

The Continuing Acts of Jesus: Change so you don't Change

Acts 6:1-7
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Please grab the Bible from the pew in front of you or use the one on your device and open to Acts chapter 6.

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If you are joining us today for the first time we are in the middle of a series through the book of Acts. Acts is a story Luke recorded for us about what Jesus kept doing in the church even after He ascended back to heaven.

What this means is that Acts isn't about the apostles. Yes, they show up throughout the book, but none of the apostles are the main character. Peter gets a fair bit of attention in the first half, Paul gets a bunch of attention in the second half, and there are a few references to some of the other apostles, but the only character that appears throughout is Jesus and His Spirit.

And Jesus' Spirit is the one who does all the action in this book. So it is the Spirit who falls on the apostles, baptises them in power, and enables them to speak the languages of all sorts of different people. It was the Spirit who filled thousands with love for each other so deep that they sold their possessions to take care of each other's needs. It was the Spirit that opened Peter and John's eyes and enabled them to heal a crippled man outside the temple. And it was the Spirit of Jesus who busted the apostles out of jail, and then busted them out of jail again.

And on and on we could go. The apostles didn't have any power to do these kinds of things – they were just regular guys. After the crippled guy got healed Peter asked the gawking crowd:

Why do you stare at us as if by our own power of godliness we made this man walk?... It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through Him that has completely healed him, as you can all see. (Acts 3:12-16)

Peter says "I'm not even particularly godly, so stop looking at us, put your eyes on Jesus, He's the one who deserves the credit!"

So Acts is full of what Jesus kept doing to build His church. And the great thing about Acts is the way it ends. The last verse in Acts reads:

For two whole years Paul stayed [in Rome] in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance! (Acts 28:30-31)

And then it just ends. There is no "The End", there is no "Happily ever after." The book just ends. And the point is this isn't over! The same God who poured His Spirit out in the first century is still in the business of pouring His Spirit out today. Amen?

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On this note I'd like to call Mithun to come up to the front and share a little bit about what God has been doing in his life over the last several weeks. Mithun is a new Jesus follower. He is from India, and has only been in Canada for about a month. And he has a great testimony about God being faithful in the midst of some significant transition.

[Mithun]

Friends, Jesus is on the move in Prince George in 2017! He is pouring out His Spirit, and people are having their lives transformed.

Now I want to give you a little challenge. Who has been encouraged by these testimonies we keep hearing?

If you've enjoyed hearing stories of God doing awesome things then it's your turn to contribute. If you've seen God working then you need to know that your encounter with God isn't just for you, it is for you to give away. This is a body. Your church needs to hear what Jesus is doing in you. So if you have been encouraged in spite of facing difficult circumstances, or if you have seen Him answer prayer, or if you have had the opportunity to share Jesus with someone in your life, or if you find your faith growing and your commitment to obedience increasing, then we need to be encouraged by you giving glory to God.

If you are a bit nervous then pray for boldness – this is what the apostles did. Don't let your nervousness stop you. And if you can't think of anything God has been doing then pray for Him to open your eyes because this is His city and He works here. You've just been missing it.

So if you've got a story about God working in any way please give me a call, I want to hear it. Your... encounter with God isn't for you, it is for us, and ultimately it is for city, so prepare yourself to give it away.

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Alright, we are going to be in the first seven verses of Acts 6 today, and these are the final verses in the first section in Acts. This has been the birth of the church stage. It has been all about the Spirit falling for the first times on people and transforming them into witnesses of Jesus, and it has all happened in Jerusalem.

And while there has been some opposition – the synagogue leaders have been jealous and people have been thrown in prison – nobody has died for their faith yet. So it has been pretty rosy. Well that is all about to start changing later in chapter 6.

But this week Luke brings section 1 in Acts to a close by talking about the church's growth and one of the challenges it dealt with.

So let's pick up the text in Acts 6 starting in verse 1

[Read Acts 6:1-7]

So there were problems in the early church. And this is something we've seen throughout Acts. Luke is really intentional to paint the early church without rose coloured glasses.

So there are texts, like the one at the end of Acts 2 or the one at the end of Acts 4 where the believers are selling their property and sharing with each other. And everyone is singing Kum-bi-ya.

But if you just grab these texts by themselves and say "this is what the early church was like" you are missing the story. So right after Acts 2 Peter and the other leaders face all sorts of persecution. And right after Acts 4 God strikes Ananias and Sapphira dead for trying to make themselves look holier than they actually were. A little later in Acts we come across Simon the magician who wanted to possess God's power, but wasn't interested in following God. And then we come across John Mark who was afraid and gives up. And on and on Luke goes showing how the early church was not some ideal that we need to get back to.

Instead the early church was a real church just like any other. Yes, there was great stuff going on, but there was brokenness in the package too.

And its with that understanding established that we get to today's text. Between two verses about great stuff Luke packs in some problems.

Luke says there were a bunch of Hellenistic, Jewish, widows who were not being taken care of. So here's what is culturally going on.

There were Jews all over the Empire in the first century. Ever since they were taken into exile 500 years earlier they had been a scattered people. And so there were two kinds of Jews in Rome. There were Hebraic Jews who lived in Israel and spoke Hebrew, and there were Hellenistic Jews who lived everywhere else and spoke Greek.

But regardless of what language the Jews spoke they loved their dirt, and so when they would get old they would move back to Israel so they could die in the Holy Land.

But when the husbands would die their widows would be a long way from the rest of their family and so wouldn't be able to provide for themselves.¹

And from a very early date the church realized that bringing Jesus' love to the community they had been placed in involved taking care of the needy – no one else was doing this. Jesus followers invented this idea.

¹ Cultural context adapted from John Piper: <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/serving-widows-preaching-the-word-and-winning-priests> (Accessed June 2, 2017)

But then a problem happened: as the church grew it became evident that the aid wasn't being handed out equally, and the Hellenistic Jews were being neglected.

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Now as I started looking at this text in depth I realized that it didn't say what I thought it would say – have you ever realized that about a text? Thought it was about one thing and then realized it was about something else? This happens to me all the time.

Anyway, I thought this passage was going to be a sin thing where a racial minority group was being marginalized. But it isn't. And we know that because there is no chastisement in this text for what the church was doing. There is a recognition of a problem, but there is no call for the leaders to repent.

Instead what we see is the church wrestling with their changing circumstances and realizing that in order for them not to change their core convictions they needed to change their practices.

This was a church that was facing new things. Verse 1 says "In those days the number of disciples was increasing." And verse 7 says "The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly." So there was growth, and this growth meant they couldn't keep doing things the same way.

Now the text makes it clear that their need to change wasn't because they had done things wrong. Yes, there was a problem, but there hadn't been any sin. No one dumped these Hellenistic widows under the bus. The way they had been doing ministry had just stopped being an effective way to help the people.

And when the leaders were made aware of the problem they addressed it right away. But here is the ironic thing. The changing circumstances the church found themselves facing meant they had to change the way we are doing things in order to not change the thing they were doing. Sometimes it is essential to change so that you don't change.

So look at verse 2. The Apostles get together and they establish the core that they don't want to change. They say "We can't neglect the ministry of the word in order to wait tables." And then in verse 4 they say "[we] will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

So prayer and the word were not new things to the apostles, these were things they had been committed to from the beginning. But then all of a sudden they realized that if they were going to maintain their focus on the word and prayer they had to change. They needed to change in order not to change.

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So what had to change? Well, up until this point the apostles had been in charge. And they weren't here because they were hoarding power, they were here because Jesus had put them here. Jesus had spent 3 years training them to lead His church, and now they were leading it. They were teaching, they were overseeing the charity, they were involved in everything. But then the church they were leading changed.

And so they agreed that they needed to change their job descriptions. Instead of being the 12 grand-pumbas of church, they needed to equip new leaders to do ministry. And they didn't just need new leaders, they needed to change their leadership structure. Instead of the 12 making all the decisions, verse 3 says they decided to turn the responsibility over to other people.

Now think of how bold this was. These 7 new leaders didn't have the same training the apostles had – none of them had a degree from the Jesus school of discipleship. Not only this, but none of them had been leaders in the church before! So you can see how easy it would have been to say they weren't qualified.

But instead of making experience or education the requirement for leadership, the apostles wisely made being full of the Spirit the requirement. And then they handed over control never to get it back. If you've been in church leadership you know how big a deal that is.

The apostles realized they had to change in order not to change. And this is something that every church finds itself faced with. And this is something Fort George finds itself faced with. The world we are living in isn't the same one it was yesterday, and as a result the strategies we used yesterday will not work today.

But this doesn't mean God as changed or the mission has changed. Friends, Fort George is a church birthed from a church committed to bringing the light of Christ to the city of Prince George. 100 years ago this was the mission, and it is still the mission today.

But just about everything about how that mission is accomplished has changed. So 100 years ago our mother church was the very first evangelical church in the area and its ministry was aimed at the flood of German immigrants who were homesteading in this area. And the ministry took off.

But then 50 years later it became apparent that the flood of German immigrants had dried up. There simply weren't piles of new young German speakers coming to this city.

And at this point Bethel Baptist found itself in a predicament. They were a church full of godly people with a mission to bring the light of Christ to the community; but the problem was PG wasn't speaking German anymore. They were speaking English.

And so Bethel found itself unable to keep doing the one thing they were committed to doing. They recognized that the effectiveness of their ministry was drying up.

And there was a second problem, and that was that they also recognized they couldn't just change their church into an English church. And that was because there were people in Bethel who couldn't speak English.

This means it wasn't a matter of deciding to do English ministry or not, this change simply wasn't possible.

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But these were godly men and women on a mission. Their primary goal was to bring the light of Christ to the city of Prince George and so they did something else. They started an English Sunday School ministry in Fort George that became our church. And it started growing.

And Bethel supported this ministry in every way they could. They threw money at us as we got started. And they sent their pastor to preach at Fort George. He would speak first thing in the morning in German at Bethel, and then run over and preach in English at Fort George.

And by doing this they were doing something really spectacular; they were changing and supporting change so that they wouldn't change. They were doing something new so that they could keep doing what they had always been committed to – bringing the light of Christ to the people of Prince George.

Now Fort George really took off in the 60's and 70's. And it was full of the same passion that Bethel had been full of. And so we did everything we could to bring the light of Christ to the city of Prince George.

But we recognized that in order to do this we couldn't do the same things Bethel had done because the city wasn't the same. And so we developed new outreach tools that had never been tried before in PG. So Fort George started a local radio program, and then a TV ministry. And we started Pioneer Clubs to reach out to the kids in the neighbourhood.

And then we decided in order to keep bringing the light of Christ to the city of Prince George we need to plant churches. And so in 1974 we planted College Heights Baptist Church and in 1980 we planted Hartland Baptist Church.

And we did all these new things in order to keep doing the core thing we had committed to doing in the first place. We changed the way we were doing things so we wouldn't change the thing we were doing.

And now we find ourselves at another crossroad. Fort George still has the same mission – we are a people committed to bringing the light of Christ to the people of Prince George, but in order to maintain this commitment we need to change.

The simple fact is nobody is listening to local church radio anymore. And any TV program we could cobble together would get no viewers. On top of this, preferences for different styles of preaching and music have changed dramatically. As great as a lot of the hymns and the Gaithers are, young people aren't having their hearts touched by them.

So we need to change so that we don't change. In fact to not change would be to change. So to not find new ways of engaging the people of Prince George would be to move away from our commitment to bring the light of Jesus to the people of this city.

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But what happens if we find ourselves unable to change? What if we can't sing the music the kids are singing? What if we don't have the energy to engage them where they are? How does a church keep bringing glory to God when it isn't able to change?

I think Bethel is the prime example for us here. When they realized they couldn't become an English church they decided to find ways to stand behind people who could.

And brothers and sisters, this is the same spot Fort George finds itself in almost 60 years later. A simple look around our congregation reveals that we are not being effective in speaking the language of our city.

The city of Prince George isn't going to come in here and do it our way, and we are not going to be able to learn how to speak Millennial. And that is okay, there isn't any fault here. Just like it wasn't the apostles fault that the Hellenistic widows had been overlooked, and it wasn't Bethel's fault they spoke German, it isn't our fault we don't speak Millennial. But this text makes it clear that we are going to have to entertain new ideas if our core commitment to bringing the light of Jesus to the city of Prince George isn't going to change.

Now the good news is we are a church that has been doing this for years and is still doing it today. We've changed and innovated and then supported people when we couldn't change and we are still doing this.

So today we have a thriving youth ministry here, and we've hired Spencer who does speak Millennial. And this year we've seen multiple salvations among the kids who are part of this group. Friends, there are piles of young Christians running around here on Wednesday nights.

Now the temptation has been to bemoan the fact that few of them attend here Sunday morning, but what we need to understand is that they can't come here any more than the English city could attend Bethel. We don't speak their language. Now yes, Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever, but the way people meet Jesus today has changed. And so like the apostles we must find new ways to make sure our core commitment to the increase of Jesus' glory is not compromised.

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Our text today ends on an incredibly hopeful note. Verse 7 shows that the church triumphed over the internal threats and the result was new growth and new kinds of growth. So not only did the number of disciples multiply in Jerusalem, but many priests joined the church. These are the priests who had opposed them in the previous chapters, and now they were coming to faith.

So the church had been tested. And she passed the test by finding a new way to take care of the widows while not forsaking her core commitment to the word and to prayer. And my prayer, and the prayer of our leadership is that this will be the story at Fort George as well. That as we give ourselves to changing so that we don't change we will experience growth, and new kinds of growth.

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So there are three applications for us that this text raises today.

First, prepare yourself to share your story of God on the move. The fact is testimonies of God at work never go out of style. Your brothers and sisters need to hear about what God is doing. So come and talk with me about how God has been working, and we will give you an opportunity to share Sunday morning. The things God has been doing in and around you aren't for you, they are for you to give away.

Second, pray for your leaders. Pray for you pastor – heaven knows I need it. Pray for your deacons. These are men and women who love Jesus, and they love this church and are working hard to discern how God wants us to change so that we don't change.

There is a lot of responsibility here. We are walking on unfamiliar ground. So pray for us that we will be wise and full of the Spirit.

And finally, be on the lookout to keep supporting new attempts to bring the light of Christ to the city of Prince George. You deacons are discussing new ways to do this right now. We don't have anything nailed down yet, but we are working on this because we recognize that we can't leave our core convictions behind. And in order not to do that we need to change. We need to find new ways to engage the people of Prince George.

I love you guys.