

Growth can Hurt

- Growth can be painful.
- Just think about the process we go through as we move from babies to adults:
 - bumps and bruises that go with learning to explore your environment as a toddler;
 - the bruises to our egos as we learn to live within the discipline of our homes, and within the limitations of the abilities God has given us;
 - the physical pain that can sometimes accompany adolescence as our bodies suddenly grow and mature;
 - and the emotional pain that so often accompanies the transition from the dependence of childhood to the inter-dependence of adult life.
- Growth can be painful.
- That reality is just as true of the church as it is of individuals.
 - but, while physical growth is something we mostly can't avoid;
 - the growth of God's Kingdom we can choose to be involved in or oppose, as we let the Holy Spirit have full reign in our lives.
- Do we want growth, or not? Do we want the Spirit to have full reign in our lives?
- What happens when the Spirit of God is given his place in the life of a church?

The Spirit can bring Growth

- First, the Spirit can bring Growth

Then:

- It was out of Pentecost, and the dynamic dependence on the Spirit that the early Church grew:
 - numerically (v.1) - also crowd at Pentecost, crowd round healed beggar, etc;
 - also spiritually - the growth in love and discipleship as they shared possessions, listened to the apostles teaching, realised the seriousness of their relationship with God as Ananias and Sapphira are struck down.

Now:

- See the same thing wherever in the world God's Spirit is given free reign:
 - not just numerically, like many places in the developing world such as Brazil;
 - also spiritually - the depth of faith and discipleship amongst believers in the old USSR before the fall of communism, today perhaps China.
- The growth the Spirit brings may not always be numeric - but it is certainly true that where the Spirit is smothered, growth does not come.

Growth can bring Disagreements

- But that Spirit fueled growth often leads to disagreements:

Then:

- Grecian widows being left out - probably omission rather deliberate:
 - gave rise to - valid - complaints.

Now:

- Today, whenever there is growth, there is change, and so inevitably there is a need to find new ways of doing things:
 - what would happen if this congregation doubled in size over the next couple of years?
 - at that rate of growth, we'd be spending all our time doing new communicants classes - but other things would get left -> complaints?!
 - practicalities of services, Body Builders, getting in and out, coffee afterwards, new names and faces!!
- It would be uncomfortable as well as joyous!
 - that's the experience of Christians around the world where growth is rapid and the chance to grow in understanding of the Bible's teaching has been limited: need for Bible training for leaders...

Disagreements can bring Improvements

- But disagreements have the potential to catalyse improvements:

Then:

- Response of the early church was to seek God's way of improving things!
- For the apostles, trying to juggle the whole responsibility was too much:
 - so appointed deacons who would serve specifically in this area;
 - notice that the requirement for their appointment was - not principally administrative ability, good cooks, whatever - but Godliness and being full of the Spirit.
 - *not just a case of "a job needs done, how can we do it better?"*;
 - sorted out the problem that up till now no one else's service seems to have been recognised as valid; as if only the "apostles" could really serve God, and rest were kind of spectators!

Now:

- Disagreements - especially when prompted by growth, but in other circumstances too - are opportunities to seek God's direction afresh, and are not necessarily to be covered over for the sake of not offending people.

Improvements can bring Opposition

- Now, often it is the case that as the church begins to make an impact, as it puts its head above the parapet, as it "improves" its mission, so it attracts opposition!

Then:

- As more became involved in service, as more were served, as the apostles were able again to concentrate on preaching, teaching and on prayer, the gospel community again grew rapidly.
- In particular priests coming to faith!
- That in turn led to increased opposition from the Jewish authorities, especially because of the priests coming to faith.
- Finally came out as outright persecution, going for the new source of threat - Stephen, Greek speaker, troublesome in arguments!

Now:

- As we have a significant impact on town and community, while many outside the church will be happy, many will also be opposed.
 - internal - not just the "we've always done it this way" - change is upsetting, growth is painful - but from people whose priorities and behaviour the Spirit is challenging, calling on them to repent, calling on them to change - even though growth is what God wants of us and needs to be embraced, it is hard!
 - external - it could take all sorts of forms, official, unofficial, justified or (as here) unjustified, or even simply personal: schools shutting off access; council being less than helpful with grants and things like planning permission; people spreading malicious gossip about the church or people in it; opposition from local groups whose ethos we spoke out against (eg gambling business).....

Opposition can bring Growth

Then:

- The opposition that brought Stephen before the Sanhedrin is a gathering storm that will, in due course, scatter the Christians, sending them running for their lives from Jerusalem:
 - running for lives, early Christians took the gospel to every place where they ended up;
 - the gospel spread throughout the Roman world!
- It is also often said that the growing church was built on the blood of the martyrs.

Now:

- When things are easy, we don't need to rely on God so actively, we don't need to work so hard.
- When things are tough, we do tend to lean more actively on the Spirit!
 - and doing that brings growth!!

Conclusion

- In the week following the death of Frank Sinatra, George Carey, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, was being interviewed. Asked how he would like to be remembered, he took great delight in misquoting the singer's most memorable song:
 - "I did it God's way!"
- If we are at all interested in growth in the church, then we need to do things God's way - since it is he alone who brings the growth.
- And God's way is to start with Spirit-filled Christians, people alive to His work in their lives.
- May God grant that we become increasingly those who are so filled with the Spirit!