

Acts Chapter 6

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 ministrations."

“When the number of disciples was multiplied” (see note on 4:4). The figure could have reached over 20,000 men and women.

“Grecians”: They believed their widows were not receiving an adequate share of the food the church provided for their care (1 Tim. 5:3-16).

The “Grecians” were not Greeks but Hellenists who allowed Greek culture and language to influence their lives. For some reason Hellenistic “widows” were not receiving the same care as the other widows. The apostles have become overburdened serving “tables” (not waiting on, but dispensing communal funds), and seek others to assist them.

“Grecians ... Hebrews”: “Hellenistic Jews” were Jews from the Diaspora; “Hebrews” were the native Jewish population of Palestine. The Hellenists’ absorption of aspects of Greek culture made them suspect to the Palestinian Jews.

Though these seven are not deacons as such, that office later arises to meet similar needs (1 Tim. 3:8-13). The biblical principles for the care of widows should not be seen merely from this historical incident. One must always look for the full teaching of the Scriptures. The apostle Paul provides extensive teaching on this subject (in 1 Tim. 5:3-16).

We see here, the church growing to a large number. As long as the church was small and they each were greatly needed, they were all pulling in one direction. They were working for a common cause. Now that the number has gotten so large, there is murmuring.

Some of the Greeks think the Hebrew widows are being cared for better than the Greeks. It seems that the early church was very concerned about the needs of widows. Many times, widows lived in the church and prayed for the church.

In (1 Timothy 5:9), Paul tells them to not take a widow under 60 years.

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."

“Serve tables”: The word translated “tables” can refer to tables used in monetary matters (Matt. 21:12; Mark 11:15; John 2:15), as well as those used for serving meals. To be involved either in financial matters or in serving meals would take the 12 away from their first priority (see note on verse 4).

These twelve disciples who seemed to be the leaders of all the rest are explaining that they should not be encumbered by trying to see to the needs of all of these widows. The man or woman of God ministering has enough to do staying in the Word of God and bringing spiritual guidance to the people.

Someone else should see to the financial responsibilities of the church. If they had to stop and see to the physical needs of the people, they will not be able to care for their spiritual needs.

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."

“Seven men”: These were not deacons in terms of the later church office (1 Tim. 3:8-13), although they performed some of the same duties. Stephen and Philip (the only ones of the 7 mentioned elsewhere in Scripture), clearly were evangelists, not deacons.

Acts later mentions elders (14:23; 20:17), but not deacons. It seems, therefore, that a permanent order of deacons was not established at that time.

“Full of the Holy Ghost” (verse 5, see notes on 2:4).

Seven, as we have said before, means spiritually complete. We see that these seven were to be men who were very close to God. They must be wise men to take care of the finances of the body of Christ. They must be honest and of good report.

This is one of the Scriptures used when churches choose seven deacons to raise the finances of the church. Many people want to be a deacon of the church until they learn that the deacons are responsible for the financial needs of the church.

Acts 6:4 "But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."

Prayer and the ministry of the Word (verse 2), define the highest priorities of church leaders.

The twelve apostles were not to be bothered with anything, except the spiritual needs of the people. Perhaps that is one of the problems in churches today.

We have made business men out of our ministers. They learn as much about the way to raise money, to have a bus ministry, and to satisfy the I.R.S. as they do about the Word of God. They should not be burdened with these administration duties. It takes too much of their time away from prayer and study of the Word.

Verses 5-7: The gracious nature of the early church is seen in its diligence and willingness to correct the irritation. This graciousness can be seen in that all seven men who are chosen have Greek names. The result: God prospers the work.

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:"

The seven men chosen by the church all had Greek names, implying they were all Hellenists. The church in a display of love and unity, may have chosen them to rectify the apparent imbalance involving the Hellenistic widows.

“They chose Stephen ... Nicolas”: For Stephen’s ministry (see 6:9 – 7:60). His martyrdom became the catalyst for the spread of the gospel beyond Palestine (8:1-4; 11:19).

Philip also played a key role in the spread of the gospel (8:4-24; 26-40). Nothing certain is known of the other five. According to some early traditions, Prochorus became the Apostle John’s amanuensis when he wrote his gospel and Nicolas was a Gentile convert to Judaism from Antioch.

“Stephen” was one of the seven chosen to assist the apostles in the administrative affairs of the early Jerusalem church. His name and activities strongly suggest that he was not a Jew of the strictest Palestinian tradition, but a Hellenist. That is, he was one of those who accepted at least some Greek customs.

Among the seven, he seems to be noted for his outstanding character. He was full of the Spirit, faith, wisdom, and power. His career was brief but illustrious. He was a forceful apologist and a worker of miracles.

God’s approval of Stephens’ work was evident by the angelic countenance given to him (verse 15). Nevertheless, the Jews led by a young radical named Saul (later Paul), rejected his message and martyred him. Stephen is mentioned only (in Acts 6-8; 11:19; and 22:20). Of these seven of course, Stephen was the most known to us. These men were above reproach. They were men of high character. These men would be fair in all their dealings.

Proselyte means a new comer. In Hebrew, it meant stranger. Philip and Stephen are the only two out of the list that the Bible tells us anything else about. These are like many deeply sincere people in the church today who work in the background and do not feel the need to be recognized by others.

Acts 6:6 "Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid [their] hands on them."

“When they had prayed, they laid their hands on them”: This expression was used of Jesus when He healed (Mark 6:5; Luke 4:40; 13:13; 28:8), and sometimes indicated being taken prisoner (5:18; Mark 14:46). In the Old Testament, offerors of the sacrifices laid their hands on the animal as an expression of identification (Lev. 8:14; 18:22; Heb. 6:2).

But in the symbolic sense, it signified the affirmation, support, and identification with someone and his ministry (see 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim. 1:6; Num. 27:23).

This is just a ceremony to anoint these men to the job they are to do. They were installed formerly when the apostles laid hands on them.

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."

One of Luke's periodic statements summarizing the growth of the church and the spread of the gospel (2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 9:31; 12:24; 13:49; 16:5; 19:20).

"Great company of the priests": The conversion of large numbers of priests may account for the vicious opposition that arose against Stephen.

"Were obedient to the faith" (see note on Rom. 1:5).

We see here, that these apostles having their priorities straight caused the Word of God to increase greatly. A church is only as powerful as the prayers that go up for it. These apostles spent much time in prayer and their ministry was powerful because of it.

Disciples here, is the same as followers of Christ. This strong message of God's Word even convinced many of the priests and they believed also.

Acts 6:8 "And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people."

"Wonders and miracles" (see note on 2:19).

Notice, that Stephen was full of faith and power. This is saying that the power of the Holy Spirit was so great in Stephen, that the great wonders and miracles were a by-product of the power of God in him.

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."

It seems that this verse describes 3 synagogues: The Synagogue of the Freedmen, a second composed of Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and a third composed of those from Cilicia and Asia. Cultural and linguistic differences among the 3 groups make it unlikely that all attended the same synagogue.

"Synagogue": These were meeting places which began in the intertestamental period where the dispersed Jews (usually Hellenists), who did not have temple access, could meet in their community to worship and read the Old Testament (see note on Mark 1:21).

"Libertines": Descendants of Jewish slaves captured by Pompeii (63 B.C.), and taken to Rome. They were later freed and formed a Jewish community there.

“Cyrenians”: Men from Cyrene, a city in North Africa. Simon, the man conscripted to carry Jesus’ cross, was a native of Cyrene (Luke 23:26).

“Alexandrians”: Alexandria, another major North African city, was located near the mouth of the Nile River. The powerful preacher Apollos was from Alexandria (see note on 18:24).

“Cilicia and of Asia”: Roman provinces in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Since Paul’s hometown (Tarsus) was located in Cilicia, he probably attended this synagogue.

“Disputing with Stephen”: The word translated “argued” signifies a formal debate. They no doubt focused on such themes as the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the Old Testament evidence that He was the Messiah.

The “Synagogue” was the assembly of the Jews like the Christian assembly, but founded before Christ. There evidently were synagogues in Jerusalem composed of various ethnic groups. The “Libertines” were slaves who had been freed along with their descendants. “Stephan” has an active ministry among these Hellenistic Jews.

It seems that there were many synagogues at this time. These different nationalities of people had their own synagogue, and that is why there are so many different names. These Libertines were Jews from Rome. The Cyrenians were from North Africa. Alexandrians were Jewish people from Alexandria and were very large in number.

Then there were also, some from Asia. Whether they did not hear, or whether they did not receive what they heard, is not explained. They just came against Stephen.

Acts 6:10 "And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake."

His (Stephen's), message was with power of the Holy Spirit. Stephen's message was so powerful that they could not overcome it.

Verses 6:11-13: Stephen is falsely accused of blaspheming in three areas:

- (1) “God” (verse 11);
- (2) “Moses” or “the law” (verses 11, 13); and
- (3) The temple (verse 13).

Stephen answers these charges in his sermon.

Acts 6:11 "Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and [against] God."

“Blasphemous words against Moses and ... God”: Unable to prevail over Stephen in open debate, his enemies resorted to deceit and conspiracy. As with Jesus (Matt. 26:59-61), they

secretly recruited false witnesses to spread lies about Stephen. The charges were serious, since blasphemy was punishable by death (Lev. 24:16).

Suborn means to throw in stealthily or introduce by collusion. They had not heard Stephen blaspheme Moses or God, but said that to get Stephen in trouble.

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,"

They had lied about Stephen. Their accusations were untrue. He gave no resistance, so they caught Stephen and brought him before the religious rulers.

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 is much like the accusers of Jesus. They have no reason to accuse Stephen of anything. The whole accusation was a lie.

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."

“Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place”: Another lie, since Jesus’ words (John 2:19), referred to His own body (John 2:21).

The Law of Moses was the basis of worship in the temple and the synagogues. They themselves, had twisted the law until it was hardly recognizable. They had taken Stephen's message and twisted it into something ugly, instead of the beautiful message of promise that it was.

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”: Pure, calm, unruffled composure, reflecting the presence of God (Exodus 34:29-35).

One of the laws of Moses said not to be a false witness. They were not concerned with Moses' law. They were just jealous. As they all looked at Stephen, they saw an inward light that made his face as the face of an angel. This should have told them who he was, but they ignored this. This light within him was the presence of the risen Christ.

Acts Chapter 6 Questions

1. When the number of disciples increased, what problem arose?
2. Who was the murmuring about?

3. What was the complaint?
4. Who did the twelve apostles call to discuss the problem with?
5. These twelve apostles' job was what?
6. How many men were chosen to take care of these needs?
7. What attributes did they have to have?
8. What two things did these 12 give themselves too continually?
9. What is one of the problems in churches today pertaining to the ministers?
10. What was Stephen full of?
11. What was the name of the only other man well known in the Bible?
12. What is a Hellenist?
13. What does proselyte mean?
14. When they set these seven before the apostles, what did the apostles do?
15. In verse 7, we learn that a great many of the _____ were obedient to the faith.
16. A church is only as powerful as what?
17. Disciples in verse 7 meant whom?
18. Stephen full of _____ and _____, did great wonders.
19. What did these different names of synagogues mean?
20. What did they do with Stephen?
21. They were not able to resist what about Stephen?
22. What does suborn mean?
23. What did they say Stephen said about Moses?
24. Who did they stir up with these accusations?
25. What did the false witnesses say?

26. What lie did they tell in verse 14?

27. All that sat in the council saw Stephen's face as what?