A disgruntled reader wrote the editor of his local newspaper, complaining that the paper was not what it used to be. The editor replied, “It never was.” The same could be said about the church of Jesus Christ. But this does not stop many from looking back for some non-existent “golden age” of the church. The mistake is understandable. When you consider the condition of the contemporary church against the standard of scripture, you inevitably conclude that the word of God is being rejected, the name of Christ is being reproached, and the work of the Spirit is being quenched. The proper response to this situation is to look forward and put our hope in the imminent day when the Lord Jesus will glorify the church and present her to himself without spot or blemish. But because we can only see through a glass darkly, it is hard for us to wrap our minds around what the church is going to be. So we look back and put our hope in the empty possibility of becoming what we used to be. But the church has never been what it used to be. The Acts of the Apostles prosecutes that indictment and leaves no room for any reasonable doubt.

Yes, there is a real sense in which the church was at its best at its birth. But as you read through Acts, you will find that the early church experienced many of the same growing pains that the church experiences today. The snapshot of the early church recorded in Acts 6:1-7 is clear evidence that the church was not born with instant or automatic maturity. The early church had a lot of growing up to do. But there is good news in this bad news. While we see the immaturity of the church in this text, we also see that this immature church was in the good, wise, and sovereign hands of the heavenly Father. The Lord Jesus Christ was obviously present and actively in-charge of the life of the church. Certainly, the situation of this text is unique. But there is a message here that speaks to every church at every time in every place. If you keep first things first, the Lord will help you to continue and increase and even multiply through your growing pains. Let’s consider what this passage teaches us about the problems, priorities and proof of a growing church.

I. THE PROBLEMS OF A GROWING CHURCH

Every church has its problems Do not be fooled by “the Church of the “Immaculate Perception.” There are no perfect churches – not this church, not the church down the street, not that church you watch on television. Here are two facts about any church you enter: nothing is as bad as it seems and nothing is as good as it seems. Every church has problems. Even the early church had its share of problems. The opening verses of Acts 6 tell us about two problems the early church faced.

A. THERE WAS DISSENSION AMONG THE SAINTS.

Verse 1 says, “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were
Note that the bad problem of dissension arose because of the good problem of growth. Acts 2:37 reports that 3,000 souls were added to the church on the day of Pentecost. Acts 2:47 reports that the Lord was adding to the church daily those who were being saved. By Acts 4:4, the number of believers had grown to about 5,000. Now Acts 6:1 reports that the disciples were increasing in number. What a great problem to have! Souls were being saved, disciples were growing, and lives were being changed. The devil must have been angry about this. So he attacked the church.

Actually the devil had been attacking the church since chapter 4. But his schemes did not work. In chapter 4, Satan attacked the church with severe persecution. But after Peter and John had been arrested, censured, arrested, and beaten, the church praised the greatness of God and prayed for greater boldness to proclaim Christ. In chapter 5, Satan attacked the church with moral corruption, when Ananias and Sapphira lied about the money they received for selling their property. But God quickly judged them, causing them to drop dead in the assembly. And the holiness of the church was preserved. But the devil still had another means of attack: internal dissension. And he used it as the Hellenists – Greek-speaking Jewish Christians – complained against the Hebrews – Aramaic-speaking Jewish Christians – because their widows were being neglected during the daily distribution of food.

In the early days of the church, many Jews lost their homes, jobs, and families when they became followers of Jesus Christ. Especially vulnerable were widows, who did not have government agencies, special grants, or insurance policies to take care of them. So it was incumbent upon the church to care for these needy saints. Acts 2:44-45 reports: “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.” Later, Acts 4:34-35 reports: “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.” By Acts 6, the church had a great supply of financial resources to minister to the needs of the saints. But for whatever reason the Hellenistic widows felt they were being overlooked in the distribution. And they complained.

I contend that these complaints were the plan of the devil to hinder the growth of the church. And I further contend that his plan has not changed. If Satan cannot crush the church with persecution or pervert the church with corruption, he will divide the church with complaints. Think about it. How many people do you know who have left this church or some other church in the past several years because of firm convictions about doctrinal matters. You would probably be hard pressed to think of any. But you can probably easily think of people who have left the church because of complaints. How many churches do you know who have had big fights over matters of truth? The sad indictment is that most church fights and splits are over complaints about titles, money, and power. Mark it down. If Satan cannot destroy a church, he will join it and let it destroy itself.

B. THERE WERE DISTRACTIONS AWAY FROM THE SCRIPTURES.
Verse 2 reports the apostles’ initial response to the problem of dissension in the church: “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.” Many commentators read the problem of dissension as an issue of racial or economic division. But the response of the twelve – the original eleven apostles and Matthias – tells us that this dissension was actually a spiritual problem. There are two issues at stake: Preaching the word and serving tables. Both matters were legitimate and significant. But the apostles had enough discernment to recognize that one of these important issues had become a problem that could potentially hinder them from focusing on the other important issue. The dissension among the saints arose in order to distract them away from the scriptures. Satan used division at the table to hinder the declaration of the truth.

The twelve’s response to this distraction is stated in clear and direct terms: “It is not right...” Notice how they spoke of this issue in moral, ethical, and spiritual terms: “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.” The twelve were not saying that they were above waiting tables or that this kind of practical service was beneath them. Rather, they were speaking as men who knew, embraced, and refused to compromise what the Lord had called them to do. As the spiritual leaders of the church, it was their God-given responsibility to proclaim, explain, and defend the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. In fact, the ministry of the apostles was so intimately connected with the ministry of teaching and preaching that Acts 2:42 calls the message of Christ “the apostles’ doctrine.” The apostles knew that the health and growth of the church depended on the faithful preaching of God’s word. So they would not neglect the vital work that the Lord had called them to do to do the important but secondary work that others could do. They refused to be distracted away from the scriptures.

II. THE PRIORITIES OF A GROWING CHURCH

The unmet needs, divisive complaints, and satanic distractions the church faced were such a threat to the progress of the church that the twelve called the entire congregation for a special meeting. And when the church met together, the twelve did not investigate the claims or referee arguments or take sides. They addressed the matter in a way that would ensure that the priorities of the church would not be compromised. They presented a plan in verses 3-4 to make sure that the main thing remained the main thing. It was a plan that called for strategic service.

A. THE STRATEGIC SERVICE OF THE MEMBERSHIP

In verse 3, the twelve laid out a strategy for making sure the needs of the Hellenistic widows were met: “Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this
duty." Notice several helpful principles for ministry that we can learn from this recommendation of the twelve. First, notice that the apostles designed the ministry of the church around the needs of the membership. Unfortunately, in too many instances, we structure the ministry for maintenance rather than for ministry. But the apostles refused to be stuck in a rut, bound by tradition, or beholden to programs. They were open, willing, and ready to change whatever needed to be changed in order to meet the needs. John MacArthur comments here: “Biblical church organization always responds to needs and to what the Spirit is already doing. To organize a program and then expect the Holy Spirit to get involved in it is to put the cart before the horse. We dare not try to force the Spirit to fit our mold. Organization is never an end of itself but only a means to facilitate what the Lord is doing in his church.”

Likewise, we can learn from the fact that the apostles did not volunteer and refused to be drafted into serving tables in spite of the pressure. They instead proposed a strategy to have the members minister to one another. That is not just the apostolic strategy for this unique situation; it is the biblical standard of the New Testament church. Christ is the head of the church. And every Christian is a member of the body. And every member of the body has an important function to fulfill that the church might be healthy, strong, and growing. Mark it down. Every member of the church is called to be a minister of Jesus Christ, not just the spiritual leaders. And the spiritual leaders have a very specific ministry, which is to get the rest of the members ready to fulfill their own ministries. Ephesians 4:11-12 says, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” The ministry of the pastors-teachers is to equip the rest of the saints for ministry. On one hand, this requires that the saints do their part to free up the pastors to focus on equipping. It also requires that pastors be humble, mature, and confident enough to get out of the way and allow the saints the freedom to minister to one another.

One more lesson here. The recommended strategy of the twelve tells us that our criteria for service out to make godliness a priority over giftedness. Verse 3 says: “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.” One of the mistakes we make in church is that we promote the wrong people for the wrong reasons.

- We promote people who are highly gifted.
- We promote people who have strong personalities.
- We promote people who have been members for a long time.
- We promote people who give a lot of money.
- We promote people who are successful in the business world.

And we promote these people, even though they may have all that, without clear evidence of spiritual maturity. In so doing, we doom the church to spiritual immaturity, because the members become what the leaders are. That is how ministries in the church or congregations themselves can become the hostages of carnal-minded people. It is because we have not kept our priorities straight. The bottom-line is that if you want a godly church, promote godly people.

They were to select men who had a good reputation throughout the congregation. This was a high standard, considering the church have over 5,000
members at the time. Likewise, they were to select men who were filled with the Holy Spirit. This qualification did not mean the chosen men had to have some supernatural endowment. According to Ephesians 5:18 it is God’s will every Christian be filled with the Spirit. They were not to select men who were worldly, carnal, of self-willed. They were to select men who obviously submitted to the leadership of the Spirit. Furthermore, they were to choose men who had wisdom.

**B. The Strategic Service of the Leadership**

Jesus faced two great crisis moments during his earthly ministry – one at the beginning, the other at the end. The crisis at the beginning of his ministry is recorded in Matthew 4:1-11, where Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness after fasting for forty days. Jesus overcame Satan’s temptations with the power of the word of God. The other crisis is recorded in Matthew 26:36-46, where Jesus’ own flesh ruse up in the Garden of Gethsemane. But Jesus was able to submit to the Father’s will, because he prayed with passion, faith and obedience. From these two episodes, Jesus gives us two tools to help us to do the Lord’s will when a crisis arises: scripture and prayer. No doubt, he taught and modeled the importance of prayer and scripture in many different ways for the twelve. And they apparently learned the lesson. In verse 4, the twelve clearly state their ministry priorities: "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the word." These are the two essential tools of Christian ministry: prayer and the ministry of the word. Warren Wiersbe writes: "Like two wings carrying a bird in flight or two oars propelling a boat through the water, the word of God and prayer keep us balanced and moving ahead."

First, spiritual leaders must be devoted to prayer. The apostles were men of prayer. But it was not just a personal devotion. They viewed it to be their divine duty to pray. It was not what they did as they led the church. It is one of the essential parts of their leadership. They had no dichotomy that separated work and prayer. Prayer was their work! This is what the church needs today. We need spiritual leaders who are men of prayer. First, **spiritual leaders must be devoted to private prayer.** Our private lives should be characterized by communion with God in prayer. A prayer less Christian is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. All the more is it so with those who lead God’s people without prayer. It has been well-said that what a minister is in his prayer closet before God alone is what he is – nothing more, nothing less. This is why the devil would have leaders do a hundred different wonderful things if he can stop of from praying. God has chosen prayer as the primary means by which his children receive what we need from him. So when we fail to pray we cut ourselves off from the source of the help, wisdom, strength, protection, and resources we need from God. Spiritual leaders can only minister effectively when we pray consistently.

O, what peace we often forfeit; O, what needless pains we bear
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.
Furthermore, spiritual leaders must be devoted to public prayer. That is, it is the job of pastors-teachers to lead the people of God in prayer and to prayer. The proclamation of the word is the most public thing that pastors do. And we are most often judged by our preaching and teaching. But this text places prayer right alongside of the ministry of the word. It indicates that spiritual leaders are to be just as committed to leading the church to pray as we are in leading the church in the ministry of the word. Jesus said that his house was to be called a house of prayer—not preaching, singing, or worship. All that we do in the name of Christ is to be fueled by believing prayer. R.A. Torrey wrote: “We are too busy to pray, and so we are too busy to have power. We have a great deal of activity, but accomplish very little; many services but few conversions, much machinery, few results.” May that not be our epitaph. Let us be a people who are characterized by prayer. Acts 12 records Herod’s stubborn determination to glorify himself. We also find God’s sovereign acts that put Herod in his place. In the crossfire of this spiritual warfare was the church that was gathered in prayer. And it is still true that we participate of the victory of Christ over the enemy to the degree we gives ourselves to prayer. Much prayer; much power. Little prayer; little power. No prayer; no power! Likewise, spiritual leaders must be devoted to the ministry of the word. Acts 6:1-7 is often considered to be the formal institution of the ministry of deacons in the church. But the text itself never indicates that this is what was going on. The word “deacon” is not used in this text. Its related term “ministry” is used in the text. But it does not apply the office of deacons. And it is not used to describe the seven men selected to wait tables. It is used in verse 4 to describe the work of the apostles. They were devoted to “prayer and the ministry of the word.” The apostles were ministers of the world. And this is the role of the spiritual leaders of the church. Think about that. Every Christian is a minister of Christ. But the spiritual leaders have a unique calling. We serve Christ as ministers of the word. We are servants of the word. This was not just the calling of the apostles. It is the calling of all who would exercise spiritual oversight over God’s people. In 2 Timothy 4:1-2, Paul writes: “I charge 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, be ready in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching.”

There are those who think pastors-teachers do very little work. They think we just play golf all week and get up when its time to preach and let it rip. But those who would do that are not true men of God. Indeed, some men make their pulpit work look so easy that you would think that it did not cost than any effort. But they have to work hard to make it look easy. The faithful ministry of the word requires preparation as well as proclamation. Really, the proclamation is the easy part. It’s the fun part. The burden is in the preparation. Bible exposition does not grow on trees. God does not speak to preachers and supernaturally give them the exegesis of the text. Clear, faithful, and consistent preaching and teaching is usually %90 perspiration and %10 inspiration. You have to do all that you can do and then God does what you cannot do. 2 Timothy 2:15 says, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”
One more thing. Let me spotlight an obvious but overlooked standard of spiritual leadership in this text. This passage makes it clear that Christ exercises pastoral oversight of his church through a plurality of godly men. This point can be made from virtually any passage in the New Testament that discusses spiritual leadership. But notice that this point is made in the text before us. Acts 6 records the selection of the first leaders outside of the apostles. And the church was to select seven men. And while these seven men made sure the needs of the widows were met at the daily distribution of food, the twelve would devoted themselves to pray and the ministry of the word. This is a reminder that the church is not to be a one man show. Christ alone is to be preeminent in the church. And we must not all any cult of personality to develop around any particular leader. There ought to be a plurality of godly men in the church who are qualified, able, and ready to lead the church in prayer and the ministry of word.

III. THE PROOF OF A GROWING CHURCH

Notice what happened when the strategic service of the membership hooked up with the strategic service of the leadership. Verses 5-6 report: “And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, an 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.” Look at how the Lord was at work this process. The seven names listed in verse 5 are all Greek names, which indicates that these were Hellenistic men. It was the neglected Hellenists who began to complain. And in the providence of God, seven Hellenists were chosen to make sure the resources were allocated to make sure their needs were met. This problem was being resolved in a way that would dramatically signify that the protecting turf was not to get in the way of meeting needs. Verse 6 says, “These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.” In so doing, the twelve affirmed these chosen men before the entire church. The reference to the laying on of hands does not suggest the impartation of a special gift, unction, or ability. The fact that they went through the screening process of the saints was proof that they had what they need for the task. They had a good reputation, were filled with the Holy Spirit, and conducted themselves with spiritual wisdom.

Verse 7 is one of the periodic progress reports of the gospel Luke gives in acts: “And 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.” This summary statement reports the results of the apostolic strategy, congregational cooperation, and ministry appointments described in the previous verses. It also gives us the proof of a growing church: “And the word of God continued to increase.” Notice that this expression of church growth is quite different from how we often think of church growth today. In far too many instances, we measure churches in terms of how many people attend, how many programs they offer, or how much money they raise. We celebrate size, money, facilities, influence, and prominence, even when these celebrated churches do not demonstrate submission
to the authority of God’s word or confidence in the sufficiency of God’s word. But this verse reminds us of the true evidence of a growing church – the word of God increases!

Verse 7 reports that as the word of God increased, the number of disciples multiplied! And the last line of verse 7 specifies a particular group of people who were becoming obedient to the faith: the priests. In the beginning of Acts 4, the priests and the other religious authorities showed up at the temple as Peter and John were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested, threatened, and beat Peter and John for the bold witness of Christ. The priests were vehemently opposed to the message of Christ. If Christ was the true Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world, the priests were out of business. So they worked hard to undermine the gospel in Jerusalem. But when the church made sure that the main thing remained the main thing, the word of God increased and even caused many of the priests to put their faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Let the church be the church and the Lord will send revival and restoration that will change lives in this city and throughout the nations.

**How to Reach the Masses, Men of Every Birth**

_for an answer Jesus gave the key_
_and I, if I be lifted up from the earth_
_will draw all men to me_

**Oh! The World Is Hungry for the Living Bread**

_lift the Savior up for them to see_
_trust him, and do not doubt the words that he said_
_i’ll draw all men unto me_

**Don’t Exalt the Preacher, Don’t Exalt the Pew**

_preach the gospel simple, full and free;_
_prove him and you will find that promise is true_
_i’ll draw all men unto me_