



Book of Acts

Chapter 6

**Witness of Stephen, a deacon
The Appointment of Deacons;**

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Theme: The appointment of deacons; witness of Stephen, a deacon

Satan: Inward dissension is more effective than outward persecution...

Those with political power generally repressed complaining minorities; here the apostles hand the whole system over to the offended minority. This may thus be the first recorded instance of what we might today call “affirmative action.”¹

When we read the descriptions of the early church—the miracles, the sharing and generosity, the fellowship—we may wish we could have been a part of this “perfect” church. In reality, the early church had problems just as we do today. No church has ever been or will ever be perfect until Christ and his followers are united at his second coming. All churches have problems. If your church’s shortcomings distress you, ask yourself: “Would a perfect church allow me to be a member?” Then do what you can to make your church better. A church does not have to be perfect to be faithful.²

McGee Introduction: In this chapter we see the further result of the defection that was in the church. We first saw that defection in the case of Ananias and Sapphira. They were believers who were saved, but they could not remain in the early church with that lie in their lives.

Now the defection we see in this chapter led to the selection of deacons. The chapter continues with the account of one of those deacons, Stephen. He was framed, arrested, and tried.³

ESV: 6:1–7 Seven Chosen to Serve the Hellenist Widows. The growth of the church created problems when a number of Hellenistic (i.e., Greek-speaking) Jews responded to the gospel. The resulting language barrier led to the neglect of some needy widows, and the apostles called upon the Greek-speaking community to choose leaders to meet the need.

Acts 6:1

And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.

“Greeks” - Hellenistic Jews. Traditional rivalry between Palestinian Jews (Hebrews, Jewish Jews) and Hellenists.

The world outside of Palestine spoke Greek. It was for this reason that 285 years before Christ was born that the Jewish establishment empaneled 70 scholars in Alexandria, a major city and a major Jewish center, to translate what we call the Old Testament, into

¹ Bible Background Commentary: New Testament

² Life Application Notes

³ McGee, J. V. (1997, c1981). *Thru the Bible commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.) (4:534). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Greek. This is called the Septuagint version (meaning 70 scholars). This took place from 285 to 270 B.C.

A Jew in those days spoke Greek, one might learn Hebrew to be able to participate in the local synagogue. Israel did not speak Hebrew after the Babylonian captivity, they spoke Chaldean Aramaic. Hebrew was reestablished in 1948.

The Hellenistic Jews were Jews born outside Israel which spoke Greek, they were still Jewish, but looked down upon by the native-born Jews.

[murmuring] Greek: *gongusmos* (GSN-1112), here; John 7:12; Phil. 2:14; 1 Peter 4:9. First murmuring in the church (Luke 5:30). If they had continued without having "all things common" this trouble would not have developed. However, without a doubt something else would have come up eventually, for no multitude can long continue without strife of some kind. Community of goods never was practical or an ordinance of the gospel.

Spurgeon: Perhaps, being strangers, they were not well known, and so were overlooked; we have no reason to believe that the neglect was intentional. Mistakes will occur, and if not rectified they may create ill will and division.

Clarke: A murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews—Those who are here termed Grecians, or Hellenists, were Jews who sojourned now at Jerusalem, but lived in countries where the Greek language was spoken, and probably in general knew no other. They are distinguished here from those called Hebrews, by which we are to understand native Jews, who spoke what was then termed the Hebrew language, a sort of Chaldaio-Syriac.

The cause of the murmuring mentioned here seems to have been this: When all the disciples had put their property into a common stock, it was intended that out of it each should have his quantum of supply. The foreign or Hellenistic Jews began to be jealous, that their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations, that they either had not the proportion, or were not duly served; the Palestine Jews being partial to those of their own country. This shows that the community of goods could never have been designed to become general. Indeed, it was no ordinance of God; and, in any state of society, must be in general impracticable. The apostles, hearing of this murmuring, came to the resolution mentioned below.⁴

[Grecians] Greek-speaking Jews of the dispersion who sojourned at Jerusalem but who had lived in various countries where Greek was spoken.

[Hebrews] Native Jews who spoke Hebrew (Acts 21:40; Acts 22:2).

Was multiplied. By the accession of the three thousand on the day of Pentecost, and of those who were subsequently added, Acts 4:4, 5:14.

⁴ Adam Clarke's Commentary on the New Testament

[ministration] *diakonia*, Greek 1248, *dee-ak-on-ee'-ah*; from Greek 1249 (*diakonos*); *attendance* (as a servant, etc.); figurative (eleemosynary) *aid*, (official) *service* (especially of the Christian teacher, or technical of the *diaconate*) :- (ad-) minister (-ing, -tration, -try), office, relief, service (-ing).

[daily ministration] The relief of Acts 2:44-45.

Barnes: In the daily ministration. In the daily distribution which was made for their wants. Comp. Acts 4:35. The property was contributed doubtless with an understanding that it should be *equally* and justly distributed to all classes of Christians that had need. It is clear from the Epistles that widows were objects of special attention in the primitive church, and that the first Christians regarded it as a matter of indispensable obligation to provide for their wants, 1 Timothy 5:3,9,10,16, James 1:27.

Barnes: In those days, The first part of this chapter contains an account of the appointment of *deacons*. It may be asked, perhaps, why the apostles did not appoint these officers at the first organization of the church? To this question we may reply, that it was better to defer the appointment until an occasion should occur when it should appear to be manifestly necessary and proper. When the church was small, its alms could be distributed by the apostles themselves without difficulty; but when it was greatly increased in when its charities would be multiplied, and when the distribution might give rise to contentions, it was necessary that this matter should be entrusted to the hands of *laymen*, and that the *ministry* should be freed from all embarrassment, and all suspicions of dishonesty and unfairness in regard to pecuniary matters. It has never been found to be wise that the temporal affairs of the church should be entrusted in any considerable degree to the clergy; and they should be freed from such sources of difficulty and embarrassment.⁵

Barnes: Of the Grecians. There has been much diversity of opinion in regard to these persons, whether they were Jews that had lived among the Gentiles, and who spoke the Greek language, or whether they were proselytes from the Gentiles. The former is probably the correct opinion. The word here used is not that which is usually employed to designate the inhabitants of Greece, but it properly denotes those who *imitate* the customs and habits of the Greeks, who use the Greek language, etc. In the time when the gospel was first preached, there were two classes of Jews- those who remained in Palestine, who used the Hebrew language, etc., and who were appropriately called *Hebrews*; and those who were scattered among the Gentiles, who spoke the Greek language, and who used, in their synagogues, the Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. These were called *Hellenists*, or, as it is in our translation, *Grecians*. John 7:36. These were doubtless the persons mentioned here-not those who were proselyted from Gentiles, but those who were not natives of Judea, who had come up to Jerusalem to attend the great festivals of the Jews.

See Acts 2:5,9-11. Dissensions would be very likely to arise between these two classes of persons. The Jews of Palestine would pride themselves much on the fact that they

⁵ Barnes' Notes on the New Testament

dwelt in the land of the patriarchs, and the land of promise; that they used the language which their fathers spoke, and in which the oracles of God were given; and that they were constantly near the temple, and regularly engaged in its solemnities. On the other hand, the Jews from other parts of the world would be suspicious, jealous, and envious of their brethren, and would be likely to charge them with partiality, or of taking advantage in their intercourse with them. These occasions of strife would not be destroyed by their conversion to Christianity, and one of them is furnished on this occasion.

Bible Background Commentary (BBC): Some scholars think that the “Hellenists” (NRSV) here are simply Greek-speaking Palestinian Jews, but most Jews in Palestine were bilingual, and Greek was probably the first language for most Jerusalemites. The more likely proposal is that this text refers to Diaspora Jews who have settled in Jerusalem, as opposed to natives of Jewish Palestine.

The Bible mandated caring for widows, who had no other means of support if they had no family nearby. Judaism took this responsibility seriously, in contrast to Gentile cultures. But because it was considered virtuous to be buried in the land of Israel, many foreign Jews would come to spend their last days there, then die and leave widows. (Palestinian rabbis eventually provided further theological incentive to immigrants; according to one common tradition, the dead would be resurrected only in Israel, so the righteous dead of other lands would have to roll the whole way back to Israel underground, and this was thought to be a very unpleasant experience.)

Thus a disproportionate number of foreign Jewish widows lived in Jerusalem, which did not have enough foreign Jewish synagogues (Acts 6:9) for their distributors of charity to supply all the widows adequately. This urban social problem of Jerusalem spilled over into the church.⁶

LAN: Another internal problem developed in the early church. The Hebraic Jews, native Jewish Christians, spoke Aramaic, a Semitic language. The Grecian Jews, Greek-speaking Christians, were probably Jews from other lands who were converted at Pentecost. The Greek-speaking Christians complained that their widows were being unfairly treated. This favoritism was probably not intentional, but was more likely caused by the language barrier. To correct the situation, the apostles put seven respected Greek-speaking men in charge of the food distribution program. This solved the problem and allowed the apostles to keep their focus on teaching and preaching the Good News about Jesus.⁷

McGee: We need to recognize that this took place early in the history of the church. They had attempted a form of communal living and, actually, it succeeded for a short while. Then carnality entered the church. We saw how Ananias and Sapphira misrepresented their situation. Now we find that there is a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews. This is not a clash between two races. This is not a demonstration of anti-Semitism. The word *Grecians* here means “Hellenists,” Greek-speaking Jews. They had a background of Greek culture, while the Hebrews in Jerusalem closely followed the Mosaic Law. Naturally, a misunderstanding developed.

⁶ Bible Background Commentary: New Testament

⁷ Life Application Notes:

It has been estimated that the number in the church at this time may have been around twenty-five thousand. And we see that this early church was not perfect. We hear people say, “We need to get back to the early church. The early church was power-conscious, and we today are problem-conscious.” That is only a half-truth. The early church did have power, but the early church had problems also.

The high plane to which the Spirit had brought the church was interrupted by the intrusion of satanic division and confusion. The sharing of material substance, which first characterized the church, gave way to the selfishness of the old nature. Carnality had come in. The Grecians, who evidently were a minority group, felt neglected and demanded that their widows be given equal consideration with the Hebrews. This communal form of living wasn't working as well as they would have liked. This was brought to the attention of the apostles.⁸

JNTC: Greek-speaking Jews ... those who spoke Hebrew. The Greek words are “*Ellênistôn*” and “*Ebraious*” (“Hellenists” and “Hebraists”), and their precise meaning is debatable. The emphasis could be less on language than on culture, or even on geography—whether these Jews were native to the Diaspora or to *Eretz-Israel*. And even if the primary referent is language, some believe that Hebrew was no longer commonly spoken in Yeshua's time and that Aramaic, the related Semitic language originally spoken in Babylon and learned by many Jews during the Babylonian Exile, is what is meant. While it could be either or both, I am convinced that Hebrew was still widely spoken in New Testament times; see Mk 5:41N.

The division between Greek-speaking and Hebrew-speaking (or culturally Greek and culturally Hebrew) Jews dates from the conquest of *Eretz-Israel* by Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.E. He and his successors introduced the Greek language and Greek culture into the lands they ruled. While Hellenistic influence produced such fruits as the Septuagint, Philo of Alexandria and Josephus, “Hebraists” considered the “Hellenists” to have developed an adulterated Judaism which had assimilated elements of the pagan cultures around them—although the Judaism of the Hebrew-speakers had not avoided these influences either. The Maccabean Revolt (see Yn 10:22N) contains elements of intra-Jewish struggle related to this issue. In any case, groups which are different from each other can usually find excuses for deprecating each other.⁹

ESV: The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews from the Diaspora (“dispersed” Jews living outside Palestine). Their primary language was Greek. The **Hebrews** were native Palestinian Jews who spoke Aramaic as their primary language and had attended the Hebrew-speaking synagogues. Not as fluent in Greek, they seem to have overlooked the Hellenist widows unintentionally. Some scholars claim this verse is just the “tip of the iceberg” indicating serious theological frictions between these two groups in the Jerusalem church, and that they had major differences over observance of the OT law and the proper role of the Jerusalem temple. But the text itself indicates just the opposite, for several places show essential unity in doctrinal understanding among the apostles and

⁸McGee, J. V. (1997, c1981). *Thru the Bible commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.) (4:534). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

⁹Stern, D. H. (1996, c1992). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 6:1). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

those who followed them (see 15:1–35; Gal. 1:18–19; 2:1–10). Any differences in emphasis were not major, but it does appear the Hellenists were less drawn to the temple, as Stephen's speech in Acts 7 suggests. **the daily distribution.** That is, of provisions for the needy.

Widows neglected

The problem is that the Hellenistic widows of the Jerusalem church are "being overlooked in the daily distribution of food" (6:1). That is, the church apparently has an organized charity, such as a daily "soup kitchen" for the needy, including widows. But the immigrant widows are not getting an equal share.

This is a blight on the church. Both the Torah and the example of Jesus mandate that the community pay special attention to helping widows (Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17, 19-21; 26:12-13). The law even specifies a curse for those who neglect the poor (Deuteronomy 27:19).

The prophets stress the responsibility of "doing justice for widows" (Malachi 3:5; Isaiah 1:17, 23; 10:2; Jeremiah 5:28; 7:6; 23:3; Ezekiel 22:7; Psalm 93:6). In the New Testament, the epistle of James reflects the importance of such justice, insisting that true religion includes looking after orphans and widows in their distress (1:27). Mechanisms for aiding widows had long been promoted in Judaism. Jews had developed a system of aid to the poor and those in need. Religious communities such as the Essenes had a kind of social security system that provided for members' needs. But here Christians are neglecting their own.

As in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, this neglect of church widows is no incidental problem. Although Luke presents the situation without condemnation, the affront threatens the spiritual integrity of the Christian community.

It's possible that the inequity in the distribution of food was merely the surface issue. This may be part of a larger conflict between two groups who had different cultural backgrounds. (We will eventually see doctrinal differences become more evident between the two groups.)

Earlier, we saw the Christian community taking care of the needy. Believers were freely sharing their possessions with the less fortunate among them (2:44-45; 5:32, 34-35). But as the church grows, so does the number of widows who need help. To make matters worse, widows from the Diaspora would probably be especially in need. They would be less likely to have relatives nearby to help them. And if they do not speak the local language very well, they may be missing out on some of the information.

They are the ones with the most need, but the church is neglecting them. Almost certainly, discrimination is involved in the inequity, but Luke tends to downplay controversies in favor of showing how problems were resolved. The distribution of food is probably in the hands of the Hebrews, and they unthinkingly take care of their own, and the Greek-speaking widows cannot communicate their needs to the people doing the distribution.

Ultimately, the apostles are responsible, because they administer the common fund (4:34-35), but they have more work than they can handle. Since they are Hebrews, it is easy for them to be unaware that the Greek-speaking widows are being neglected. As soon as they

learn that the immigrant widows are being neglected, they immediately take steps to correct the problem.¹⁰

Acts 6:2

Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples *unto them*, and said, **It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.**

Then the twelve. That is, the apostles. Matthias had been added to them after the apostasy of Judas, which had completed the original number. Those who say Paul is or should have been the 12th apostle, should realize that he has not been appointed yet however there are 12 here.

[serve tables] Attend to the tables where collections were received and distributions to the people were made.

Clarke: It is not reason— it is not pleasing, proper, or fitting, that we should leave the word of God, that we should give up ourselves, or confide to others, the doctrine of salvation which God has commanded us to preach unto the people.

[serve] *diakoneo*, Greek 1247, *dee-ak-on-eh'-o*; from Greek 1249 (*diakonos*); to *be an attendant*, i.e. *wait upon* (menially or as a host, friend or [figurative] teacher); techn. to *act as a Christian deacon* :- (ad-) minister (unto), serve, use the office of a deacon.

And serve tables—Become providers of daily bread for your widows and poor: others can do this, to whom our important office is not intrusted.

Barnes: The multitude of the disciples. It is not necessary to suppose that *all* the disciples were convened, which amounted to many thousands, but that the business was laid before a large number; or perhaps *the multitude* here means those merely who were more particularly interested in the matter, and who had been engaged in the complaint. **It is not reason.** The original words used here properly denote, it is not *pleasing*, or *agreeable*; but the meaning evidently is, it is not *fit*, or *proper*. It would be a departure from the design of their appointment, which was to preach the gospel, and not to attend to the pecuniary affairs of the church.

Leave the word of God. That we should neglect, or abandon the preaching of the gospel so much as would be necessary, if we attended personally to the distribution of the alms of the church. The *gospel* is here called the *word of God*, because it is his message; it is that which he has *spoken*; or which he has commanded to be proclaimed to men.

Serve tables. This expression properly denotes to take care of, or to provide for the table, or for the daily wants of the family. It is an expression that properly applies to a steward, or a servant. The word *tables* is, however, sometimes used with reference to *money*, as being the place where money was kept for the purpose of exchange, etc., Matthew 21:12,

¹⁰ <http://www.wcg.org/lit/bible/acts/acts6.htm>

25:27. Here the expression means, therefore, to attend to the pecuniary transactions of the church, and to make the proper distribution for the wants of the poor.

the multitude—the general body of the disciples.

It is not reason—The word expresses dislike; that is “We cannot submit.”

to leave the word of God—to have our time and attention withdrawn from preaching; which, it thus appears, they regarded as their primary duty.

to serve tables—oversee the distribution of provisions.¹¹

McGee: The apostles felt that they should not give up the study of the Word of God. They felt it was important for them to continue with that. If they gave up the study of the Word of God and served tables, that would be the undoing of them. They *should* spend their time in prayer and in the study of the Word of God.

It is important for every church to recognize that the minister should have time to study the Word of God and should have time for prayer. Unfortunately, the average church today is looking for a pastor who is an organizer and a promoter, a sort of vice-president to run the church, a manager of some sort. That is unfortunate. As a result the church is suffering today. When I was a pastor in downtown Los Angeles, I had to move my study to my home. I built a special room over the garage for my study. I found out that all I had in the church was an office, not a study. They didn’t intend for me to study there. They didn’t want me to study there.¹²

Church Leaders, Deacon—The seven men chosen to assist the Twelve are not identified as deacons, but the verb “to wait on” (Greek *diakonein*) comes from the same root as the noun (Greek *diakonos*) translated into English as deacon. The selection of the seven grew out of the needs of the apostles in ministering to the congregation. The special responsibilities of the seven involved practical service. Those chosen for this assignment had already demonstrated evidence of the working of the Spirit in their lives and ministry. Following the example of these seven, deacons of today will see their responsibilities as serving with the pastor in ministering to the needs of the church congregation and the community.

"Choose seven men" (6:2-6)

When the neglect comes to light, the Twelve gather the church together and tell the members that they can no longer manage the food distribution program. They simply lack the time to do it right. The apostles are too occupied with evangelism to "wait on tables" (6:2). They ask the group to choose seven men to handle the daily distribution. The apostles will turn the responsibility of the "soup kitchen" over to them (verse 3). The apostles do not ignore the problem, nor chastise the widows for complaining. Nor do they try to hold on to this important responsibility, because they can do it only if they

¹¹Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Ac 6:2). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

¹²McGee, J. V. (1997, c1981). *Thru the Bible commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.) (4:534). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

neglect their duty to preach. Members of the Jerusalem congregation are therefore asked to choose seven people who can take over the social-service work of the church. The Twelve obviously have great stature and power in the church community and could have chosen the leaders on their own. But on this critical decision they are willing to give up their authority and ask the community to decide. The apostles turn the authority for working out the solution of the problem to those who feel it most acutely, for they are probably the best ones to solve it.

The apostles give one requirement. The men are to have both *wisdom* and the *Spirit*, or we might say, a wisdom inspired by the Holy Spirit (6:3). Clearly, the apostles are no longer jockeying for power, as when they were unconverted (Luke 22:24; Matthew 20:20-28).

The seven men chosen are Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas, a Gentile convert to Judaism from Antioch (6:5). The men have Greek names, and it is likely that they all come from the Hellenistic wing of the Jerusalem church (though many Palestinian Jews also have Greek names).¹³

Acts 6:3

Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.

The start of “deacons” - men who serve.

[look ye out among you seven men] Choose men from among both factions in whom all can confide. We will appoint them over this work, but we will continue in prayer and ministry of the Word (Acts 6:3-4).

[honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom]

Qualifications—Business Elders

1. Men of honest report (Acts 6:3)
2. Full of the Holy Ghost (Acts 6:3,5)
3. Full of wisdom (Acts 6:3)
4. Full of faith (Acts 6:5,8)
5. Full of power (Acts 6:8)

Compare these qualifications with those in 1 Tim. 3:8-13.

Clarke: Wherefore—look ye out among you seven men—Choose persons in whom ye can all confide, who will distribute the provisions impartially, and in due time; and let these persons be the objects of the choice both of the Hebrews and Hellenists, that all cause of murmuring and discontent may be done away. Though seven was a sacred number among the Jews, yet there does not appear to be any mystery intended here. Probably the seven men were to take each his day of service; and then there would be a superintendent for these widows, etc., for each day of the week.

¹³ <http://www.wcg.org/lit/bible/acts/acts6.htm>

Barnes: Look ye out. Select, or choose. As this was a matter pertaining to their own pecuniary affairs, it was proper that *they* should be permitted to choose such men as they could confide in. By this means the apostles would be free from all suspicions. It could not be pretended that *they* were partial, nor could it ever be charged on them that they wished to embezzle a part of the funds by managing them themselves, or by entrusting them to men of their own selection. It follows from this, also, that the right of selecting *deacons* resides *in* the church, and does not pertain to the ministry. And it is evidently proper that men who are to be entrusted with the alms of the church should be selected by the church itself.

Full of the Holy Ghost. This evidently does not mean endowed with miraculous gifts, or the power of speaking foreign languages, for such gifts were not necessary to the discharge of their office; but it means men who were eminently under the influence of the Holy Ghost, or who were of distinguished piety. This was all that was necessary in the case, and this is all that the words fairly imply in this place.

The qualifications of deacons are still further stated and illustrated in 1 Timothy 3:8-10.

Over this business. That is, over the distribution of the alms of the church—not to preach, or to govern the church, but solely to take care of the sacred funds of charity, and distribute them to supply the wants of the poor. The office is distinguished from that of *preaching* the gospel. To that the apostles were to attend. The deacons were expressly set apart to a different work, and to that work they should be confined. In this account of their original appointment, there is not the slightest intimation that they were to preach, but the contrary is supposed in the whole transaction. Nor is there here the slightest intimation that they were regarded as an order of clergy, or as in any way connected with the clerical office; In the ancient synagogues of the Jews there were three men to whom was entrusted the care of the poor. They were called by the Hebrews *Parnasin* or *Pastors*. (Lightfoot, *Horse Heb. et Talin. Matthew 4:23.*) From these officers the apostles took the idea probably of appointing deacons in the Christian church, and doubtless intended that their duties should be the same.

And to the ministry of the word. To preaching the gospel; or communicating the message of eternal life to the world. The word ministry properly denotes the employment of a *servant*, and is given to the preachers of the gospel because they are employed in this *service* as the servants of God, and of the church. We have here a view of what the apostles thought to be the proper work of the ministry. They were set apart to this work. It was their main, their only employment. To this their lives were to be devoted, and both by their example and their writings they have shown that it was on this principle they acted. Comp. 1 Timothy 4:15,16, 2 Timothy 4:2. It follows, also, that if their time and talents were to be wholly devoted to this work, it was reasonable that they should receive competent support from the churches, and this reasonable claim is often urged by the apostles. See 1 Corinthians 9:7-14, Galatians 6:6.

This administrative task was not taken lightly. Notice the requirements for the men who were to handle the food program: full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. People who carry heavy responsibilities and work closely with others should have these qualities. We must look for spiritually mature and wise men and women to lead our churches.

full of the Holy Ghost—not full of miraculous gifts, which would have been no qualification for the duties required, but *spiritually gifted* (although on two of them miraculous power did rest).¹⁴

(Acts 5:32) *And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.*”

Acts 6:4

But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.

[**ministry**] Greek: *diakonia* (GSN-1248) tou (GSN-3588) logou (GSN-3056), the deaconship of the Word. This suggests preaching elders, the others being business elders, servants to minister the Word and servants to minister material things to the people. Every Jewish synagogue had at least three deacons who were judges of sacred and civil problems and who presided at all trials of Jewish members. See Matthew 20:26.

Distributors of charity filled an office in later Palestinian Judaism. Reputation was important for the sake of public credibility; see comment on 1 Tim. 3:7. There was Old Testament precedent for having the people themselves choose these distributors and the leader ratify their choice (Deut. 1:13), and the Essenes reportedly elected their officials.

LAN: As the early church increased in size, so did its needs. One great need was to organize the distribution of food to the poor. The apostles needed to focus on preaching, so they chose others to administer the food program. Each person has a vital part to play in the life of the church (see 1 Cor. 12). If you are in a position of leadership and find yourself overwhelmed by responsibilities, determine *your* God-given abilities and priorities and then find others to help. If you are not in leadership, you have gifts that can be used by God in various areas of the church’s ministry. Offer these gifts in service to him.

The apostles’ priorities were correct. The ministry of the Word should never be neglected because of administrative burdens. Pastors should not try, or be expected to try, to do everything. Instead, the work of the church should be spread out among its members.

McGee: The seven men were to be appointed because a crisis had arisen. The apostles felt it was important that they should not have the burden of this detail so that they could give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

Now I want you to notice the qualifications of these seven men who are to assume the burden of handling the material substance of the church. I’m afraid this is something which is neglected in the average church today when the deacons are chosen. In fact, I’ve heard men say they didn’t want to be appointed to the spiritual office of an elder but would like to be a deacon to handle the material things.

¹⁴Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Ac 6:3). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

May I say to you, the office of deacon requires more spirituality and wisdom and prayer than any other office. Now notice the qualifications: These men had to be men of honest report. Their honesty was to be unquestionable. It is really a tragic thing for a church to have a deacon whose honesty is in question so that others—including the pastor—cannot trust him. Such a man should not be in the office of deacon. The second qualification was “full of the Holy Ghost.” They were not to be filled with wine but were to be “filled with the [Holy] Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). Thirdly, they were to be men of wisdom. They were to be spiritual men who would be able to make an application of spiritual truth. That was very important. You see, the fact that they were handling material matters was apt to give them a lopsided view of things. So it is most important that deacons should be men who look at things from the spiritual point of view.

We shall see that Stephen was a man who met these qualifications. He had wisdom—“they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake” (v. 10). He had real conviction. Also he was “full of faith.” Not only did he have saving faith but also serving faith—witnessing faith. It wasn’t the amount of his faith but the object of his faith that was important. We learn from this same verse that he was full of power. Such were the kind of men chosen as deacons.¹⁵

The apostles mentioned three qualifications for those who would be enlisted to serve: they must (a) **be full of the Spirit and** (b) be full of **wisdom** (cf. v. 10). In addition they were to (c) be **known** for these things, that is, the previous two qualifications were to be their reputations. All three were necessary for the handling of finances. (Faith, v. 5, is not another qualification, for belief is simply the means of being filled with the Holy Spirit.)

Selecting **seven men** may go back to the tradition in Jewish communities where seven respected men managed the public business in an official council.

By choosing these seven, the Twelve could **give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word** (cf. v. 2).¹⁶

Were these the first deacons? Which church office is in view here? Three answers are given to these questions.

(1) Some say these were the first deacons. Several factors are used to support this viewpoint. First, the office of deacon is assumed in Paul’s letters (cf. Phil. 1:1). If Acts 6:1-6 is not an account of their beginning, it is argued, when and where did deacons originate? Second, several words related to deacon (*diakonos*) are found here: “distribution” (lit., “service”) in verse 1 is *diakonia*, and “to wait” in verse 2 is *diakonein*. However, these men were never called “deacons” (*diakonoi*) as such. Much later they were called “the Seven” (21:8). Furthermore, the words “distribution” and “wait” do not

¹⁵McGee, J. V. (1997, c1981). *Thru the Bible commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.) (4:535). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

cf. *confer*, compare

v. verse

¹⁶Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:367). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

cf. *confer*, compare

lit. literal, literally

seem to have a technical sense here. These words in the Greek New Testament are commonly used in a nonspecialized sense.

(2) Others hold that these were precursors to the office of elder. This is not a common interpretation, but it gains its support from 11:30, which refers to relief money being given to the elders. If deacons handled these funds earlier (chap. 6), it is argued, they must have later become the elders (chap. 11). However, the office of elder has its origin in the Jewish synagogue.

(3) A third view is that these seven men held a temporary position for the purpose of meeting a specific need. This seems to be the best approach for a couple of reasons. First, these men were chosen for a particular task, not an overall one. Second, they were in a temporary responsibility because of the communal nature of the church at Jerusalem. Even so, these men do illustrate the role and function of the office of deacons.¹⁷

ESV: Essential to the work of the apostles was their devotion **to prayer and to the ministry of the word**. The burgeoning ministry of charity was distracting them from this calling. The Greek-speaking Hellenists from whom the seven were selected were better equipped to serve and communicate with the widows.

Acts 6:5

And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch:

[they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas] The church chose seven men and the apostles laid hands on them and prayed, setting them apart for this business (Acts 6:3,5-6). Apart from Stephen (Acts 6:5-8:2; Acts 22:20) and Philip (Acts 6:5; Acts 8:1-40; Acts 21:8) all we know of the others is here.

[proselyte of Antioch] [proselyte] Greek: *proselutos* (GSN-4339), a newcomer, a convert from a Gentile religion to Judaism (Acts 2:10; Acts 6:5; Acts 13:43).

Two Classes of Jewish Proselytes:

1. Proselytes of righteousness who received circumcision and vowed to keep the whole law of Moses and all requirements of Judaism.
2. Proselytes of the gate (Exodus 20:10; Deut. 5:14; Deut. 24:16-21) who dwelt among Israel, and, although uncircumcised, observed the "seven precepts of Noah" which, according to the rabbis, were laws against idolatry, blasphemy, homicide, unchastity, theft or plundering, rebellion against rulers, and the use of "flesh with the blood thereof." They were called the scabs of the Jewish church. History records that they were more bitter against Christ and Christians than Jews, fulfilling this verse.

chap. chapter

¹⁷Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:367). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

And they chose Stephen, A man who soon showed (Acts 7) that he was every way qualified for his office, and fitted to defend also the cause of the Lord Jesus. This man had the distinguished honor of being the first Christian martyr, Acts 7.

Barnes: A proselyte. A *proselyte* is one who is converted from one religion to another. Matthew 23:15. The word does not mean here that he was a convert to Christianity—which was true—but that he had been converted at Antioch from paganism to the Jewish religion. As this is the only proselyte mentioned among the seven deacons, it is evident that the others were native-born Jews, though a part of them might have been born out of Palestine, and have been of the denomination of *Grecians*, or *Hellenists*.

Barnes: Of Antioch. This city, often mentioned in the New Testament, (Acts 11:19,20,26, 15:22,35, Galatians 2:11, etc.,) was situated in Syria on the river Orontes, and was formerly called *Riblath*. It is not mentioned in the Old Testament, but is frequently mentioned in the Apocrypha. It was built by Seleucus Nicanor, A. D. 301, and was named *Antioch*, in honour of his father Antiochus. It became the seat of empire of the Syrian kings of the Macedonian race, and afterwards of the Roman governors of the eastern provinces. In this place the disciples of Christ were first called Christians, Acts 11:26. Josephus says it was the third city in size of the Roman provinces, being inferior only to Seleucia and Alexandria. It was long, indeed, the most powerful city of the East. The city was almost square, had many gates, was adorned with fine fountains, and possessed great fertility of soil and commercial opulence. It was subject to earthquakes, and was often almost destroyed by them. In A.D. 588, above sixty thousand persons perished in it in this manner. In A.D. 970, an army of one hundred thousand Saracens besieged it, and took it. In 1268 it was taken possession of by the Sultan of Egypt, who demolished it, and placed it under the dominion of the Turk. It is now called *Antakia*; and till the year 1822, it occupied a remote corner of the ancient enclosure of its walls, its splendid buildings being reduced to hovels, and its population living in Turkish debasement. It contains now about ten thousand inhabitants.—*Robinson's Calmet*. This city should be distinguished from Antioch in Pisidia, also mentioned in the New Testament, Acts 13:14.

BBC: Tomb inscriptions show that many Jerusalemites had Greek names whether or not their parents or grandparents had lived outside Judea. But even in Rome, under 40 percent of Jews had any Greek in their name, and only one or two of the apostles had a Greek name. That all seven of these men have Greek names suggests that they are known to be Hellenists (Acts 6:1), first-or second-generation Jewish immigrants to Palestine—hence members of the offended minority. One is even a proselyte—a former Gentile who had converted to Judaism; many of these lived in Antioch (cf. Acts 11:19).

The first two, Stephen and Philip, will be mentioned again as we go along in the Book of Acts. They were outstanding men in the early church. Although they were to “serve tables,” the record of them is that they were spiritual men. The NT makes no further mention of the other five.

Stephen and Philip (6:5)

Stephen, introduced here almost as an aside, will become an important figure in Luke's story. (Luke often casually introduces important characters a short time *before* they become important.) His activities in the next chapter link the Jerusalem church to the Christian movement beyond Judea. He is a pivotal character whose death ends Luke's story of the Jerusalem church. Luke mentions Stephen later in Acts, and his book shows how Stephen provides a turning point for the spread of the gospel (11:19; 22:20). In particular, Stephen's speech is the catalyst that sparks a great persecution. This causes Christians to flee to other areas, bringing the gospel with them (8:2). What looked like bad news at first, turned out to be good in the long run.

Of the other six individuals Luke mentions, only Philip plays a further role in Luke's account. And it is an important one. Philip became a prophet-evangelist. Luke shows him doing signs and miracles (8:6, 13) and being empowered by the Spirit to preach the gospel (8:29, 39). Even his seven daughters prophesy (21:9). Philip carries the gospel to Samaria (8:5); proclaims salvation to the Ethiopian (8:29); and takes the message along the Judean coast from Azotus to Caesarea (8:40). Some years later on his final trip to Jerusalem, Paul visits Philip in Caesarea (21:8). It's possible that Philip was one of Luke's sources for the story of Acts, especially for the events narrated in chapters 6-8. The interesting thing about Nicolaus, the last-mentioned of the seven, is that he is a convert (proselyte) to Judaism from paganism. Only full converts are called proselytes. They are instructed in Judaism, baptized and circumcised. The God-fearers only worship and study in the synagogues; they are not circumcised. Luke notes that Nicolas comes from Antioch in Syria. This is the first reference to the city that will soon become the launching-point for the Gentile mission.¹⁸

Acts 6:6

Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid *their* hands on them.

[laid their hands on them] The laying on of hands was not to impart the Holy Spirit or some gift. They already had the Holy Ghost, faith, power, and wisdom (see Qualifications—Business Elders). Laying on hands was to designate them for an office, as Moses did Joshua (Numbers 27:18-23).

Barnes: They laid their hands, Among the Jews it was customary to lay hands on the head of a person who was set apart to any particular office, Numbers 27:18; comp. Acts 8:19. This was done, not to impart any power or ability, but to *designate* that they received their authority, or commission, from those who thus laid their hands on them, as the act of laying hands on the sick by the Saviour was an act signifying that the power of healing came from him, Matthew 9:18; comp. Mark 16:18. In this case the laying on of the hands conveyed of itself no healing power, but was a sign or token that the power came from the Lord Jesus. Ordination has been uniformly performed in this way. See 1

¹⁸ <http://www.wcg.org/lit/bible/acts/acts6.htm>

Timothy 5:22. Though the seven deacons had been chosen by the church to this work, yet they derived their immediate commission and authority from the apostles.

BBC: The laying on of hands communicated blessing in the Old Testament (still occasionally attested in the apostolic period), but the idea here seems to be that of ordination, as in Numbers 27:18, 23 (cf. Acts 11:25), similar to the later practice for ordaining rabbis, called *semikah* (cf. 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). (Rabbis applied this rite of laying on hands only to sacrifices and to ordaining scholars.) If so, the apostles considered their friends' office of social ministry quite important.

Spiritual leadership is serious business and must not be taken lightly by the church or its leaders. In the early church, the chosen men were ordained or commissioned (set apart by prayer and laying on of hands) by the apostles. Laying hands on someone, an ancient Jewish practice, was a way to set a person apart for special service (see Numbers 27:23; Deut. 34:9).

JNTC: Laid their hands on them, conferring the duties and privileges of their office; see Mt 21:23N on "*s.mikhah*" ("laying on of hands").¹⁹

Laying on of hands (6:6)

The church community as a whole, or perhaps the Hellenistic part, selects the men it wants to handle the daily distribution. They are taken to the apostles, who officially place them in office. The apostles give a community prayer and "laid their hands on them" (6:6). This is the first mention of this practice in Acts. In Acts it accompanies several events—baptism (8:17, 19; 19:6); healings (9:12, 17; 28:8) and a commission to ministry (13:3).

The practice has ties with the Old Testament, where the laying on of hands is mentioned in a variety of contexts (Genesis 48:13-20; Exodus 29:10; Leviticus 1:4, 3:2; 4:4; 16:21; Numbers 27:23). In general, it symbolizes a conferring of office and responsibility (Numbers 8:10). In the Old Testament, it was the community of Israel that placed hands on the individual, though it would have been impossible for the entire community to do it. People *representing* the community laid on their hands. The same thing is true in Acts as the apostles lay hands on the seven men on behalf of the whole community. This ritual signals that the church as a whole approves the men to supervise the daily distribution. It is not quite as clear as NIV makes out who prayed and laid their hands on them. If the grammatical agreements of the Greek are any guide, then it was done by the whole church acting "in the presence of the apostles".... By this act the people made them their representatives, as the Israelites had once made Levites their representatives by laying hands on them (Numbers 27:18; Deuteronomy 34:9. (David J. Williams, *Acts*, page 123. It is often assumed that the Seven are appointed to the office of deacon. However, Luke does not refer to them by this term. He uses the ordinary verb for service, *diakoneo*, but not the noun *diakonos*. When Philip is described by a title, he is called "Philip the evangelist" (21:8), not "Philip the deacon." (The first New Testament mention of *deacons* is in Romans 16:1 and Philippians 1:1.)

¹⁹Stern, D. H. (1996, c1992). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 6:6). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

Actually, the Seven are not in an office, and are not given a title — they are simply in a service role. Their responsibility is similar to what deacons later did (1 Timothy 3:8-13), but over time, it becomes apparent that these men are appointed by God to serve in a special ministry. Stephen and Philip, the two of the Seven about which we know something, seem to have no further connection to the daily distribution or "waiting on tables." They are prophets who preach the word, do signs and wonders, and extend the work of the apostles.

They are formally named as the Seven (Acts 21:8), even as the original apostles are called the Twelve. In effect, the office of the Seven is as unique as that of the original apostles.

While not minimizing the importance of the apostles to the whole church, we may say, that in some way Stephen, Philip, and perhaps others of the appointed seven may well have been to the Hellenistic believers what the apostles were to the native-born Christians. (Richard N. Longenecker, "Acts," page 335)²⁰

Acts 6:7

And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.

“Priests”- they actually converted members of the priesthood.

Note that the whole congregation, not just the apostles, made the selection of the deacons. 4 criteria:

- 1) from among you, no outsiders.
- 2) of Good report, good witness (word is martyr).
- 3) full of the Spirit.
- 4) full of wisdom (*sophia*) - sanctified common sense.

Notice who they picked:

All were Grecian Jews except Nicolas who was a proselyte (converted Gentile).

Interesting that it was the Hellenists who felt that they were getting short changed, yet all seven picked were non-Palestine Jews.

[priests were obedient to the faith] This was one of the greatest miracles yet. To convert many of these men who were bitter enemies of Christ shows how powerful the revival was.

Clarke: The word of God increased—By such preachers as the apostles and these deacons, no wonder the doctrine of God increased—became widely diffused and generally known; in consequence of which, the number of the disciples must be greatly multiplied: for God will ever bless his own word, when ministered by those whom he has qualified to proclaim it.

²⁰ <http://www.wcg.org/lit/bible/acts/acts6.htm>

Barnes: And a great company of the priests. A great *multitude*. This is recorded justly as a remarkable instance of the power of the gospel. How great this company was is not mentioned. But the number of the priests in Jerusalem was very great; and their conversion was a striking proof of the power of truth. It is probable that they had been opposed to the gospel with quite as much hostility as any other class of the Jews. And it is now mentioned, as worthy of special record, that the gospel was sufficiently mighty to humble even the proud, and haughty, and selfish, and envious priest to the foot of the cross. One design of the gospel is to evince the power of truth in subduing all classes of men; and hence in the New Testament we have the record of its having actually subdued every class to the obedience of faith. Some MSS., however, here instead of *priests* read *Jews*. And this reading is followed in the Syriac version.

Were obedient to the faith. The word *faith* here is evidently put for the *Christian religion*. Faith is one of the main requirements of the gospel, Mark 16:16, and by a figure of speech is put for the gospel itself. To become *obedient to the faith*, therefore, is to obey the requirements of the gospel, particularly that which requires us to *believe*. Comp. Romans 10:16. By the accession of the *priests* also no small part of the reproach would be taken away from the gospel, that it made converts only among the lower classes of the people. Comp. John 7:48.

Although most upper-class priests were Sadducees, the poorer priests, many of whom came to Jerusalem only several weeks of the year, were not; some priests were even Pharisees. Priests were accorded high status in the Qumran community. Priests did not represent any given ideology or economic status, but their conversion here shows that the Christians are making inroads even into the temple establishment, or at least the lower echelon of priests who served there.

Jesus had told the apostles that they were to witness first in Jerusalem (Acts 1:8). In a short time, their message had infiltrated the entire city and all levels of society. Even some priests were being converted, an obvious violation of the wishes of the council that would endanger their position.

LAN: The word of God spread like ripples on a pond where, from a single center, each wave touches the next, spreading wider and farther. The gospel still spreads this way today. You don't have to change the world single-handedly—it is enough just to be part of the wave, touching those around you, who in turn will touch others until all have felt the movement. Don't ever feel that your part is insignificant or unimportant.

a great company of the priests were obedient, &c.—This was the crowning triumph of the Gospel, whose *peaceful* prosperity was now at its greatest height. After Stephen's teaching and trial made it clear that sacerdotal interests could not stand with the Gospel, such priestly accessions became rare indeed. Note (1) how easily misunderstandings may arise among the most loving and devoted followers of the Lord Jesus: but (2) How quickly and effectually such misunderstandings may be healed, where honest intentions, love, and wisdom reign: (3) What a beautiful model for imitation is furnished by the class here complained of, who, though themselves the majority, chose the new office-bearers from amongst the complaining minority! (4) How superior to the lust of power do the

apostles here show themselves to be, in not only divesting themselves of the immediate superintendence of temporal affairs in the Christian community, but giving the choice of those who were to be entrusted with it to the disciples at large! (5) How little of formal organization did the apostles give to the Church at first, and when an emergency arose which demanded something more, how entirely was the remedy suggested by the reason of the thing! (6) Though the new office-bearers are not expressly called *Deacons* here, it is universally admitted that this was the first institution of that order in the Church; the success of the expedient securing its permanency, and the qualifications for “the office of a Deacon” being laid down in one of the apostolical Epistles immediately after those of “a Bishop” (1Ti 3:8–13).²¹

JNTC: A large crowd of *cohanim* (“priests”; see Mt 2:4N) **were becoming obedient to the faith.** Although most of the *cohanim* are presented in the New Testament as being opposed to Yeshua, this was not true of all. There were holy men in the priesthood such as Z’kharyah the father of Yochanan the Immerser (Lk 1:5–25, 57–59).

There is a theory that the *cohanim* who came to believe in Yeshua were not part of the establishment but those who had become disenchanted with it and had gone off to join the Essenes in Qumran. The reasoning is that the theology of the Dead Sea Scrolls is much closer to the New Testament than that of the *Tz. dukim* who controlled the Jerusalem priesthood. But the theory lacks New Testament evidence to support it. Moreover, since the activity of the Messianic believers had not yet spread to other parts of the Land than Jerusalem, it seems more likely that the *cohanim* becoming obedient to the faith at this time were those who made it their business to be in Jerusalem, rather than retreat to the desert. For God can reach the hearts even of people whose usual ties and associations might be expected to lead them to an opposing stance. At 15:5 we are also informed of believing *P.rushim*.²²

Luke provides six summary statements which highlight the progress of the gospel and Christian mission (Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31). Each of these verses concludes a section of material, and they can be used as helpful devices in subdividing the book and charting the advance of the word of God.

ESV: the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. In spite of suffering and persecution (5:41), in spite of sin in the church (5:1–11), and in spite of conflict (6:1), the church continued to grow. It grew in the context of remarkable love among the Christians in Jerusalem (4:32, 35), frequent miracles (5:12), and the courageous proclamation of the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit (5:29–32). **The word of God continued to increase** in spite of widespread opposition. **A great many of the priests** became Christians. The lower ranks of the priesthood numbered in the thousands, of whom many were poor and may have first been attracted to Christians by their charity, under the guidance of the newly appointed deacons (6:1–6).

²¹Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Ac 6:7). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

²²Stern, D. H. (1996, c1992). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 6:7). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

Jerusalem church grows (6:7)

Luke ends the account of the Seven with a summary statement of the progress of the gospel and church: "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith" (6:7).

This is one of Luke's regular pauses to summarize the state of the church's growth in Jerusalem (2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14). Six of these general reports have been noted in Acts, each one showing a further outreach of the gospel from Jerusalem (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31. (One commentator estimates that each of the six panels covers on average about five years.)

The events of the first panel probably take place in the first year or so after Jesus' resurrection. The second panel occurs in the mid-thirties A.D. The second panel (6:8-9:30) focuses on the work of three Hellenists whose ministries were essential for spreading the gospel beyond Jerusalem—Stephen, Philip, and Saul (Paul). Stephen had a brief career. He was martyred after giving a scathing speech to Jews who were members of one or more Hellenistic synagogues in Jerusalem.

Luke records only a brief ministry for Philip in Samaria and the coastal area of Palestine. However, he probably continued to preach, and is still part of the community about 20 years later (21:8-9). Also in the second panel, Luke records Saul's conversion and early ministry. He is, in a sense, the third "Hellenist." (Though Saul is a Hebraic Jew in some respects, he is also a man of the Diaspora and the Greek world.)

In the second panel, Luke's interest moves from Peter and the Twelve to focus more on the Hellenistic Seven and Paul. The church in Jerusalem has expanded among Jews who are connected with the world at large—the Hellenists. They may be "Hellenists" because of one or more characteristics—language, place of birth, custom or psychological orientation. This means that the preaching of the gospel has begun to go beyond the traditional preoccupations of Jewish culture—its land (especially Jerusalem), the temple and the Law.

The church has resolved some of its major potential problems—especially injustice and disunity. Now, in a spirit of prayer and with the power of the Holy Spirit, it is ready to move on— "So the word of God spread" (6:7).

Luke has successfully portrayed a restored people and the authority of the Twelve over it. Now, he prepares for the second stage of Jesus' programmatic prophecy in Acts 1:8, that the Gospel would move out from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the world. (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, page 110)

Luke informs his readers that a large number of priests are converted and become part of the church (6:7). One commentator estimates that as many as 8,000 priests and 10,000 Levites serve at the temple. We should distinguish these ordinary priests from the high priestly families. The working priests are a marginalized group—far removed from the world of the enormously wealthy high priestly families—and perhaps even disaffected from them (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:181; *Wars* 2:409-410). It is from the ranks of the common priests that many were converted to faith in Jesus as the Messiah.²³

²³ <http://www.wcg.org/lit/bible/acts/acts6.htm>

Acts 6:8

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

Our attention is now drawn to Stephen. He is one of the great men in the early church.

This deacon, who was called to wait tables, is starting to demonstrate great spiritual power.

[did great wonders and miracles among the people] This confirms the truth of the promises and signs for all believers, not apostles only (Matthew 17:20; Matthew 21:22; Mark 9:23; Mark 11:22-24; Mark 16:15-20; Luke 24:49; John 14:12-15; John 15:7,16; John 16:23-26; Acts 1:4-8; Acts 2:38-39; Acts 5:32; 1 Cor. 12:4-11). Seven men besides the apostles did these works that we know of in this one chapter. Among the thousands promised the same Spirit baptism in Acts 2:38-39, how many others did miracles is not recorded. According to the above scriptures such is promised each believer then and now.

Barnes: And Stephen. The remarkable death of this first Christian martyr, which soon occurred, gave occasion to the sacred writer to give a detailed account of his character, and of the causes which led to his death. Hitherto the opposition of the Jews had been confined to threats and imprisonment; but it was now to burst forth with furious rage and madness, that could be satisfied only with blood. This was the first in a series of persecutions against Christians that filled the church with blood, and that closed the lives of thousands, perhaps millions, in the great work of establishing the gospel on the earth.

Like Christ and the apostles, **Stephen** was **full of God's grace and power** (cf. 4:33; Luke 2:40, 52). Interestingly Stephen was "full of" or controlled by five factors: the Spirit, wisdom, faith, grace, power (Acts 6:3, 5, 8). What an outstanding leader! Furthermore, he **did great wonders and miraculous signs** (cf. 2:22; Luke 24:19; also cf. Acts 2:43). These evidences of God's grace were in addition to his responsibilities in the daily ministrations to the widows.²⁴

ESV: 6:8–8:3 Stephen Bears the Ultimate Witness. The Greek word for "witness" is *martys*, which came to be associated with witnessing to the point of death, from which the word "martyr" derives. Stephen became the first such "ultimate" witness in the early church (c. a.d. 31/34).

Acts 6:9

Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called *the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.*

cf. *confer*, compare

²⁴Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:368). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

[Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia]

Either slaves freed when Tiberius expelled all Jews from Rome about A.D. 20, or more likely the inhabitants of Libertina in Africa who had come to settle in Jerusalem. Many Jews from Cyrene and Alexandria in North Africa are also mentioned here. These Jews from Africa had their own synagogues and together with Jews of Cilicia, Paul's district in Asia, started a dispute with Stephen. They could not resist the wisdom of Stephen so used physical force to get rid of him. This has been the common method of dealing with heretics in all ages.

Barnes: Of the Libertines. There has been very great difference of opinion about the meaning of this word. The chief opinions may be reduced to three;

(1.) The word is Latin, and means, properly, a *freedman*, a man who had been a slave and was set at liberty. And many have supposed that these persons were manumitted slaves, of Roman origin, but which had become proselyted to the Jewish religion, and who had a synagogue in Jerusalem. This opinion is not very probable; though it is certain, from *Tacitus*, (Annul. lib. il. c. 85,) that there were many persons of this description at Rome. He says that four thousand Jewish proselytes of Roman slaves made free were sent at one time to Sardinia.

(2.) A second opinion is, that these persons were Jews by birth, and had been taken captives by the Romans, and then set at liberty, and thus called *freedmen*, or *libertines*. That there *were* many Jews of this description there can be no doubt. Pompey the Great, when he subjugated Judea, sent large numbers of the Jews to Rome.- (*Philo, in Legat. ad Caium.*) These Jews were set at liberty at Rome, and assigned a place beyond the Tiber for a residence. See Introduction to the Epistle to the Romans. These persons are by *Philo* called *libertines*, or *freedmen*.-(*Kuinel, in loco.*) Many Jews were also conveyed as captives by Ptolemy I. to Egypt, and obtained a residence in that country and the vicinity.

But another and more probable opinion is, that they took their name from some *place* which they occupied. This opinion is more probable, from the fact that all the *other* persons mentioned here are named from the countries which they occupied. Suidas says that this is the name of a place. And in one of the Fathers this passage occurs: "Victor, bishop of the Catholic church at *Libertina*, says unity is there," etc. From this passage it is plain that there was a place called *Libertina*. That place was in Africa, not far from ancient Carthage. See Bishop *Pearce's* Comment on this place.

Cyrenians. Jews who dwelt at *Cyrene* in Africa. Matthew 27:32.

Alexandrians. Inhabitants of Alexandria in Egypt. It was founded by Alexander the Great, B.C. 332, and was peopled by colonies of Greeks and Jews. This city was much celebrated, and contained not less than three hundred thousand free citizens, and as many slaves. The city was the residence of many Jews. Josephus says that Alexander himself assigned to them a particular quarter of the city, and allowed them equal privileges with the Greeks. (Antiq. xiv. 7, 2; against Apion, ii. 4.) Philo affirms, that of five parts of the city the Jews inhabited two. According to his statement, there dwelt in his time at Alexandria, and the other Egyptian cities, not less than *ten hundred thousand Jews*. Amron, the general of Omar, when he took the city, said that it contained forty thousand tributary Jews. At this place the famous version of the Old Testament called the *Septuagint*, or the Alexandrian version, was made. See Robinson's Calmet.

Cilicia. This was a province of Asia Minor, on the sea-coast, at the north of Cyprus. The capital of this province was Tarsus, the native place of Paul, Acts 9:11. And as Paul was of this place, and belonged doubtless to this synagogue, it is probable that he was one who was engaged in this dispute with Stephen. Comp. Acts 7:58.

Of Asia. Acts 2:9.

JNTC: Synagogue of the freed slaves. People with similar cultural and social backgrounds often choose to worship together. The **freed slaves** were probably Jewish **Cyrenians, Alexandrians and people from Cilicia and the province of Asia** who had been captured and enslaved by the Romans, or their descendants; General Pompey, who captured Jerusalem in 63 B.C.E., took a number of Jews prisoner and released them in Rome. Some, however, may have been Gentile converts to Judaism; the phenomenon of proselyte zeal is familiar in all religious communities.²⁵

Acts 6:10

And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

Stephen was effective in his speeches.

[**wisdom and the spirit by which he spake**] Stephen was no apostle, proving that the spiritual power promised the apostles was not confined to them (Luke 21:15). Not one degree of power promised apostles was limited to them (John 14:12; Mark 9:23; Mark 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 12:4-11).

Clarke: They there not able to resist the wisdom, etc.—He was wise, well exercised and experienced, in Divine things; and, as appears by his defense, in the following chapter, well versed in the Jewish history. The spirit by which he spake was the Holy Spirit, and its power was irresistible. They were obliged either to yield to its teachings, or were confounded by its truth. Several MSS. add to this verse, because he reproved them with boldness, they could not resist the truth. This reading is not genuine, though it exists (but in different forms) in some good MSS.

Barnes: The wisdom. This properly refers to his knowledge of the Scriptures; his skill in what *the Jews* esteemed to be wisdom-acquaintance with their sacred writings, opinions, etc.

And the spirit. This has been commonly understood of the Holy Spirit, by which, he was aided; but it rather means the *energy, power, or ardour* of Stephen. He *evinced* a spirit of zeal and sincerity which they could not withstand; which served, more than mere argument could have done, to convince them that he was right. The evidence of sincerity, honesty, and zeal in a public speaker, will often go farther to convince the great mass of mankind, than the most able argument, if delivered in a cold and indifferent manner.

²⁵Stern, D. H. (1996, c1992). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 6:9). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

BBC: Stephen's fellow Hellenists felt local Jewish hostility more acutely than the church's Hebrew faction (see comment on Acts 6:1). Jerusalem had many synagogues (though not the 480 of later tradition), including some of those mentioned here. Archaeologists have found the dedicatory inscription from a "synagogue of the freedmen," those descended from former Roman slaves. (They constituted a particular class in Greco-Roman society in the first generation; Judaism ranked them just below proselytes.) Later sources attest the synagogue of the Alexandrians and that of the Cilicians; the capital of Cilicia was Tarsus, Paul's hometown. Other ancient cities with large Jewish immigrant populations also sported diverse synagogues.

The preaching of Stephen (6:8-10)

Luke next turns to give an account of Stephen's ministry. The apostles are teaching mainly at the temple, and in front of the Sanhedrin. Now we see a subtle shift in audience, as a leader of the Hellenistic Christian community brings the gospel to the Greek-speaking synagogues in Jerusalem. In particular, he evangelizes among members of the "Synagogue of the Freedmen," composed of Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria in North Africa and from provinces in Asia Minor—Cilicia and Asia (6:9).

"Freedmen" were former slaves (or their children) who had been emancipated by their owners. During Pompey's conquest of Judea in 63 B.C., for example, many Jews were taken captive to Rome, and many others probably ended up being sent to various parts of the Empire. Many of these slaves were later freed.

The descendants of such slaves, the Jewish freedmen, begin to argue with Stephen. But they cannot "stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke" (6:10). Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would teach them what to say when they came to trial (Luke 12:12). They will be given "words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict" (Luke 21:15). Luke shows that another prophecy had come to pass.

In essence, Stephen speaks as a prophet, as one of the witnesses predicted by Jesus. He is filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom (6:5, 10; 7:55) and he does "great wonders and miraculous signs." For Luke these are the marks of a prophet (2:19, 22, 43; 4:16, 22, 30; 5:12). Stephen is "full of God's grace and power" (6:8). The comparison with the apostles, who also spoke "with great power," is clear (4:33). Stephen speaks with the same spiritual might as the apostles, and should be recognized as one who brings a true gospel message.²⁶

Acts 6:11

Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and *against* God.

Not true statements, made by false witnesses.

²⁶ <http://www.wcg.org/lit/bible/acts/acts6.htm>

JNTC: To allege, “We heard him speak blasphemously against Moshe and against God.” What would have been the content of the alleged blasphemy? The two most likely possibilities: (1) Yeshua is greater than Moshe (see 3:22–23), (2) the *Torah* has been changed²⁷

ESV: Secretly instigated (Gk. *hypoballō*) implies putting words in someone's mouth or making false suggestions. The basic charge was blasphemy, speaking against **Moses** (the Law) and against **God** (that is, against the temple, God's dwelling place; cf. vv. 13–14). Jesus was accused of the same thing (Mark 14:63–64).

[suborned] Greek: *hupoballo* (GSN-5260), make false charges; swear to or do underhand work for money.

[blasphemous] Greek: *blasphemos* (GSN-989), here; Acts 6:13; 1 Tim. 1:13; 2 Tim. 3:2; 2 Peter 2:11.

Clarke: Then they suborned men—ὑπεββαλον. They made underhand work; got associated to themselves profligate persons, who for money would swear any thing. **Blasphemous words against Moses, and against God**—This was the most deadly charge they could bring against him. We have already seen, Matthew 9:4, that blasphemy, when against GOD, signifies speaking impiously of his nature, attributes, or works; and, when against men, it signifies speaking injuriously of their character, blasting their reputation, etc. These false witnesses came to prove that he had blasphemed Moses by representing him as an impostor, or the like; and GOD, by either denying his being, his providence, the justice of his government, etc.

Barnes: Then they suborned men. To *suborn* in law, means to procure a person to take such a false oath as constitutes perjury.- *Webster*. It has substantially this sense here. It means that they induced them to declare that which was false, or to bring a false accusation against him. This was done not by declaring a palpable and open falsehood, but by *perverting* his doctrines, and by stating their own *inferences* as what he had actually maintained—the common way in which men oppose doctrines from which they differ. The Syriac reads this place, "Then they sent certain men, and instructed them that they should say," etc. This was repeating an artifice which they practised so successfully in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ. See Matthew 26:60,61.

It seems to have been an ideal for people to be judged by one of their peers (a judge in a local court); a criticism by fellow Hellenists would receive more weight than one from those who would be less likely to know Stephen. “Blasphemy” here does not have the later technical sense of pronouncing the divine name of God but the more general sense of purported disrespect for God.

²⁷ Stern, D. H. (1996, c1992). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 6:11). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

These men lied about Stephen, causing him to be arrested and brought before the Jewish council. The Sadducees, the dominant party in the council, accepted and studied only the writings of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy). In their view, to speak blasphemy against Moses was a crime. But from Stephen's speech (Acts 7), we learn that this accusation was false. Stephen based his review of Israel's history on Moses' writings.

Acts 6:12

And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon *him*, and caught him, and brought *him* to the council,

[stirred up the people] Organized a mob of baser people, got the elders' approval, and violently brought him before the judgment seat, ready to carry out any evil work.

The Sanhedrin was not likely to be favorably disposed toward Stephen; the Jewish law of rebuke required a warning, but the Sanhedrin had already warned the leaders of this movement (Acts 5:40), and from this point the Sanhedrin would have to take action.

Acts 6:13

And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:

[This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law] Four accusations of Stephen's blasphemy:

1. Blasphemed Moses by making Christ greater than Moses (Acts 6:11,14)
2. Blasphemed God by exalting Christ greater than the temple and law (Acts 6:11,14)
3. Blasphemed the temple by saying that Christ will destroy it (Acts 6:14; cp. Matthew 24:1-3; Luke 21:20-24; Daniel 9:26)
4. Blasphemed the law by saying that Christ had abolished the law and made a new covenant (Acts 6:14; cp. Matthew 26:28; 2 Cor. 3:6-15; Col. 2:14-17)

Acts 6:14

For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

When Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin (the council of religious leaders), the accusation against him was the same that the religious leaders had used against Jesus (Matthew 26:59-61). The group falsely accused Stephen of wanting to change Moses' customs, because they knew that the Sadducees, who controlled the council, believed *only* in Moses' laws.

These words were sufficient to arouse the laity and leaders to apprehend **Stephen** and accuse **him before the Sanhedrin**. This is the third of four times in Acts when the Lord's

followers stood before this Jewish court; the others were Peter and John (4:15), Peter and the apostles (5:27), and Paul (22:30).

The **false witnesses** were not necessarily outright liars. Stephen had probably said the things they accused him of; however, they misrepresented the intentions and imports of his statements (cf. Matt. 26:61; Mark 14:58; John 2:19). The Lord Himself predicted the destruction of the temple (Matt. 24:1-2; Mark 13:1-2; Luke 21:5-6), though He never said *He* would do it. The other half of the allegation against Stephen involved the temporary nature of the Mosaic system. Undoubtedly he saw the theological implications of justification by faith and the fulfillment of the Law in Christ. Furthermore, if the gospel was for the whole world (Acts 1:8), the Law had to be a temporary arrangement.²⁸

ESV: Stephen must have referred to what Jesus said about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days (Mark 14:58), which John clarified as referring to the temple of Jesus' body (John 2:19–21).

With such volatile issues at stake, the antagonistic Freedmen merely need to put a subtle but deadly twist on what Stephen is saying. There is no need for wholesale fabrication.

Acts 6:15

And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

[face of an angel] God permitted His glory to shine through the face of Stephen to convince all the people that what he had said was the truth. Thus everything in the establishment of the church was miraculous. It had to be, for everything that could prevent the establishment of the church was brought to bear against it. The men used in establishing it had neither might nor power except what came from God.

ESV: Stephen's face is described as being **like the face of an angel**. There was apparently a visible manifestation of the brightness of the glory of God on his face, as there had been with Moses (Ex. 34:29–30, 35) and, to an even greater extent, with Jesus at his transfiguration (Matt. 17:2).

Clarke: **Saw his face, as it had been the face of an angel**—Sayings like this are frequent among the Jewish writers, who represent God as distinguishing eminent men by causing a glory to shine from their faces. Rabbi Gedalia said that, “when Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh, they appeared like those angels which minister before the face of the Lord; for their stature appeared greater, and the splendor of their faces was like the sun, and their eyes like the wheels of the sun; their beard like clusters of grapes, and their words like thunder and lightning; and that, through fear of them, those who were present fell to the earth.”

cf. *confer*, compare

²⁸Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:368). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Barnes: The face of an angel. This expression is one evidently denoting that he manifested evidence of sincerity, gravity, fearlessness, confidence in God. It is used in the Old Testament to denote peculiar wisdom, 2 Samuel 14:17, 19:27. In Genesis 33:10, it is used to denote peculiar majesty and glory, as if it were the face of God. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai from communing with God, it is said that the skin of his face shone, so that the children of Israel were afraid to come nigh to him, Exodus 34:29,30, 2 Corinthians 3:7,13. Comp. Revelation 1:16, Matthew 17:2. The expression is used to denote the impression which will be produced on the countenance by communion with God; the calm serenity and composure which will follow a confident committing of all into his hands. It is not meant that there was anything miraculous in the case of Stephen, but is an expression denoting his calmness, and dignity, and confidence in God; all of which were so marked on his countenance, that it impressed them with clear proofs of his innocence and piety. The expression is very common in the Jewish writings. It is common for deep feeling, sincerity, and confidence in God, to impress themselves on the countenance. Any deep emotion will do this; and it is to be expected that religious feeling, the most tender and solemn of all feeling, will diffuse seriousness, serenity, calmness, and peace, not affected sanctimoniousness, over the countenance.

BBC: Ancients viewed perjury as an affront to the god in whose name the false witnesses had sworn an oath. False witnesses in a capital case were to be executed if found out (Deut. 19:18-19; also under Roman law), but in this case Stephen will seem to confirm half their charge in reply to the high priest's interrogation (Acts 7:1). He is for the law (cf. the bulk of his quotations in Acts 7) but in some sense against the temple (Acts 7). Jewish tradition praised those who had suffered to preserve the ancestral traditions based on Scripture; its defenders would regard Stephen as apostate. The accusers spoke first in a case.

McGee: Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin, and false witnesses are brought in. The false witnesses tell a half-truth, of course. The Lord Jesus did say that they would destroy this temple and He would raise it up again, but He was speaking of the temple of His body. At His trial, the false witnesses misunderstood that and misrepresented it. So here, they misunderstand Stephen when he says that the temple in Jerusalem will be left desolate. Actually, it was desolate without Christ anyway. And they twist what he is saying about the customs of Moses. Of course men are not saved by the Law but by grace. But salvation in Moses' day was by grace even as it is today. Their accusation is based on only a partial truth.

They see something marvelous in the face of Stephen. This man came closer to being an angel than any man who has ever lived.²⁹

Spurgeon: His holy and glad heart beamed forth in his countenance, a flash of coming glory lit up his face, and even his foes were forced to see it; yet neither this sight nor his eloquent address could touch their cruel hearts, for they thirsted for his blood, and would have it.

²⁹McGee, J. V. (1997, c1981). *Thru the Bible commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.) (4:536). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Clarke: The history of the apostolic Church is a series of wonders. Every thing that could prevent such a Church from being established, or could overthrow it when established, is brought to bear against it. The instruments employed in its erection and defense had neither might nor power, but what came immediately from God. They work, and God works with them; the Church is founded and built up; and its adversaries, with every advantage in their favor, cannot overthrow it. Is it possible to look at this, without seeing the mighty hand of God in the whole? He permits devils and wicked men to work—to avail themselves of all their advantages, yet counterworks all their plots and designs, turns their weapons against themselves, and promotes his cause by the very means that were used to destroy it. How true is the saying, There is neither might nor counsel against the Lord!

Chapter 6 describes the background of Stephen's missionary work, which leads to his arrest. The next chapter, the longest in Acts, is devoted to Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin—the longest speech in Acts. Taken together, the two chapters complete Luke's discussion of the preaching of the gospel in Jerusalem and his description of the church in the city. After this, Luke begins reporting on the church's expansion beyond Jerusalem.

The last verse of chapter 6 sets the stage for Stephen's long speech before the Sanhedrin. Luke says that to the Sanhedrin members Stephen appeared to have "the face of an angel" (6:15). Luke probably means to tell us that Stephen is being led by the Holy Spirit (6:3, 5), and that the speech we will read is inspired by God. The high priest asks Stephen if the charges brought against him are true (7:1). This high priest was probably Caiaphas, who held office until A.D. 36. As president of the Sanhedrin, he was the chief judge in Jewish trials.