

Growing Pains

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[0 : 00] Hey FCC family, I know, I know, you thought you were getting rid of me for a few weeks, but you never know when I'm going to pop up on a screen like this. But hey, as I'm just a few days into my sabbatical here in the month of May, I want to introduce you to a man who I've gleaned so much from in ministry probably for the last 15 years.

Our leadership has recently gotten to know him even better through a partnership FCC has with E2 Effective Elders. Gary Johnson has served the Lord in ministry for a long time, passionately preaching the word and leading the bride of Christ.

And there's no question the Lord has used him in a big way as the lead servant at the creek in Indianapolis for decades and now helping elders and church staffs get biblically healthy so that we can truly impact the kingdom of God.

So I'm excited for you to hear this gifted preacher of the word. So won't you give a warm FCC welcome to our friend Gary Johnson. Hey folks, it's a privilege for me to bring the word of God today to all of you here at First Christian Church in Greensburg.

Maybe you can remember back to a time when you woke up of a morning and you said to mom, Oh mom, my legs hurt or my elbows hurt.

[1 : 22] Mom said, Oh, you've just got growing pains. Well, I don't know about you, but as for me, I still have some growing pains, but I call them growing older pains. And the good news is here at First Christian Church in Greensburg, you have growing pains.

It's a good thing when a parking lot is absolutely full and not another car can get in. It's a very good thing when one service is full and it spills over into the next service.

And you have so many children coming, you have no idea where they are going to meet. God's favor is resting on his bride here at First Christian Church in Greensburg.

Now today, what we're going to talk about is just that, growing pains at First Christian Church. But what we want to do is talk about First Christian Church in Jerusalem, in first century Jerusalem.

As a matter of fact, if you want to open your Bibles, we're going to be in chapter 6 of the book of Acts. Now, a little bit of context before we get into the content.

[2 : 29] Always looking at context. Everything that we read today in Acts chapter 6, verses 1 through 7, is happening in the city of Jerusalem.

As a matter of fact, the great persecution is going to be happening at the end of chapter 7, when the Christians, they scattered from Jerusalem and only the apostles and elders remained behind in Jerusalem.

So, what's happening here, we see that First Christian Church is growing by leaps and by bounds. As a matter of fact, in chapter 4 of Acts, it says in verse 4 that the number of men grew to about 5,000.

So, that means you've got 5,000 guys, and then you give them some wives and some children. The first Christian church in Jerusalem was a congregation that probably numbered 15,000 to 20,000 people.

The very first church on planet Earth was enormous in size. Now, with all that being said, let's get into the text. We're going to begin and we're going to just go through this verse by verse and unpack it because it's going to speak loudly and clearly today to life even right here at First Christian Church Greensburg.

[3 : 51] Alright, here we go. Chapter 6, verse 1, In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, that in Greek it means the number of followers of Jesus kept growing and growing and growing.

It never plateaued. It never declined. It kept growing. Well, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Now, this is pretty profound. No wonder there was a complaint in the very first church on planet Earth. What's going on, the widows who spoke Greek, the Grecian Jews, those widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Now, in this day, people had one meal a day. They didn't have three meals a day with snacks in between. Whenever you and I opened the Bible, it was a survivalist culture, Old and New Testament alike.

People did not have wardrobes for every season of the year in different parts of the house. They didn't have pantries or deep freezers or cupboards that were brimming with food.

[5 : 15] The only clothes that they owned were on their bodies. The only food that they had was the food in front of them. So, these Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

What would happen? There was a practice from the Old Testament called the kuppah, K-U-P-P-A-H, a Hebrew word that meant basket.

So, when the apostles were done eating, they would then go out door to door, knocking on doors, saying, Hey, do you have any food? Do you have any bread? Any olives? Any fish? Any figs?

For widows and orphans. Remember, the Old Testament commanded God's people, you be sure that you take care of widows and orphans and even aliens, strangers in the land.

For you were once strangers in a land not your own, referring to the time when they were in Egypt. Now, so, the apostles, they've eaten their one meal a day.

[6 : 16] They get up from the meal, they take their baskets, and they go to the door, knocking on the doors. You have any food for widows and orphans? The Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked.

And that word in Greek means it didn't happen just once. It happened again and again and again. They were being overlooked in receiving their one meal a day.

If we put that together, that meant they were literally starving to death. No wonder there was a complaint about the problem. Now, let's go on in the text.

Verse 2. So, the apostles, the twelve, they gathered all the disciples together. That doesn't mean all 5,000 guys plus their wives plus their kids for a congregational meeting.

It doesn't mean that. They gathered together all of the disciples who brought the complaint. And to these people, these gentlemen, they said, It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.

[7 : 25] It wouldn't be right for us to neglect teaching the Word of God in order to go door-to-door, knocking on the doors, collecting food for widows and orphans. All right? So, what'd they do?

Verse 3 and 4. Brothers, speaking again to the guys who brought the complaint, Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be, they have a reputation for being, full of the Spirit. That would be the Holy Spirit. They were walking closely with Jesus. They were known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them. We're going to give them the responsibility of going door-to-door, collecting food for widows and orphans.

And we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Now, they have two items on their to-do list. Well, what happened?

After the 12 apostles, the spiritual leaders, gave this group of guys this responsibility, well, it says in verse 5, the proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Teman, Parmenas, and Nicholas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

[8 : 43] Now, what is significant about verse 5 is that all of these names are Greek. So, that means that Greek men with Greek names who probably spoke Greek as their mother tongue, their language, and would have had a heart for Greek-speaking widows who were literally starving to death, indicating that the right guys were chosen for the right job.

It was a great solution to the problem. Now, watch what happens next in verse 6 and verse 7. They presented these men. So, the guys who selected them very carefully, they carefully chose, vetted, seven men known to walk closely with Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, having godly wisdom.

They presented these seven men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Now, remember, in the Scriptures, there were multiple reasons for the laying on of hands, one of which was for the giving of authority. In the Old Testament book of Numbers, chapter 27, God said to the old guy Moses, Hey, Moses, you have Joshua, the young guy, stand up in front of all the people, and you lay your hands on him, giving him some of your authority.

So, you see, the giving of authority came through the laying on of hands. In other words, right here in verse 6, and they laid their hands on them. Not only did the apostles give these seven guys a job to do, but they gave to these seven guys the authority to get the job done.

[10:36] They gave them the authority to get the job done. And what was the result? Verse 7, So, the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

What you and I want to see here is that there was great results spiritually. You talk about growing pains. The church grew to about 5,000 men plus women and children.

And now, this phrase in verse 7, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly. It's geometric multiplication. It's growth that was even greater still.

Growing pains were off the chart at First Christian Church in Jerusalem in the first century. So, here's the issue. This context is not about a title.

It's not about a position. It's not about an office. It's about a role. It's about responsibilities. It's about tasks. Two tasks.

[11:39] The physical feeding of widows. And the spiritual feeding of believers. So, it breaks down like this.

There are three things that stand out about First Christian Church Jerusalem in the first century. FCC. F. Function. Everybody knew their function.

So, the apostles, the spiritual leaders, they said, we're going to devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. That's our function. You seven guys, you're going to go door to door, knocking on those doors, collecting food for the Greek-speaking widows.

And why was that? Because, see, they had a heartfelt concern for these Greek-speaking widows. A heart of concern. That's why they did it. And they were committed.

There's that final C. FCC. Function. Concern. Heartfelt concern. And it all was rooted in a commitment that they had to Jesus Christ.

[12:46] Incredible. Now, let's think a moment. Dr. Thomas Edison, he had a winter home in Fort Myers, Florida.

Maybe you've been there. My wife, Leah, and I, we've gone there with the kids, and we've even taken the grandkids to go through this winter home of Dr. Thomas Edison.

Now, there's this dock there at the Edison estate that goes out into the water. It has been rebuilt from photographs that have been found on the estate.

Now, tradition has it that many a time when Dr. Edison was there in the winter months, he would go to the end of that dock and he would fish for hours upon hours.

And when he was at the end of that dock fishing, nobody was allowed to step foot on that dock. Nobody. Not even Mrs. Edison. Well, it was discovered after his death why many a time he did not catch fish, because in a journal it had said something to the effect of that Dr. Edison did not even bait the hook many a time because he didn't want the fish to bother him.

[13:59] He just wanted time to sit and think. Sit and think. This guy is credited with having said, quote, 5% of people think, 10% think they think, and the other 85% would rather die than think.

Well, we're going to be of the 5% today. We're going to sit here and think. What on earth does Acts chapter 6 verses 1 through 7 have to do with us today?

Well, it speaks powerfully to us. The organizational structure of the church. You see, the American church is struggling.

We have what would be called a bell curve. A bell curve. And the American church, it has a launch date. It has a time when it is established, a birth date.

And as the church grows, there's excitement. We call it momentum growth. But pretty soon, the new wears off.

[15:07] And the church needs to become then strategic. Strategic in how to reach people, how to keep growing, if they want to keep that right climb, if you will, to reach a place of sustained health at the top of the bell curve.

Now, roughly today in America, there are about 350,000 churches, Protestant churches in America. And regretfully, the majority of them are on the wrong side of the bell curve.

Eight out of ten. Eight and a half out of ten churches in America today are declining. Many of them are in what we would call a maintenance position.

They hope to maintain the offering. They hope to maintain the attendance. They hope to maintain the interest of people. They are not growing. They are declining. And even out of that number, there are several that you and I could call on life support.

We don't know if they're going to be open at the end of the month, let alone at the end of the year.

And regretfully today, there are roughly 12 churches closing every day in America.

[16:24] 12 closed yesterday. 12 closed today. 12 will close tomorrow. Thousands of churches every year now close in America.

And it has something to do with how churches are structured, how they're put together. It begs us to just really stop and think of how critical the day is.

You know, it might be, ladies, that you saw the commercial for Whisk Laundry Detergent. I remember it airing on television again and again and again.

And that commercial always indicated that the homemaker did not know how to do the laundry.

Here she was washing her husband's shirts.

The commercial said, Oh, she's tried scrubbing them out. She's tried soaking them out, but still she gets ring around the collar. Oh, those filthy rings. She's tried soaking them out.

[17:24] She's tried scrubbing them out, but still she gets ring around the collar. Now, that commercial, though it implied that homemaker did not know how to do the laundry, it needed to ask the obvious question.

And that question is, When is that guy going to learn to wash his neck? That's what it should have asked. How do we, here's the obvious question, how do we live this out?

How do we apply Acts chapter 6 verses 1 through 7 to life today in the church so that we can survive growing pains?

Well, it's called elder governance. You see, this passage tells us clearly of two of the five responsibilities of elders that are found in the book of Acts.

It has everything to do with how churches are put together. You and I have been created by God.

We have been fearfully and wonderfully made, as it says in Psalm 139.

[18:34] Fearfully and wonderfully made. And God gave to us a skeletal system. We have bones, and bones give us form and function. It's how we're put together.

It's our structure. Well, similarly, the local church has a structure, and when we follow the structure as described in the Word of God, we're going to be healthy, and healthy things grow.

They're going to have growing pains. Now, here are the five responsibilities of elders. Remember, it's about task. It's about role. It's about responsibility.

It's not about title. It's not about a position. It's not about an office to which we're nominated and elected. It's about responsibilities. And elders have five responsibilities found in the book of Acts.

I use the letter P so that I can remember them. First of all, in Acts chapter 6, we learn that an elder is responsible for preaching, meaning the teaching of the Word of God, whether that's in a service, whether that's in a life group, a Sunday school class, a Bible study, mentoring a couple of guys over a cup of coffee, over breakfast.

[19:50] So, an elder has to be responsible for communicating the Word of God. Number two, prayer. It's right here in the text. We will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word of God.

So, elders then are responsible for the church to be a praying church. They lead by example.

They're not saying all the prayers. They are leading the people to a place of a church culture that is enamored with, rooted in, affixed to prayer.

Just like in Acts chapter 2, when we read in verse 42, they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

If they can devote themselves to prayer, so can we, and we as elders, lead the charge in that regard.

Number three, policy. In the book of Acts chapter 15, in a passage that is referred to as the Jerusalem Council, the elders in Jerusalem, led by James, the brother of Jesus, they establish a policy as to how Gentiles can come to Christ and be saved.

There were Judaizers who said, oh no, those Gentiles, they have to be circumcised, obeying the law of Moses. Then they become a Jew, and then they can become a Christian, a follower of Jesus, our Messiah.

[21 : 20] And the elders, led by James, the half-brother of Jesus, they said, no, no, no. In chapter 15, verse 19 of Acts, James said, it is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to Christ.

He then writes a letter, and he gives that letter to Barnabas and to Paul, and he says, go back and implement this in the church in Antioch, but also in other locations.

And that's exactly what happens. Go do church this way. The elders established policy, how church was to be done. Then, number four and five of these five responsibilities, they are found in the book of Acts, chapter 20.

Paul is saying goodbye to the elders in Ephesus. He had been there for three years, his single longest located ministry. He's turning in his resignation, if you will.

He's going to the mission trail, and he's speaking with the elders. And in verse 28, he says, be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

[22 : 39] He goes on, and he says, soon after I leave, savage wolves will come in to destroy the flock in order, and he said, even from your own number, men will arise to distort the truth in order to draw disciples away after them.

He's prophesying that even from the elders, there would be false teachers. elders. So here are two responsibilities for elders, number four and five. Elders must provide protection of the flock against all manner of evil, against Satan.

Remember, our struggle is not with flesh and blood, but it's with the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this dark world. It's against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms, Ephesians chapter 6, verse 12.

We protect the doctrine of the church. We protect the family of God against division. So protection, and then finally, pastoral care.

Be shepherds of God's flock. That's under your care, of which the Holy Spirit, see, the Holy Spirit has called you. The Holy Spirit has urged you. The Holy Spirit has given you this responsibility.

[23 : 46] You are pastors. You are shepherds of the flock serving the great master shepherd, Jesus. So we have five responsibilities. Now, if this is what elders do and they don't have 58 things to do or 79 things to do, then what happens?

That means then in the church, Ephesians chapter 4, verse 11 and following, it was he, Jesus, who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors, some to be teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service.

So those who are leaders, prepare those to use their spiritual gifts for works of service. And then notice in verse 16, from him, from Jesus, the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work.

See, everybody's got a job to do. Elders have five things to do. They're not getting the repair bids for the roof. They're not getting the striping bids for the parking lot.

They're not balancing the checkbook. They have five things that they do. And when elders are investing in, staying in those five areas of responsibility, their to-do list is long and enormous.

[25 : 17] And that means every one of us then steps up to the plate and we serve. We would call those deacons. Now, what I want us to understand is that the word deacon is this Greek word diakonos, and it means, actually in Greek, servant, or someone who serves.

diya means through, konos means dust. So, when you and I are on the move serving Jesus, we're making a cloud of dust, kind of like pig pen in Charlie Brown.

So, don't think of the word deacon as an office to which we're nominated and elected. The word means to serve. So, the church is full of servants.

I happen to be an elder where I attend and worship. Indian Creek Christian Church, the creek in Indianapolis. I'm an elder and that's the way that I'm serving.

I am a diakonos, a servant of Jesus. I happen to be a shepherd of the flock. And, we need to remember Jesus said in Mark chapter 10 verse 45 that the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.

[26 : 34] Then, when you and I claim to be a Christian, when we claim to be his follower, we must live as Jesus lived. So, that's the structure of the church, the body of Christ.

It's not an address. It's not a time of service. It is a living entity. And, all of us have been given a gift and we need to use that gift for serving.

So, FCC, First Christian Church, not Jerusalem, no, First Christian Church, Greensburg, now in the 21st century, F, we all have a function.

First Peter, chapter 4, verse 10, each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, thereby administering God's grace in its various forms.

Remember, a gift is meant to be given. and, we're moving into high school graduation season, college graduation season.

[27 : 35] We're going to be picking up gifts for those graduates. Those gifts are not going to stay at home on the dining room table. No, a gift is meant to be given. What gift has Jesus given to you and to me?

everybody's got a gift. First Peter, chapter 4, verse 10, and we should use that gift to advance the kingdom of God all for the glory of Jesus alone.

The letter C is for Christ Jesus. Colossians, chapter 3, verse 17, whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of Jesus Christ giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

You see, it's all for the Lord Jesus Christ. It's not for our acclaim. It's not for our name. It's for the name of Jesus.

So, whatever gift I've been given, that's my function in the body of Christ. And I'm doing it for one person and that person alone is Jesus Christ. And how I want to do it is in a spirit of compassion.

[28 : 47] I want to follow His compassion. Remember, in Matthew, chapter 9, verse 36, when Jesus saw the crowds, He had compassion on them. They were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

That word compassion, it's a medical term, biological. It means bowel or gut. So, when Jesus saw broken, hurting people, He had feeling for them that came welling up from deep within Him.

Deep within Him. And that should be motivating us when we see broken, hurting, lost people. We should have empathy and feeling for them that comes from deep within.

What's our function? What's the gift you and I have received? Are we using that for the glory of Jesus and Him alone, our function for Christ Jesus in a spirit of real compassion?

Those are life lessons. You know, bottom line, it looks like this. Healthy things grow. You must be growing there at First Christian Church, Greensburg, Indiana.

[29 : 58] Look at all these growing pains. Healthy things grow. Well, growing things change. And change challenges us, doesn't it?

Change challenges us in so many ways. challenges. And what you and I want to remember is that challenges, they force us to trust God. God's got this.

No matter what it is that we need, God has got this. And then trust leads to obedience. When we are trusting God in the midst of the challenges, that trust leads to obedience, and obedience makes us grow.

It's incredible. that is the life cycle of a healthy church. First Christian Church, you are having some growing pains, all by God's great grace, and it's all for the glory of Jesus Christ.

Thanks for the privilege of bringing today the Word of God.