

ACTS

Chapter 6

Seven Chosen to Serve

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.

6:1-7 As noted in the early chapters of Acts, the Christians were devoted to caring for each other, as wealthier Christians are sharing their resources with the less fortunate. Even this was not without difficulty as *goggusmos* indicates a quarrel, disagreement, complaint, or tension that came to a head over the proper daily allocation, *hē diakonia*, service, of the offerings to the widows. The apostles were determined not to let this service of the Church in caring for temporary physical needs interfere with their primary concern of preaching the Word for the eternal salvation of souls. The seven are chosen by the people and set apart for service. We know little about them, with the exception of Stephen and Philip. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 18, Part 2)

6:1 *disciples were increasing in numbers.* A considerable length of time may have transpired since the end of ch. 5. The church continued to grow (see 5:14), but this gave rise to inevitable problems, both from within (6:1–7) and from without (6:8–7:60). At this stage of its development, the church was entirely Jewish in its composition. However, there were two groups of Jews within the fellowship: 1. *Grecian Jews.* Hellenists—Those born in lands other than Palestine who spoke the Greek language and were more Grecian than Hebraic in their attitudes and outlook. 2. *Hebraic Jews.* Those who spoke the Aramaic and/or Hebrew language(s) of Palestine and preserved Jewish culture and customs. – Given the number of times such an increase in believers has been referred to since Pentecost, very likely the congregation by now numbered somewhere between 20 and 25 thousand. Twenty-five thousand members and 12 pastors! (CSB)

disciples – Here for the first time Luke uses the beautiful word “disciple” when writing about the increase in believers. “Disciple may mean either someone who is learning or under instruction, or it may mean someone who has already learned the Gospel and is actively following Jesus in daily life. Both meanings of that word were undoubtedly in Luke’s mind as he wrote. There were many who were still under instruction, daily sitting and learning more and more about their new Master. Such teaching inevitably led to the mature meaning – those who have become like their Master and were following in His footsteps. (CSB)

First of 25 occurrences of this term in Acts; emphasizes personal adherence to Christ. (TLSB)

Hebrews. Jews resident in Jerusalem, speaking Aram as their primary (and perhaps only) language; generally resistant to Hellenistic culture. (TLSB)

daily distribution. Help was needed by widows who had no one to care for them and so became the church's responsibility (cf. 4:35; 11:28–29; see also 1Ti 5:3–16). (CSB)

Greek diakonia, “service,” “ministry.” The social service described in 4:34-35 remained a striking feature of the Jerusalem Church and was attractive to outsiders. It benefited especially widows, who were often subject to dire hardship. Cultural factionalism had broken out, threatening the Church's unity described in the two previous summaries (2:42-47; 4:32-35). (TLSB)

The Jews of Jerusalem had developed a system for distributing food money to widows, especially those from other lands. The Christian community set a similar arrangement, funded by the gifts of people like Barnabas. There is no reason to think that there was any malice in the neglect of the Grecian widows. Language barriers and differences in social customs would contribute to their being overlooked. A new resident would not have the circle of acquaintances that the native enjoyed, either.

6:2-6 Example of a local church council; this burning issue affected only the local church of Jerusalem. Luther: “The diaconate is the ministry, not of reading the Gospel or the Epistle, as is the present (medieval) practice, but of distributing the church's aid to the poor” (AE 36:116). (TLSB)

6:2 *the Twelve.* At this early stage, the apostles were responsible for church life in general, including the ministry of the word of God and the care of the needy. (CSB)

number of disciples - The sense of plethos here is that of a deliberative body rather than a loose assemblage. Luke may even be thinking of a representative group rather than the entire (by his reckoning now quite large) community of believers. For all the prophetic authority of the Twelve, it is striking that on such critical decisions the discernment of the community is invited. (Sacra)

tables. The early church was concerned about a spiritual ministry (“word of God” and “prayer”; see v. 4) and a material ministry (“wait on tables”). (CSB)

The verb kataleiro is strong: to “leave behind,” or “forsake.” The pressures of community growth and the needs of the poor outstrip the administrative capability of the Twelve; a distribution of roles is required. The issue is not a moral one but rather of what is “fitting” or “appropriate.” (Sacra)

This expression could well be rendered “to see to meals.” They were not claiming that the work of seeing to meals for widows was beneath them. It would be a mistake to think that the apostles thought that waiting on tables was “unspiritual” work. The ministry of the Word of God and waiting on tables are both spiritual when they are done by spiritual persons. That is true of every God-pleasing occupation. Service done for Jesus' sake, done as to the Lord is spiritual service. But the particular service to which the Lord had called the Twelve was to proclaim the word. (PBC)

The works of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, do not differ at all in the eyes of God from the works of the rustic toiling in the field or the woman who is taking care of her household; for all works are measured before Him by faith alone.... Nay, it often happens that the domestic and menial work of a maidservant or manservant is more pleasing to God than all the fasting and works of a monk or a priest, because the latter are done without faith. (What Luther Says – Monasticism page 971 & LW on Gen. 18:9)

6:3 *pick...hoose seven men.* † The church elected them (v. 5), and the apostles commissioned them (v. 6). In this way they were appointed to their work. (CSB)

See the qualifications for deacons in 1 Tim. 3:1-13. (TLSB)

full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Both spiritual and practical aptitudes. (TLSB)

appoint to this duty - The people chose the deacons; the apostles instituted their office. (TLSB)

6:4 Christ mandated to the apostles the ministry of prayer and the Word. Later, this apostolic ministry is passed on to the elders and overseers (14:23; 20:28). By instituting the separate office of deacon, the ministry of directing the practical affairs of the Church (especially relief of the poor) is entrusted to a different set of office bearers. Though Christ alone had authority to establish the apostolic ministry, the apostles could establish other offices according to the Church's needs (see list in Eph. 4:11). (TLSB)

Pastors should not occupy themselves with congregational business that takes them away from the public and private teaching of God's Word, from leading in worship and praying for those entrusted to their care. (PBC)

prayer - For the apostles in prayer, see 4:23-30, and now, before their laying of hands (6:6). The combination makes for a striking definition of ministry. (Sacra)

ministry of the word - Luke can use "word of God" for the entire mission (4:31; 6:2; 7; 8:14; 11:1; 12:24; 19:20), so the "service" here probably means more than simply preaching. (Sacra)

6:5 *They chose Stephen ... Nicolas.* It is significant that all seven of the men chosen had Greek names. The murmuring had come from the Greek-speaking segment of the church; so those elected to care for the work came from their number so as to represent their interests fairly. Only Stephen and Philip of the Seven receive further notice (Stephen, 6:8-7:60; Philip, 8:5-40; 21:8-9). (CSB)

The seven men for the task were not to be chosen on the basis of availability or popularity or to "get them active in the church." They were to be men recognized as spiritual and practical, men known to have good supply of sanctified common sense.

Full of faith and the Holy Spirit - Stephen's spiritual gifts anticipate his confrontation with the authorities at Jerusalem (Chapter 7). (TLSB)

The deacons' Greek names suggest that they were likely Hellenists, though some Judeans also had Greek names. (TLSB)

proselyte of Antioch. It is significant that a proselyte was included in the number and that Luke points out his place of origin as Antioch, the city to which the gospel was soon to be taken and which was to become the “headquarters” for the forthcoming Gentile missionary effort. (CSB)

6:6 *prayed and laid their hands on them.* Laying on of hands was used in the OT period to confer blessing (Ge 48:13–20), to transfer guilt from sinner to sacrifice (Lev 1:4) and to commission a person for a new responsibility (Nu 27:23). In the NT period, laying on of hands was observed in healing (28:8; Mk 1:41), blessing (Mk 10:16), ordaining or commissioning (Ac 6:6; 13:3; 1Ti 5:22) and imparting of spiritual gifts (Ac 8:17; 19:6; 1Ti 4:14; 2Ti 1:6). These seven men were appointed to responsibilities turned over to them by the Twelve. The Greek word used to describe their responsibility (“wait on”) is the verb from which the noun “deacon” comes. Later one reads of deacons in Php 1:1; 1Ti 3:8–13. The Greek noun for “deacon” can also be translated “minister” or “servant.” The men appointed on this occasion were simply called the Seven (21:8), just as the apostles were called the Twelve. It is disputed whether the Seven were the first deacons or were later replaced by deacons. (CSB)

Luther: “We are all equally priests, that is to say, we have the same power in respect to the Word and sacraments. However, no one may make use of this power except by the consent of the community or by the call of superior. (For what is the common property of all, no individual may arrogate to himself, unless he is called.) And therefore this ‘sacrament’ of ordination, if it is anything at all, is nothing else than a certain rite whereby one is called to the ministry of the church” (AE 36:116). (TLSB)

6:7-9 The Church now refocused, “the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied.” Even “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (v 7). Now the narrative turns to Stephen, one of the seven. *epoiei terata kai sēmeia megala*, “[he] was doing great wonders and signs.” At this, resistance begins from a synagogue, ultimately leading to his appearance before the council. The text skips vv 6:10–7:50 (with the exception of 7:2a). These words must be read in order to understand properly the context of Stephen’s martyrdom at the end of ch 7. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 18, Part 2)

6:7 One of a series of progress reports given periodically throughout the book of Acts (1:15; 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31). (CSB)

increased number of the disciples - More people received the apostolic message. (TLSB)

many became priests. Though involved by lineage and life service in the priestly observances of the old covenant, they accepted the preaching of the apostles, which proclaimed a sacrifice that made the old sacrifices unnecessary (Heb 8:13; 10:1–4, 11–14). (CSB)

Given the priests’ vested interest in the continuance of their careers at the temple, they may have been the most difficult to change. But God’s Word can bring faith to any heart. (TLSB)

became obedient to the faith. † Believed in the gospel. To believe is to obey God’s call, but faith also produces obedience (Eph 2:8–10; Jas 2:14–26). – This is another way of saying “believed the gospel” or “trusted in Christ.” (CSB)

6:1–7 The apostles deal with complaints about the relief of the Church’s poor, instituting the office of deacon. Church conflict can often be resolved for the benefit of the ministries, preaching, teaching, and physical care of God’s people. If your congregation is experiencing

conflict, take counsel and comfort from this passage. Also, rest your heart and confidence in the Lord, who sends His Spirit and heals His Church. • Lord, let love rule our life, and supply us with pastors and deacons for Your glory and for the good of Your flock. Amen. (TLSB)

Stephen is Seized

8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. 10 But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly instigated men who said, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” 12 And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, 13 and they set up false witnesses who said, “This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.” 15 And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

6:8-7:2a, 51-60 Although Acts 6:8 is the basic text, the sermon will treat the entire martyrdom narrative, which extends through Acts 7. Stephen was one of the seven deacons chosen to assist the apostles (Acts 6:1–7). The prime requisite for deacons was to be “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (v 3). They were to be men in whom the Holy Spirit had created the wisdom of knowing and trusting in the Savior. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 10, Part 1)

6:8 *full of grace and power* - Stephen was “full of God’s grace and power” (v 8). The Greek word *charitos* is translated “faith” in the AV. The NIV translation, “grace,” is better. However, we do not agree with Dr. Lenski, who writes: “This is not ‘*charis*’ in the sense of pardoning grace . . . but the special favor Dei that was connected with the ‘*dunamis*’ or power bestowed upon him . . . the ability to perform miracles” (R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of Acts* [Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1944] 249). “Full of grace” means that God’s love was upon and within him. (Concordia Pulpit Resources - Volume 10, Part 1)

This means that Stephen enjoyed special gifts in addition to the wisdom and faith which were noted at the time of his election as “deacon.” He was able to employ those gifts in doing great wonders and miraculous signs. (PBC)

The signs pointed to God’s grace and power, not only present in Stephen but available for all. They were invitations to hear the gospel message. (PBC)

great wonders and miraculous signs. Until now, Acts told of only the apostles working miracles (2:43; 3:4–8; 5:12). But now, after the laying on of the apostles’ hands, Stephen too is reported as working miraculous signs. Philip also will soon do the same (8:6). (CSB)

To this point we have heard of only the apostles doing great wonders and miraculous signs. Now one of the administrators was doing them as well. Later, we shall hear that Philip too performed such works. These men had faithfully used the gifts God gave them and carried out the responsibilities to which the church had elected them. God added more gifts and gave them further responsibilities. (PBC)

There is no sign that the power of the witness weakens as others begin to share what has been the work of the apostles, for Stephen shares qualities with God's most important messengers.

6:9 synagogue - The NT provides some of the earliest references to synagogues. Later, the Jerusalem Talmud numbered 480 synagogues in Jerusalem. The early Christians may have been regarded as their own synagogue. (TLSB)

Jews living in such places and others in the diaspora used the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT (the Septuagint), and even in Jerusalem they conducted their services and carried on their discussions of the Scriptures in Greek. (PBC)

Stephen was probably a member of the larger group of Grecian Jews himself. (PBC)

It is also possible that Saul was a member of such a synagogue, since his province was Cilicia and he was present at the trial and stoning of Stephen.

Freedmen. Luke describes Stephen's attackers as those who, like Stephen, were born and grew up in one of the countries listed in Acts 2 and had come back to Jerusalem to live. (CSB)

Jews killed their own too.

Greek transliteration of Latin, likely indicating Jew from Italy who had been freed from slavery. (TLSB)

Freedmen were former slaves who had earned or been granted their freedom. Many Jewish freedmen returned to the land of their fathers and would have been included among those people whom Luke calls "Grecian Jews." (PBC)

Cyrenians. The chief city in Libya and North Africa (see note on 2:10), halfway between Alexandria and Carthage. One of its population groups was Jewish (see 11:19–21). (CSB)

Recall Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus' cross. Alexandria was the capital of Egypt then, and there were so many Jews there that they enjoyed the privilege of conducting their own civil government, separately from the Gentile population. (PBC)

Alexandrians. Capital of Egypt and second only to Rome in the empire. Two out of five districts in Alexandria were Jewish. (CSB)

Cilicia. A Roman province in the southeast corner of Asia Minor adjoining (CSB)

Cilicia was the province in the southeastern corner of Asia Minor. Asia was what the Romans called their province in the westernmost part of Asia Minor. Its chief city was Ephesus. (PBC)

Syria. Tarsus, the birthplace of Paul, was one of its principal towns. (CSB)

Asia. A Roman province in the western part of Asia Minor. Ephesus, where Paul later ministered for a few years, was its capital. (CSB)

rose up and disputed. Since Saul was from Tarsus, this may have been the synagogue he attended, and he may have been among those who argued with Stephen. He was present when Stephen was stoned (7:58). (CSB)

Luke's overall point here is clearer than the specifics. He wants to show that Stephen is attacked without provocation by Diaspora Jews who frequent (one or more) synagogues within the city. (Sacra)

6:10 *they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit* – But try as hard as they could to back Stephen into a corner, they simply could not. Frustrated and angry, these men's minds became fertile ground for the Father of Lies (John 8:44), Satan. (CSB)

Cf v 3. Stephen received the gifts promised by his Lord (cf Lk 12:12). (TLSB)

Jesus had told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would instruct them when they came to trial (Luke 12:12), and also that he would give them “wisdom that none could oppose” (Luke 21:15). (Sacra)

The important point that Luke wants to make, is that the people who argued with Stephen could not successfully stand up against his wisdom. He spoke by the Spirit, and no one can successfully argue with God. (PBC)

6:11 *instigated men who said* – Determined to stop Stephen and bring him to trial, they stooped to the same tactic that Sanhedrin used at the trial of Jesus (Matt. 26:59-62) – the hiring of false witnesses. Only this time they were smarter than the Sanhedrin. They gave the false witnesses the words they were to use. (CSB)

blasphemous words against Moses and against God. Since Stephen declared that the worship of God was no longer to be restricted to the temple (7:48–49), his opponents twisted these words to trump up an accusation that Stephen was attacking the temple, the law, Moses and, ultimately, God. (CSB)

The form of the charges was an attempt to appeal to the two religious schools which were represented in the Sanhedrin. The Sadducees would regard a threat against the temple as especially repugnant and blasphemous, for their religious concerns focused on the temple and its services. The Pharisees would react most negatively to a change in “the customs of Moses,” for their religious concerns focused on the law of Moses and the many traditional regulations which had been added to it. (PBC)

Stephen may have declared how Christ fulfilled the Law, altering the people's relationship to the Law of Moses and the temple services (insights later associated especially with Paul). People feared that the Christians would despise worship at the temple. (TLSB)

6:13 *false witnesses.* Same strategy that led to Jesus' arrest and condemnation. Cf Mk 14:56–59. (TLSB)

speak words against this holy place...and law. Similar to the charges brought against Christ (see Mt 26:61). Stephen may have referred to Jesus' words as recorded in Jn 2:19, and the words may have been misunderstood or purposely misinterpreted (v. 14), as at the trial of Jesus. (CSB)

6:14 *heard him say* - Since the witnesses were false, we can assume that Stephen had not said these things. What he and the apostles had taught was that salvation is in Jesus Christ, not in the sacrifices or works of the law. Again, they taught that Jesus is the “place” where salvation is found, not in the temple. As we read his address before the Sanhedrin, it will be very clear that Stephen did not speak against Moses or God or the law or the temple. (PBC)

Oral law taught by the rabbis. (TLSB)

6:15 *face of an angel* – Probably a parallel to Moses’ shining face. – The Sanhedrin members gazed in astonishment. They were struck by the phenomenon – struck but not moved. Again, the blindness and unmoving stubbornness of unbelief. (CSB)

Stephen’s face likely shone with heavenly light, a sign of Christ’s indwelling and the nearness of God’s presence. (PBC)

6:8–15 Stephen is the new target of persecution. Synagogue leaders twist his words, accusing him of treason against Judaism. When persecution confronts you, be faithful to Jesus, whatever the consequences may be. Remember that He is always faithful to you and can deliver you. • Lord, may we, like Stephen, never falter when under attack for You. Amen. (TLSB)