



# Central Peninsula Church

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## The Problem of Growth

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

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The map of global Christianity that our grandparents knew has been turned upside down. At the start of the 20th century, only 10% of the world's Christians lived in the nonwestern world. 90% lived in North America and Europe, along with Australia and New Zealand. But at the start of the 21st century, at least 70% of the world's Christians live in the nonwestern world. More Christians worship in Anglican churches in Nigeria each week than in all the Episcopal and Anglican churches of Britain, Europe, and North America combined. There are more Baptists in the Congo than in Britain. There are more people in church every Sunday in communist China than in all of Western Europe. Nepal is the birthplace of Buddhism. It's the only official Hindu kingdom in the world. But several years ago, the Lord saved Lok Bhandari, a revolutionary "freedom fighter" and a national martial arts champion whose father had groomed him to become prime minister. Today, Lok shares with crowds of 65,000 how Jesus revolutionized his life. He's been arrested more than 30 times for preaching the gospel. Christians in Nepal now number more than 700,000—amazing considering that 50 years ago there were no known Christians in Nepal.

It begs the question, why does the word of God spread and grow in some places, while in others it remains stagnant? Have you ever wondered that? It's like, why do some plants thrive in one area while somewhere else they barely survive? We've been studying Acts and we've seen how the writer, Luke, is big on the spread of God's word and the growth of the church. Let me show you:

- Acts 2:41, "**So those who received the word were baptized and there were added that day about 3,000 souls.**"

- Acts 2:47, "**And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.**"

- Acts 4:4, "**Many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to about 5,000.**"

- Acts 5:14, "**More than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.**"

- Acts 13:49, "**And the word of the Lord spread throughout all the region.**"

- Acts 16:5, "**So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.**"

- Acts 19:20, "**So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily.**"

Luke is into growth. It's interesting, I find that most of us are into growth until we experience it. We pray for growth but as soon as the little church that we loved so much starts to grow we get uncomfortable. Growth means change and we don't like change. Growth also brings problems and those problems can be painful. We're not even sure we like all of these people! Pretty soon we find ourselves longing for the good old days when everything was so simple and we knew everyone's name and they were all like us. Then because of our discomfort and all these problems we end up sabotaging the very growth we thought we wanted, and we're back where we started.

In Acts chapter 6 we have a story from the early church which begins and ends with statement about growth. It starts out and says "**the disciples were increasing in number**" (v.1) and it ends saying that "**the number of disciples continued to increase greatly...**" (v.7). But, in between, we have a problem; a big problem; you might even call it a threat. This problem threatened the health and vitality and growth of the early

church. It's a problem that has plagued the church ever since. The question is, how did they and how can we overcome it?

## **I. The Problem: Growth threatened by division and distraction.**

**A. Division:** The problem is described in v.1. **"Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food."** The threat or the problem has two parts. The first part is what I would call division. The conflict is between the Hellenists (the Greek-speaking Jews) and the Hebrews (the Hebrew or Aramaic-speaking Jews). The Hebrews probably felt more pure. They hadn't been as influenced by Greek culture and thinking. So there seems to be a cultural rift in the church and with that there was discrimination against the widows of the Hellenists in caring for their needs. Widows were especially needy in those days. It was common for widows to move into Jerusalem towards the end of their life because it was thought to be a good thing to die and be buried in the Holy Land. Normally, they would be taken care of by the Jewish synagogue, but when they became Christians the church took care of them. But it wasn't working. The system developed back in Acts 4 to take care of the poor was not working for this minority group. If that were to continue then Christians would come into disrepute and the spread of the gospel would experience a serious setback. That's the first part of the threat to the spread of the word.

By the way, this kind of thing can happen all the time in churches. It's not uncommon for one group to feel neglected. Sometimes this happens along racial lines. The church has been stained by prejudice at different times in history. Or perhaps the older people in a congregation feel neglected. Or

perhaps those who are not married feel that all the ministry is directed towards couples and those with children. Or perhaps those who are wealthy are given preferential treatment. One of the ways we tend to deal with these problems today is just to leave; we just go find another church that suits our own taste better, where we get more of our needs met, and where the people are all like us. It's so easy to do that today when finding a church is like choosing which supermarket you want to shop at. If this one doesn't have what you want, go to that one down the street. One of the problems we have today is that we evaluate our church experience as consumers. It's all about me. It's all about what meets my needs. But they didn't have those kinds of options in the early church. There wasn't another church down the road to attend. They had to deal with it, and I think that was good. So the first part of the threat to growth is division.

**B. Distraction:** The other part of the threat is what would happen if the problem was solved in the wrong way. It's what I would call distraction. You can see this clearly in v.2. **"So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables."** That almost sounds like a defense. Perhaps the apostles were the ones who were being criticized. We know that they were at least in some way in charge of the distribution. Or perhaps someone suggested that the apostles give more hands-on time to this problem. The threat here is that those called to the ministry of the word would leave that calling and serve tables. Luke clearly shows us that the temptation to do this is a major threat to the spread of the gospel. Notice the connection between **"the word of God"** in v.2 and **"the word of God"** in v.7. In v.2 he quotes the apostles saying that leaving "the word of God" would be a big mistake. And in v.7 he reports the effect of NOT leaving the word of God: **"And the word of God increased and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly."** His point is that the word of God kept spreading because the apostles didn't make the strategic mistake of neglecting it. The threat is whatever threatens the ministry of the word. Notice that it was

something very good that was threatening it, not something bad. That's almost always how it works. It would seem like a good thing for the apostles to show their humility by serving tables and getting involved in the nitty-gritty of caring for the widows' physical needs. Didn't Jesus teach us to be servants? Isn't this what "servant-leadership" is all about? Wouldn't you be impressed if you went into the bathroom one Sunday morning and saw me cleaning the toilets? Wouldn't you think, "Oh man, he is so humble. What a servant." By the way, I used to do that. When I was in seminary, I had my own janitorial business. My motto was, "Clean your bowl, save your soul." You may laugh, but I did pretty well. I had a thriving business. When I was just finishing my studies, a guy offered me \$14,000 a month to clean three of his Chuck E. Cheese restaurants. That's a lot of money now, but that was a staggering amount in 1981! But then, while I was thinking about it, I received an offer to be a youth pastor at my first church. They offered me \$16,500 a year. It was a "no-brainer" for me. I took the youth pastor job because I knew that's what I was called to do. I look back on that tempting offer now as a threat to distract me from what God had called me to do. It seemed like such a good thing, but it would have been a mistake.

So there were two parts to the threat: 1) division as seen in the conflict that resulted in neglected widows, and 2) distraction as the apostles are tempted to move away from the ministry of the word.

## **II. The Solution: Growth enhanced by good leadership.**

**A. Leaders must listen:** The solution to this problem is found in vv.2-6.

**"So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.' The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a**

**man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them."**

The word that comes to mind as I read this is leadership. This threat is dealt with because of good leadership. One of the things these apostles did as leaders is they listened. They took the complaint seriously. There are a lot of things they could have done besides listen. They could have thrown them out: "We don't want whiners around here. If you don't like it, you can leave." Or they could have just ignored them. That's a favorite of leaders. You just don't respond at all. You pretend they don't exist. Delete their e-mail and tell them it must have gotten lost as spam. Another thing they could have done is pass the problem off to a committee. Leaders are great at that: "Well, this really isn't my decision. We have a committee who deals with these things. I wish I could help but you'll have to talk to them." But the apostles didn't do any of those things. It's clear that they listened; they took this complaint seriously. Bill Gates writes: "You have to be constantly receptive to bad news, and then you have to act on it. Sometimes I think my most important job as CEO is to listen for bad news. If you don't act on it, your people will eventually stop bringing bad news to your attention. And that's the beginning of the end. The willingness to hear hard truth is vital not only for heads of big corporations but also for anyone who loves the truth. Sometimes the truth sounds like bad news, but it is just what we need." It's important that leaders listen.

**B. Leaders must stay focused:** But at the same time they didn't get sucked into the implication that they should fix the problem. Another thing they did as leaders was they stayed focused on their calling. Their calling was to be devoted to prayer and to the ministry of the word. The point was not that serving tables was beneath them. It's not that one is better than the other. The point is that Jesus called them to be

apostles and that meant being devoted to prayer and to the word. There is an interesting word play in what they say. The verb “to serve” is used twice in this passage. The word is diaconeo. This is the word they use in v.2 when they talk about “serving tables.” But it is also the word they use in v.4 when they talk about “the ministry (service) of the word.” In essence, what they say is like this: “Instead of serving tables we’re called to serve the word.” In both cases, they’re serving. But the issue is what are THEY called to serve. Someone once paid a compliment to Lee Iacocca, the former Chairman of Chrysler Corporation. “Mr. Iacocca,” the man said, “I want to tell you how much I enjoy your television commercials advertising Chrysler.” Iacocca replied, “Sir, I could care less of what you think of my commercials. What I want to know is what kind of car do you drive?” You see, he stayed focused on what his purpose was. For the apostles, they could care less about making people like them by serving tables; they wanted to know what kind of God you believed in. Now, that doesn’t mean that serving tables was unimportant. For someone else, serving tables is the right focus.

**C. Leaders must delegate:** This leads to still another thing they did as leaders. They learned to delegate. They oversaw a process in which others were given the important responsibility of serving tables. They tell the congregation to select seven men to oversee this work. I wonder if that was a little bit scary for the apostles, because all of a sudden they’re really having to let go of something. What if these guys messed it up? What if they made things worse? What if they handled the problem in a different way than they would have? Worse yet, what if they were better at it than the apostles? That would really make them look bad! But notice how careful they are to ensure that the job gets done well. They establish three criteria: they had to be men of good

reputation, men who were full of the Spirit, and men who were wise. Let me put it another way: they had to be men of character, men of spiritual maturity, and men with practical common sense. So they weren’t looking for men who were wealthy or good looking or influential, but men who had proven their worth in the nitty gritty of life.

**D. Leaders must be team players:** Since it’s Super Bowl Sunday let me say one more thing about leaders. Leaders must be team players. Here we see these leaders willing to team up with the people of God to get the work of the church done. They team up with the congregation by letting them select the men. Then when they’ve done that they confirm the ones chosen by prayer and laying on of hands. There is a lot of wisdom in this. They get the congregation involved in making a decision, but they also establish the ground rules and perhaps even have the right of veto. But then they will also team up with these seven new leaders. It’s interesting that most of the men on this list we know nothing about, but two of them will come to play a very prominent role in the book of Acts. If you thought of these guys as silent, quiet, behind-the-scenes type of guys then you’re wrong. At least two of them would become powerful spokesman for the Christian faith. Stephen is described right down in v.8 as **“full of grace and power...performing great wonders and signs among the people.”** All of chapter 7 is him preaching and then becoming the first martyr. Philip will become a great evangelist, leading the church in its first great mission outside of Jerusalem. So these men aren’t limited to setting up chairs and making coffee for the rest of their lives. They will go on to all kinds of ministry.

So we have here the people of God, both servers of the word and servers of tables, teamed up in serving God. Let me just say here that it will take a whole lot of teamwork to accomplish the mission of CPC. We want to make a difference for Christ here on this Peninsula. I want to challenge you this morning: are you willing to step up and become involved in serving the Lord? I know that there

are so many different ways to do that, and it doesn't only have to be in the context of church. But if this is your church, if this is where you get fed the word of God, if this is where you come for your kids to get dedicated and married, if this is where you worship Sunday after Sunday, then you need to find a way to serve here. Every week there are opportunities. There are Sunday school classes, youth ministries, small groups, ushers, greeters, prayer warriors, coffee makers, flower arrangers, hospital visits, meals to make for hurting families. I could go on and on. Maybe you don't feel qualified. Maybe you don't have a good reputation, or are filled with spiritual maturity or practical wisdom. If that's the case, then what are you doing to grow?

We've always been a church that that has believed in the ministry of ALL God's people; not just a few paid professionals. So what's your ministry? How are you teamed up in the service of God?

### **III. The Result: When the people of God are teamed up in the service of God then the Word of God will spread.**

Look at the result Luke tells us about when this happens. **“The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith”** (v.7). Luke is celebrating the victory over this in-house problem. The word of God keeps spreading. The number of disciples keep increasing. He shows us how it even resulted in a new breakthrough in evangelistic power. Now, even priests, who had been so hostile are responding to the word of God. The church had been tested. She had passed the test by caring for the widows and guarding the word. And God honored this triumph with new power and fruitfulness. You see, when the people of God are teamed up in the service of God then the word of God will spread.

We want to make a difference for Christ here on this Peninsula. But if we really do that, we will grow, and growth means change and it means we will have to deal with new problems and new threats. In the next couple of years we want to start a new church. Some of you will even be asked to make a sacrifice to leave this church and become a part of a new work somewhere on the Peninsula. I want to challenge you this morning. Are you willing to deal with uncomfortable realities of growth? It's not about me or you being comfortable. It's about what God is doing. Are you, the people of God, willing to team up in the service of God so the word of God will spread?

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