

PUTTING FIRST THINGS FIRST Transcript

By Dr. Ron Jones

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Problem solving is something that every leader has to learn how to do well because problems arise in any organization. Whether it's a business, in the marketplace, or in the military, even in a ministry setting, the leader or leaders in those organizations need to know how to problem solve and to even expect problems to arise and to know how to get after those problems in a way that moves the organization in a positive direction. With that in mind, we shouldn't be surprised as we're studying through the book of Acts that a problem arises in Acts 6.

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And let me just summarize where we've been so far in our study of the early church. And I'll say it again. Acts 2, the Holy Spirit comes and Peter preaches his first sermon. Three thousand people come to know Jesus on that birthday of the church. Two chapters later he preaches his second sermon. Five thousand more are added. That's just the men. Add to that the women and children, and what you have is an early church that is explosive in growth. And with that growth in the early church, as in your business or in any organization, what we learn is that problems do arise. And we learn a very important principle in any organizational leadership or dynamic. And that is that growth brings its own set of problems, doesn't it? You may notice as a business. Maybe you know it as a military leader. Perhaps you know it as a ministry leader. Growth brings its own set of problems, and this was true in the early church.

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Let me read Acts 6:1-7 so we have a context for our discussion today. It 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 being neglected in the daily distribution. 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. 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. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.' And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a 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. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them." And now verse 7, "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."

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Again, the early church was exploding in growth. And growth presents its own set of problems, and a problem arose in the early church. Let me try to explain what was happening. At this time in the early church, it was a Jewish thing. And it was a Jerusalem thing. We don't get to the Gentile expansion of the church until Acts 10. Right now it is a combination of Hebrew-speaking Jews. And what we learn from the text here, there was also a group of Greek-speaking Jews. The Hellenists are known as the Greek-speaking Jews. And a complaint arose in

the early church coming from the Hellenists that the Hellenist, or Greek-speaking, Jewish widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

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Now, 2000 years ago some of the poorest people in society were widows because the law did not allow, when a husband died, for the transfer of assets to his wife. And so that's just the way it was in this culture 2000 years ago. And so a widow in this culture became one of the poorest and most dependent people. And the early church and the apostles had some kind of means to address those needs. They called it the daily distribution. It was a food distribution to widows, and it was given to the Hebrew-speaking Jewish widows. But somebody noticed that the Greek-speaking Jewish widows were being neglected. And they brought the complaint to the early apostles.

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Now, notice it was a complaint. And complaints arise all the time in any organization. If I had a dollar for every complaint that has come to me over the years in 2 ½ decades of ministry, I'd probably be a wealthy man. We don't have a complaint department in the church. A complaint department is usually an invitation to receive a complaint without a solution, right? That's how a lot of complaints come. And this is how this complaint came. Not all complaints are illegitimate complaints. Some complaints are very legitimate that were maybe resulted from an oversight in the administration and organization. And that was the case here. The apostles didn't intend to neglect the Greek-speaking Jewish widows, but that is what had happened. And somebody brought that complaint, which was an indication of discontent and dissatisfaction somewhere in the body of Christ there. They brought this to the attention of the apostles.

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Again, it shouldn't surprise us. It's not a cause for alarm. If handled properly, it shouldn't stop the growth and the forward progress of the gospel. But it is a reminder to us that in any organization—in a business, in the military, in a ministry setting, even in your own home—complaints arise. Problems arise. And every leader needs to know how to address those complaints and address those problems.

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I jotted down this week three different categories where the problem might be. It may be a people problem or a processes problem. Or it could be a problem related to our priorities. And every time we have a problem or a complaint that arises in the church, we need to determine the legitimacy of it. And we also, then, may need to look...is it a people problem? Do we have the right leaders in place? You know, the old adage, do you have the right people on the bus, and are they sitting in the right seats on the bus?

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Is it a processes problem? Do we have an administration or organization issue that we need to address? Something that might have worked when we were this size organization, but is it working as we've grown and expanded? So we look at processes. Maybe our priorities are out of whack in some way. This gives us an opportunity to identify primary and secondary tasks. To ask the question, what is most important, and what cannot and must not be sacrificed? What

is our mission? What is our vision? What is our strategy? And are we pinpointing that in a very efficient kind of way?

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All of these kinds of organization questions come up to a leader or a group of leaders when a complaint or a problem arises. And I hear some people from time to time that say, “I love God, and I love Jesus. But I don’t want to be...I don’t get into that organized religion thing.” And I kind of jokingly say, “Well, would you rather have disorganized religion?” And I don’t mean that in a provocative way. But the God we serve is a God of order. And the body of Christ is a living organism, right? We’re a living organism, the body of Christ. But every living organism, whether it’s a single cell or a complex organism, is miraculously organized by our Creator, right? You can look under a microscope and see a single cell, a living organism. That biology, the anatomy, the physiology is highly, highly organized. And so every organism, including the body of Christ, needs organization. And when problems arise, when complaints arise, we need to look inside the organization in terms of people, processes, and even priorities, and introduce some positive changes that help us get down the road. Even to look at, hey, is there some of the status quo we need to do away with so we can move forward in a positive way because, well, the ministry has changed or the organization has changed? All of these kinds of things leaders in ministry, in business, in the military...even dad, as a leader in your home, you have to address complaints and problems that arise.

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Now, how do we do that? Well, as I read this simple text, Acts 6:1-7, I just jotted down a seven-step problem-solving strategy, for what it’s worth. And we’re going to learn from the apostles how they went after this. Now, let me say this on the front end, because I’m going to give you this on the back end. I’m going to tell you why it is absolutely critical we get this right in the church. I’ll give you the reason why at the end.

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But for now, step number one to problem solving and prioritizing in the church I call identification. You have to identify the problem, clearly identify the problem in any organization- ministry, marketplace, military, wherever you are in leadership. The complaint comes. The problem arises. In this case it was a legitimate complaint- the neglect of the Greek-speaking Jewish widows. But you have to clearly identify the problem. You’ll never be able to solve a problem you cannot clearly identify. It was easy to identify the problem here. And verse 1 tells us about the neglect in the daily distribution. But any time you’re trying to solve a problem, it’s always a good time to say, have we clearly identified the problem? Or is there something underneath all of this? Is there something that is disguising...maybe a peripheral issue that is disguising what the real issue is? You know, when you’re trying to solve problems in a marriage and you’re doing marriage counseling, the problem that you’re dealing with is not always the real problem. And a skilled marriage counselor is going to dive in a little bit deeper into both the husband and the wife to discover what the real problem is.

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And here is where you need to take some time. Don’t rush through the first step. Don’t rush through the first step. Clearly identify the problem. It’s a good time to do an agenda check,

too. You know, if you're a leader in an organization and a problem arises, a complaints arises, is there anybody in and around that problem or complaint that has a personal agenda, hidden or not? And it's a good time to just press the pause button and ask the question, have we clearly identified the problem? Are there any agendas here that we need to deal with before we go on to presenting solutions? So step number one is identification.

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Step number two is clarification. Identifying the real problem is going to lead to a clarification of roles and responsibilities within the organization. And this is what happens in Acts 6. Look at it in verse 2. It says, "And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said..." Let me stop right there. Notice what is happening here. The twelve, who are the apostles, summon the full number of disciples. I take that to mean they got the entire church together. Thousands of them into one place to deal with the problem. There was something at stake here, and they needed to handle this problem correctly. So they get everybody together in one place, and they said, "All right, we see the problem. We're going to stop doing everything we're doing as apostles, and we're going to go over here and serve tables." Is that what they say? Not at all. Here is what the apostles said. "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables." And verse 4, "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

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I take this to be the apostles' coming to that moment of clarification. We have a problem over here. "We have a complaint. It's a legitimate one that we need to address. But it's not one that we should drop everything that we're doing...in this case, the time that we take to devote to prayer and to the ministry of the Word...to go over here and serve in the food distribution." It was a clarification of their roles and responsibilities. It was the apostles putting first things first in terms of what they were to do as leaders in the church.

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I remember years ago one of the first churches I served...this goes back 15, 20 years ago...I arrived. And that week the chairman of the deacons called me. And he says, "Hey, I want to take you to lunch, Pastor, and welcome you to town and all that." And I said, "Great." We went to lunch. And no sooner did we sit down than I kind of sensed there was a little bit of an agenda. He says, "Pastor, I'm going to pay for your lunch today, but don't get used to it. This is last time I'll probably ever pay for your lunch." And I thought, *okay*. I said, "Well, thank you. I didn't expect you to pay today, but thank you for doing that. And I appreciate your generosity." And he went on to take out a list, a very long list, of what he thought my job was, and began to tell me, you know, "We expect you to do this and this and this." A lot of things that he was doing as the chairman of the deacons, now, boom, "It's on you, Pastor." And we had a very interesting conversation about my job description, my biblical job description. I took him to Acts 6, and we also went to Ephesians 4 where it talks about how God gives the church prophets and evangelists and pastors and teachers to do all the work of the ministry. Is that what it says? No, it says for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry.

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And I learned a long time ago my job as a lead pastor is that I'm kind of a player/coach. And I have certain roles and responsibilities that are primary to me and to what we do as a church. But my job also is to equip and to train and to mobilize the saints for the work of ministry. One person can't do it all, and you can't hire enough pastors to do it all. And, thankfully, we get that here, because we have hundreds and hundreds of volunteers that we are equipping and training and mobilizing into ministry.

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Well, my chairman-of-the-deacons friend years ago didn't quite understand that. And he, kind of, you know, ruffled himself toward the end of the lunch. And he just says, "Well, okay. But we all know that it'll just take some time for you to become the pastor we all want you to be." Whoo, okay. Duly noted. And we went from there. But it was a clarification, a time for clarification in roles and responsibilities.

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Third step is delegation. Once you've identified the problem and you've clarified roles and responsibilities, now as a leader you need to employ the fine art of delegation. Look at how it falls out in chapter 6 and verse 3. The apostles 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." You know, the apostles could have looked at this said, "Well, we're going to do the job of seven men." Maybe the leader, maybe Peter said, "Okay. I get the problem. I'm going to drop all of this." And he tries to do the job of seven men. Or he could get seven men to do the job. And every leader has to come to that crossroads in his leadership. Are you going to learn the fine art of delegation and raising up other leaders? Or are you going to try to do the job of seven people and flame out somewhere along the way?

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You know, Moses had to learn this in the Old Testament. Exodus 18 is a case study in the fine art of delegation. Moses was the leader of nearly 2 million Hebrews traveling through the wandering wilderness on their way to the Promised Land for 40 years. And early on in all that, in Acts 18—two chapters before he went up Mount Sinai and brought down the Ten Commandments—here is Moses sitting on a chair. And there were hundreds, if not thousands, of people lined up to have a word with Moses to ask him to solve some issue that arose in their tribe or their community. And read Exodus 18. Moses's father-in-law named Jethro sees this. And he pulls his son aside, his son-in-law, and he says, "Son, you're going to have to figure out a better way to do this. These people can't stand in line for hours and hours and hours to get a word with you. You're going to have to find captains of five and captains of 50 and captains of hundreds to handle this." And many people, even business leaders, look at the advice Moses got three to four thousand years ago in the middle of the Sinai Desert from his father-in-law Jethro as, wow, what a business principle. The fine art of delegation. And that's what Moses did. He found captains of 5 and captains of 50 and captains of 100. (0:19:00.0) And he led the captains while the captains led everybody else. Otherwise Moses would have flamed out in the middle of the desert. The fine, fine art of delegation.

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By the way, Acts 6 is the place where we often say these were the first deacons in the church. These seven men whom the apostles raised up, trained, equipped and appointed a task—the daily distribution, to tweak that—these were the first seven deacons. Why? Because the word *diakonos* in some form appears three times in these seven verses. And we often point to these as the first deacons. It's not until later in the New Testament, 1 Timothy 3, where the apostle Paul writes and lays out specific instructions and qualifications for at least two offices in the (0:20:00.1) church—the pastor/elder and the deacons and the qualifications that go with that. But here we have an example of delegating to a group of men here who can take on the task. I've always said the question is not, was the pastor there or the pastors there in solving some problem? The question is, did the church respond? Did the church respond? If you always want the pastor to be there or one of the pastors, then we need to keep this to about 150 people. But once the ministry grows larger, we equip the saints. And the bigger question is, did the church respond to a particular need, not one particular person? And that's just an organizational thing and an administrative thing and a leadership thing that a lot of smaller churches have to grow through to even get to size of the church that we are.

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So we have identification. We have clarification and delegation. Then comes qualifications. Back to verse 3, “Therefore 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.” Here is the beginning of the qualifications of leadership. There are at least three that they mention here. These need to be people—and men, in this case—who had a good reputation in the community and a good reputation amongst the rest of the brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. They also need to be men who are full of the Holy Spirit. They have demonstrated they understand the spiritual life and how to walk by the Spirit and live by the Spirit and be full of the Spirit so they can make Spirit-filled decisions. And they need to be men of wisdom, people who have demonstrated a certain life skill to not just have knowledge, but to apply knowledge and, yes, even biblical knowledge to certain situations in a wise sort of way. It's the beginning of what is later flushed out in the New Testament in terms of the qualifications of a leader.

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And I would just encourage all of us, as we do in this church, to pause and make sure we don't hopscotch over the qualifications when we put a leader in place. You ought to see the application that we send to prospective elders and deacons. The vetting process. It's about six pages they have to fill out when they're nominated from you, the church family. They go through a vetting process to make sure that they qualify, you know, they meet the qualifications of a deacon or the qualifications of a leader. And we're not looking for perfection. We're looking for direction in a person's life. Do they meet the qualifications?

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Even if you're a business person, don't skip over it. Don't be in so much of a hurry to hire somebody or put somebody in a position that you don't take the time to, you know, look at their qualifications. Because a bad hire, well, down the road will be worse than just taking the time to hire the right person or put the right leader in place in a volunteer organization. And the apostles did that. They set the tone for that. They delegated the responsibility. And they said to the church family, “You come up with seven men that meet these qualifications and bring them

to us. Because the church is going to respond here to this very legitimate need, this complaint that you brought to us. And we've got to get the right leaders in place." I learned a long time ago, everything rises and falls on leadership and having the right leaders in the right place at the right time. And if you rush that process too much, oh, the ripple effect of that can be devastating. The wrong hire in a business can cost you momentum in the marketplace and cost you tens of thousands of dollars because you didn't have the right person in place. Some of you business leaders understand that.

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Step number five is what I call installation. I could also call it affirmation, because we read on in verse 4, "And what they said pleased the whole gathering." Let me just pause right there and just say this. Three cheers for the early church. Here there was a problem, a complaint that didn't have a solution attached to it. It was just a complaint. And the apostles get after it. They bring everybody together. And the solution pleased everybody. They came together in unity as a body of believers. "And they chose,"—and here is the list of men—"Stephen, a 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. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them."

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This is the installation of leaders. They prayed over them. They laid hands on them. We do that with our deacons, with our elders. We have a process of affirmation. We also have a process of ordination. Just recently we ordained into the ministry two men, two men on our staff and in our leadership pool that went through the ordination process. And they came before an ordination council that grilled them on their theology and all of that. And we had a celebration last Sunday night during vision night about the ordination of two men. But along with that, the affirmation of deacons and the elders. In the business world we call this the onboarding process. It's one thing to hire a leader who is qualified to bring him onto your team in terms of the marketplace or the military, even the ministry. How you onboard them needs to be well thought through as well. How you introduce them to the organization and position their roles and responsibilities. And we see a model of this in the early church.

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By the way, these seven people, interesting names here. Stephen, who was the first mentioned, is going to take center stage in the story starting in verse 8 of chapter 6 and all the way through chapter 7. Stephen becomes the first martyr in the church. Philip, we read about his ministry as time goes on in the book of Acts. And he has a great ministry in different places as he is sent out. The rest of the names, we never hear from them again. And that's all right. We assume that they faithfully served behind the scenes. They weren't looking for the spotlight. They weren't saying, "Hey, look at me." They were doing what, in this case, deacons do. They serve the body of Christ, and they bring a servant's heart and servant leadership to the organization. And that's all part of the installation and affirmation.

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Step six, I would say, is implementation. How do you put...now that you have the leaders in place, how do you put the plan in place to address the problem? And we don't have

specifics on what happened here. But we can only assume that now there was an implementation plan to get after the neglect in the daily distribution.

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And then step number seven I call multiplication. This gets to the effect, the positive effect. Look at it in verse 7. “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.” Now, this is one of those summary statements that we often come across in the book of Acts. I think of Acts 2:47, “And the Lord was adding to their number daily those who were being saved.” And statements like that are all throughout the book of Acts, sort of a summary statement of what was happening in the early church.

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In this case, I see three things that were happening. Number one, it says “the word of God continued to increase.” That’s an interesting way to phrase it. Because up to this point, what we’ve been hearing is the number of disciples were added or increasing. But here Luke says “the word of God was increasing.” Because at the center of this problem and discussion in how to solve the problem was the priority of prayer and the preaching of God’s Word. And the apostles put first things first in terms of their role and their responsibility and how important it was that the ministry to the Word of God went forth efficiently and effectively. And the proclamation of God’s Word was center stage.

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And Luke says the Word of God increased, that word that Jesus compared to a seed. Remember the story about...the parable of the soils and the farmer that went out and scattered his seed? And Jesus compares the Word of God to a seed. And what was happening here was nothing interrupted, nothing got in the way of the proclamation of the Word of God. And the seed continued to go out, and it landed on fertile soil. And it took root, and it grew up to harvest of spiritual fruit in people’s lives. That’s how I understand that. And that’s always a good thing.

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And then it says, “The number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.” There is a math shift here. We’ve gone now from addition—“The Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved,” Acts 2—now to multiplication. Wow, I mean, they are getting after it in a way that you can’t even count here. You’ve got to go after it with a different math angle. And here we are 2000 years later. We’ve gone from addition to multiplication to, I don’t know, some measure of calculus. This is a worldwide enterprise where still the church of Jesus Christ is making disciples of Jesus Christ who go and make disciples. And we’re a part of that today, and that’s exciting.

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And then the third thing that happened, “A great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” This is an indication of something new and fresh that God was doing. Scholars believed that there were as many as 8,000 priests that served in the temple in Jerusalem on a regular basis. And if you remember, the early church met over here in a place called Solomon’s portico. It was a section of the temple that they had found a place to gather as the early church.

They probably outgrew that at some point and were spilling over into other aspects of the temple. But as they gathered as the church in the temple and during the week from house to house...remember that pattern from Acts 2? As they gathered in the temple there were some priests that took note of what was going on. Priests who were still caught in the legalism of Pharisee-ism and all of Judaism that had gone off in the wrong direction. And look what God is doing. He is reaching into that group of people.

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You know, God loves to do new things, doesn't He? Don't get too settled into this world. Because as I read the Bible and the last book of the Bible, there is coming a new heaven, a new earth and a new holy city Jerusalem. God loves to do new things. "Behold, I am doing something new," He says in the Old Testament. 2 Corinthians 5:17, "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things are passed away; all things are becoming new." You're not an improved version of yourself. You're a brand new creation in Christ. And God loves to do new things. And then problems arise in the church, when a complaint comes, if handled properly, it's an opportunity for God to show up and do something new and to expand the gospel.

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Now, to the comment that I made at the beginning of the message where I said I would tell you why it is so, so critical to get this right in the church...it's critical to get it right in your business. Don't miss me here. Because if this gets messed up, it could mean a loss of momentum in the marketplace, a loss of money, loss of...all that kind of stuff. But here is the reason why it is so critical to get it right in the church. For the sake of the gospel. For the sake of the gospel. Before you bring a complaint, before you raise an issue or a problem, first of all, have a solution. And just remember that whatever you drop in to the discussion there will either have a positive or negative effect on the gospel, the advancement of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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My son is an intern at a church in Chicago this summer. He is heading into the ministry. He is at a tiny little church of seven campuses and 15,000 people in the Chicago area. He's one of 75 interns at that church, summer interns. And he called me up and, after two days of orientation, he says, "Dad, this is ministry on steroids." And he says, "The culture here is so defined." I said, "What do you mean by that?" He says, "Well, here is what they told us on the first day. They said, 'We expect perfection. We settle for excellence because we do this for the sake of the gospel.'" Wow. And that's bled through the entire staff, interns, even down to lay leaders. We expect perfect, but we settle for excellence because we do this for the gospel.

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Oh, friends, I hope we have a high and holy expectation of ourselves, that what we do as a church either positively advances the gospel or it doesn't. We're never going to achieve perfect. We won't have perfect leaders. Direction, not perfection, right? But when problems arise, when complaints come, we can learn something from the early apostles that handled it well. And look at the results in verse 7, the multiplication of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The church didn't skip a beat here. It kept on growing. And here we are 2000 years later. Thank God for how the apostles handled it. Not perfect men, but men who were full of the Holy

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Spirit and men who thought this through. Men who put first things first in terms of their own roles and responsibilities, raised up leaders to handle a legitimate issue, delegated authority to them, implemented it. I mean, job well done. Job well done. And we applaud them for a job well done. But let's go and do likewise. Amen? For the sake of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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