

MULTIPLY – Gospel Movements

Priorities

Acts 6:1-7

Mark Vroegop

¹ 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. ² 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. ³ 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. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 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. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. 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 (Acts 6:1–7).

Last Sunday night all three of our congregations voted on the opportunity to adopt The Rock Bible Church and to launch our third congregation in Greenwood. The 95 percent approval vote means that we will begin immediately providing pulpit supply and that we will start an incubator at the Ministry Center after Easter. Our dream is to see a healthy church replanted in Greenwood, starting in August.

Someone at the congregational meeting asked how we saw the Spirit leading us. Well, it relates to what we talked about last week—generosity. Over the last few months, our Elders had been praying about the wisdom of adopting The Rock Bible Church because, as you may remember, there is some debt connected to the facility. Our staff did our due diligence, and we determined that we needed some additional capital—outside of the budget and the Next Door Mission Fund—in order for this to work. We asked the people who are planning to go and the people of The Rock Bible Church to make three-year commitments. And they did. But there was still a gap.

As a group of our Elders were getting ready to discuss this issue, a member at North Indy inquired about a year-end gift. He asked where we had pressing needs. Rather than talk about our budget needs (remember we were still behind), I told him about the challenge with the Greenwood adoption. After I walked him through the scenario, he agreed to underwrite half the mortgage and interest for a year and find someone else to join him. By the time I walked into the meeting with the Elders, I could tell them that the Lord had provided a year's worth of debt coverage from two individuals in our church. These two families helped answer our prayers. And they helped rescue a church.

I tell you that story so that you can rejoice with us at the Spirit's leading, but also so you realize that without the pressure of multiplication, we miss opportunities to see God at work. Now I know there

are limits and that we need to use wisdom. Those of you who know me know that I'm careful and thorough.

But I'm also here to tell you that some of the greatest spiritual moments of my life and in pastoral ministry have come when the pressure is the greatest.

Multiplication Challenges

When you study the way gospel movements multiply, you will find that along with the increasing opportunity and impact comes increasing pressure. These scenarios become defining and refining moments in the life of the church.

We are looking at Acts 1-11 to help us understand how to answer three questions. I keep repeating these questions because I want to keep reminding you what I'm asking the Lord to do through this series. I do not desire for this series to only increase your understanding of eleven chapters of Acts. I want this study to have an impact on how our church thinks about our mission, our definition of success, and your personal role.

By way of reminder, here are the three questions:

- 1) What were the ingredients for the missional movement of the early church?
- 2) What unique mission is God calling College Park to in 2018?
- 3) What is your Spirit-empowered mission?

Today we are going to see how multiplication creates pressure, which clarifies priorities and creates opportunities. This is one of the most important and helpful texts in the book of Acts. There's a lot to learn and glean from this passage. There are far-reaching applications, so let's dig in and see what we learn.

1. Pressure

We are picking up the story-line of Acts after some defining moments in the life of the church. After we read about the generosity of the church culture, we read about the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter five. Their deceptive gift and their pretense led to God striking them dead. Take note that the early church—and every church—has sin issues in its midst. Sometimes they become evident. It's not worse when they are revealed. It's actually a gift, because they are always there.

Along with this, the church was still growing and suffering. Acts 5:14 says “. . . more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.” And along with this blessing came persecution. Acts 5:17-41 states that the religious leaders arrested the apostles. They were delivered out of prison, kept preaching, and they were arrested again. This time they were brought before the council, warned not to preach in the name of Jesus, and were beaten.

But listen to what Acts 5:41-42 says:

⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. ⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus (Acts 5:41–42).

This is an amazing moment of ministry! Sin is surfacing. Multitudes are being converted. Persecution is happening. And the gospel is still advancing. There is a frontal attack on the church, but it is not working. The external pressure was not penetrating the body of Christ.

But another issue emerges. As is always the case, the church faces pressures from the outside but also pressures from the inside. Take note of this. Multiplication creates external pressure and internal pressure. If you are going to be part of the advance of the gospel, you simply have to embrace this.

In Acts 6:1 we see that the church continues to grow. Take note that it says, “when the disciples were increasing in number.” This is significant, not only because of growth dynamic, but also because it is the first time in Acts that the word disciples is used for believers.¹ The definition of disciple is now expanding.

However, in the midst of this great moment of multiplication, a major issue develops. Like most church body issues, it is complicated and layered.

¹ 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 (Acts 6:1).

What’s happening here? Let me explain. Apparently, an important part of the early church ministry involved caring for destitute widows. There was some kind of daily distribution of food to assist these vulnerable women. Now previously, in Acts 4:34, we read that “there was not a needy person among them.” It was a commentary on their generosity.

However, as multiplication took place, a problem emerged. The “Hellenist widows” were being neglected. Who were Hellenists? They were Jewish Christians who were from Greek-speaking areas of the Roman Empire. They lived in Jerusalem, and they were Jewish. But they were “outsider” Jews. They were country-bumpkin Jews. Or if you are a fan of old television, get the Beverly Hillbillies in your head. Every ethnic group has a potential pecking order to it.

The problem may have been as simple as the sheer size and scale of the need. More people meant more opportunity for misses. Or the issue could have arisen because of something as simple as a language barrier. Or maybe there were some cultural barriers in play that made things complicated. Or it may have been that there really was a racial disdain in play. We don’t know.

¹ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 229.

But whatever the cause, the issue was loaded because of the ethnic issues. Luke could have simply said, "some widows were neglected." But he helps us understand the complicated nature of this potential conflict. The food distribution issue had a racial layer to it.

Now, this text is not about racial reconciliation, but can we just stop and appreciate what Luke does here? He simply identifies that a food distribution problem was loaded with a racial issue. He doesn't make it all about food or all about ethnicity. It's about both. To limit it to one or the other would not be accurate or helpful. But this makes the situation filled with pressure.

Multiplication will create pressure points. The price of more impact is navigating our way through the challenges of those pressures. More people equals more problems. More opportunities mean more risk. More influence means more exposure. This is true at every level of life and ministry. If you are single and you live with a roommate, adding another person makes things exponentially more complicated. If you are a parent, having a third child is not like two and not like one. You have to play zone defense. A church of 2,500 in 2008 is not the same church as one of 4,308 in 2018 with three (soon to be four!) congregations. Our last membership class was 40 percent non-white. That is awesome! And it creates new challenges.

Every time we launch a new congregation, there is pressure. Every time a Small Group multiplies, it creates pressure. And part of that pressure is simply the fact that things are going to happen. Gaps are going to be created. People's needs aren't going to be met. There are some people who are going to feel hurt, even neglected. And we'll have to face down some issues that feel like they could blow up in our face.

Just mark it down somewhere: For some people, their vision of the ideal "church" is no pressure, no conflict, no uncertainty, no gaps, no fear, no sin being revealed, no communication breakdown, no risk, and no racial tension. But that is not what is happening in the early church. Multiplication becomes uncomfortable.

So, if as we multiply you feel some pressure, just know you are right where you need to be. Everything's fine. We're just multiplying.

2. Priorities

The pressure of multiplying creates an opportunity for clarification. The reason is that the issue that emerged in 6:1 has to be addressed. However, the temptation would be for the ministry to direct all its energies at the problem. In so doing, it can begin to become unbalanced or overly reactionary.

People are upset. A problem has emerged. But this is a moment for wisdom as it relates to priorities. Notice what Acts 6:2 and Acts 6:4 say:

² 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 (Acts 6:2).

⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word (Acts 6:4).

The “twelve” attempt to find a solution to this problem without creating an even bigger problem. While they realized that the issue with the Hellenists was really important, they refused to allow it to diminish the central function of the church’s mission: gospel proclamation. They knew that if the prioritization of the Word and prayer were neglected, then the entire ministry of the church would fail. Hungry, neglected widows is a problem. But it can’t be fixed by gutting the essentials. They had to figure out a way to do both.

Now sometimes the disciples get a bad “rap” for the statement “it is not right that we should give up preaching . . . to serve tables.” It almost sounds if they were insensitive or unwilling to serve. But I don’t think that is the case.

We need to place more emphasis on “give up preaching.” The challenge is a familiar one for any pastor. A problem emerges in the church that is personal, hurtful, and emotional. It is likely that the emotions of the moment were high and that people were saying, “If the apostles care, they will stop spending so much time preaching and start caring our people. This widow isn’t getting food. You need to spend as much energy caring for hungry people as you do preaching.”

Now, this is not to say that the issue should be ignored. No way! But this familiar situation presents an opportunity for the fear of man, the emotions of people, and the need to “fix a problem” to cause a deterioration of the church. The apostles had to care, and this problem had to be solved, but not by trading preaching for food distribution.

The apostles reminded the people about the priority of prayer and the ministry of the Word. Why are these important? Well, as we learned in week two of our series, prayer is the fuel for gospel ministry. It is the means by which the Holy Spirit helps us, empowers us, and works in us. And as we learned in week three, the gospel spreads through words. So, these two ingredients are essential to the life of the church. Without prayer and the Word, the church simply isn’t on mission. They are core.

I must tell you that any person in ministry knows this tension. It is hard to write sermons or spend time in prayer when there are controversies swirling or when people have expectations that are unmet. Throw words like “widows” or “race” into the mix, and it takes a deep commitment to keep the main thing the main thing. But this isn’t just true for pastors; this is true for you as well.

The pressures of life, the challenges with your family or career, and the busyness of your schedule all conspire to eat away at your commitment to saturate your soul with God or to talk about the gospel with other people. Sometimes we can be so busy meeting needs that we neglect prayer and the ministry of the Word.

A friend mine, Daniel Henderson, says “the power of ‘no’ is in a stronger ‘yes.’” Multiplication will create a pressure that not only reveals who we really are but also the things to which we are really committed. Pressure serves to clarify priorities. One way or another, your priorities become clear. The question is whether or not those priorities fit with Scriptural priorities. Multiplication reveals and strengthens priorities.

3. People

What is the solution to this problem? How did the apostles address the legitimate concerns of the people without allowing them to sidetrack the entire ministry?

We discover that they engaged all the disciples. They helped the entire assembly understand that this was not just a problem for “leadership” but that this was something they needed to solve together. Second, they sought the church’s help in identifying capable people who could help find a solution to this important issue.

³ *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 (Acts 6:3).*

They sought godly, Spirit-filled, reputable, and wise leaders who could handle this problem. They believed (and this is very important) that God had already supplied the leaders among them to solve the problems in the church. They just needed to identify them. The problem was actually an opportunity for new leaders to be appointed.

In verse 5 we see the list. It is interesting that every person listed has a Greek name, so it appears they selected Hellenists to solve the Hellenist problem. They commissioned them to this work. This is genius! They relied on the people who understood their culture to help them solve the issue, and the people who could have been the most offended chose to join the solution-oriented ranks. These seven Hellenists joined ranks to meet the need with the blessing and authority of the apostles.

Now some people think this is an early form of a Deacon ministry. That’s probably correct, although it is not an official church office at this point in the church’s development. The point is not the position or the office, but the engagement of people.

There is a temptation, when pressure comes because of multiplication, for people to misunderstand, be offended, make assumptions, draw conclusions, and then have a spirit of “they need to get in here and solve this.” Now the leaders needed to solve this problem, but they needed help doing it. The issue had to be solved through other people.

Do you realize how important these seven men were? By stepping up, they took a very volatile issue, and they not only solved it, they kept the apostles focused on the critical ministry of the church. I’m here to tell you that this sermon would not have happened today without our staff doing their jobs very, very well. The proclamation of the Word would not take place on Sunday without hundreds of people doing their part to meet the needs of people. Every part of what this church does is critical because without those things happening, prayer and the Word are easy to neglect.

But there’s another application here for us. Let me give you one tangible example. Tracy and Jody Brown came to College Park in 2014 after a THINK conference. They both are presently serving in children’s ministry, Tracy as a teacher, and Jody a small group leader for our Next Generations Ministry. Every week they teach and facilitate the Word being spoken into our children’s lives. They live in Greenwood.

Tracy and Jody have committed to be among those who are going to be sent out from our church. We are thrilled because there are more people to reach in Greenwood and because it's where they live. While they make the drive every Sunday, it's a barrier for their neighbors. So, they are going to help start the Greenwood congregation this year. But we're sad as well because when they do, there will be a need. And so the question is: Who has God already called to teach our Next Generations? Who will fill the gap?

If the need takes too long to be filled, here's what will happen. Our staff will spend multiple meetings (hours) thinking, strategizing, talking, and praying about how we are going to fill those holes. We'll engage other leaders. We'll ask them to help us. We'll talk about the value of a "pulpit announcement" and other ways to spread the news.

If the need continues, some will start to question if we are moving too fast with Greenwood. Maybe we are? So that will result in a conversation with our Elders about timing, pacing, etc.--all of which we are happy to do if that is what God calls us to do and is what is needed. But meanwhile, we'll have to fight against the temptation to spend more time trying to recruit people to solve a problem than we are spending time in prayer, the Word, and trying to reach people for the gospel.

What's the solution? Ideally, it would be such that people so understand the connection between multiplication and the Browns' leaving that they say, "I'm in. Let me help." But even more, it would be that we would be a church that would say, "We don't want our pastors being distracted by this. Let's solve it by being involved."

This conversation is why we started the Next Door Mission. It is why we have Brookside. It is why we are passionate about global missions. If we want the gospel to advance, we have to multiply. We have to multiply disciples. Small Groups have to multiply. Adult Bible Groups need to multiply. Churches need to multiply. The word spreads through multiplication.

And the better we are at multiplication, the more important it is for us to be committed to our priorities and for people to step up and say, "I'm in."

4. Power

Finally, we see the effect. The pressure, prioritization, and people all converge for even more power for multiplication. Look at verse 7:

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 (Acts 6:7).

Notice that Luke uses the phrase "the word of God increased." He says it this way to reinforce the church's mission and the means by which it happened. The fruit of multiplication is seeing the Word of God increased. More people came to understand the message of the gospel.

But there's more here. The number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, so the church continued to grow. They didn't have to compromise their message or their priorities. They stayed on

mission, and the Lord gave them more fruit. More isn't always better. But if it means more people coming to faith in Jesus, that surely is better!

There's one last thing here to note. Verse seven also says that a great man of the priests became obedient to the faith. Realize that the priests were hostile to Christianity. The religious establishment was persecuting them. And there are some priests within the ranks of the greatest opposition who were becoming Christians.

This is why the religious leaders persecuted them. It is why Saul, before he was converted in Acts 8, would travel from city to city arresting people. These people were coming to faith in Jesus. It is a remarkable and miraculous transformation.

If the work of Jesus continues through the church and by multiplication, then we need to ask ourselves if we are willing to embrace the pressure of having the Word spread. We need to examine our priorities and resolve that we will not allow the ministry of the prayer and the Word to be neglected. We need to understand how every role in this ministry is connected to this common vision of multiplication. And it means that your church needs you to ask itself—"What is my role in this?"

Actually, let me say it this way: The city of Indianapolis, the neighbors in Brookside, and unreached people groups need you to ask yourself—"What is my role?"

Priorities are tested in the pressure of multiplication. Let's be a church that passes that test!

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