

Gospel Triumph: Staying Faithful While Ministry Expands – Acts 6:1-7

I don't know if you've ever seen those videos online of them launching a new oil tanker into water for the first time. It's quite a dramatic scene. The tanker slides off the pad and into the water and then rocks back and forth until it settles into place upright and stable. The design of the ship includes a ballast which is what ultimately causes it to avoid tipping over.

A ballast is a weight placed low in a ship to lower the center of gravity and provide stability to the ship. This lower center of gravity helps to right the ship when the hull of the ship starts to shift from side to side due to waves or wind. The ballast keeps the ship steady so that it won't capsize or turn over to the point where water begins to flow over the sides.

This is why these massive ships sail through places like the North Sea where waves get huge, and the ship will generally be stable and won't capsize.

One of the biggest threats to the local church is to get out of balance by not having a ballast to maintain stability. We need something to keep us steady because as we've seen in Acts there will be things that rock the boat. The early church has seen internal threats and external threats up through the first 5 chapters of Acts and that's only going to continue. In Acts 6 we have another wave hit the side of the boat, but we also get a clear picture of what the ballast is for the early church. This section is a transitional section in the book as the ministry starts to show signs of expanding out to Greek speaking Jews and others. It needs to maintain its center of gravity throughout the process of expanding.

Now, I'm not saying we are in the exact same situation as the early church and you can hardly classify our leadership as Apostles, nor should you. However, there are clear principles we can learn here from an expanding ministry and how to remain faithful and not compromise what God has called the church to be and do. So, in these few verses we will see **4 Ways to Maintain Faithfulness as Ministry Expands.**

1. Commit to the Main Thing (vv. 1-2)

A couple of weeks ago we looked at the Apostles second "trial" before the Sanhedrin in chapter 5. They were ordered not to speak in the name of Christ, beaten, and let go. Let me remind you of the manner in which they left the council

in 5:41. And after they left they went right back to doing what they had been doing before. Look at verse 42. They were teaching and preaching that Jesus is the Christ.

This is the situation 6:1 is referring to when it says in “these days.” The direct result of this continued teaching and preaching is found in 6:1. This is the first time in Acts that Christians are described as “disciples”. This word was used by Luke in his gospel to speak of those who actively traveled with Jesus and learned from him in person. Now it expands beyond those with Jesus physically to include all of those who hear the Gospel message, respond to it, and apprentice under Jesus through the teaching of His Word.

This is what Jesus commanded in the Great Commission, and this is why we include our main mission here at WBC as making followers of Christ. We want you to think of yourself as a disciple attached to the Rabbi and learning from the Rabbi and imitating the way of life of the Rabbi because of the death, resurrection and ascension of the Rabbi.

But as the number of disciples increases it creates a problem. Look at the rest of verse 1. Let me make sure you understand these two groups here. The Hellenists are most likely Jews ethnically, but they probably don’t speak Aramaic and only speak Greek. Some of them would have been raised in Gentile areas outside of Israel and may have moved back to Jerusalem. The Hebrews were Jews who were raised in Israel and spoke Aramaic as their primary language.

The widows who were Hellenists were somehow being missed in the daily distribution of food. This is talking about what is described in Acts 4:34-35. The point in Acts 4 is how incredibly unified the church was. This neglect in Acts 6 threatens the unity of the church. And it threatens to divide the church up along cultural lines, which is certainly a problem. In Christ and in the church we are meant to be unified around Christ despite cultural, racial, and economic differences. Anytime there’s a division along one of those lines it’s ripe for problems and that’s exactly what happens here. This clearly needs to be addressed. But notice how the Apostles begin to address it in verse 2.

We’ll talk about what they do in our second point but notice first the focus they maintain. It would have been very easy to drop everything and for the Apostles to handle this situation themselves. But they know the role they play in the body of

Christ, and they know what has to remain the ballast of the ship. One author put it like this:

"By prioritizing Scripture and prayer, the apostles are choosing to stay focused on the whole church's spiritual welfare, even as they affirm the Hellenists' physical needs. Nevertheless, the apostles recognize a fundamental truth: a church whose ministers are chained to the tyranny of the urgent - which so often shows up in 'tangible problems' - is a church removing its heart to strengthen its arm. It's a king of slow-motion suicide." - Matt Smethurst

Listen, I never want to sacrifice the main thing to the tyranny of the urgent. We want to follow the example of the Apostles here. But that example doesn't mean ignoring this genuine need. And this brings us to our second way to maintain faithfulness as ministry expands.

2. Create Shared Ministry (vv. 3-4)

Notice in verse 2 they bring everyone together and then in verse 3 they assign this task to the church. Widows were among the neediest people in the culture of this time and those within the church needed to be cared for by the church. This has to take place but the whole church needs to be involved in making sure every aspect of ministry is served.

Now, the Apostles give some direction for the choosing of these men and notice what they focus on. Character. 3 Qualities. They must have a good reputation among the people. They must have a vital and active relationship with God through the Spirit, and they must be full of wisdom. They must have the practical know how to take the information they are given and use it for the best possible outcome.

The Apostles direct toward shared ministry so that they can continue to give themselves to preaching and praying. Look at verse 4. Prayer must be a vital part of ministry for leadership in the church because this connects us to God and shows dependence on God. When I move away from prayer in my own ministry life it's like removing the ballast. My priorities get out of whack and I begin to give my time to other things. But commitment to prayer keeps me focused on God and shepherding others.

And along with prayer the focus here is on preaching the Word of God. This fits quite well with the instructions Paul gives to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:11-16. My desire here at WBC is to follow this example and clear instruction from the Apostles and Paul. Now, I know there are some pastors who are like, “I can’t do anything else. I need to study to preach for 40 hours a week.” I do think there are shepherding aspects of ministry and leading aspects of ministry that must be upheld. At the same time, intimate knowledge of God and His Word and clear and faithful preaching from the Word doesn’t happen in 5 hours a week.

This, of course, requires shared ministry and this is something we are actively pursuing here at WBC. We have in place a structure to help you get involved and we want to see more and more people help to carry the load of ministry so that the Word can go forward.

3. Cultivate Leaders of Character (vv. 5-6)

The clear direction from the Apostles leads to verses 5-6. Shared ministry means that leaders will be cultivated and begin to lead. These 7 are not necessarily given a specific office, but they are commissioned to fulfill this duty. But what’s interesting here is that as these 7 take on leadership roles and are faithful, God expands their ministry opportunities.

Notice the first two, Stephen and Philip. Look at 6:8 and then Stephen ends up giving an amazing sermon before the Sanhedrin and is the first martyr of the church. Then in chapter 8 we find Philip taking the Gospel to Samaria and sharing the Gospel with the Ethiopian Eunuch.

While this particular task of distributing food to widows may have seemed unimportant in the grand scheme of ministry, it was vital, and it led to other ministry opportunities. And it led to other opportunities because these men had the right character and were available to serve. And shared ministry and new leaders while being committed to God’s Word led to verse 7 and our last way to maintain faithfulness.

4. Continue to Unleash the Word (v. 7)

Look at verse 7. What has been the common theme of the early church? Listen to Acts 2:42. 5:42. Three times in our passage this morning we have seen the apostles desire to be committed to the Word of God or the proclamation of the

Gospel of Jesus Christ. If you keep reading through Acts you find similar statements. Listen to Acts 12:24 and Acts 19:20.

You almost get this sense in the book as if the Word of God is alive and acting on its own. It's like the Apostles and others just need to open the cage and let it out and it will do its work. I do think that's exactly the situation. Notice what it says at the end of verse 7.

The priests were mostly Sadducees and would have been a key part of the religious establishment in Jerusalem. Are there any people in your life that are unsaved and you just think, "yeah, that's not going to happen"? You just can't picture them coming to Christ. Well, the priests would probably have been that group for the Apostles, especially after their trips before the Sanhedrin.

And yet, when the Word of God is unleashed, things happen. The Word multiplies. It saves. It changes people. It's powerful. This is precisely why the Apostles were so committed to teaching and preaching the Word of God.

And this is exactly why we need to remain committed to all of the same things. We need to practice shared ministry and cultivation of leaders of character. We need to continue to unleash the Word of God as we pray and depend on God.

In many ways the ministry model given in the NT isn't complicated. Keep the main thing the main thing and creatively meet ministry needs together in order to keep preaching and praying and let the Word of God do its work. Let's keep at it. Let's pray.

Sermon Reflection Questions – 1/19/25

- What are the biggest threats today to keeping the church steady and balanced?
- How would you describe being a disciple of Jesus? How is it similar to those who followed Jesus physically around Isreal and how is it different?
- Explain the difference between the Hellenists and the Hebrews in 6:1. Why would this have had the potential for conflict?
- What are some areas of cultural differences that could lead to conflict in our church?
- Doesn't the Apostles response in verse 2 seem a bit cold? Why or why not?
- Give an example of how a minister could be "chained to the tyranny of the urgent" in our day.
- How can our church cultivate more shared ministry? What do we do well and what could we improve on?
- What are some practical ways to cultivate leadership in the church?
- Why do you think the Apostles place such a premium on character traits when they tell the church what to look for in these leaders?

- Why does the book of Acts mention the salvation of the priests in 6:7? Who do you know that seems next to impossible to picture coming to Christ?
- What is one principle from this passage that you can use to encourage another believe this week?