

Appointment of Deacons, and Stephen, the First Christian Martyr

Acts 6

Acts 6:1-7: *“Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. ² Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. ³ Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; ⁴ but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”*

⁵ And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, ⁶ whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. ⁷ Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.”

Background Notes

It's been said that if you're looking for the perfect church, and you find it, then don't join it. Why make it imperfect with your presence? Seriously speaking, there is no such thing as a “perfect church.” There never has been a perfect church. Because all the members of every church are imperfect people, every church has problems that need to be worked out. Praise the Lord, with God's grace, the problems **can** be worked out! It's not always easy, and some problems are huge, but with God's help they can be worked out.

In Acts 6, the early church worked out a problem that arose in their midst. Verse 1: *“Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.”* It appears that the Hellenist Christians (Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews) complained that the Greek-speaking widows were not being cared for as well as the native Israeli Christian widows. Notice that the early Christians were already doing what the New Testament book of 1 Timothy commands - caring for needy widows. The mention of the “tables” (v2) either refers to tables for food or for money to care for the widows. Caring for needy widows and children is a responsibility of every church.

1 Timothy 5 is a well-known passage about caring for widows. *“Honor widows who are really widows. But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God. Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications*

and prayers night and day... But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. Do not let a widow under sixty years old be taken into the number, and not unless she has been the wife of one man, well reported for good works: if she has brought up children, if she has lodged strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has relieved the afflicted, if she has diligently followed every good work." (1 Timothy 5:3-10).

This passage indicates that the early churches already had what could be called a semi-official "needy widows list." 1 Timothy was written about thirty years after the events in Acts 6. 1 Timothy 5:3 teaches that the church has a responsibility to care for widows who are "really widows" – in other words, older women who had no children or other relatives who could meet their needs, and no other means of support. Furthermore, these women should have lived, and continued to live, a godly lifestyle.

These widows were (and are) to be cared for by the church - then and today. The deacons of the local church are to handle the logistics of providing for the truly needy and godly widows of the church.

In Acts 6, how did the early church solve the internal problems of properly caring for both the Hebrew and Hellenist widows? They selected seven godly men to work out the problem! These men were the first deacons in the early Church. They were deacons in the true sense of what the word *deacon* means – they were to **serve**. The "office" of deacon mentioned in 1 Timothy 3 had not yet come into being, but these seven men certainly paved the way for the "office" of deacon in the Church.

Notice the apostles' wisdom in the procedure of selecting these seven men.

- a. They let the people do the choosing, so that no charge of favoritism could be leveled at the apostles.
- b. Seven men were selected - not just one or two who could possibly manipulate decisions, but seven.
- c. All seven men had Greek names, indicating that they would not neglect the Hellenist widows.
- d. Prayer was made for the men who were selected - this is always an excellent and appropriate step!
- e. The men were formally appointed with the laying on of hands (v6).

Doctrinal Points

1. Good churches need good deacons.

For a number of years, the U.S. Marines had a very effective recruiting slogan that some of you may remember – "Give me a few good men." And that's certainly an appropriate slogan for the church, when it comes to deacons: Give me a few **good** men!

Good churches need good deacons in order to function properly. For proper function, the pastors and teachers need to be freed up from the more practical down-to-earth needs of the church - such as logistics of new parking lots, painting Sunday school rooms, counting the collection, etc., so that the pastors and teachers can concentrate on the spiritual needs and spiritual problems of the people in the church.

According to 1 Timothy 3, there are two distinct offices in local church administration. One is the office of *elder* and the other is the office of *deacon*. Elders are the spiritual shepherds of the local church. They have the responsibility to feed (teach) the flock, to care for the other spiritual needs of the flock, and to discipline the flock. Notice what the apostles said in verse 2: *“It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables,”* and verse 4, *“But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”* Notice the emphasis on **prayer** as well as the **teaching the Word**. Spiritual shepherds should spend a lot of time in prayer for the flock, as well as teaching the flock.

The deacons have the responsibility to care for the temporal needs of the church, so that the shepherds can do their job more effectively. Verse 3 gives three qualifications for good deacons:

- a. Deacons should be spiritual** - filled with the Holy Spirit. Did you have the idea that only the elders of the church have to be spiritual - but the deacons don't? No! The Bible does **not** teach that! Both elders and deacons are to be spiritual – they just have different functions in the local church.
- b. Deacons should be wise** - filled with wisdom. It's important for deacons to have a lot of common sense and wisdom, because they're making important decisions for the church all the time – and often those decisions involve using the church's money well.
- c. Deacons should have a good reputation.** Those who are chosen to be deacons should already have proved by their steady lifestyle that they are reliable, and can do the job well.

In Acts 6, the seven men who were chosen to handle the problem of the widows had these three qualifications. No wonder the apostles were relieved, and thus were able to concentrate on the ministry of the Word and prayer.

Verse 7, *“Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.”* Even many Jewish priests were becoming believers! The early Church was growing by leaps and bounds, and it was functioning properly. Good churches need good deacons.

2. Evil people use evil tactics.

Acts 6:8-15: *“And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.”*⁹ *Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen.*¹⁰ *And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.*¹¹ *Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”*¹² *And they stirred*

up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. ¹³ They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." ¹⁵ And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel."

Stephen was one of the seven faithful men who were chosen to serve as deacons. Stephen was also a gifted speaker and miracle worker. Stephen debated and defended the Christian faith with some Jewish men from the "Synagogue of the Freedmen." These "freedmen" would have been former Jewish slaves, or descendants of slaves, who came to Jerusalem from the various parts of the Roman Empire (v9). These Jewish men didn't like the message of Christ that Stephen was preaching, but they were unable to match the wisdom and power of Stephen, or refute the truth that he was preaching. So what did they do? They did what evil people always do, even in the area of religion: they practiced evil tactics. They may even have meant to murder Stephen.

Notice the evil practices and the evil tactics that they used. They got people to falsely accuse Stephen of blasphemy (v11). They incited the crowds, and had Stephen dragged before the religious authorities (v12). They drummed up false witnesses to twist Stephen's words and message (v13-14). The men on the council saw that Stephen's face was like the face of an angel because of the presence of the Spirit of God in his life - but still they refused to believe his message.

As evil people used evil tactics in the 1st century, they will do so today. Unbelievers who hate the gospel will do whatever it takes to "*suppress the truth in unrighteousness*" (Romans 1:18). Evil people will use evil tactics.

Practical Application

Remember, there is *one interpretation* but *many applications*.

This is an important principle of *hermeneutics* (biblical interpretation). We've already discussed the proper interpretation of verse 2, when the apostles said, "*It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.*"

I've never forgotten an application of this verse from way back when I was a teen and working on staff at a Christian family camp for the summer. One of our jobs was to get up early to serve tables in the dining room. At a staff meeting, one of the guys mentioned that he had been neglecting his daily reading of Scripture because he had to get up so early to serve breakfast. But one day he read Acts 6:2, and God used it to convict him and motivate him to get up even earlier to have a "quiet time" with the Lord before work.

The proper *interpretation* of Acts 6:2 is that the apostles needed help in caring for the needy church members, but this camp staff member made a helpful personal *application* of Acts 6:2. So - when you're interpreting Scripture, it's valuable to remember that there is only *one proper interpretation* - but there may be *many applications!*