

Table Servers Needed

Acts 6:1-7

If to this point in Acts, the story has felt foreign or unrelatable to your experience of being a part of the Church in the 21st century, the passage this week should make you feel right at home. Because the beginning of Acts 6 relates an incident, the kind of which commonly occurs in the Church today: a group of people is dissatisfied with how the church is doing things. And like modern instances of this kind of situation, it is a seemingly complicated situation. On the one hand, it looks pretty bad and there is some legitimate reason for concern, and yet, on the other hand, there is also some misunderstanding or misassumptions at play. Generally, everyone involved is sincerely trying to do the best they can, but the enemy tries to sow seeds of doubt and mistrust. Yet, as we will see, the early Church navigates the situation well, and, I believe, gives us an example to follow.

Before we get to chapter 6, let me first make a couple important notes from the preceding context of Acts. As pastor Grant and pastor Stan have been showing us, the story of Acts thus far has focused on the explosive birth of the early church. The first Christian sermon delivered by Peter grows the Church from about 120 people to about 3,000; not bad for a first sermon. And the Church continues to grow on a daily basis from there. Yet, as Stan has memorably summarized, “Where the Spirit is working, the enemy is lurking.”

This succinctly captures the basic tension of Acts 4 and 5, in which the fledgling Church begins to be assailed by the enemy with attacks coming from both outside and inside the church. First, Peter and John are arrested, threatened, and told to stop preaching about Jesus, which they, of course, say they cannot do. Then comes the story of Ananias and Sapphira’s dishonesty, which threatened to destroy the integrity of the Church from the inside with the cancer of hypocrisy. Following this episode, the external pressure is increased when the apostles are again arrested, freed by an angel, and then threatened, beaten, and charged again to stop preaching about Jesus. They would have been killed at this point, if not for the advice of Gamaliel to the counsel. And yet, after each one of these attacks Luke is careful to tell us that the Church just kept growing, serving one another and the community, and preaching the Word. Our passage this morning is a continuation of this pattern in which the Church is threatened by another internal attack and responds well, which leads to the continued and expanded spreading of the Word.

With that, let’s read verse 1 of Acts 6, “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.” This kind of situation happens all too often in the Church today, and it looks pretty bad from the outside. The apostles, all of whom are card-carrying Jews born and raised in Israel, have been entrusted with a significant amount money and assets through the Spirit-inspired generosity that Luke noted earlier. A chunk of those resources was devoted to supporting the widows of the early church. In a time and place in which women were extremely dependent on men for economic support, a childless widow was one of the most vulnerable members of society. Because of this, caring for such women was a high-priority ministry of the church, rightfully so. James 1:27 captures this saying, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: *to visit orphans and widows in their affliction*, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.”

And yet, some widows aren't getting their allotment of food. What makes the situation look really bad is that this neglect seems to disproportionately affect Hellenist widows, as opposed to the Hebrew widows. Suddenly, an honest oversight seems to carry the implication of cultural discrimination. The term Hellenist simply refers to anyone who primarily spoke Greek, and Luke uses it a few times in Acts. In Acts 9 he will use the term to refer to non-Christian Jews, and in Acts 11 it is used to refer to Gentile unbelievers. But in our passage, it refers to Jewish Christians who, again, primarily or even exclusively spoke Greek.

However, there is more than just a difference in language at play here. Language and culture go hand-in-hand with culture shaping language and vice versa. In other words, it is not just that these Hellenistic Jews spoke a different language than the Aramaic-speaking Hebraic Jews; they viewed the world differently. The Hellenists would have been Jews from the Diaspora; Jews who lived outside of Palestine in other regions of the Roman Empire. Therefore, they were not immersed in Jewish culture anywhere near to the degree that Jews who grew up in Palestine, just a few days walk from the Temple would have been. Rather, they grew up surrounded by and saturated in Roman culture, yet while maintaining their Jewish faith through worship at the local synagogue.

What this simply means is that the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebraic Jews were different from one another, linguistically and culturally. This cultural tension likely meant that the Hellenists felt like outsiders at times, and thus would have made it really tempting to claim discrimination when their widows began to be overlooked, and it would not have been an illegitimate concern to have, considering human nature (again, the ones overseeing the distribution were all Hebraic Jews). And yet, it should be noted that there is no indication that there was any ill intent on the apostles' part. Actually, this is a fulfillment of what Jesus said would happen: the Gospel would be universal, cross-cultural. But, for the moment, the situation looks bad. So, what do the apostles do? We find out in verses 2-4.

"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. 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.'" So, what do the apostles do? Simply put, they delegate. However, there are a few notes to make about this delegation. First, the humility of the apostles. Consider who we are talking about here. These are the men who knew Jesus personally. These are the men who are laying the foundation of the Church. These are the men through whom the Spirit is working signs and wonders and saving people by the thousands. They would have been well within their rights to maintain control, or at least a significant say in this important ministry.

And yet, they freely relinquish control over this significant part of the Church's ministry, not to mention control of the money and assets that went along with it. In effect, they admit, "We can't do it all, and it wouldn't be right for us to neglect our primary calling for the sake of an important, but secondary one." And so, they tell those who brought the concern to choose men for themselves to fill this need in the ministry. Their humility is also shown in the relatively short list of parameters they give for the men to be chosen, and yet those parameters and their order are significant, and the second thing I want to note. The general qualification for those chosen was that they be of "good repute". Specifically, what this means is that they be known as men "full of the Spirit and of wisdom".

It seems significant that, when faced with a largely administrative problem, the apostles still care about the spiritual qualification, even listing it before the practical qualification. We live in a practical

culture that is quick to overlook deficiencies of character in those who can get results, provided they share our party affiliation or help our favorite team win games. And yet, it is the consistent witness of the Bible from David to these men here that God prioritizes spiritual and moral integrity over practical effectiveness. Which is not to say practical effectiveness is unimportant. "Wisdom" in this context almost certainly includes the idea that the men chosen should be proficient in the administrative aspects of this ministry to widows. The practical is not unimportant, but it is secondary to the spiritual. The reality is that for Christian leadership, at least, both spiritual integrity and practical proficiency are important. Which, I believe, is why the apostles list those as the necessary qualifications.

Thirdly, I want to briefly note the end goal the apostles are aiming at with the delegation they suggest, which was to allow the ministry of prayer and the word to continue unhindered. I will come back to this point in a bit, but first let's read verse 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." Here we read that the plan is met with great approval, and so they choose seven men. Let me mention a couple things regarding the men who were chosen. First, Stephen and Philip will both go on in the next couple chapters to play significant roles: Stephen becoming the first martyr and Philip converting the first Samaritans and the first Gentile. Second, while the other five do not get mentioned again in Acts, many commentators have noted that all seven men selected have Greek names. This is significant because it possibly indicates that it was seven *Hellenistic* men who were chosen, or at least a mix of Hebrews and Hellenists.

This would make some logical sense. Hellenistic men would be much better equipped to serve the Hellenistic widows. Additionally, giving such men the platform of leadership in the Church would show the other Hellenists that they were indeed full and valued members of the Church. And it is clear that the apostles desired to show that just as the Hellenists were not second-class members of the church, these men would not be second-class leaders in the church. We can see this in verse 6.

"These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them." This may seem like an insignificant verse, but it is massively important. In this commissioning the apostles are saying to the whole Christian community, "These men serve with the same Spirit-endowed power and authority that we do." All you have to do to see this reality is read the stories of Stephen and Philip I mentioned that immediately follow our passage to see that they perform acts as extraordinary as any of the apostles. It is as if Luke is going out of his way to show that even though these seven have a different primary calling within the church, it does not mean they are any less important to the spread of the Kingdom. In other words, serving tables full of the Spirit is just as necessary as prayer and preaching, because serving tables contributes to the word going forth unhindered, as we see in verse 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." It seems to me that Luke is trying to make the point that the mission of the church requires more than prayer and preaching. As foundational as those ministries are, they are not enough. It takes the ministry of table serving too. *Because* these men, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, take over serving tables, the word of God continues to go forth in increasing measure.

And so, this becomes another example of the unstoppable progress of the Gospel, which pastor Grant has highlighted for us the past couple weeks. It was not stopped by threat or persecution. It was not stopped by internal unfaithfulness. And now, it is not stopped by internal division, *because* of these men's role. The main point of this passage, I believe, and my main point for this morning is this: the mission of the Church is to increase the word of God (bear witness to the Gospel of the Kingdom), and to make disciples (train Kingdom citizens), and that mission takes much more than prayer and the ministry of the word; it takes all types of ministries.

Please do not hear me wrong, the ministries of prayer and the word are *essential* and *foundational*. It is through these ministries that pastors and other leaders in particular hold the center for the church. Pastors must spend time in prayer wrestling with how to bring the Gospel to bear on real life, which is often far from easy. Prayer is the context in which we try to reconcile the realities of life with the reality of God. Just consider the Psalms to see this, or for that matter, consider your own prayers and you will find many of them wrestle with questions like, "How could a good God let this happen?". And so, one of the primary, if not *the* primary role of a pastor is to do the hard work of prayer, in order to help God's people as a whole to reconcile those realities.

And then, pastors must constantly call God's people back to the word, the Gospel of the Kingdom. Because the Gospel is not just a story to be memorized; it is a way of life. And it includes things like blessing those who curse us, loving our enemies, considering others more important than ourselves, and other dramatically countercultural and counterintuitive attitudes and behaviors. Because this Gospel way of life is so vastly counter to the world around us and the natural instincts inside us, we must be constantly reminded of our call to live as citizens of *God's* Kingdom, if we are to avoid slipping into living as citizens of the world instead. Thus, pastors and other leaders, like the apostles, must be committed to and protect their ability to carry out the tasks of prayer and preaching of the word in order to maintain the integrity of the Church. Those callings are extremely important, and I will just tell you, from my experience they are often really difficult to maintain and protect. Which is why while those ministries are the *foundational starting points* of the mission of the Church, they are not the only *necessary* ministries to that mission.

As we turn to application, I just have one point: there should be no spectators when it comes to the mission of the Church; every Christ-follower has a role to play, including you. Pastors and other church leaders are not called to carry out the totality of the Church's mission and ministry, they are called to mobilize the Body to carry out the mission and ministry. Ephesians 4:11-12 says, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, *to equip the saints for the work of ministry...*" Ephesians 1:22-23 says that as the Body of Christ (in which we are individual members, or body parts) the Church is "the fullness of him who fills all in all." That is a tall order. Representing the fullness of Christ on earth is a tall order, and thus takes a concerted effort.

All of this means, there can be no spectators when it comes to the mission of the Church, and *you have a role to play*. Yes, you have a role to play. Maybe not in preaching and teaching, which is fine. Maybe not as a full-time pastor, or missionary, or evangelist. Again, fine. But there are many more *necessary* roles to play. And I mean necessary. Necessary, like each of our body parts are necessary. Are there any body parts you would not mind losing this morning? I am not sure what the appendix does, but I am okay with just leaving it in there if it is not causing any problems. Well, that is how necessary you are, and every Christ-follower is to the Church.

If the mission of the Church is to increase and multiply, then table servers are needed too. As are helpers, administrators, exhorters, donors, committee leaders, mercy-givers, chair-stackers, floor-sweepers, soup-servers, counselors, baby-holders, writers, painters, carpenters, plumbers, lawyers, janitors, and a thousand other roles. Each is necessary, because the mission is to take the Gospel of the Kingdom to every corner of the earth, which means we need Kingdom citizens in every corner of society. So, whatever your skill, gift, passion, job, or personality, you have a role, if you follow Jesus. And, very practically, the pastors and leaders of EBC want to help equip you for whatever ministry God has called you to.

Which leads me to something that's right in front of you. There are cards in the pew backs that are designed to get you plugged into EBC with the aim of helping you grow into Christlikeness and into your role within the Body. There is a connection card so we can get to know you, and hopefully help you get involved in ministries that will build you up in your faith. Then there is a ministry opportunity card which is a way for you to become a part of the ministries we have going here at EBC.

That is one way to play a role, but *the* Church is much bigger than Emmanuel Bible Church, and so your role in the mission of *the* Church may not mean you serve in a formal role at our church, which is just fine. Maybe your role is in your workplace, or in your family, or your circle of friends, or your neighborhood, or gym, or something else. Whatever it is, you have a role, this much I know, and we are here to help you find what it is and equip you for it.

EBC exists in order that Christ would be seen by all. That is an ambitious vision for what we do (intentionally so). And we could use your help.

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Main Idea: The mission of the Church to increase the word of God and to make disciples takes many different ministries and roles.

1) Do you know what you are called to as a part of the Body and the mission of the Church? If so, share with the group to gain an understanding of various callings.

2) If you don't know your role, how might you go about discovering it? Discuss as a group.

3) How might EBC help support you in your role?