

## Acts 6:1-7

### I. Acts 29?

Back when we first began our series through the book of Acts, we titled it: “The Kingdom Comes.” By now, we know we could title it more descriptively: “The *Eschatological* Kingdom Comes.” This kingdom is the universal and everlasting rule and reign of God over a “new creation” in and through His Messiah. Thus far in Acts we’ve seen that this eschatological kingdom *has come already* in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the Son of David, to sit enthroned at God’s right hand. The resurrection of Jesus has already inaugurated the New Creation, and the ascension of Jesus (which is, in a sense, “one and the same” with His resurrection) has already inaugurated His messianic reign. We’ve seen that this eschatological kingdom has come already, and we’ve also seen that it *will come, one day*, when the King Himself returns (Acts 1:11; 3:21) and the last enemy (death) is destroyed and the new creation is consummated in a glorified people and a new heavens and a new earth. In the meantime, the kingdom *is coming, even now*, in Jesus’ *present* rule and reign.

When I say that the kingdom is coming “even now,” of course I mean today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, when Luke records the “coming” of the kingdom in Acts, we must see that there’s a chronologically limiting redemptive-historical focus. It’s true that there’s a secondary sense in which we might see Luke recording the beginning of a work that’s continuing until the present day and will continue until Christ returns. The names “Acts 29 Network,” “Acts29.org,” “Acts 29 Ministries,” and “Acts 29 Missions” reflect this idea. Since there are only 28 chapters in Acts, the concept of a 29<sup>th</sup> “chapter” is intended to point us to the ongoing work of the church by the power of the Holy Spirit and under the authority of Christ, the risen and reigning King. But there’s a serious problem with this idea of an “Acts 29.” Specifically, “Acts 29” obscures (and may even ignore) the redemptive-historical focus of Luke which necessarily limits his book to only the 28 chapters that he includes. In other words, for Luke the modern concept of a 29<sup>th</sup> chapter (even figuratively speaking) would have been something wholly foreign—even impossible. We see the reason for this in this longer description of the book of Acts.

Luke’s second volume is an account of “The acts of **God**, in **Jesus Christ** the King, by the power of the **Holy Spirit**, *through His apostles*—the apostles whom the King Himself *chose* (1:2), and to whom the King Himself *appeared* (1:3a), and to whom the King Himself *spoke* of all the things concerning the kingdom (1:3b), and who were *commissioned* by the King Himself to speak and to act in His name as His witnesses (1:2, 8b), and who were *empowered* by the King Himself to fulfill this commission in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the end of the earth (1:4-5, 8a).” Insofar as a 29<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts indicates a time when the apostles themselves are no longer living and working in the world, then this “29<sup>th</sup> chapter” can’t possibly be a true continuation of the book of Acts. Connected with this in the closest possible relation: Insofar as a 29<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts reflects the idea that the apostles themselves didn’t actually succeed in being Jesus’ witnesses “both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the end of the earth,” what this “29<sup>th</sup> chapter” implies is that Jesus didn’t accomplish through the apostles what He said that He would. In other words, the idea of an “Acts 29” implies that the apostles stopped short of fulfilling their commission—that they didn’t bring the gospel even to the end of the earth and that therefore it’s now our job to finish this work that they left

unfinished. A “contemporary life-lesson” approach to Acts 1:8 asks the question: “Where is our Jerusalem? Where is our Judea and Samaria? And how are we working to complete the task of taking the Gospel even to the end of the earth?” But these questions ignore the fact that the progression from Jerusalem to all Judea and Samaria to the end of the earth is a redemptive-historical progression (cf. Rom. 1:16; 2:9), which means that in the context of Acts there are no modern-day counterparts to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. And, of course, this also means that in the context of Acts, the apostolic task of being Jesus’ witnesses “even to the end of the earth” must already have been completed. Let’s trace, now, how this progression unfolds in Acts.

## **II. Acts: A complete story of a completed mission in 28 chapters**

In the first five chapters of Acts, we’ve never left Jerusalem. In fact, there’s a sense in which we’ve hardly left the temple. After Jesus ascended into heaven, the apostles returned to **Jerusalem** and went up to the upper room where they were staying (1:12-13). Ten days later, on the day of Pentecost, the apostles preached to all the Jews living in **Jerusalem** (2:5). Luke tells us in chapter three that “Peter and John were going up to the **temple** [in Jerusalem]” (3:1; cf. 2:46) and in chapter five that “at the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were happening among the people, and they were all with one accord in **Solomon’s Portico**” (5:12). Later in chapter five, Luke tells us that “the multitude from the cities in the vicinity of **Jerusalem** were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed” (5:16). At the end of chapter five, Luke tells us that “every day, in the **temple** and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ” (5:42; cf. 5:20). To this point, the apostolic witness has been carried out exclusively among the Jews in Jerusalem. Now we come to the opening verses of chapter six.

- Acts 6:1 — Now in those days, while the disciples were multiplying [redemptive-historical fulfillment; the seed of Abraham], there was grumbling from the Hellenists [the Greek-speaking Jews from the Dispersion] directed toward the Hebrews [the Aramaic-speaking Jews native to Palestine], because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving [*diakonia*] [of food].

Does Luke include this account here to warn against the dangers of grumbling, on the one hand, and/or of discrimination, on the other hand? All the evidence argues against this. Neither the grumbling, nor the supposed discrimination is ever rebuked or given any further notice at all in the rest of the passage. The solution to the problem focuses not on any repentance or change of heart or any disciplinary action, but only on the appointment of seven men to oversee the daily distribution of food.

- Acts 6:2-4 — So the twelve summoned the multitude [redemptive-historical fulfillment] of the disciples and said, “It is not pleasing [to God] for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve [*diakoneo*] tables. Therefore, brothers, select seven men from among you who are well-attested, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this need. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the service [*diakonia*] of the word.”

Does Luke include this account to explain the origin of the church office of deacon? Once again, all the evidence argues against this. First, this would be wholly out of keeping with Luke's purpose in the rest of the book of Acts. This isn't the kind of thing Luke does. Second, not only is the word for deacon (*diakonos*) never used in Acts 6, but the related words, *diakoneo* and *diakonia* are used both for the work of the "seven" ("serv[ing] tables") and for the work of the apostles ("service of the word"). In this sense, then, both the "seven" and the apostles must be called "deacons" in Acts 6. Third, there's no sign that the apostles were instituting an "office" of "deacon" to be held perpetually in all local churches in order to free elders to devote themselves to prayer and to the service of the word. Having said this, the principle at work here in Acts 6 is the same principle which explains the development/institution in the church of the office of "deacon." It's not inappropriate to glean from the principles in Acts 6 some lessons for the functioning of elders and deacons in the church. However, it is wrong to suppose that Luke included this account in order to provide us with these lessons or to give us the origin of the office of deacon. So why, then, has Luke included this passage? Luke continues in verses 5-6:

- Acts 6:5-6 — And this word pleased the whole multitude [redemptive-historical fulfillment], and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they stood before the apostles, and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

Again, there are principles at work, here, which have obvious implications for how elders and deacons are appointed in the church today. And yet, once again, it would be wrong to think that Luke included this account in order to provide us with these principles. What we need to see is how this passage (Acts 6:1-6) fits within the unfolding redemptive-historical narrative of Acts. And to see this, we don't have far to look.

Stephen and Philip are first on the list of those appointed by the apostles to oversee the daily distribution of food. And "as it happens," the rest of chapter 6, as well as chapters 7 and 8, are taken up entirely with a description of the activity of Stephen and Philip (no longer Peter). And yet the activity described is not serving tables, but rather doing "great wonders and signs" (6:8; 8:5-6) and preaching the Gospel (6:8-7:60; 8:4-40; cf. 21:8). As one person says: "The resulting picture looks less like the appointment of a committee for [one] particular task, and more like the release of a [new] cadre of [Spirit-filled] leaders to... open ended service" ([www.fuller.edu/next-faithful-step/resources/the-hellenistic-widows/](http://www.fuller.edu/next-faithful-step/resources/the-hellenistic-widows/)). This helps us to make even more sense of the apostles laying their hands on these seven men. Certainly, they were to oversee the important work of serving tables, but apparently they were also to be powerfully equipped—even as the apostles were—for the work of bearing faithful witness and testimony to Jesus. Are you seeing the significance of this in the context of Acts? What we have here is the appointment of leaders in the Jerusalem church in addition to the apostles by the apostolic laying on of hands. Furthermore, in contrast with the apostles (who were all "Hebrews"), six of these new leaders were almost certainly "Hellenists" (native Greek-speaking Jews who had relocated to Jerusalem)\* and one of them was a Greek-speaking Gentile convert to Judaism. It's through this

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\* They were appointed specifically to address a complaint from the Hellenistic Jews. All of their names are Greek. Three of these names have not been attested among Palestinian Jews (Schnabel). "Stephen's debate is with a Diaspora synagogue (6:9), Philip evangelizes beyond the Jewish community (8:5, 26, 40), and Nicanor is a Gentile

brief internal challenge in the Jerusalem church that God is preparing the way for a redemptive-historical expansion of the Church outward from Jerusalem. At the conclusion of this account, Luke says:

- Acts 6:7 — And the word of God kept on increasing [cf. Gen. 17:6; 26:22; 28:3; 35:11; 48:4; Exod. 1:7; 23:30; Lev. 26:9], and the number of the disciples continued to *multiply* [*plethyno*] *greatly* [redemptive-historical fulfillment] **in Jerusalem**, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

It's time, now, for that redemptive-historical expansion outward from Jerusalem to begin (and we might naturally assume that the priests who were becoming obedient to the faith will play an important part in this expansion; cf. Alexander). But what part will Stephen and Philip play in this? For all the prominence given to the Jerusalem temple in chapters 2-5, Stephen is the first one in Acts to highlight the inadequacy of the Jewish law and temple for salvation apart from their fulfillment in Christ (6:13-14; 7:48-53)—and so also the first martyr for the faith. After recounting the stoning of Stephen, Luke says:

- Acts 8:1 — [O]n that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem [the only church there was at the time], and they were all scattered throughout the regions of **Judea** and **Samaria**, except the apostles.

Specifically, Luke says:

- Acts 8:5 — Now Philip went down to the city of **Samaria** and began preaching Christ to them.

And then:

- Acts 8:14-17 — [W]hen the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, **they sent them Peter and John**, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For He had not yet fallen upon any of them; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

This isn't your everyday story of missionary endeavor. This is a story of missionary endeavor full of redemptive-historical significance—which explains the apostles laying their hands on the Samaritan believers so that they might receive the Holy Spirit. The point isn't that these baptized Samaritan believers didn't initially have the Spirit at all. The point is rather that the external miraculous sign of the Spirit's indwelling (cf. speaking in tongues; 2:4, 11; 10:46; 19:6) had not previously come upon them as it had initially come upon the Jews in Jerusalem. Now that it has, the redemptive-historical spread of the Gospel to the Samaritans is authenticated. We read in verse 25 of Acts 8:

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convert to Judaism from Antioch (6:5)" (<https://www.fuller.edu/next-faithful-step/resources/the-hellenistic-widows/>).

- Acts 8:25 — So, when [Peter and John] had solemnly borne witness and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem, and were proclaiming the gospel **to many villages of the Samaritans**.

Meanwhile, Philip proclaims the gospel to an Ethiopian court official (a Gentile) returning home after worshiping in Jerusalem (8:26-39), after which:

- Acts 8:40 — Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through [travelling north along the Mediterranean coastline] he kept proclaiming the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

It's the apostolic appointment of the Hellenistic (native Greek-speaking) Jews, Stephen and Philip, as leaders in the church that prepared the way for the redemptive-historical expansion of the church from Jerusalem outward to all of Judea and even to Samaria. This is what explains Luke's inclusion of the appointment of the seven here in Acts chapter six. It's a part of his theological, redemptive-historical narrative.

So what comes after Samaria? In chapter 9, Luke tells the story of Paul's conversion and appointment as an Apostle—the Paul of whom Jesus said to Ananias:

- Acts 9:15 (cf. Gal. 1:16; 2:7, 9; Acts 22:21) — “[H]e is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name **before the Gentiles and kings** and the sons of Israel.”

But before we can come to Paul's preaching to the Gentiles there are other things that have to happen to prepare the way. In Acts 9 we see Paul proclaiming Jesus to the Jews in the synagogues at Damascus (Syria; 9:1-2, 19-20), and then Luke tells us:

- Acts 9:31 — So the church throughout all **Judea** and **Galilee** and **Samaria** was having peace, being built up. And going on in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it continued to **multiply [plethyno; redemptive-historical fulfillment/expansion]**.

In the rest of chapter 9 and all of chapter 10, Luke returns to Peter as he travels from Jerusalem to Lydda to Joppa, and finally to Caesarea where he proclaims the Gospel to a Gentile Centurian named Cornelius (9:32-10:48). This time, rather than believing and being baptized and *then* speaking in tongues as in the case of the Samaritans, Cornelius and his household believed and *immediately* spoke in tongues and *then* were baptized. This speaking in tongues is the outward, miraculous sign of the redemptive-historical expansion of that original Pentecost in chapter two—now even to the Gentiles (10:47; 11:15-17; certainly the Gentile Ethiopian eunuch had also received the Spirit, though there's no evidence that he spoke in tongues). Again, this isn't your everyday story of missionary endeavor. This is a story of missionary endeavor full of redemptive-historical significance (cf. 10:1-23; 11:1-18). When the Jewish believers in Jerusalem had listened to Peter's account of what happened in Caesarea, they responded:

- Acts 11:18 — “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also [as Gentiles and not as proselytes to Judaism] the repentance that leads to life.”

The next thing we read is this:

- Acts 11:19–20 — So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene [Hellenistic Jews], who came to Antioch [in Syria] and began speaking to the Greeks also, proclaiming the good news of the Lord Jesus.

When the Jerusalem church heard about the believers in Antioch, they sent Barnabas to them, who in turn went and found Paul and brought him to Antioch (11:22, 25-26). It was from this church in Antioch that Paul and Barnabas were sent out on the first major “missionary journey” to Cyprus, Pamphylia, Galatia, Cilicia, and then back home to Syria (Acts 13-14). And it was on this first missionary journey that Paul and Barnabas said to the unbelieving Jews in Pisidian Antioch:

- Acts 13:46–48 — “It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first. Since you reject it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, ‘I have placed you as a light **for the Gentiles**, that you may bring salvation **to the end of the earth** [cf. 1:8].” And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

After this first missionary journey, we have the Jerusalem council (Acts 15), dealing again with the redemptive-historical significance of the incorporation of Gentiles (as Gentiles) into the new Israel. And then Luke recounts Paul’s 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journeys which reach even beyond Asia into Macedonia and Achaia (Acts 15:36-18:22; 18:23-21:17). In the last eight chapters of Acts (21-28), we see Paul the prisoner, testifying first in Jerusalem, and then, finally, in Rome.

### **III. From Jerusalem “even to the end of the earth”**

In the days of Jesus and the apostles, and from the redemptive-historical perspective that begins with Jerusalem, it was the city of Rome that represented the Gentile capital of “the whole world” and of “all the nations” and therefore also “the end of the earth.” This gives insight into what the Lord said to Paul when he was a prisoner in Jerusalem:

- Acts 23:11 — “Take courage; for as you have solemnly borne witness to My cause at **Jerusalem**, so you *must* bear witness at **Rome also**.”

Paul can conclude his letter, then, to the church *in Rome* (where the Apostle Peter ministered), with these words:

- Romans 16:25–27 — Now to Him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, **has been made known to all the**

**nations/Gentiles [*pas ho ethnos*]**, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in about AD 57 the gospel had already, in some sense, been made known to “all the nations.” Paul knew that this “universal” proclamation (understood in redemptive-historical terms) was a uniquely apostolic calling. He had already opened his letter to the church in Rome with these words:

- Romans 1:1, 3, 5 — Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, **called as an apostle**, having been set apart for the gospel of God... concerning His Son... **through whom we received grace and apostleship** for the obedience of faith among **all the Gentiles/nations [*pas ho ethnos*]** for the sake of His name...

Just two or three years after Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, he was himself in Rome under house arrest (AD 60; cf. Acts 28:30-31). It was at this time that he wrote his letter to the Colossians, opening with these words:

- Colossians 1:3–6, 23 — We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you, just as in **all the world [*pas ho kosmos*]** also it is constantly bearing fruit and multiplying, just as it has been doing in you also... if indeed you continue in the faith firmly grounded and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which you have heard, which was proclaimed in **all creation under heaven [*pas ktisis ho hypo ho ouranos*]**, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.

Six or seven years later, when Paul was again a prisoner in Rome, this time facing martyrdom, he could write:

- 2 Timothy 4:16–17 — At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me. May it not be counted against them. But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that **through me** the preaching might be **fulfilled**, and that **all the Gentiles/nations [*pas ho ethnos*]** might hear.

What had already been “fulfilled” when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in AD 57 was being even further fulfilled ten years later on the eve of Paul’s martyrdom in AD 67 (cf. Rom. 15:22-24). We know that the apostolic commission to bear witness to Jesus even to the end of the earth reached its final fulfillment prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. Jesus said:

- Matthew 24:14, 34 — “[T]his gospel of the kingdom shall be proclaimed in **the whole world [*ho holos oikoumene*]** as a witness to **all the nations [*pas ho ethnos*]**, and then the end will come [signaled by the destruction of Jerusalem]... Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.”

In Revelation 5, Jesus is “the Lamb... [who was] slain” and who has “purchased for God with [His] blood people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9; cf. 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). One commentator writes:

“It is fruitless to attempt a distinction between these terms as ethnic, linguistic, political, and so on. The Seer is stressing the universal nature of the church and for this purpose piles up phrases for their rhetorical impact. In contrast with the exclusivism of Judaism that prided itself on having been chosen out from among the nations, the church was genuinely ecumenical, recognizing no national, political, cultural, or racial boundaries” (Mounce; cf. Kistemaker).

## **Conclusion**

When Luke concludes the book of Acts with Paul under house arrest in Rome, “welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, unhindered” (28:30-31), we’re not meant to feel like we’re left hanging with the story “unfinished” (as do those who suggest that the original ending of Acts has been lost or even those who propose that it still remains for us to complete the apostolic mission that was only begun in Acts). Instead, we’re meant to see in these closing words of Acts the awesome redemptive-historical mission that Jesus gave to the apostles in the opening chapter (1:8) now completed. We remember that while Paul may be under house arrest, “the word of God has not been chained” (2 Tim. 2:9). What this means is that the return of Christ is now “imminent”—and has been ever since the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. No longer is our Lord’s return conditional upon reaching “to the end of the earth” with the Gospel because the redemptive-historical “end of the earth” has already been reached. Already, in redemptive-historical terms, “this gospel of the kingdom” has been “proclaimed “in all the world,” “in all creation under heaven,” and “to all the nations.” Already, a people has been gathered in from “every tribe and tongue and people and nation,” which is to say that the church is—already—the universal church. This is the completed story that Acts tells.

It remains for us, then, to continue building upon this completed apostolic mission until the day that Christ returns. There’s a healthy “triumphalism” here. On the one hand, the return of Christ is imminent, no longer being contingent upon any marker that we can identify or measure. On the other hand, we know that Jesus will not return until the full number of the elect (which number only God knows) has been gathered in (cf. 2 Pet. 3:3-9). On the one hand, the apostolic task has already been completed and the Gospel already proclaimed to the redemptive-historical “end of the earth.” On the other hand, we know that the full number of God’s elect has not yet been gathered in—because the King has not yet returned. We rejoice, then, to know that His coming is imminent even as we work to hasten that coming by building upon the completed mission of the Apostles—faithfully preaching, *today*, that same apostolic gospel that’s powerful to save, both now and also in that final day (cf. 2 Tim. 2:10; Titus 1:1; Acts 18:9-11).