

When the Kingdom Shapes the Church.

I. Introduction

- A. As we come to Acts 6, remember that Acts is the continuation of Luke's Gospel. Together they tell one story—the life, death, resurrection, and ongoing work of Jesus through His church. So the themes we saw in Luke continue in Acts: Jesus fulfilling Israel's story, God's concern for those on the margins, and the creation of a countercultural Kingdom community. Acts 6–8 marks an important transition in that story. The gospel is beginning to cross cultural, racial, and geographical boundaries. What began in Jerusalem is becoming increasingly clear: the gospel isn't for one kind of person or one culture. It is a gospel for the world.
- B. But Luke is also a realist. The church is growing—and with growth comes complexity. More people mean more needs, greater diversity, and new challenges. Acts reminds us that a growing church isn't a problem-free church. In fact, communities often encounter problems in the very areas where they've previously been strong. So the question isn't whether the church will face challenges. The question is whether we will respond to them in a way that reflects the Kingdom of God.
- C. And Acts 6 gives us three important truths about Kingdom ministry:
 - 1. Kingdom ministry cares without partiality.
 - 2. Kingdom ministry meets needs through God's people.
 - 3. Kingdom ministry advances through prayer and proclamation.

II. When the Kingdom Shapes the Church

- A. Kingdom ministry cares without partiality.
 - 1. The first challenge Luke tells us about is that some people within this rapidly growing church were being overlooked (a particular group of widows). The church is growing. But growth has brought some growing pains (as is often the case), and in this case the problem is significant: some of the most vulnerable people in the church are not being cared for.
 - a) In the ancient world, widows were particularly vulnerable economically and socially. This is why throughout the Old Testament God repeatedly

commands His people to care for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, and the poor. Exodus 22 warns Israel against mistreating widows and orphans. Deuteronomy 14 commands God's people to provide for the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow. Psalm 146 describes God Himself as the One who “watches over the sojourners” and “upholds the widow and the fatherless.”

- b) Notice that the apostles don't dismiss this concern as unspiritual.¹ They don't say, “We're concerned about souls; somebody else can worry about food.” They take the problem seriously. Spiritual and material concerns are intimately connected in Christian community.
 - c) Caring for vulnerable people was never supposed to be an optional ministry on the margins of God's people. It was part of their identity. Part of the prophetic witness of God's people is seen in how they treated those with the least power, the fewest resources, and the greatest needs. This act of prophetic witness of caring for the vulnerable now belongs to the church. So this isn't simply a matter of, “We forgot to get food to a few people.” Something bigger is at stake. If the church proclaims a King who cares for the vulnerable, then the church must be a people who care for the vulnerable.
 - d) That's part of what makes the church countercultural. We naturally gravitate toward people who are like us, people who can do something for us, people with influence, resources, or status. In God's Kingdom, we notice the person everyone else overlooks. We move toward the vulnerable rather than away from them. Kingdom ministry cares without partiality.
2. But there is another layer to the problem. This wasn't only about widows being neglected. There were ethnic and cultural tensions underneath it. Luke says that the complaint came from the Hellenists against the Hebrews.

¹ Frank E. Gaebelin, J. D. Douglas, and Dick Polcyn, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary : With the New International Version*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995).

These were both groups of Jewish Christians. They worshiped the same Messiah and belonged to the same church, but they came from different cultural backgrounds. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jewish believers, while the Hebrews were primarily Aramaic-speaking Jewish believers.² And when the daily distribution took place, it was the widows from the Greek-speaking community who were being overlooked. Now the problem becomes even more serious. One group within the church senses that another group is receiving preferential treatment.³

- a) We don't know that the discrimination was intentional. Luke doesn't tell us that someone deliberately decided, "Let's take care of our widows and ignore theirs." It may simply have been an administrative failure created by the rapid growth of the church. But intentional or not, the result was the same: one group was being cared for while another group felt overlooked. This is how partiality works? Nobody has to announce, "These people matter more than those people." It can simply happen because we naturally notice our people first. We know their names. We understand their language. We recognize their needs. We're comfortable around them. And before long, without ever intending to, *our people* become the people who receive our attention, our resources, our invitations, and our care. But the gospel will not allow the church to settle for "our people."
- b) The Kingdom of God isn't divided into people Jesus cares about and people Jesus cares about a little less. When we come to Christ, the identities and distinctions that once separated us no longer determine our standing before God or with one another. Our ethnicity doesn't disappear. Our culture doesn't disappear. Our background doesn't disappear. But none of those things gets the final word about who belongs at the table. Jesus does. This is why Paul writes in Galatians 3,

² David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. ; Apollos, 2009), 231.

³ Peterson, 230.

“For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.” And then:
 “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” WE are all one in Christ Jesus.

- c) One of the most beautiful things about the response of the early church is what they didn't do. They didn't say, “Apparently the Hellenists and Hebrews can't get along, so let's start two churches. We'll have a Greek-speaking church over here and an Aramaic-speaking church over there.”⁴ No. They fixed the problem. They made sure the people who had been overlooked were seen. They made sure the people who had been neglected were cared for. They refused to allow cultural differences to fracture the unity Jesus had created. That's what Kingdom ministry does. It asks, Who are we not seeing? Who might be falling through the cracks? Whose needs are easier for us to overlook because they aren't part of “our” group? Who might experience this church differently than I do? Because the credibility of our proclamation is connected to the character of our community. This is what we mean by holding together faithful presence and prophetic witness as a vision. We proclaim a Savior who welcomes people from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. We proclaim a Kingdom in which people who might otherwise have very little in common can look across the room at one another and say, “You are my brother. You are my sister. We belong to one another because we belong to Jesus.” If that is the gospel we proclaim, then that must increasingly become the kind of church we are. Kingdom ministry cares without partiality.
3. Reflection Question: Who am I most likely to overlook because they are not one of “my people”?

B. Kingdom ministry meets needs through God's people.

⁴ Ajith Fernando, *Acts, The Niv Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 230.

1. There is a real problem in the church. Widows are being overlooked. People are hurting. And the apostles recognize that something has to change. But this wasn't simply an organizational problem to be solved. These were people who needed to be cared for. And while better structures and systems were needed—and the church would put those in place—a system by itself doesn't care for anybody. A structure doesn't notice a widow. A program doesn't sit across the table from someone who is hurting. Ultimately, people care for people. And this is one of the ways God works in His Kingdom: God meets needs by sending people.
2. Look at the solution the apostles propose in verses 3–4: “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.” Notice what they don't do. They don't ignore the need, but neither do the twelve simply add another responsibility to their schedules. Up until this point, the apostles have been carrying an enormous amount of responsibility. But the church is growing, the needs are multiplying, and it is becoming clear that the apostles cannot do everything. And if they try to do everything, eventually they will neglect the very things God has primarily called them to do.
 - a) There is an important ministry principle here: Every need is important, but every need is not necessarily your calling. Sometimes faithfulness means saying yes to a need. Sometimes faithfulness means recognizing that someone else is better equipped to meet it. That's what the apostles do. They reestablish their priorities. They recognize what God has primarily called them to do, and then they relinquish a responsibility that others can faithfully carry. The early church was willing to adjust its procedures, change its organizational structure, and create new positions of responsibility in response to new needs.⁵

⁵ Peterson, 233.

3. Their solution is to select seven people from among the congregation. And notice the qualifications they look for. Verse 3 says they are to be people “of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.”
 - a) First, a good reputation. These are people whose lives have credibility. Others can look at the way they live and say, “I trust that person.” That's worth asking ourselves: *Do I have that kind of reputation?* Does my life reinforce the faith I profess?
 - b) Second, they are to be full of the Spirit. This ministry may involve distributing food, but the church doesn't say, “Just find somebody who can get the job done.” Character matters. They need people whose lives demonstrate the transforming presence of the Holy Spirit—the kind of character Paul describes in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.
 - c) And third, they need wisdom—the ability to navigate real-life situations in a godly way. James 3 describes wisdom from above as “pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.” Think about how important those qualities would be here. This is a culturally sensitive situation involving hurt feelings, accusations of partiality, limited resources, and vulnerable people. They don't just need people who are willing. They need people who are spiritually mature enough to handle the responsibility wisely. So the church chooses seven qualified people, brings them before the apostles, and verse 6 says, “they prayed and laid their hands on them.” This is significant because the apostles are not dumping an unwanted responsibility on somebody else. They are entrusting an important ministry to gifted people.
4. Sometimes we read this passage and unintentionally create a hierarchy that the text doesn't create—as though preaching and prayer are the important “spiritual” ministries and serving food is the lesser ministry. But that's not the point. The apostles aren't saying, “We're too important to serve tables.” They are saying, “God has called us to something we cannot neglect, and God has called others to something we cannot adequately do.” That's a very

different thing. Kingdom ministry honors the different ways God calls and gifts His people. The person preaching a sermon is not inherently more valuable to the Kingdom than the person sitting with a grieving family, serving a meal, teaching a child, welcoming a stranger, repairing something that is broken, praying with someone who is hurting, or quietly meeting a financial need. Different roles. Same Kingdom. Same Lord.

- a) In fact, these seven men don't turn out to be insignificant figures in the story of Acts. Stephen will become a powerful witness for Christ and the church's first martyr. Philip will carry the gospel into Samaria and eventually share Christ with the Ethiopian official. The very people selected to meet this practical need become instrumental in carrying the gospel beyond Jerusalem.⁶
5. And that brings us to something important for every one of us: Many people are willing to identify a need; fewer are willing to become part of God's answer to it. It's easy to say, "Somebody should do something about that." Somebody should care for those people. Somebody should reach those kids. Somebody should visit them. Somebody should lead that ministry. Somebody should welcome those newcomers. Somebody should help that family. And sometimes the reason God has allowed you to see the need is because He intends for you to become part of the answer. I Believe this the sweet spot in Kingdom ministry where the gifts God has given us intersect with the needs God has placed around us. We don't all have the same gifts. We aren't all called to the same ministries. And we certainly can't meet every need. But God has placed gifts within His church because there are needs He intends to meet through His church. Just look at Acts 6. The widows have a need. The apostles have a calling. The seven have gifts. And when each person faithfully occupies the place God has given them, the whole church becomes healthier and the mission moves forward.
6. Reflection Question: Where do the gifts God has given me intersect with the needs He has placed around me?

⁶ Fernando, 229.

C. Kingdom ministry advances through prayer and proclamation.

1. The apostles have recognized the need and empowered gifted people to meet it. But in doing so, they also make an important decision about their own calling. Verse 4 says, “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” That word *devote* is important. They aren't saying, “We'll pray when we have time,” or, “We'll get to the Word once everything else is taken care of.” They are saying, “These are the things to which we must give ourselves.” There are many important ministries within the church, but prayer and the proclamation of God's Word are essential to the advance of God's Kingdom.
 - a) The apostles have to resist the pressure to do everything. They refuse to believe that busyness is necessarily evidence of thriving ministry. Eugene Peterson observed that ministers can become busy for two rather unflattering reasons: vanity and laziness. Vanity, because being busy can make us feel important—everyone needs me. And laziness, because sometimes it is easier to allow other people to determine our priorities than to do the difficult work of discerning what God has called us to do. We tend to admire busyness. Ask someone how they're doing and one of the most common answers is, “Busy.” Somehow we've learned to associate busyness with importance and productivity. But busyness and faithfulness are not the same thing. The apostles could have been incredibly busy doing incredibly good things and still neglected the things Jesus had primarily called them to do.
2. So they say, “We will devote ourselves to prayer.” I wonder if we actually believe prayer is as important as we say it is. Suppose you called someone and asked to meet tomorrow morning and they responded, “I can't. That's the time I've set aside to pray.” What would you think? We would understand if they had another appointment. But prayer? Couldn't you just move that? Maybe that exposes something in us. We say prayer matters, but often we treat it as the thing we do after we've done everything else we think really matters. Prayer acknowledges our dependence upon God. “Personal

prayerlessness...indicates self-sufficiency.”⁷ Kingdom ministry begins with what only God can do. Prayer acknowledges that Kingdom ministry requires Kingdom power. That's why prayer isn't merely preparation for ministry. Prayer is ministry.

3. And alongside prayer, the apostles devote themselves to “the ministry of the word.” If prayer expresses our dependence upon God's power, proclamation expresses our dependence upon God's message. We have been entrusted with the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins, rose from the grave, reigns as Lord, and offers forgiveness and new life to everyone who turns to Him in faith. There are many good things a church can do. We should feed hungry people, care for the vulnerable, strengthen families, invest in young people, and serve our community. Acts 6 has just shown us how seriously the church should take those responsibilities. But if we do all of those things and fail to proclaim Jesus, we have neglected something essential to our mission. Good works can demonstrate the gospel, but they cannot replace the proclamation of the gospel.
4. And then notice what happens in verse 7: “And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.” Luke doesn't simply say, “The church grew.” He says, “the word of God continued to increase.” The Word goes out. It reaches people. It takes root. It transforms lives. And throughout Acts, it will continue moving beyond Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria, and eventually toward the ends of the earth. Prayer and proclamation are not peripheral ministries of the church; they are at the heart of how the Kingdom advances. The great danger isn't simply that we become inactive. It may be that we become incredibly active while neglecting the things that give life to our activity. The Kingdom does not advance because we are busy. The Kingdom advances as God's people depend upon Him in prayer and faithfully proclaim the good news of Jesus.

⁷ Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts, Chris-Centered Exposition* (Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Reference, 2017), 94.

5. Reflection Question: Do my priorities reveal that I truly believe prayer and God's Word are essential to Kingdom ministry?

III. Closing Thoughts

- A. Acts 6 reminds us that Kingdom ministry can be messy. As the gospel advances, new people come in, new needs emerge, and new challenges arise. But those challenges don't have to derail the mission. They can become opportunities for the church to more clearly reflect the Kingdom of God.
- B. Our church is in a season of growth, with that growth comes challenges and opportunities. So like the early church, we must begin asking ourselves: **What kind of church are we becoming?**
 1. Are we a church that **cares without partiality**—that notices those who might otherwise be overlooked?
 2. Are we a church that believes **God meets needs through His people**—where each of us is willing to offer our gifts in service to others?
 3. And are we a church that remains deeply committed to **prayer and proclamation**—recognizing that ultimately the Kingdom does not advance through our busyness, programs, or abilities, but through dependence upon God and faithfulness to His Word?
- C. That's the kind of church Acts 6 points us toward: a church where people are cared for, God's people are mobilized, Jesus is proclaimed, and the Word of God continues to spread. May God make us that kind of church.

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