

**Acts 6:1-7 Teacher's Lesson**  
**Growing Pains**  
**(Insights on Leadership & Polity)**

**Review:** The key verse to Acts is 1:8 (read loud in unison). Acts has 28 chapters can be divided into three sections:

Jerusalem <b>Chapters 1-7</b> 2 years	Judea & Samaria <b>Chapters 8-12</b> 13 years	End of the Earth <b>Chapters 13-28</b> 14 years
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**A-S-C-E-N-D-S:** The events of the first section can be remembered using the word “ascends”. In chapter 1, Jesus **A**scends. In chapter 2, the **S**pirit descends. In chapters 3-4, we read about the miraculous **C**ure of a lame man. Chapter 5a records **E**mbezzlement committed by Ananias and his wife Sapphira. Chapter 5b contains the account of a miraculous **N**ight release from jail. The letter **D** is for **D**eacons chosen (chapter 6). Finally, in chapter 7 **S**tephen was stoned (the first Christian martyr).<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction:** The early church wasn't perfect. We already studied how it had people like Ananias and Sapphira in it. Today we'll see how the church became a victim of its own success when it grew so fast that people's needs were not being met. We will study the appointment of the first deacons, and we will also be introduced to a remarkable deacon named Stephen.

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**\*\*\*\*What growing pains did the early church suffer (6:1-6)?** Church growth outstripped the church's administrative capacity to the point that some widows' needs were not being met.

**1. What was the difference between Hellenist Jews and Hebrew Jews (6:1)?** Greek word for the Greek language is *hellénistés*. The Hellenists were Jews born outside Judah who mainly spoke Greek. The Hebrews (*hebraios*) were Jews born in Judah who mainly spoke Hebrew (or Aramaic).<sup>2</sup>

**How did all these Hellenistic widows end up in Judah?** It was common for retired Hellenistic Jewish to move to Judah to live out their last days. Since wives commonly outlive their husbands, there were a large number of Hellenistic widows in Judah.

**2. What was the daily distribution (6:1)?** See 6:2, *Deuteronomy 27:19*. As is evident from 6:2, it was a daily distribution of food to needy widows. Unlike modern Western governments, the Romans had no welfare system, no safety net. Thus it was common for the synagogues to take care of their widows. Since the Christian Jewish widows had left the synagogue and had instead joined the church, the duty of taking care of them now fell on the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Seminar notes, Walk Thru the Bible, Atlanta, early 1980s.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, 105.

ESV **James 1:27** Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction . . .

**3. What does the New Testament teach about which widows the church should support?**

*See 1 Timothy 5:3-16.* The early church continued the practice of caring for widows as it spread through the Roman Empire; it was not unique to the Jerusalem church. Four key prerequisites were: truly in need, no family who could help, godliness, and over sixty.

**4. Based on 6:1-2, why were these widows being neglected?** *See 4:34-35.* It seems to have been simple oversight caused by sudden and explosive church growth. Perhaps the language differences created a communication problem. Initially, the apostles were in charge of rightly using the donations, but the two jobs of keeping up with the widows and teaching the World soon overwhelmed them. It was an honest mistake.

**5. What solution did the Twelve recommend in 6:2-4?** Their solution was for the church to appoint seven men devoted to the duty of the daily distribution. Thus we have the Twelve and the Seven.

**6. How were seven men expected to do what twelve were unable to do (6:2-4)?** The problem was that the apostles had also been tasked with the primary task of the ministry of the Word (6:2, 4). Their key to success was division of labor (specialization).

**Were these seven the first deacons (6:3)? Why?** The word “serve” (6:2) is from the verb *diakoneo* and is related to our word “deacon” (“servant”). Although these seven men are not called “deacons” anywhere in this passage, from ancient times the church has viewed them as the first deacons.

**7. Based on 6:2, who was involved in the decision making process?** The apostles summoned the “full number” of disciples<sup>3</sup>, which numbered in the thousands. Where such a large assembly was able to meet is unknown. Roman amphitheaters would hold thousands of people, but there was not one in Jerusalem. Despite growing opposition from the Sanhedrin, perhaps they still met in Solomon’s Portico.

**Why seven men (6:3)? Why not ten or twelve or twenty?** This was evidently in accordance with what was then the Jewish convention of setting up boards of seven men for a particular purpose.<sup>4</sup> It was convention.

**According to 6:3, what five qualifications were the seven to have?** They had to be **1)** men (*anér*; which refers to males), **2)** of good repute, **3)** full of the Spirit, **4)** full of wisdom, and **5)** chosen by the church.

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<sup>3</sup> “Disciples” (6:1) is used here for the first time in Acts. It is from *mathétés* (“mathematics”) and means learner, pupil, apprentice, or adherent (BAGD, 485).

<sup>4</sup> Marshall, 135.

**8. Why did the seven have to be male just to serve tables (6:2-3)?** Gender would seemingly play no importance in serving tables. The situation here is that this was, to some extent, also a leadership position. It might have literally involved serving tables, but the bigger picture is that the funds had to be managed, food had to be purchased and prepared, people trained and managed, and widows screened to be sure they were qualified. It shows that leadership in the early church was reserved for men. Jesus chose only men as apostles and now the apostles specified that only men serve as so-called “deacons”. Other Scriptures indicate that only men are to serve as elders (overseers, pastors) and only men are to teach other men.

**9. Why did they need to be of good repute (6:3)?** These men handled the church’s money! Like bankers, they need to be men well recognized as of good character, as those not likely to be tempted to misuse the funds. Repute and reputation are related words. Their good reputation needed to have preceded them.

**10. What does it mean to be full of the Spirit (6:3)?** It means the men chosen were to be led by the Spirit, influenced by the Spirit. Even though they were to handle physical things (food), they needed to be spiritually minded men.

ESV **Galatians 5:22-23** . . . the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control;

**11. Why was it important that they be full of wisdom (6:3)?** Since they were spending the church’s money, they needed to be known as men who were wise. Men with a history of foolish endeavors were disqualified. They were to be competent in administration.<sup>5</sup>

**12. In 6:4, what ministry did the apostles plan to concentrate on?** They purposed to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word (evangelism and teaching).

**Application:** It is important for church leaders to be freed to devote time to prayer and the ministry of the Word. In the 1800s, pastors often put the letters V.D.M. after their name. It is Latin for *Verbi Domini Minister*, “Minister of the Word of the Lord”.<sup>6</sup> As one pastor told his church, you can have either my head or my hands.

ESV **1 Timothy 5:17** Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

**According to 6:5, how did the church feel about the apostles’ proposal?** It pleased the whole gathering.

**13. What do you suppose would have happened had the apostles’ proposal had not pleased the whole gathering (6:5)?** If there had been considerable opposition to the proposal, the apostles might have done more persuading, altered the proposal, or sought an alternative solution. One of leaderships’ roles is to identify problems, suggests solutions, and then to be able to persuade the church of a certain course of action. The building of consensus

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce, 128.

<sup>6</sup> Kistemaker, 223.

by the leadership is critical to the health of a church. Whenever any church undertakes major decisions, it should only be when it pleases the whole gathering! The apostles did not simply announce a new policy (“Deacons!”); they presented it to the church in a winsome way so as to get everyone on board with it.

**Church Polity:** Hebrews 13:17 says the church is to “obey” its leaders and “submit” to them. However, the word for “obey” is from the root *peitho*, which fundamentally means to persuade. It has the flavor of obeying after having been convinced. The word for “submit” does mean submit, but it is qualified. It is the idea of yielding after a contest or struggle. Mindless obedience and submission is not the picture painted by these two words.

**Quote of the Day:** “For all the prophetic authority of the Twelve, it is striking that on such critical decisions the discernment of the community is invited.”<sup>7</sup>

**Who actually picked these seven men (6:5)?** The congregation picked them.

**14. Why is it noteworthy that the seven were picked by the full number of disciples rather than by the apostles (6:5)?** Though we have to be careful when drawing conclusions from historical narrative, this does begin to suggest the type of relationship that should exist between a church and its leaders. A problem came up; the leaders suggested a solution to the church; the solution involved the church selecting the men who would carry out the duty. The church selected them, the leaders appointed them.

**The Greek word for church is *ekklésia*. It means those who are called out. Called out why? To do what?** Outside the New Testament, *ekklésia* referred to the meetings of the Greek city-states. It was not a religious word. It was a political word. The secular *ekklésia* was a decision-making body. That Jesus used the word *ekklésia* to describe His new covenant people suggests the church as a whole has the authority to make decisions that are binding on its members.

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson, 106.

**15. Why is it significant that all seven have Greek names (6:5)?** This suggests they were Hellenistic themselves and would be in tune with the needs of the Hellenistic widows since they were fluent in Greek.

**What did Luke record about Stephen that was not said about any of the other men (6:5)?**  
Luke recorded that Stephen was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.

**16. Each of the seven was a man full of the Spirit or else he would not have been qualified for the job (6:3). Why did Luke call attention to Stephen in particular (6:5)?** *See 6:8-7:60.*  
Luke wanted to call attention to Stephen because of what happened next (his trial and martyrdom).

It is no coincidence that Stephen and Phillip were listed first in this list of seven (6:5). Both these men went on to play important roles in Luke's narrative. Nothing is recorded about what the other five did after this.

**The apostles laid hands on the seven (6:6). What did that symbolize?** In this case it symbolized the transfer of authority from the apostles to the seven and it set these men apart as those with official duties.

**Ordination:** An ordination service is when the church formally recognizes someone for a special ministry. Often the leadership of the church lays hands on that person in symbolic authorization of the special task or ministry to which he has been appointed. The English Bible never uses the word "ordained" to refer to those who have been set apart for ministry, but the idea of it is clearly biblical. (Other words not in the Bible: missionary, rapture, Trinity, Bible, sovereignty).

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**\*\*\*\*What progress report did Luke give in 6:7?** Luke reported a great increase in the number of disciples. The growth was not merely addition, it was multiplication.

**17. Why did Luke point out that so many priests were coming to the Faith (6:7)?** Not only is it interesting history, but it shows that the lower tier of priests were not necessarily in agreement with the attitudes of the ruling priestly families (the Sadducees).

**What does it mean to be "obedient" to the faith?**

**So What?**

**18. Based on 6:1-6, what qualities should we look for in church leaders?**

**19. What can be learned about decision making in church from 6:1-5?**

\*\*\*\* = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

• These lessons are designed for a 45 minute session and are based on the text of the ESV.

- You can hear this lesson being taught at [SermonAudio.Com/NTRF](http://SermonAudio.Com/NTRF).

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