

Servants in the Church

Acts 6:1-6

I. Introduction

- A. “In this chapter we see two of Satan's favorite methods of assailing the church that he has employed throughout history: internal dissension (vv. 1-7) and external persecution (vv. 8-15).”¹

II. **6 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.**

A. Disciples vs added to their number

1. “Disciple” lit: learner²
2. “The number of the disciples of Jesus continued to grow. This is the first mention of the word “disciple” in Acts, where it occurs 28 times. In addition, the word appears about 238 times in the Gospels, but nowhere else in the New Testament.”³

B. Problem: favoritism = Hellenists widows in the daily distribution of food

1. Hebrews vs. Hellenists

- a. “Two types of Jews made up the Jerusalem church. Some were native ‘Hebrews,’ who had lived primarily in Palestine, spoke Aramaic predominantly but also Greek, and used the Hebrew Scriptures. The others were ‘Hellenists,’ who originally lived outside Palestine (Jews of the Diaspora), but were now living in Palestine.”⁴ “The main distinction between the two groups was probably linguistic: the Hellenists were Jews who habitual language was Greek and who attended Greek-speaking synagogues; the Hebrews spoke Aramaic (or Mishnaic Hebrew) and attended synogues where the service was conducted in Hebrew.”⁵
- b. “It seems from history that many Jewish families who lived and worked in other countries returned to Palestine in the father's later years so that he

1 Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts” (2021 ed.), <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.

2 Bob Utley, “Luke the Historian: Acts” (Bible Lessons International, 2012), <https://bible.org/seriespage/acts-6>. Cf., Greek Lexicon, “Strong’s 3101” <https://greeklexicon.org/lexicon/strongs/3101/>.

3 Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts” (2021 ed.), <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>. Cf. Bob Utley, “Luke the Historian: Acts” (Bible Lessons International, 2012), <https://bible.org/seriespage/acts-6>.

4 Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts” (2021 ed.), <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.

5 F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 120

could be buried in the Promised Land. Therefore, there were many widows in Palestine, especially the Jerusalem area.”⁶

c. “The Hebrews and the Hellenists had their own separate synagogues in Jerusalem.”⁷ “But when they became Christians, they came together in one fellowship. As the church grew, some of the Christians believed that the church leaders were discriminating against the Hellenists unfairly (cf. Eph. 4:31; Heb. 12:15).”⁸

d. ““The early church had problems but, according to Acts, it also had leaders who moved swiftly to ward off corruption and find solutions to internal conflicts, supported by people who listened to each other with open minds and responded with good will.”⁹

C. ILL:

“A Chicago bank that once asked for a letter of recommendation on a young Bostonian being considered for employment. The Boston investment house could not say enough about the young man. His father, they wrote, was a Cabot; his mother was a Lowed. Further back was a happy blend of Saltonstalls, Peabodys, and other of Boston’s first families. His recommendation was given without hesitation. Several days later, the Chicago bank sent a note saying the information supplied was altogether inadequate. It read: ‘We are not contemplating using the young man for breeding purposes. Just for work.’”¹⁰

D. APPL: Verses from the Word

III. 2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

A. Three ministries, gifts and callings

1. Apostles

6 Bob Utley, “Luke the Historian: Acts” (Bible Lessons International, 2012), <https://bible.org/seriespage/acts-6>. Cf., Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts.”

7 *The Jewish Encyclopaedia*, s.v. “Alexandrians in Jerusalem,” by Emil Schürer, 1:371-72. See also Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ*, ch. xvi: Synagogues: Their Origin, Structure, and Outward Arrangements.” As cited in Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts” (2021 ed.), <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.

8 Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts” (2021 ed.), <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.

9 Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*. Vol. 2: *The Acts of the Apostles*.

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 2:81. As quoted in Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts” (2021 ed.), <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.

10 Bible.org, Submitted by Kathleen Peterson, Source unknown, <https://bible.org/illustration/recommendation>.

- a. The 12 = the Apostles = lit: delegate, messenger
 - i. Footnote: All are apostles
 - ii. Romans 1:1-6, “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, 2 which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, 3 concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 4 and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, 5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, 6 including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.”
- b. Prayer
 - i. “Observe here, that the apostles put prayer before preaching in their work, their conflict with the power of evil being more especially carried on in it, as well as their realization of the power of God for the strength and wisdom they needed ...”¹¹
 - ii. “Prayer is the most powerful and effective means of service in the Kingdom of God ... It is the most dynamic work which God has entrusted to His saints, but it is also the most neglected ministry open to the believer.”¹²
 - iii. ““If the church today would regain the spiritual power of the early church it must recover the truth and practice of prayer as a vital working force.””¹³
- 2. Disciples: All disciples do not preach the Word
- 3. Table Servers
 - a. “This is not to suggest that serving tables is a menial task, because every ministry in the church is important. But it is a matter of priorities; the apostles were doing jobs that others could do just as well. D. L. Moody used to say that it was better to put ten men to work than to try to do the work of

11 John N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*. 5 vols. Revised ed. (New York: Loizeaux Brothers Publishers, 1942), 4:25. As quoted in Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts” (2021 ed.),

<https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.

12 D. Edmond Hiebert, *Working With God: Scriptural Studies in Intercession* (New York: Carlton Press, 1987), 19-20. As quoted in Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts” (2021 ed.),

<https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.

13 D. Edmond Hiebert, *Working With God: Scriptural Studies in Intercession* (New York: Carlton Press, 1987), 19-20. As quoted in Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts” (2021 ed.),

<https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.

ten men. Certainly it is better for you, for the workers you enlist, and for the church as a whole.”¹⁴

- b. “‘Serving tables’ probably involved the organization and administration of ministry to the widows, rather than simply serving as waiters or dispensers (cf. Matt. 21:12; Luke 19:23).”¹⁵

B. First Part of the Solution: The 12 summoned the full number of the disciples

1. “Church problems also give us an opportunity to exercise our faith, not only faith in the Lord, but also faith in each other. The leaders suggested a solution, and all the members agreed with it. The assembly selected seven qualified men, and the apostles set them apart for ministry. The church was not afraid to adjust their structure in order to make room for a growing ministry. When structure and ministry conflict, this gives us an opportunity to trust God for the solution. It is tragic when churches destroy ministry because they refuse to modify their structure. The apostles were not afraid to share their authority and ministry with others.”¹⁶
2. “We commonly call these seven men of Acts 6 ‘deacons’ because the Greek noun *diakonos* is used in Acts 6:1 ... [‘distribution, ESV’], and the verb *diakoneo* (‘serve’) [and: take care of, wait upon] is used in Acts 6:2. However, this title is not given to them in this chapter, although you find deacons mentioned in Philippians 1:1 and their qualifications given in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. The word simply means “a servant.”¹⁷
3. There are priorities for different people’s gifts and ministries.
4. All ministries matter = table waiters = from the disciples
 - a. All leaders in the church should have spiritual maturity
5. They were to pick people out among their peers
 - a. Brothers first
 - b. Good repute

C. ILL:

“A large group of European pastors came to one of D. L. Moody’s Northfield

14 Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: NT* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 343.

15 Richard N. Longenecker, “The Acts of the Apostles.” In *John-Acts*. Vol. 9 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. 12 vols. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelein and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 331. As cited in Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts” (2021 ed.), <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.

16 Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: NT* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 343. Cf. Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts” (2021 ed.), <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.

17 Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: NT* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 343. Cf. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 120

Bible Conferences in Massachusetts in the late 1800s. Following the European custom of the time, each guest put his shoes outside his room to be cleaned by the hall servants overnight. But of course this was America and there were no hall servants.

Walking the dormitory halls that night, Moody saw the shoes and determined not to embarrass his brothers. He mentioned the need to some ministerial students who were there, but met with only silence or pious excuses. Moody returned to the dorm, gathered up the shoes, and, alone in his room, the world's only famous evangelist began to clean and polish the shoes. Only the unexpected arrival of a friend in the midst of the work revealed the secret.

When the foreign visitors opened their doors the next morning, their shoes were shined. They never know by whom. Moody told no one, but his friend told a few people, and during the rest of the conference, different men volunteered to shine the shoes in secret. Perhaps the episode is a vital insight into why God used D. L. Moody as He did. He was a man with a servant's heart and that was the basis of his true greatness.¹⁸

D. APPL:

1. All you do matters.
2. God gives greater honor to the gifts that lack it.
3. Bloom where God has planted you.

IV. 5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

A. Second Part of the Solution

B. Seven appointed by the 12

1. “Selecting seven men may go back to the tradition in Jewish communities where seven respected men managed the public business in an official council.”¹⁹
2. Laid hands on them / Set apart for ministry

C. Administration / Discernment

18 Gary Inrig, *A Call to Excellence*, (Victor Books, a division of SP Publ., Wheaton, Ill; 1985), p. 98. As quoted by Bible.org, <https://bible.org/illustration/man-servant%E2%80%99s-heart>.

19 Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts." In *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*. Ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Scripture Press Publications, Victor Books, 1983), 367. As quoted in Thomas Constable, "Notes on Acts" (2021 ed.), <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.

1. “All seven men whom the congregation chose had Greek names. Luke gave the impression, by using only Greek names, that these seven were from the Hellenistic group in the church, though many Palestinian Jews at that time had Greek names.²⁰ Thus Hellenists appear to have been given responsibility for settling a Hellenist complaint—a wise approach.”²¹
- D. “Problems also give us the opportunity to express our love. The Hebrew leaders and the predominantly Hebrew members selected six men who were Hellenists and one man who was both a Gentile and a proselyte! What an illustration of Romans 12:10 and Philippians 2:1–4! When we solve church problems, we must think of others and not of ourselves only.”²²
- E. Stephen
1. “The emphasis in Stephen’s life is on fullness: he was full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3, 10), full of faith (Acts 6:5), and full of power (Acts 6:8). In Scripture, to be ‘full of’ means ‘to be controlled by.’ This man was controlled by the Spirit, faith, wisdom, and power. He was God-controlled man yielding to the Holy Spirit ...”²³
 2. “To be full of the Spirit implies two things: 1) that the person is saved (cf. Rom. 8:9); 2) that the person is led by the Spirit (cf. Rom. 8:14).
 3. It seems that one’s “fullness” is related to one’s continually being filled (PRESENT PASSIVE IMPERATIVE of Eph. 5:18).”²⁴
 4. “full of Faith” = “The term faith came from an OT word (i.e., *emeth*) that originally meant a person whose feet were in a stable stance. It came to be used metaphorically for someone who was trustworthy, faithful, dependable, and loyal.”²⁵
- V. “This pericope helps us see several very important things about the priorities of the early church. First, the church showed concern for both spiritual and physical needs. Its leaders gave priority to spiritual needs (prayer and the ministry of the Word), but they also gave attention to correcting injustice and helping the poor. This reflects the

20 R. J. Knowling, “The Acts of the Apostles.” In *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*. 2 (1912):1-554. 4th ed. Edited by W. Robertson Nicoll (London: 5 vols. Hodder and Stoughton, 1900-12), 2:170. As cited in Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts” (2021 ed.), <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.

21 Thomas Constable, “Notes on Acts” (2021 ed.), <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.

22 Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: NT* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 343.

23 Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: NT* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 343, 344.

24 Bob Utley, “Luke the Historian: Acts” (Bible Lessons International, 2012), <https://bible.org/seriespage/acts-6>.

25 Bob Utley, “Luke the Historian: Acts” (Bible Lessons International, 2012), <https://bible.org/seriespage/acts-6>.

Christians' commitment to loving God wholeheartedly and loving their neighbors as themselves, God's great ethical demands.”²⁶

- A. “... the early church was willing to adapt its organizational structure and administrative procedures: to minister effectively and to meet needs. It did not view its original structure and practices as binding, but adapted traditional structures and methods to facilitate the proclamation of the gospel and the welfare of the church. In contrast, many churches today try to duplicate the form and functions of the early church because they feel bound to follow these.”²⁷
- B. Soul care involves spiritual and physical needs
 - 1. ILL: If a man is thirsty....
 - 2. APPL:
 - a. Be alert and listen
 - b. Responded to problems

All footnotes and end-notes are kept in long form for future editing purposes.

²⁶ Thomas Constable, "Notes on Acts" (2021 ed.), <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.

²⁷ Thomas Constable, "Notes on Acts" (2021 ed.), <https://www.planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/html/nt/acts/acts.htm>.