

More Workers into the Fields

Acts 6

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 apostles and the mission of the church. Acts makes that clear. And second, we will see the Lord send more workers into his fields than just the twelve apostles. And there'll be some other stuff too.

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

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

Jesus knows that when he sends people, they will go. No one defies this call. Many Old Testament prophets were reluctant, but they all went. And they all said and did what God wanted. When Jesus sends, people go.

But we all have a part to play: Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers. 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 the Twelve Apostles to be so Prominent at the Start? Acts 6:1–6

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group.

They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Here's the important part: Peter tells the church that the twelve have to keep preaching the word, and then he says it again. The twelve cannot deal with the problem themselves, because they must keep giving their message. Jesus wanted the twelve to have a strong speaking role at the start. Jesus had shaped them for this in seven ways.

- (1) Messianic prophecy as taught by Jesus: Jesus showed the apostles which prophecy to use.
- (2) Resurrection certainty: the apostles were totally convinced that Jesus rose from the dead.
- (3) Holy Spirit: the apostles could not begin to witness until they had received the Holy Spirit.
- (4) Life of Jesus first hand - They had to be present with Jesus through his whole ministry.
- (5) Chosen by Jesus: these witnesses had to be chosen directly by Jesus himself for this task.
- (6) Twelve: there had to be twelve, to show that Christ's people were the revised Israel.
- (7) Jerusalem: it had to begin in Jerusalem, the Jewish capital.

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 at the start of the church.

3 Church Growth in Acts: What About 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, joyfully reporting how many people are becoming disciples of Jesus. In the NT Letters, from Romans to Revelation, this never comes up once. We don't know 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 the church.

The writers of the NT Letters don't care about growth pattern. Is that not remarkable? They care intensely about faithfulness to the Lord, but not about numbers. Acts likes it when numbers increase. So what's going on? Why does Acts care and not the Letters? 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 seems to have a life of its own. It never happens without willing people, but people are not focus. We're all encouraged when we hear that in some place, many 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 useful about that church, not as far as the writers are concerned. And most of the writers are evangelists! So, let's stay with our instructions.

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 6:7, only the twelve have been performing great wonders and signs. Now Stephen as well. That's very new, a big important development. And we find out in the next verses that he also speaks the gospel powerfully and teaches about Jesus. This is why I am sure that the prayer for boldness in Acts 4 is the prayer of the apostles alone, not all the believers.

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 to four 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 who is 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 Saul the persecutor is sent out. Go figure.

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

5, Antioch, the First Gentile Church – Acts 11:20–21

Antioch was in Syria, and by now there were quite a few preaching the gospel, but still mostly 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 came 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 today.

"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 Isaiah, God told that 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 few turned to the Lord. That’s a common story for Old Testament 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 11:28–30; 12:25.

A prophet named Agabus stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius [41–54].) The disciples, as each one was able, decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul ... When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark.

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.*” In Ephesians 1, Paul begins his prayer for them like this: *Since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I haven’t stopped giving thanks for you.*” 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. The sharing possessions between the 3000 Jerusalem believers after Pentecost had become sharing between churches.

In Acts and the New Testament 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 New Testament strongly emphasizes believers taking care of believers.

7 Review the Two Missions in Acts

By the two missions, I mean the mission of the apostles, and the mission of the church. The mission of the apostles was to be the spearhead of the kingdom of God advancing in this world. Jesus prepared them to announce him in the right way. We’ve already covered that.

When they received the Spirit, their mission began in Jerusalem. Here’s why God gave them their mission: to create the new people of God, the new nation, revised Israel, “the Israel of God” as Paul calls it in Galatians 6. That is, the church.

All of this occurred in Acts 2, which tells us about the day of Pentecost. On that day, the Spirit came and by the Spirit’s power the apostles said what Jesus told them to say, and 3000 Jews from every nation under heaven repented and were baptized. Their sins were forgiven, and they received that same Holy Spirit.

And now we are talking about the second mission, the mission of the church. Those 3000 from every nation under heaven lived out the most amazing unity and care for one another that has ever happened on this planet. The mission of the church is to continue that. The measure of a church is how much we together live like that.

The second mission, to be the church, is the ultimate mission. Not every believer is sent into the Lord's harvest fields. But Jesus told the apostles themselves: "*A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*"

That's in John 13. In Matthew 20 and Mark 10 he said this to the apostles themselves: *Whoever wants to become great among you [apostles] must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.* And in Luke 22 Jesus says something very similar to the twelve. The one another mission is the ultimate mission, even for the apostles.

By the end of Acts 4, Luke writing Acts has made both missions clear, the preaching of the apostles and the life together of the church. And here is where we sometimes get misled about Acts. Luke's real energy is not the mission of the church, but rather the mission of the apostles. Luke wants to tell us the story of how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to everywhere.

Acts lays out the mission of the church in Acts 1–4, and then largely leaves it. Luke tells how the gospel included more and more people, and went farther and farther, ending up in Rome. Luke loves that story. And some see this and conclude that the mission of the church is the spread of the gospel. But that's not true. Let's not confuse the two missions.

The rest of the New Testament, Romans to Revelation, is letters written to churches. Those letters fill out the mission of the church. Luke in Acts just tells us the start.

Final Word

As I said last week, we all have limitations, and church life has always been like that. The Holy Spirit is not limited by our limitations. When Jesus fed the multitudes, he asked the disciples, "what do you have?" Five loaves and two fishes. Given the need, what they had was nothing. But it's what they had, and they brought it to Jesus, and it went a long way. We have a mission, and every week the Holy Spirit's power carries it along. 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, just as you and the Father are one. This way the world will know that you come from the Father, and 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.