

KING JESUS AND HIS CHURCH:

Week Three: The King Provides Servants

Acts 6:1–7

Christ. Shepherds. Servants. Saints. Mission.

Five words that we have been using to help us understand Christ's design for His church. And before we move forward this morning, I want us to remember how we got here.

Because we didn't begin this conversation by asking, "**How should First Baptist Church be organized?**"

We began with a much more important question:
"Whose church is this?"

And the answer changes everything. The church belongs to Jesus Christ. He purchased her with His blood. He is the Head of the church. He is the Chief Shepherd of the church. He is the Lord of the church. He is the King of the church. Accordingly, our first word was: **Christ.**

Everything begins there. If Christ is the King, then the question is not primarily what kind of church structure we prefer. It isn't what kind of church structure we grew up with. It isn't what Baptists have traditionally done in a particular place or at a particular time.

The question is: **How has King Jesus designed His church to function?**

And when we began looking at the New Testament, we discovered that King Jesus has not left His church without leadership. That brought us to our second word: **Shepherds.**

Last week we looked at the way Christ provides shepherds for His people. The New Testament uses several words to describe these men—pastors, elders, overseers—but they describe different aspects of the same responsibility. These men are not a board of directors. They are not corporate executives. They are not spiritual celebrities. They are shepherds.

They are called to know the sheep, feed the sheep, protect the sheep, lead the sheep, and equip the sheep for the work of ministry. And importantly, the New Testament pattern is not one shepherd standing alone. It is a **plurality of shepherds** sharing the responsibility of caring for the flock of God.

But shepherds are not the only servants King Jesus provides for His church. That brings us to the third word: **Servants**.

And that is where we are this morning.

Christ. Shepherds. Servants. Saints. Mission.

We started with **Christ** because He is the King. We moved to **shepherds** because the King provides spiritual leadership for His church.

Today we come to **servants** because the King also provides men who help meet the practical needs of His people and protect the unity and mission of His church.

Next week we will come to **saints**, because ultimately the work of ministry belongs to the whole body of Christ. And all of it moves toward the final word: **Mission**.

The goal isn't better organization. The goal isn't a cleaner organizational chart. The goal isn't simply to replace one church structure with another. The goal is a healthy church carrying out the mission King Jesus has given us.

That is why I want to keep reminding us: **We are not trying something new. We are trying to be faithful to something ancient.**

By ancient, I don't mean old customs. I don't mean preserving traditions simply because they are traditions. I mean returning again and again to the pattern King Jesus established through His apostles nearly two thousand years ago. **Our goal is not innovation. Our goal is apostolic faithfulness.** So today we come to Acts chapter 6.

And Acts 6 is fascinating because it allows us to watch the early church encounter something every church eventually encounters.

A problem. Imagine that. The church in Acts had problems. This is the church that experienced Pentecost. This is the church where Peter preached and thousands of people were saved. This is the church where believers were devoted to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. This is the church where people were selling possessions to care for one another. This is the church where signs and wonders were taking place. And this church had problems.

That ought to encourage churches everywhere. Because sometimes we develop a romantic picture of the early church. We imagine that if we could somehow get back to the book of Acts, everything would be easy. Everybody would agree. Nobody would complain. Nobody would get overlooked. Nobody would have hurt feelings. Nobody would misunderstand anyone else's intentions. Then you actually read Acts.

And by Acts 5, people are lying about money. By Acts 6, people are complaining about ministry. And before long Paul and Barnabas are going to disagree so sharply that they separate from one another. The New Testament church was not perfect because it was made up of imperfect people. And neither is ours.

The question is not whether a church will ever have problems. **The question is what a church does when problems arise.** And Acts 6 gives us a beautiful picture of that.

"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."

—Acts 6:1

Notice how the verse begins: **"When the disciples were increasing in number..."** This problem arose because something wonderful was happening. The church was growing. People were being saved. Disciples were multiplying. The gospel was advancing. And growth created complexity. That is important for us to understand.

Sometimes we assume that every problem in a church means somebody has failed. Not necessarily. Sometimes problems arise because God is doing something good.

A church of fifty people can function relationally in ways that a church of five hundred cannot. When twelve people know everybody, communication happens naturally. When thousands of people suddenly become part of a church family, somebody has to begin thinking intentionally about how people are cared for. And that is exactly what happened in Jerusalem.

The church had developed a daily distribution to care for widows. Remember, there was no Social Security. There was no Medicare. There was no government safety net as we understand it. A widow without family support could easily find herself in desperate circumstances. So, the church was doing exactly what God's people ought to do.

They were caring for vulnerable people among them. But there was a problem. The Hellenistic widows were being overlooked. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jewish believers, while the Hebrews were primarily Aramaic-speaking Jewish believers. So, this was not merely a logistical problem. It had the potential to become a **unity problem**.

One group could easily begin saying: *"Our people don't matter as much as their people."* And once that kind of thinking takes root in a church, the problem becomes much bigger than food. So, the apostles have a decision to make.

They can ignore the complaint. They can become defensive. They can say, "Do you have any idea how much we're already doing?" They can personally take over the food distribution. Or they can recognize something important about the way King Jesus intends His church to function.

Listen to verses 2–4 (read) There it is. A real need. A real problem. A real threat to unity. And the answer is not for the shepherds to do everything. The answer is for the church to raise up **servants**. And I want us to see something before we go any farther.

The apostles did not say: **"That isn't spiritual enough for us."**

They didn't say: "**Serving tables is beneath us.**" They didn't say: "**We're apostles. Somebody else can deal with widows.**" The issue wasn't importance. The issue was **calling**. There was something the apostles had been specifically entrusted to do. They were to devote themselves to **prayer and the ministry of the Word**.

And there was something else that absolutely had to be done. Widows needed to be cared for. Neither responsibility could be neglected. The Word must not be neglected. And the widows must not be neglected.

So, what does King Jesus do? He doesn't choose between them. **He provides servants for both.** That is the beauty of Christ's design for His church. The shepherds don't have to abandon shepherding in order for people to be cared for. And practical needs don't have to be ignored so the shepherds can preach.

King Jesus provides shepherds. And King Jesus provides servants. And when each faithfully carries out the responsibility Christ has entrusted to them, the whole church becomes healthier.

I. HEALTHY CHURCHES DO NOT AVOID PROBLEMS—THEY ADDRESS THEM BIBLICALLY

One of the great misconceptions about a healthy church is that healthy churches don't have problems. They do. Healthy families have problems. Healthy marriages have problems. Healthy organizations have problems. And healthy churches have problems.

The difference is not the absence of problems. The difference is **how those problems are handled**. And Acts 6 gives us a remarkably healthy picture.

There is a legitimate complaint. The leaders listen. The need is acknowledged. The congregation is involved. Qualified servants are identified. Responsibilities are clarified. And the mission continues. Nobody pretends the problem isn't there. Nobody turns it into a power struggle. Nobody forms a faction. Nobody spends six months deciding who is to blame.

They solve the problem so the church can keep pursuing the mission. That is what biblical servants do. They don't create problems in order to gain influence. They help solve problems through humble service.

And that is where we begin to understand why servants matter so much in the church of King Jesus.

II. THE KING PROVIDES SERVANTS TO MEET REAL NEEDS

Look again at what happens in Acts 6. The apostles hear about a problem involving widows who are being overlooked in the daily distribution.

And their response is not: "Let's form a committee to study the problem." It isn't: "Let's put it on the agenda for next month." It isn't: "Let's hope somebody eventually volunteers." They recognize that there is a real need among real people, and somebody needs to take responsibility for meeting it.

So they tell the congregation: "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." —Acts 6:3

Servants Are Connected to the People They Serve

There is one more detail in this passage that is easy to read right past. Look at the names of the seven men the congregation selects: "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."

They are all Greek names. Now, we need to be careful here. Luke does not specifically tell us that all seven men were Hellenistic Jews, and having a Greek name by itself doesn't prove that. But it is certainly striking given the problem that started this whole episode. Who was being overlooked?

The Hellenistic widows. And whom does the church select to address the problem? Seven men with Greek names. At the very least, it suggests that these were men who had natural connections to the people who needed to be served. They could understand them. They could communicate with them. They likely knew their community.

And the Hellenistic believers could look at these men and say: "**They know us.**" "**They understand us.**" "**We can trust them to see what is happening.**" I think there is an important principle there for us as we think about the difference between **shepherds and servants.**

Elders are called to shepherd the **whole church.** An elder is not elected to represent a constituency. We don't need an elder representing the senior adults and another elder representing the young families and another representing a particular Sunday School class and another representing people who prefer one style of music.

That's not the picture of shepherding we find in the New Testament. Peter tells the elders: "Shepherd the flock of God that is among you..." **The flock.** Paul tells the Ephesian elders in Acts 20: "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock..." **All the flock.**

An elder cannot say, "Those aren't really my people." If Christ has entrusted the church to the care of its shepherds, then **all of Christ's sheep are their people.** Young and old. New members and lifelong members.

People they naturally connect with and people they don't. People who agree with them and people who challenge them. The shepherds are responsible for the spiritual health and direction of the whole body. They oversee. They teach. They guard doctrine. They pray. They equip the saints. They watch over souls. Their responsibility is intentionally broad because they are shepherding **the church as a whole.**

But servants can function somewhat differently. Servants often minister precisely because they **do have natural connections to particular people and particular needs.** And Acts 6 gives us a beautiful picture of that.

There is a specific group experiencing a specific problem. And the church identifies spiritually mature servants who are particularly suited to step into that situation. That is not favoritism. **That is wise ministry.**

Someone who has walked through grief may have a particular sensitivity toward grieving families. Someone who understands financial hardship may have wisdom for benevolence ministry.

Someone who already knows our widows and senior adults may recognize needs that others would never see. Someone connected with young families may hear about a practical need before it ever reaches the church doors.

Someone who knows the circumstances of a particular family may understand that what appears to be a financial problem is actually a much deeper problem requiring long-term care. Those relationships matter. Because ministry is personal. We are not managing numbers on a spreadsheet. **We are caring for people.**

And people are best cared for by servants who know them. The apostles don't say, "We will personally handle every need in the congregation." They also don't say, "Those needs aren't our concern." Instead, they provide oversight while trusted servants move close to the people who need care.

You might think of it this way: **Shepherds watch over the whole flock. Servants move toward particular needs within the flock.** The shepherds maintain responsibility for the overall spiritual health, doctrine, direction, prayer, and ministry of the Word. The servants help make sure that real people with real needs don't disappear in the crowd.

And those two ministries strengthen one another. The closer servants are to the people they serve, the more effectively they can recognize needs. And the more faithfully servants meet those needs, the more faithfully shepherds can remain devoted to the responsibilities Christ has specifically entrusted to them.

That's exactly what happens in Acts 6. The seven don't compete with the apostles. The apostles don't micromanage the seven. **They serve the same King in different responsibilities.** And because they do, people are cared for, unity is protected, shepherds remain focused on prayer and the Word... **and the gospel keeps moving.**

And the pattern is unmistakable. **There is a need in the body. Qualified servants are identified. Responsibility is entrusted to them. They serve.** That is remarkably simple. And maybe we have sometimes made it more complicated than Jesus intended.

Because when the New Testament later speaks specifically about deacons, the word itself tells us something. The Greek word *diakonos* simply means **servant** or **minister**. That is what a deacon is. A servant. Not a church politician. Not a junior elder. Not a board member waiting for a vote. Not someone who has finally accumulated enough years in the church to receive a title. A servant.

And that should immediately change the way we think about influence in the church. Because the kingdom of Jesus has a very different definition of greatness than the world around us.

The world says, **Move up**. Jesus says, **Kneel down**. The world says, **Gain authority**. Jesus says, **Take up the towel**. The world says, **Get people to serve you**. Jesus says, **Serve them**.

Jesus said in Mark 10:43, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant.” In the kingdom of God, influence is not measured primarily by **position**. **It is measured by service**. And that helps us understand why character matters so much.

When the apostles tell the church to select these seven men, they don't ask for successful businessmen, organizational experts, or the people who have been around the longest. They say, “Pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.”

Paul does the same thing in 1 Timothy 3 when he gives qualifications for deacons. He doesn't give us a résumé. He gives us a picture of character. Because the title doesn't create the servant. **The servant gives meaning to the title**.

And the word in Scripture that is translated “deacon” is also in other places simply translated as “servant.” Which means today, that is the application for every Christian in here.

You want to make a difference? Serve. See a need? Meet it. See someone hurting? Help them. See someone alone? Sit beside them. See someone discouraged? Encourage them. You don't need a title to do any of those things.

You just need the heart of Jesus. And now look at how Acts 6 ends. Verse 1 begins with a complaint. Widows are being neglected. Unity is threatened. There is a real problem in the church. But verse 7 says, “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.”

That's the goal. Not organization for organization's sake. Not structure for structure's sake. Not offices for the sake of offices. **Mission.**

Christ rules His church. Shepherds equip His church. Servants care for His church. The saints carry out the ministry of His church. And together the church pursues the mission of Christ.

Christ. Shepherds. Servants. Saints. Mission.

Church, if all we accomplish is changing some words in our bylaws or rearranging an organizational chart, we will have accomplished very little.

Structure should never become the ministry. **Structure should serve the ministry.** We want to become a church where shepherds shepherd, servants serve, saints minister, needs are noticed, burdens are carried, the vulnerable are cared for, unity is protected, and the gospel keeps moving.

We are not trying something new. **We are trying to be faithful to something ancient.** Our goal is not innovation. **Our goal is apostolic faithfulness.**

And ultimately, Acts 6 isn't primarily about seven servants. Because behind every faithful servant stands a greater Servant. Jesus didn't merely notice people who were overlooked. **He came to seek and save the lost.**

He didn't merely carry someone else's burden. **He carried our sin.** He didn't merely kneel down to serve. **He humbled Himself to death—even death on a cross.**

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Christian service in the church doesn't begin with Stephen. It begins with **Jesus.**

Think about that upper room. The King of kings gets up from the table. He takes off His outer garment. He wraps a towel around His waist. He kneels down. And one by one, the hands that created the universe wash the dirty feet of His disciples. Simon Peter, who would soon deny knowing him. Thomas who would soon doubt his resurrection power. Even Judas.

Jesus knew exactly where those feet were going. He knew Peter would deny Him. He knew the others would scatter. He knew Judas would betray Him. And still **the King took up the towel.**

But the towel wasn't the end of His service. Because within hours, those same hands would be stretched out on a cross. The One who knelt before sinners would die **for sinners.** The Servant King would take our guilt, bear our judgment, and give His life as a ransom for many.

So, before we ever ask, “**How can I serve Jesus?**” The gospel asks a more important question: “**Have you received what Jesus has done for you?**”

Because Christianity does not begin with what you do for the King. It begins with what **the King has done for you.** And when you have been loved like that, when you have been forgiven like that, when you have been served by a King like that, you don't have to fight for a position. You don't have to demand recognition. You don't have to wait for somebody to give you a title.

You pick up the towel. You find somebody to love. You find somebody to help. You find somebody to serve. Because that is what our King did for us.

The King took up the towel. The King took up the cross. And now He calls us: “**Follow Me.**”