

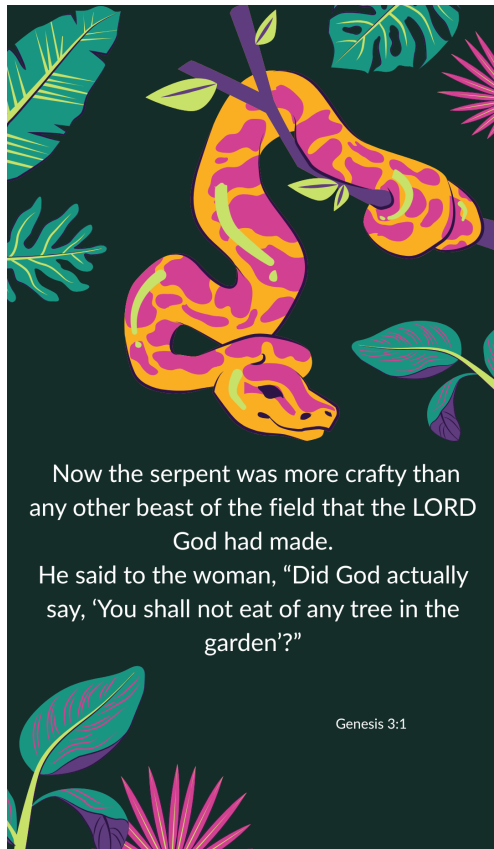


Chapter 6: Growing pains

The Church: A Spiritual (Supernatural) Creation

- **In Genesis**, the earth begins formless and void with darkness, while the Spirit hovers over the waters (Genesis 1:2-3) — a state of potential awaiting divine activation.
- **At Pentecost**, the Spirit similarly arrives as a rushing wind and fire, filling the disciples and empowering them to speak (Acts 2:2–11).
- **God breathed life** into Adam (Genesis 2:7)
- **Jesus breathed the Spirit** onto his disciples (John 20:22)
- **At creation, God commanded** humanity to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth (Genesis 1:26–28).
- **Jesus commanded his disciples** to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). Three thousand souls were baptized on the first day (Acts 2:41–47), and the Lord continued adding daily to their number (Acts 2:41–47).
- **Pentecost symbolically reverses** the fracture in human history caused by the Tower of Babel. Where God dispersed humanity and confused languages at Babel, at Pentecost, people from diverse nations heard the disciples speak in their own languages, establishing community and regathering God's people.
- **Theologically**, both accounts center on God's presence entering creation through divine initiative. Genesis and Acts can both be read through the saving work of the Holy Spirit, inviting participation in God's creative and redemptive activity.

An Interloper In The Church Garden



Just as Satan led Adam and Eve to turn away from God through deception, the same Satan appears in Ananias and Sapphira's decision to lie and retain the money (Acts 5:1-11). Both accounts feature Satan filling hearts and moving people toward deception, establishing a pattern of satanic temptation across redemptive history.

Satan capitalized on human desire by seducing Adam and Eve with an attractive fruit, just as the devil lures Ananias and Sapphira with money. In both cases, something appealing becomes the vehicle for rebellion against God's authority.

Both couples fail to recognize the relational dimension of their sin. Ananias and Sapphira disregarded God's presence in the Christian community and failed to discern that deceit against the church was fundamentally sin against the Lord of the church. Similarly, Adam and Eve's transgression violated their relationship with God, not merely a rule about fruit.

Nevertheless, this comparison is not absolute. Ananias retained ownership of the property and its earnings, with no directive requiring him to donate them to the ministry. Instead, his transgression lay in projecting a false image of total generosity while keeping a portion for himself. This sin is defined by deceptive appearances rather than the breach of an explicit mandate, serving as a uniquely communal example of human vulnerability to temptation in the context of the new covenant fellowship.

Matthew 16:15-18

¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Satan's strategy

Suppressing Evangelistic Witness (Physical/Persecution)

Satan's first strategy involved attempting to stop evangelistic outreach — exemplified when the Jewish Council imprisoned Peter and John for preaching and healing, specifically targeting their teaching about Jesus' resurrection.

This opposition intensified in Acts 5, when the entire apostolic band faced imprisonment following power encounters with evil spirits and the apostles' continued ministry. Despite beatings and orders to cease speaking in Jesus' name, the apostles disobeyed, resulting in the Devil's first recorded defeat in Acts.

Corrupting Internal Life (Moral)

Satan's second strategy involved contaminating the church's spiritual life through the incident with Ananias and Sapphira, where he attempted to gain power over the church by corrupting a prominent family. Though this strategy ultimately failed through God's direct intervention, it has remained one of Satan's most effective tactics for hindering the church's impact throughout history.



Exploiting Growth Through Division (Institutional)

Satan's third strategy attempted to divide the fellowship by exploiting the church's evangelistic success and growth, creating problems within the expanding community. As the Jerusalem church became bicultural with both Hebrew and Hellenistic members, tensions arose over alleged discrimination in the distribution of welfare assistance to widows.

"When Satan does not succeed in stopping the church with a frontal assault, he attacks from within. This usually happens subtly — an invitation not sent, a job unnoticed, a critical comment overheard, jealousy over something that really does not matter. When the murmuring begins, the devil smiles."

R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*

The Perfect Church?

Acts 2:42-47

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 4:32-37

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ 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 ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

"It is a mistake to romanticize (or idealize) the church in Acts. Is it a model church? Yes. Is it a perfect church? Absolutely not! Did the early church have a lot of wins? Yes! Did it have any failures? Yes. In fact, we see one of them right here. The people were failing to attend to the needs of widows, which is a big deal according to the Bible. They were failing to live out James 1:27."

Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*

Acts 6:1-7

- **The Problem** (6:1): The growing Jerusalem church faces internal friction. Greek-speaking Jewish believers (Hellenists) complain that their widows are being neglected in the daily food distribution compared to native Hebrew-speaking widows.
- **The Apostolic Priority** (6:2-4): The Twelve Apostles intervene, stating it is improper for them to abandon "the word of God to serve tables." They instruct the congregation to select seven capable men to manage the physical distribution so the apostles can focus entirely on prayer and teaching.
- **The Qualifications** (6:3): The chosen men must be of good reputation and full of both the Holy Spirit and wisdom.
- **The Selection & Ordination** (6:5-6): The church selects seven men (including Stephen and Philip) and presents them to the apostles, who pray over them and lay hands on them, thereby commissioning them for the task.
- **The Result** (6:7): With the operational issue resolved, the church continues to multiply rapidly, and even many Jewish priests embrace the Christian faith.

The players

The Hellenists: Greek-speaking Jews, probably originating from Hellenized parts of the Mediterranean world. Many had been converted on Pentecost itself, coming from diaspora communities like Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Cyrene, and Rome. Rather than a hard distinction, the line between Hebrews and Hellenists was not rigid, since many Jews were bilingual — the determining factor was often whether one's synagogue conducted services in Greek or Hebrew.

The Hebrews: Palestinian-born, Aramaic- or Hebrew-speaking Jewish believers, with the apostolic leadership originally appointed by Jesus forming their core. As the community grew, other Hebrews joined their ranks, and priests who converted to the faith would have been counted among them.

The Jewish Diaspora: Communities living outside the land of Israel. The term itself comes from Greek meaning "dispersion," though it also carries the sense of exile — concepts rooted in the Jewish experience of forced displacement. Two major events shaped the diaspora: the Assyrian capture of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC, after which large numbers of Israelites were resettled in Assyria, and the Babylonian conquest of the Southern Kingdom in 586 BC, which resulted in the transportation of many Judahites to Babylon.

The Seven: 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.

Acts 6:8-15

- **Stephen's Power and Wisdom (6:8-10):** Stephen, filled with grace and the Holy Spirit, performs significant wonders and engages in powerful debates with opponents from various local synagogues.
- **The False Accusations (6:11-14):** Unable to counter Stephen's wisdom, his opponents secretly bribe men to lie, accusing him of blasphemy against Moses, God, the temple, and the Law.
- **Stephen's Appearance (6:15):** Stephen is seized and brought before the Sanhedrin (the Jewish council), where the council members look at him and see that his face appears like "the face of an angel."

The players

The Synagogue of the Freedmen: A synagogue in Jerusalem. The term "Freedmen" likely referred to descendants of Jews who had been enslaved and subsequently freed — possibly former slaves or their descendants who had been captured during military campaigns and then liberated or ransomed back.

This synagogue appears to have been a gathering place for diaspora Jews, as it included members from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia (Acts 6:8–7:60). The presence of these geographic origins suggests the Freedmen synagogue served Greek-speaking Jews from across the Mediterranean world who had settled in Jerusalem. Such diaspora synagogues were common in Jerusalem during the Second Temple period, allowing foreign Jews to maintain their own worship communities while in the holy city.

The conflict with Stephen indicates the Freedmen were engaged in theological debate within the early Christian movement. Their opposition to Stephen — a Hellenist known for performing wonders and signs — may reflect tensions between diaspora Jews and the Jerusalem establishment, or disagreements over how the gospel related to Jewish law and temple practice. The fact that they "rose up and disputed" with him suggests they took his message seriously enough to challenge it directly, making them active participants in the earliest Jerusalem church's internal conflicts.

The Sanhedrin: The supreme council and the highest judicial and religious court of ancient Israel. It functioned as a combination of a Supreme Court and a Senate, holding legislative, administrative, and judicial power over the Jewish people under Roman oversight.

The Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem consisted of 71 members (modeled after the 70 elders appointed to help Moses plus Moses himself as the head).

Next: Acts 7