

Join us, if you can, in reading this with your family and praying at 10:15 on Sunday, May 3, 2020.

Serving Together for Kingdom Increase

Dear First Southern Baptist Church family,

As we jump back into the book of Acts this morning, chapters 6-8 function as a transition, both in the narrative of the text and the history of the gospel mission. In Acts 1:8, Jesus told his disciples that they would receive power from the Holy Spirit and that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the uttermost ends of the earth. To this point, the ministry of the church after Pentecost had taken place primarily in Jerusalem. As the church grew in number, so too had opposition to the followers of Jesus. The events that transpire in chapters 6-8 serve, according to God's wisdom and providence, as a catalyst to propel the church and their gospel witness out of Jerusalem and into the world. As we look at Acts 6:1-7, we'll see how the growth of the church created new challenges as well as opportunities to serve. The theological and organizational clarity that came to the church, under the leadership of the apostles and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, helped the church continue to successfully fulfill their mission to make disciples and share the gospel. Let's look at Acts 6:1-7:

“1) 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. 2) 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. 3) 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. 4) But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’ 5) 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. 6) These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. 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.”

Notice that chapter 6 starts the phrase “now in these days.” It is important for us to see that Luke is recording the events throughout this book as a real history of what happened as the followers of Jesus took the good news into all the world. Remember, too, that he is writing to Theophilus an orderly account of what has transpired in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in the gospel of Luke and in the continued work of Jesus through the ministry of the church in Acts. By the time we arrive in chapter 6, we have to consider all that has occurred to this point. After the giving of the Holy Spirit, the summary statement in chapter 2 showed us the commitment of the church to the teaching of the apostles, prayer, and loving service to one another, as well as a commitment to share the gospel. The result of these commitments and the sharing of the gospel was the growing number of people being added to the membership of the church. We saw these commitments and the resulting growth in

chapters 3-5, too. Notice that the problem, the complaint raised in verse 1 is the direct result of the growth of the body.

As they were increasing in number, there were more people to care for and serve. A natural line of division arose in the body along cultural/language lines. The Hellenists were those Jews who had grown up in the diaspora, or dispersion, outside of Israel and their native language and customs were Greek, as opposed to those who grew up and lived primarily in Israel whose native language and customs were Aramaic or Hebrew. The Greek word translated as “complaint” implies a murmuring or muttering. There’s a growing concern because the Greek-speaking widows are being overlooked or neglected in the distribution of food. There is no implication that this is a willful neglect, but an oversight. There are too many people and too few leaders organizing this ministry. The Greek word here for distribution is “diakonia” which means service or ministry, with origins in service waiting on tables. So, the problem present in the church in this text was that the Hellenist widows were not being served and simply falling through the cracks of this large church’s ministry.

The twelve apostles offer some thoughts and a solution on this matter. Notice in verse 2 that they gather the whole congregation, all the disciples of Jesus. The apostles are clear that their calling and ministry is primarily the preaching of the Word. It was not their primary ministry to wait or serve tables. The verb “to wait” is the verbal form of the same word from verse 1, “diakonia,” for the distribution. Though the ministry of serving tables and distributing to the poor is important and necessary, it is not their primary ministry. The phrase “it is not right” speaks to the appropriateness of their serving tables rather than preaching. They aren’t saying that they should never serve tables, but that it does not please God for them to forsake their primary responsibility in order to do so. Their solution was an expansion of the church’s organization and leadership.

In verse 3, Rather than divide the apostle’s time, the congregation was to select seven qualified men to help lead the church in caring for the practical needs of distribution to the widows. They served the needs of the congregation alongside the apostles for the good of the congregation and to free the apostles to serve the body according to their calling. Notice the qualifications set forth by the apostles. These servants were to have a good reputation and character that others can attest. They were also to be filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom. This indicated that they were primarily guided by the Lord and able to make good, practical choices. In other words, these servants should have an obvious spiritual maturity. These spiritually mature servants would lead the practical ministry, overseeing the distribution to the widows.

We see then, in verse 4, that the ministry of these servants would free the apostles to continue to perform their primary ministry to the church. Freed from the responsibility of serving with the distribution, the apostles could commit themselves to the ministry of prayer and preaching the Word. The Greek word in verse 4 for ministry is, again, the word “diakonia.” The task of serving the widows, of serving in distribution, is not a lesser or demeaning task. The continued use of “diakonia” shows the worthiness and importance of this vital service and ministry of waiting tables, or serving, as well as the worthiness and importance of the vital task of preaching the Word and praying. Part of the implication of this text is that as the congregation grows numerically, so to must the number of those who lead in serving grow. More people mean more people to serve. More people to serve, as we see here, shows that more servant-leaders are needed. Some are needed to care for practical needs and some are needed to preach. They serve the whole body and each other by responsibly devoting themselves to their primary area of ministry.

As the apostles lead in this change, the congregation approves in verse 5-6. The congregation sees the wisdom of the apostle’s council and they act to nominate seven qualified men to serve the

body in the ministry of distribution and caring for the widows. Little is known about these men beside Stephen and Philip. It is assumed because of the context and the complaint that these men are Hellenists. We'll see more of Stephen and Philip in the next two chapters, but notice how Luke foreshadows Stephen's role in the next verses by particularly describing him as a man filled with faith and the Holy Spirit. The congregation nominated these men and the apostles approved of their appointment. The laying on of hands is a recognition on the part of the apostles that these Spirit-filled men are called of God to do this task. The practice of laying on of hands is symbolic of a passing of responsibility to a specific task, such as Moses' commissioning of Joshua in Numbers 27:16-23 or the church's sending out of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:1-3. The prayer and laying on of hands were a public commissioning by the apostles of these seven men to the task of caring for the Hellenist widows.

This text ends in verse 7 with another summary statement from Luke. The Word increased and the disciples multiplied. This verse uses three imperfect verbs to describe the progressive, unfinished, and unstoppable expansion of the Kingdom of God. The Word was increasing, disciples were being multiplied, and priests were becoming obedient to the faith. The increase of the Word in this verse should be understood as increasing in range. More and more people are hearing the Word, and not just hearing it, but also believing it and becoming disciples of Jesus, especially in Jerusalem. The mentioning of the priests is an interesting point. Scholars typically number the priestly class in Jerusalem at this time in history in the thousands. Most of these men were poor, working a trade to provide for their family until their two weeks for rotation to perform duties at the temple came around. They received very little from the temple and had little in common with the Sadducees and high priest. It was the priestly aristocracy, the Sadducees and the high priest, in chapter 5 who arrested, threatened, and beat the apostles for preaching in the name of Jesus. We should see a contrast between them and these priests who were becoming obedient to the faith. Luke's summary in this verse is a helpful transition for what is to come.

There are trials and difficulties ahead for Jesus' disciples, but they continue to obey the Lord and remain faithful to him and their task to bear witness to him. Simply consider, contextually, the hurdles the church endured to this point. They faced physical suffering, persecution, sin in the congregation, and church conflict, yet by God's grace they continued to be faithful witnesses of the gospel of Jesus. This is an encouraging reminder for us, as we consider the challenges we face in our day, that the gospel cannot be stopped. With the Lord's help, we too will persevere for the sake of the glory of the name of Jesus. Allow me to offer some thoughts about what the meaning of this text implies and how we can apply it to ourselves and our church.

- 1) This text functions as a literary bridge between Jesus' disciples witnessing in Jerusalem and the hard circumstances that force them out of the city. This is the first time we see a distinction in the body of Christ between two different groups and it is no accident that one of those groups is all Jewish, and the other is Jewish with Gentile backgrounds. The gap between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians will grow until we see how the Spirit brings clarity and unity in chapter 15. This is the starting point, as Stephen is held up as servant of the church, comes into conflict with the Jews in the next chapter, and ultimately how his martyrdom pushes the church out of Jerusalem. If you'll consider this passage in the context of the whole of Acts, we see here the wisdom and purpose of God as he sovereignly accomplishes his purpose. This should encourage us as we press on at First Southern. God can use obstacles to help the church grow. He can use problems to bring clarity and health. He works all things for our good and his glory. Let this text guide you to trust in the sovereign wisdom and kind leadership of our good King.

- 2) Second, Clear lines of responsibility, expectations of roles, and sound ecclesiology promote church health and gospel advancement. This text shows us how the early church faced a family hurdle and worked through it. They clarified their expectation of the apostle's role as leaders, and brought along others with defined roles to lead and serve in practical matters. The apostles saw a need in the neglect of the Hellenist widows, and with the church's blessing, delegated some of the church's leadership to other, faithful servants, freeing them to preach without having to worry about whether the widows were being looked after or not. The delineating of the ministerial role of those who serve in preaching/teaching as distinct from those who labor in practical service is a helpful model we see appointed here. Having said that, the apostles are not to be equated with pastors/elders because these twelve men were unique in their roles in redemptive history. Also, scholars will debate as to whether the seven chosen to serve should be called deacons. However, when you look at the distinction between the apostles and these practical servants, we can glean some wisdom as to how our own servants who labor in preaching and servants who labor in practical needs should function and have their roles defined. We spent a lot of time talking through some of this in the Fall. I want to remind everyone that the pattern we see in the appointment of these seven men brought health to the church because the leaders knew what they were supposed to be doing and were able to share the load so that the Word was able to be preached effectively and the needs of the church were able to be cared for unhindered. It's worth taking time to prayerfully and thoughtfully consider our own church's structure and how we can continue to refine our church government and leadership structure to reflect what we see modeled in this text.
- 3) Finally, as we see reflected in this text, our church also needs mature, Spirit-filled servants to help lead. When the Jerusalem church saw a need, their response was to find godly, growing Christians to help lead the body in addressing the issue. There's a two-fold challenge here. We should be praying that God would continue to raise up those who are maturing in the faith who are willing to use their gifts, wisdom, and experience to serve the body. We should also work hard to grow in faith and wisdom, personally. Ask yourself and pray about how can you work to be eligible, available, and equipped to serve at our church? This is true if you're a teen or a senior and everyone in between. The church is blessed and healthy, and the gospel witness is helped when Christians ask how they can serve and give, rather than only asking how they can be served.

As we get nearer to potential re-opening, please continue to pray for me and the other church leaders. Ask God to grant us wisdom as to when and how we should approach gathering together. I'll keep you informed as we make these decisions and get closer. I love you and I've been praying for you all this week.

God bless you,

Pastor Bryan McClelland
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