff with him or her?

Luke described this same amazing love and care for one another again in Acts 4:32ff:

*Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:32-35)*

They weren't doing this because they had to, but because they wanted to. It was the most fitting way to respond to God's lavish generosity in giving his only Son for our sakes. But just because the early Christians gave voluntarily doesn't mean that we can regard radical generosity as something extra. There's a reason why Luke keeps spotlighting the radical generosity of the early church alongside its Gospel ministry. These two things go together, because money is muscle for ministry. We're not gnostics, we're Christians. We believe that God cares about the body as well

as the soul. The church depends upon financial generosity to do tangible ministry, so that they will know we are Christians by our love. It's like what James wrote to the early church when he asked, "*If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?*" (James 2:15-16 ESV) It's no surprise that all over the world, the churches that are growing are the ones in which you find these two things side by side: the clear proclamation of the Gospel, and the radical generosity of the believers within the church community. Generosity isn't optional. The Gospel and generosity go together hand in hand.

In Acts 6 we find that the healthy dynamic of Gospel + generosity in the early church was threatened. This was the third major threat to the early church, and it was the most insidious of the three. (See Stott, p 124). The first threat was external force at the hands of the Jerusalem Council. The second threat was internal corruption as Ananias and Sapphira tried to get a name for themselves by faking their own generosity. And now this threat was one of division and distraction, through uncharitable administration of the church's finances. What had happened was that as the church had grown to number more than 5,000 households, they had done what any organization must do, and that is to develop an administrative system for stewarding their finances. The money was pouring in, and some people took charge of making sure that it was used to benefit those in need. Except that they didn't. They played favorites, and feelings were hurt, and the church began to split along cultural lines, and the apostles had to drop what they were doing in order to straighten out the mess.

In 6:1 we learn that there was a new group of Jews who had joined the early church. The original members, led by the Twelve Apostles, were described as Hebrews, because they were people who were born and raised in Palestine, who spoke Aramaic as their first language, and who were immersed in the culture of the Hebrew Bible. But there were also Jews who had grown up in Greek culture in places like North Africa and modern Turkey, but had relocated to Palestine. These Jews were described as Hellenists, because Greek was their first language, and they thought and behaved like Greeks. They also read the Septuagint, which was a Greek translation of the Old Testament, and had a somewhat different feel from the Hebrew Bible. So they were of the same race, and they were of the same faith, having all put their trust in the same Messiah Jesus, but they were from vastly different cultures (Stott, p 120). And there was a tendency *outside* the church among the Hebrews to look down on the Hellenists, because their customs were shaped more by pagan culture than by the Old Testament. So it's very sad that these cultural prejudices found their way *within* the early church, but it's not surprising. Just as Ananias and Sapphira fell prey to hypocrisy and greed, so also did the administrators of the church treasury fall prey to favoritism. As a result, the early church no longer had all things in common. Only the Hebrews did; the Greek-speaking widows were going hungry.

When the Twelve Apostles heard about the dispute, they called a congregational meeting. Church meetings have gotten a bad rap over the years, because they often have been filled, not with the Spirit, but with rancor. But this meeting was different, because the Twelve were filled with the Spirit. Never underestimate what the Spirit can do through the mundane mechanisms of governing the church's treasury.

In 6:2, before proposing a solution, the Apostles clearly identified the threat. They said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.” They weren’t making a value judgment regarding the ministries of the church, as if to say that caring for one another wasn’t important. They weren’t arguing that the church should only proclaim the Gospel, and shouldn’t be involved in meeting physical needs. They also weren’t making a value judgment regarding the roles that people play within the body of Christ, as if to say that preachers are more important than administrators. In fact, the Greek word that they use for *service*, when they say “we shouldn’t give up preaching to *serve* tables,” is the same word that they use a little later in describing their own responsibilities. They say in v 4 that they must devote themselves to prayer and to the *service* of God’s word.” Same Greek word, describing what we all do as members of the body of Christ. We all serve in one way or another. Some do one thing, some do another, but all serve and therefore no one is dispensable or unnecessary.

So the Apostles weren’t making a value judgment in what they were saying. They were merely identifying the threat to the early church as being the threat of distraction. If they had to stop doing their role in order to do someone else’s role, then there would still be a major problem. And likewise, if I start preaching that Jesus didn’t rise from the dead, and our Treasurer has to start preaching, then who’s going to be overseeing our treasury, which is so essential to the mission of our church? It’s the very same threat, the threat of distraction and internal chaos that keeps us from growing as we should.

That’s why the Apostles proposed a solution in vv 3-4, saying: *Therefore 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.*” And what happened next is one of the most beautiful lessons in generosity in the book of Acts. Because the Spirit, at work through the mundane mechanism of a congregational meeting, moved the entire body to select seven men from among the Hellenists. They could have gone 4 and 3: four guys with Hebrew names like Eliezer, and Elijah, and Benjamin, and Jeremiah, and then three guys with Greek names like Timon and Parmenas and Nicolaus. But the church picked seven Hellenists. They put the entire treasury into the hands of the new guys from the lower class. It would have been quite a risk, if you think about it. They could have retaliated and only cared for their own widows. But from all that we can tell, the Seven fixed the broken system, the Twelve were able to get back to work praying and preaching, and the church kept growing. Luke reports in v7 that “*the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*” (Acts 6:7 ESV) Probably some (if not many) of those priests were Hellenists too. The way that the Hebrews and Hellenists loved each other was yet another sign that God had moved house and his Spirit was with the early church.

Before we move on to Stephen’s story, note the brilliant symbolism in the Apostles’ decision to appoint 7 men to oversee the treasury. Ever since 12 sons were born to Jacob the patriarch, 12 has been used to represent the Jewish people. And ever since they left Egypt for the promised land, a land occupied by 7 nations, 7 has been the number used to represent the world. You’ll find this in various places throughout the Bible, including Jesus’ two bread miracles. When Jesus fed 5,000 people in Jewish territory, there were 12 baskets of bread leftover. A sign that Jesus was the manna from heaven for the children of Israel. And then when Jesus fed 4,000 people in Gentile territory, there were 7 baskets of bread leftover. A sign that Jesus was the bread of the

world. So the Twelve Apostles were simply following Jesus' lead when they appointed the Seven. On the verge of carrying the Gospel beyond Jerusalem and eventually out to the ends of the earth, it was right that the Twelve would delegate stewardship of the treasury to the Seven, and that those Seven were all people who spoke the lingua franca and understood the culture of the Greco-Roman world.

With Acts 6:7, the first section of the book of Acts comes to a close, the section focused on reaching Jerusalem. And from 6:8 through most of chapter 9 we will watch as the church spreads throughout Judea, and Samaria, and Galilee, and up into Syria.

Among the Hellenists was a man named Stephen, who was described in v 5 as being "full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." He was one of the 7 whom the Apostles appointed to oversee the treasury, one of the 7 on whom the Apostles had laid hands and prayed for God's anointing. Presumably between vv 7-8, some time had passed in which the Seven had worked out the kinks in the daily distribution, the threat of distraction had been neutralized, and the church had started growing again. What we discover starting in v 8 is that Stephen had grown spiritually, and he's now the first person after the Apostles to be described as doing "signs and wonders," which is a shorthand way of conveying all the things that Jesus used to do, and the Apostles were doing as they shared the Gospel throughout Jerusalem. In other words, Stephen had become an evangelist, proclaiming the Gospel. And apparently this wasn't the least bit distracting to the church, because the member's meeting had worked, the 7 had resolved the internal conflict between Hebrews and Hellenists, and now Stephen had presumably raised up someone else to take his seat in managing the treasury, so that he could go out and preach the Gospel too.

Nevertheless, Peter was the leader of the church in Jerusalem. Peter was the one who had done all the preaching at the temple, and had twice been the church's spokesman in trials before the Council. It stands to reason that it would have been Peter who launched the church's mission out into the wider world. But Peter was a local. His language was Aramaic, and his customs were distinctly Hebrew. The Hellenistic synagogue, where Jews from the diaspora would gather, had a very different language and culture. So we discover in v9 that it was Stephen, not Peter, who carried the Gospel to them. When you think about it, it makes perfect sense, because Stephen was one of them. Who better to tell them the good news about Jesus than one of their own? Like Rosa Parks finally breaking through where Juliette Morgan had tried unsuccessfully for 16 years, it took a Hellenist to launch the church out into the Hellenistic world.

Yet just as the Temple authorities had tried to silence Peter, some of the synagogue leaders opposed Stephen. In fact, this is the third time in Acts that we've seen an arrest, a trial, and a ruling. The first time, Peter and the Twelve got off with a warning. The second time, Peter and the Twelve got off with a beating. This time, Stephen will get what Jesus got, and the church will be released from Jerusalem for the life of the world. But not before Stephen gives the longest recorded sermon in Acts.

In tonight's passage, we learn the charges against Stephen when he was arrested and brought before the Council. Like in Jesus' trial, false witnesses rose up against Stephen also, and they accused him of (v 11) "speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God." Then in v 13 Luke gives us further detail: *they said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,*

*for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” (Acts 6:13-14)*

Just as with Jesus, so also with Stephen, the false witnesses took what he was saying and twisted it into something grotesque. Because the point of the Gospel was not to undermine the temple or the Old Testament, but instead to show how Jesus fulfilled them. Jesus’ one final sacrifice on the cross fulfilled the entire sacrificial system of the temple, eliminating the need for another sacrifice ever again. Jesus’s gift of the Holy Spirit fulfilled the role of the temple, so that communion with God could be mobilized and taken to the nations. Jesus’ teaching, summarized in the Great Commandments of loving God and love your neighbor, both simplified the OT law into something that could be practiced in any culture, yet it also raised the bar, making righteousness a matter of the heart rather than just external practices. But the Hellenists from the synagogue were probably often accused by the Hebrews of similar things. Because they met in the synagogue rather than the temple, people must have thought that they didn’t value the temple. And because they didn’t keep all the Hebrew customs, people must have thought that they didn’t value the Law of Moses. So you can see why they wanted to drag Stephen before the Temple authorities. It was a public pledge of allegiance, demonstrating their loyalty to their Jewish race instead of their Greek culture. Stephen’s aberrant views could not be tolerated.

But before Stephen would make his defense, Luke gives us a glimpse of him as he stands before the Jerusalem council, in the final verse of chapter 6, v 15. *And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.* It sounds a little syrupy to our ears, but that’s because we have a sentimentalized perception of angels, fat little babies with wings, rather than the terrifying warriors of God’s army as they are depicted in the Old Testament. Luke’s point here is to distinguish Stephen from an ordinary foreigner brought before the highest court in the land, charged with blasphemy and facing almost certain death. Anybody else would have been a complete wreck. But Stephen looked like Moses has looked after he met with God. Stephen looked like Jesus looked after his transfiguration. It was with that amazing, supernatural courage that Stephen began to preach the longest sermon in Acts, and the Gospel continued to go forward against all odds, despite constant persecution.

So as we come to the end of this remarkable chapter, let’s review what we have learned. I’ll highlight five important details in closing:

First, the early church emphasized ministry in both word and deed. They did not want to give up prayer and proclamation of the Gospel, but they also believed that radical generosity and caring for one another’s needs was vitally important. It’s often been observed that the split between mainline churches and fundamentalist churches in the 20th C left both sides in need of the other, as the mainline churches tended to bypass the Gospel and go straight to its social implications, while the fundamentalists proclaimed a Gospel that was completely detached from any social implications. But the early church held both word and deed together, and we must do the same. The word of God must be proclaimed, and radical generosity must be practiced, in order for the Kingdom of God to grow in this city. So as Jesus’ ambassadors here, let’s commit ourselves to both.

Second, the early church also really cared about unity. So much so that leaders from the majority culture were willing to appoint leaders from the minority culture to take control over the treasury. It was a risky, surprising, brilliant strategy to go the extra mile for the sake of unity within the body. And it turns out that in protecting their unity across cultures, they were also laying the groundwork for their mission to other cultures. So each of us also ought to be on the lookout for those in our midst who are perhaps from a different social class or background or nationality, maybe they don't speak English too good, but perhaps God is calling us to make the extra effort to be one with them, so that they can then carry on the mission in places where we could never get any traction on our own.

Third, it didn't take long for the early church to get organized. If you believe that life in the Spirit is chaotic and disorderly, then you're mistaken, because this chapter, and lots of other places in the New Testament make clear that the early church valued and relied on mundane mechanisms for administration, organization, and stewardship. It's never been sexy, but it's the bones and sinews for the body of Christ. Without our by-laws and our Parish Council, this church would have folded years ago. So please support the mundane ministries that keep our mission going. The Apostles could not pray and preach unless they had others who served tables. And serving tables is nothing to be ashamed of. It's what Jesus does for us all every Sunday. "Serving tables," whether by running the meals calendar, or flipping slides during worship, or revamping the website, or whatever important task you take on—all of it is an extension of the ministry of our Lord, who did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:45).

Fourth, by this point in Acts, we mustn't be surprised by persecution. It happened to Jesus. It happened to the Twelve. Now it's begun with Stephen, and in another chapter it will become the plight of the entire church. What should surprise us, rather, is the absence of persecution. If we're not facing opposition, it's worth asking why. Is it because no one knows what we believe? Is it because we haven't been opening our mouths and proclaiming the good news of Jesus to those who don't yet know him? Or is it perhaps because we haven't been caring for one another, practicing the kind of radical generosity that enables the world to know that we're Christians by our love. Maybe the good Lord is sheltering us from persecution for a season. But by this point in Acts I hope that you're picking up on one of Luke's main points, which is that the cruciform life of Jesus is what we all should expect as Jesus' disciples. As Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first."

But fifth, and finally, we mustn't let persecution have the last word, because just as v7 the word of God continued to increase after the internal challenge related to the daily distribution, so also we will see the word of God continue to increase after the martyrdom of Stephen, and the scattering of the church, and on and on to Luke's last word in ch 28:30.

*He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. (Acts 28:30-31 ESV)*

Nothing can stop the Gospel going forward. Jesus shall reign until he puts every enemy under his feet. (1 Cor 15:25.)