

More Workers into the Fields
Acts 6 – 15

Turn to Matthew 9 please. Our main text will be Acts 6, but we'll begin with Matthew 9, the last two verses. In Acts 6, there was a big shift in who preached the gospel. To the middle of Acts 6, only the twelve apostles preached. After that, more preachers.

We will see two things today, so you know where we're going. First, like we've been doing right through Acts, we will see the difference between the mission of the missionaries, and the mission of the church. Acts makes that clear. And second, we will be called to unity between churches, between all who say, "Jesus is Lord." This sermon has seven points to say these two things.

1, The Lord's Theology of Sending – Matthew 9:37-38

At the end of Matthew 9, *Jesus said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*

This is terse and direct, and is the biblical theology of "sending" in two short sentences. Jesus knows the problem: a great harvest of people ready to hear the gospel, and not enough workers. The Lord takes some responsibility for this. He has not sent enough workers. If he sent more workers, there would be more. That much is on him.

Jesus did not ask for volunteers, and he did not send everyone. Jesus said things that every disciple must do, but this is not one of them.

Jesus knows that when he sends people, they will go. I've heard preachers assume that some are sent but are resisting. Jesus does not know about that problem, because it does not exist. Many OT prophets were reluctant, but they all went. Moses in particular did not want this calling, and Ezekiel also resented God for this. Jonah is famous for resistance. But they all went, and they said and did what God wanted. When Jesus sends, people go.

But we have a part to play: Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers. When we see the problem, pray that he will send more workers, and he will. He tells us to pray about the lack of workers, so let's do that. Now to Acts 6.

2, Why did Jesus want Twelve Apostles to be so Dominant at the Start? Acts 1, 6:2,4

Acts 6 tells us about a church problem. One part of the church was being neglected, it was not getting the kind of care that others were receiving. So they picked seven men, traditionally called "deacons," to take care of this.

Here's the important part: Peter tells the church twice that the twelve have to keep preaching the word. The twelve cannot deal with the neglect problem themselves, because they must keep giving their message. Why did Jesus want the twelve to have such a strong role at the start? Let's briefly list what we saw in Acts 1, the five things Jesus made sure the twelve had.

- (1) The twelve must be absolutely certain about the resurrection of Jesus. Jesus met with them and ate with them regularly for forty days. No doubts left by then.
- (2) Jesus needed to carefully teach them which OT Scriptures spoke about him. Jesus had his own views of what the OT said about him, and he taught them this carefully for forty days.
- (3) They had to have been with Jesus from John the Baptist right through to his resurrection. They needed to know this firsthand, the life of Jesus matters. That's why we have Four Gospels.
- (4) The twelve had to receive the Holy Spirit. None of this would work without the Spirit.
- (5) There had to be twelve. For Jesus, the symbolism of the number twelve was essential. Luke the Gentile gets this, perhaps because he's a Gentile. The new Israel, the new holy nation, included the first Israel that said, "Jesus is Lord," and it also included Gentiles who could say, "Jesus is Lord." For Jesus, there had to be twelve, to make clear what the gospel was doing.

Jesus wanted all of this built into the fabric of the church, all of this built into our foundation, so he gave the twelve as a unit a strong presence, especially at the start.

3, Church Growth in Acts and in the New Testament Letters – Acts 6:7

The word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

The book of Acts speaks like this several times, cheerfully reporting how many people are becoming disciples of Jesus. In the NT Letters, from Romans to the end of the NT, this never comes up. We have no idea which churches were growing, which were shrinking, and which staying the same. The writers never mention it, either to correct the church, or to encourage it.

The writers of the NT Letters just don't care. They care a lot about faithfulness, but not about numbers. But Acts likes it when numbers increase. So what's going on? Listen to what we just read: "The word of God spread. The number of disciples increased rapidly." People don't get the credit for this, neither the apostles nor the Jerusalem church.

The word of God spreads. It nearly has a life of its own. Every believer rejoices when we hear that in some other place, many people are turning to the Lord. Don't you enjoy that? I sure do. So did Luke, and he wrote about it. But according to the Letters, what happens with any church's numbers does not tell us anything about whether or not those believers are faithful to Christ.

What I really want to know is, why is it not enough for a church just to do what the Bible says?

4, New Preachers! Stephen, Philip, Paul – Acts 6:8

Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

Until Acts 6:8, only the twelve have been performing great wonders and signs. Now Stephen as well. That's very new, a big development. And we find out in the next verses that he also speaks the gospel powerfully and teaches about Jesus.

Beginning at Acts 6:8, Jesus sends more workers into his harvest fields. Until now, as far as Acts is concerned, Jesus deliberately sent the twelve, but no more. But now, perhaps two or three years after Pentecost, Jesus sends more workers.

So in Acts 7, we read about Stephen preaching, and in Acts 8 we read about Philip preaching to the Samaritans, and doing great miracles among the Samaritans.

And in Acts 9, the Lord calls Saul the persecutor, on the road to Damascus. The Lord tells Ananias that Saul will take the Lord's name to Gentiles and to their kings and to Israel. How on earth does the Lord decide who to send into his harvest fields? From our part, there is no rhyme or reason to it. Stephen gets killed, and the persecutor is sent out. Go figure.

Here's the thing: beginning in the middle of Acts 6, the Lord is sending out more workers.

5, Antioch, the First Gentile Church – Acts 11

Antioch was in Syria, and by now there are quite a few preaching the gospel, mostly still to Jews. *But some ... went to Antioch, and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.*

Why do a great number of Greeks turn to the Lord? Because the Lord's hand was with them. The Lord decided it was time for this. We don't even know who preached.

So, in Acts 8, Philip brought Samaritans into the people of God. Samaritans were Jew-Gentile mixed race, but they did worship the God of Israel. But in Acts 11, Gentiles come to the Lord. The church in Antioch was mostly Gentile, and it was an important and leading church for hundreds of years. You can feel the gospel widening out in who it includes. It began with Stephen in Acts 6:8, and it is still widening.

“The Lord's hand was with them,” it says, “and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” The reason a great number of people turned to the Lord is because the Lord's hand was with the preachers. The Lord decided that this preaching would be effective.

In Isaiah 6, God called Isaiah to be a prophet and sent him to preach, and on the day God called him, God told Isaiah it would not work, the people would close their eyes, plug their ears, and their hearts would get harder. Isaiah said what God wanted, in the way the God wanted, and the Spirit was on Isaiah, as well.

But very few turned to the Lord. That's a common story for OT prophets. Preaching works when the Lord decides it will work, and the Lord wanted many followers in Antioch.

6, The Antioch Church Cares for the Jerusalem Church – Acts 11:29-30; 12:25.

There was a wide-spread famine at that time, and the Antioch church decided to collect money and send it to the Jerusalem church. Each disciple set aside money according to their ability, and Barnabas and Paul took the money to Jerusalem and gave it to the elders of the Jerusalem church for them give to those in need.

Now the taking care of each other does not just happen between the members of a particular church, it also happens between churches. One church is in trouble, so another church takes care of them and helps them.

The goal of the Lord Jesus is that we would ALL be one, one flock, one shepherd. Paul tells the Thessalonians, “You do love one another, and you also love all the believers in Macedonia.” Our kindness and hospitality to one another extends to all Christians.

And Antioch, a Gentile church, shares its possessions with the mother church, the Jerusalem Jewish church. You can bet that felt a little funny in Jerusalem, Gentile disciples of the Christ taking care of the more proper Jewish followers.

In Acts and the NT Letters, sharing possessions and hospitality almost always happens between believers. I don’t think there’s one clear example otherwise. It is not wrong to help a needy unbeliever, Marilyn and I do that, this church has done that. But the NT strongly emphasizes believers taking care of believers.

7. Is it Enough to Say, “Jesus is Lord”? Circumcision versus the Holy Spirit – Acts 15

There was an important conference in Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15. The question was about the Law of Moses: do Gentiles who come to Christ need to keep the covenant law of Moses? The question boiled down to this: did the Gentile men who believed in Christ also need to be circumcised, as Moses taught?

The OT prophets always said that lots of Gentiles would come to God, but the Jews always assumed that when this happened, the Gentiles would obey the covenant law of Moses. Jesus did not talk about this part one way or the other, and the apostles probably would have taught the Gentiles to obey Moses, except that God did something peculiar that changed their minds.

When the Gentiles believed that Jesus of Nazareth was Lord of heaven and earth, and they trusted him with their lives, God sent them his Holy Spirit! The Jewish apostles could hardly believe it. All the Gentiles did was trust in Jesus the Lord, and God gave them the Holy Spirit!

They are uncircumcised and they eat bacon and work on the sabbath, but they made Jesus their Lord, and then they received the Spirit. The apostles knew for sure that if God gave his Spirit to someone, then God had completely accepted that person.

The law of Moses became redundant. You would do that to be acceptable to God, and be one of his covenant people, but if you had the Spirit, then you were obviously included.

So, on that basis they decided that Gentiles did not need to keep the law of Moses. God had made this clear by giving his Spirit to Gentiles who confessed Jesus as Lord, and were baptized, and nothing else.

The reason this matters so much in Acts is that the Jewish and Gentile churches have to accept each other. The Antioch Gentile church was doing fine without Moses, and the Jerusalem Jewish church was doing fine with Moses, but unless this was resolved, there would be big tension between those churches. And that tension between churches must not happen.

The mission of the church is to be the new people of God, which we show above all by our relationships with each other. Acts 6 - 15 tells us that this also shall happen between churches.

It is not enough for there to be a Jerusalem church and a Samaritan church and a Gentile church in Antioch, each doing their own thing and ignoring the others. These churches shall all be one with each other, and the oneness between believers in a local church will include other believers and other churches.

“Jesus is Lord” is the main theological statement of the NT. “Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth, and he has full rights to my life.” That plus baptism brings the Holy Spirit. That’s the foundation of oneness between believers and the oneness between different local churches. In Acts and the rest of the NT, this bigger unity is very important.

We sort of do this instinctively. If you meet a stranger, and in the conversation you find out that this person also follows the Lord, isn’t that a nice thing? There is an instant oneness and enjoyment of each other.

Sometimes there are other churches that we righteously despise. We are glad we are nothing like them, and we kind of enjoy bad news about that church, when they’re in trouble it serves them right. I am quite capable of this. People, that’s not good.

They had all kinds of churches in the NT, including churches with big time misbehavior and sin, but the NT still always encouraged warm relationships between churches, and between believers from different churches who hardly knew each other. That is all still the mission of the church. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, send workers into your fields. Raise up evangelists of all kinds, and send them to the people who are ready to turn to you. And Lord, you prayed that we would all be one, that we’d all be one just as you and the Father are one. This way the world will know that you come from the Father, and the world will know that you love us. Lord, may we all be one, as you and the Father are one. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give all of us the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice we may all together glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.