

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Acts 6:1-7 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the passage. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

ACTS 6:1-7 ESV

1 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. 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." 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. 7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

STRUCTURE

- I. The complaint: minority Jews neglected (1)
- II. The solution: the church prioritizes (2-6)
 - a. Apostles prioritize preaching and prayer by wise delegation (2-4)
 - b. The church prioritizes neglected minorities by wise representation (5-6)
- III. The fruit: the word of God increases (7)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

Acts 6:1-7 marks Satan's third tactic for derailing the church. As I detail in the comments below, he began with persecution, continued with hypocrisy, and now he caps it off with the most subtle test: distraction. Even when you see it, distraction is hard to see and easy to justify. The apostles could have easily justified "doing better next time" to care for these widows—what could be more important than caring for widows?!—but they knew their calling and refused to be distracted. They were called to preach and to pray.

But what about the widows? The church was called to prioritize them too, but the apostles couldn't do it all. They wisely invited the church to become part of the solution, and a grace-filled decision saves the church from rupture. This easily could have been the first church split, and it would have occurred right along ethnic lines (Hebraic Jews/Hellenistic Jews). Instead, it became an opportunity for expansion.

In all three demonic attacks—persecution, hypocrisy, distraction—the problem becomes an opportunity. Persecution leads to more bold preaching and more people hearing. Hypocrisy leads to great fear coming on the church and revival fires spreading. Distraction leads to the word of God multiplying even into the corrupt priesthood.

But the opportunity is not automatic. In this case, the apostles exercise wisdom by delegating, and the church exercises wisdom by choosing some from the offended party (who meet the qualifications) to become leaders. The minorities feel heard, the split is averted, the apostles fulfill their calling, and the Word of God increases.

Overall, this section functions as a transition, introducing key elements in the coming story: Stephen, who will soon be a preacher, a miracle worker, and the first martyr; Philip, who will soon be a preacher, a miracle worker, and his four daughters will prophesy; Nicolaus, the proselyte of Antioch, who foreshadows the salvation of Gentiles and the Antiochian missions base. From here forward, the Gospel marches forward beyond Jerusalem. And it spreads by the faithfulness of not just apostles, but table servers like Stephen and Philip.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 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.

—"Now in these days":

- This marks a transition from the blessing of 5:42, where the apostles "did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus." Now they are threatened to cease—not by persecution but by *distraction*.
- Thus, we mark the three-fold attack of Satan: persecution (twice in Acts 3-5), hypocrisy (Acts 5), and distraction (Acts 6). All three of these attacks endanger the preaching of God's Word. Persecution silences it; hypocrisy corrupts it; distraction diminishes it. When Satan can neither silence nor corrupt it, he aims for the next best thing: diminishment.
- This statement matches Old Testament prophetic language for the last days (cf. Joel 3:1: "In those days and at that time..."). The church is the eschatological fulfillment of God's promises for His people. Specifically, the Jerusalem church displays God's eschatological ideal by preaching continually—despite persecution and distraction—and without corruption.

—"when the disciples were increasing in number":

- "increasing" (Gk. *plethyno*):
 - This word repeats in 6:7, which also describes the blessing of God. Thus, Luke creates an *inclusio*—bookends—framing 6:1-7 as a single section.
 - This section operates as a transition from the ministry of the apostles (Acts 1-5) to the expanding circle of ministers (6-end). It also transitions from Jerusalem to Samaria and the ends of the earth (cf. 1:8).
 - 6:1 speaks of the disciples "increasing" but 6:7 of "the word of God" increasing. I'll comment on the latter under 6:7.
- The complaint that arises is associated with growth. Growth is a blessing, but it creates problems that must be addressed.

—"Hellenists... Hebrews": these were all Jewish people, but the Hellenists were culturally Greek (they spoke primarily in Greek and related to Greek customs), and the Hebrews were culturally Jewish (they spoke primarily in Aramaic and related to Jewish customs).

—"widows were being neglected in the daily distribution":

- It doesn't say they were being abused, which would be more active. They were being neglected, and the neglect was associated with growth. The minority party of Hellenists were overlooked as the movement exploded with growth.
- Even though it was unintentional, that didn't make it okay. Luke presents this as a problem that threatens to split the church along cultural lines.
- "widows... daily distribution":
 - I love that the early church provided "daily" for the weakest members of society. Every church and every Christian must champion the weak.
 - Paul later provides criteria for discerning which widows to provide for. Churches should not hand out money willy-nilly. I provided a list of criteria in the Study Guide that covered 4:32-5:11.

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."

—"twelve... seven": without the "seven", you don't get "the twelve." If these seven individuals don't step up, the twelve apostles cannot fulfill their purpose. Every part of the body of Christ is necessary. Every one of us has gifts to bring to the table.

—"summoned the full number of the disciples and said... 'pick out from among you seven men':

- The apostles clearly led the Jerusalem church, yet they entrusted the congregation with decision-making power on this issue.
- Some have interpreted this to mean that churches should be led by a congregational vote. But in Acts 15, the whole church does not gather to decide a key issue; the apostles and elders do (15:2). Paul says the elders are to direct the affairs of the church (1 Tim. 5:17).
- Elders should lead the church, but the church should be given a voice.

- Like the apostles, church leaders should be open to correction.
- Wise leaders do not just delegate tasks; they delegate authority. Here the apostles delegate authority to the church for making a particular decision. They also entrust leadership to the seven table-servers. They don't micromanage.
- Nevertheless, ultimate authority still resides with the apostles. The congregation will "pick out" seven candidates, but the apostles "will appoint" them. The language suggests they had veto power. The church does not "pick" and also "appoint." They only pick. The apostles make the final call.
- It is important to raise up leaders with real decision-making power. Elders can define the "playing field" with clear boundaries, but within that field there is freedom. In Acts 6, the apostles define which characteristics these table servers must possess, but they don't tell the church whom to choose. This implies a general leadership approach of delegation and congregational cooperation. Elders direct the affairs of the church, but they should not make every decision in the church down to the wallpaper.

—"It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables"

- The apostles do not imply that preaching matters and serving doesn't. Both preaching and serving matter.
- Reinforcing this conclusion is that in 6:1, "distribution" of food is the same Greek word as in 6:4, which is rendered, "*ministry* of the word." It's the word, *diakonia*—most often translated "ministry" or "service." Thus, there is a "ministry" of serving tables and a "ministry" of preaching Scripture. Both are ministries. Both matter. We all have different callings.
- The apostles know their lane and stay in it. This is one way Satan gets us distracted. We drive in the wrong lane. We wish we had someone else's gifts, and we shoehorn our way into ministries that don't suit us. Sometimes this looks like leaders trying to be everything to everyone. And sometimes it looks like non-leaders/teachers trying to act like leaders/teachers. Both are rooted in the same sin: people-pleasing. The leader who tries to be everything to everyone is pleasing people by saying yes to everything—and neglecting his/her calling. The non-leader who tries to be a leader is trying to please people by convincing them of his/her importance through ministry. But it backfires. People resent the person who "tries too hard" and won't accept reality.
- The apostles wisely recognize that they can't fulfill multiple callings simultaneously. They have a unique capability of serving the Word to the people. Focusing their ministry in that direction will pay huge dividends even if they feel internally like they are being selfish (by not serving tables).
- How do we balance this with Jesus washing the disciples' feet? He humbled Himself and became One who served. Should not elders/leaders be servant-hearted and willing to do "the dirty jobs"?
 - The apostles definitely should have been willing to do the dirty jobs. But this could take multiple expressions. Peter could help his wife out around the house or give her a night off by watching the kids. In other words, "doing the dirty jobs" did not have to be confined to his day job. It could apply to everyday life duties.
 - Furthermore, preaching God's Word—while in some ways "exalting" a leader—in other ways could be classified as a dirty job. These men faced the loss of all things for their faithfulness to preach God's Word. Paul talks to Timothy about the elders who "work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). Ezra was renowned for his strenuous labor: "Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach its statutes and rules in Israel" (Ez. 7:10). As one who has preached hundreds of sermons, I can testify that it's the hardest work I do.
 - Personally, I want to do the "dirty work" of digging, digging, digging in God's Word to bring out the treasure—this is my ministry—while at the same time showing servant-heartedness in the everyday affairs of life. I don't want to get distracted by trying to do other peoples' jobs at the church, but I do want to be servant-hearted in other ways.
 - In the end, it's not very servant-hearted to occupy someone else's calling. It serves neither God, nor you, nor the other person.
- In verse 2, they commit to focusing on preaching the word of God; in verse 6, they expand that commitment to include not just preaching but prayer.
 - Preaching implies prayer. Without it, the most eloquent sermon is a dud in God's eyes. It might impress, but it will not impact.
 - The word of God is Him speaking to us; prayer is us speaking to Him. Preachers of God's Word should be mystics. That is, they should relate closely to God—hearing Him through

Scripture, and talking to Him in prayer. God wants a friendship. Preachers should communicate the nature of God, not as an academic lecturer, but as a friend who knows Him personally.

- That is not to discount the academic side of preaching. A careful reading of the text requires intense study. But study without prayer is dry wood. Prayer lights the study so that preaching becomes fire.

—"men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom"

- They needed to be men. Why? Some would argue that these men were precursors to deacons (even though Luke doesn't use this term) and that deacons should be men. Paul seems to allow for female deacons, however. The reason for their being men might be more practical than theological. Perhaps the apostles reasoned that men—especially in their culture—would be more respected in settling contentious disputes. In the end, we are not told why.
- They needed a good reputation in the community. Why? You can't settle disputes if people don't respect you. Divvying out resources requires utmost integrity, and it would be a huge mistake to place an untrustworthy individual over them.
- They needed to be full of the Holy Spirit. Why? The word "full" is different than "filled." To be "filled" with the Spirit is to receive something like a Holy-Spirit-turbo-boost for preaching the gospel boldly (cf. Acts 4:8, 31). To be "full" of the Spirit is to be characterized by the Spirit's fruit and ministry.
- They needed to be full of wisdom. Why? Most disputes are not black-and-white. It requires wisdom to discern between parties that both seem right.

—"devote" (Gk. *proskartareo*):

- [Act 1:14 ESV] 14 All these with one accord were **devoting** (*proskartareo*) themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.
- [Act 2:42, 46 ESV] 42 And they **devoted** (*proskartareo*) themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ... 46 And day by day, **attending** (*proskartareo*) the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts.
- So far, *proskartareo* has depicted the devotion of the early church to teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. Of these, prayer is mentioned in 1:14, 2:42, and now also 6:4. Teaching is mentioned in 2:42 and 6:4.
- The consistent language reminds us that Satan's goal is to distract us from our main things and that the church must respond by being devoted, not distracted.
- Granted, the apostles might have reasoned that helping with the daily distribution was an exercise of "fellowship." As we saw in Acts 2 and 4, "fellowship" is a sharing of life that includes resources. And "fellowship" was one of the core callings of the early church (2:42).
- But there is a difference between prioritizing fellowship in the life of the church and being the one responsible for making it happen. The apostles were devoted to fellowship, not by overseeing the daily distribution, but by handing it off to those who could oversee it. This actually made them more, not less, devoted to fellowship. When the apostles oversaw the daily distribution, problems ensued. They were too stretched thin. By handing it off, the food was better distributed, more people were happy, and fellowship was richer.
- I don't oversee small groups in addition to preaching ministry and everything else I do. I prioritize fellowship in the church by entrusting someone else to oversee it. (And, of course, I prioritize it in my own life by being part of a Community Group, being with people often, and sharing my resources.)

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.

—"what they said pleased the whole congregation":

- Those who began with anger (6:1) ended with satisfaction (6:5).
- God gives wisdom to church leaders for resolving problems. Even the healthiest of churches have problems. But leaders should listen diligently to the Spirit for wisdom in communicating.
- Church leaders need to communicate not only Gospel truth but practical wisdom. Those entrusted with governing the church must communicate both.

—"Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit":

- One of the requirements was to be “full of the Spirit” (6:3). Here Luke affirms the choice of Stephen by describing him as “a man full of... the Holy Spirit.”
- Stephen also possessed great faith, which explains the miracles that flowed through his ministry (6:8).

—“Stephen... Philip”: these two are mentioned first because their table service will lead to powerful preaching and miracles in Acts 6-8. This section thus serves as a bridge from the apostles to non-apostles, and from Jerusalem to Samaria/the ends of the earth.

—No one knows the rest of the names on this list, although some claim Nicolaus was the father of the Nicolaitans, whose cult Jesus rebukes in Revelation 2:6, 15. In such a scenario, Nicolaus would have defected from the faith and led others astray. As far as I know, this assertion is rooted entirely in the writings of Irenaeus—a respected church father, but he was not inerrant. As far as I’m concerned, this is just theory.

—What we do know about Nicolaus is that he was a “proselyte.” This means that he had been a Gentile who converted to Judaism and then Christianity. This is the first mention of the Gospel reaching a Gentile in Acts.

—Nicolaus also hails from Antioch, which will become the first intentional missions base. Jerusalem sent missionaries unintentionally, as disciples fled persecution and preached wherever they went (8:4). Antioch sent Saul and Barnabas intentionally (13:1-3). Nicolaus, the Gentile proselyte of Antioch, foreshadows the Antiochian missions base.

—Notably, all seven names are Greek. The minority party—the one neglected in the daily distribution—received 100% representation in leadership. The Hellenistic widows who identified with Greek culture would have felt seen and heard. What profound grace!

—The early church did not separate culturally like we do in America. They did not have Jewish churches on one street corner and Greek churches on the next. Much of the New Testament focuses on coming together despite vastly different cultures. The church in Jerusalem worked through cultural and even linguistic differences by showing grace toward minorities who were hurt.

—In our culture, “diversity” is a buzzword. Companies hire “diversity consultants” to help employees value one another despite their differences and to increase hiring diversity. On one hand, we can celebrate that our culture values something God values. Jesus came to break down the “wall of hostility” between rival ethnicities (Eph. 2). On the other hand, the world will never achieve what it aims for with mere hiring quotas and forced trainings. The Gospel has the power to unite formerly hostile people groups because we all have the same Father, are redeemed by the same Jesus, and worship by the same Spirit.

—While it’s true that the Gospel gives us tools for unity, that doesn’t mean it’s automatic. The apostles could have botched this one and ruptured the church along ethnic lines. (Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews would have both been racially Jewish, but the word “ethnicity” includes not just race but culture. They were racially the same but culturally different.) Unfortunately, slaveowners in US history “preached the Gospel of grace” without showing grace toward the ones they oppressed. Knowing the Gospel is not enough. Preaching the Gospel is not enough. We must live the Gospel. The church in Jerusalem “lives the Gospel” by not just receiving grace, but showing it.

—Paul makes the same point with Peter when the latter pulls away from Gentiles:

- *Gal. 2:11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. 13 And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that **their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel**, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?”*
- Peter preached the Gospel, but his ethnocentric behavior was “not in step with the truth of the Gospel.” The Gospel unites. When we divide along ethnic lines (or any other lines), we bear witness to our defiance of the Gospel.

—Could this passage be used to support “hiring quotas” of minorities? Let’s go ahead and get controversial here. The early church shows incredible wisdom. On one hand, they appoint all Greek people who hail from the offended/minority party to resolve disputes. This suggests that mindfulness of ethnicity in appointing people to leadership can be wise and godly. On the other hand, the apostles provide standards: they must be “men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom...” In other words, they can’t compromise their standards just to promote someone who looks/talks a certain way. That’s where the world often messes this up. God isn’t interested in quotas. He’s interested in grace. Let us be mindful of ethnicity so we can

best magnify the Gospel of Grace through the unity our Gospel brings. O, that the world might look at the church and say, "We haven't figured out this diversity thing, but look at the church! People of every tongue, tribe, and nation pray and worship and eat and share life together!"

—But in our mindfulness of ethnicity, may we never compromise our standards to meet a quota. Qualified individuals of all ethnicities must be pursued for leadership roles.

—Keener: "Those with political power generally repressed complaining minorities; here the apostles hand the whole system over to the offended minority."

6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

—Laying on of hands in the Old Testament (see Schreiner): we are reminded of patriarchal blessings (Gen. 48:14), Moses' commissioning of Joshua (Num. 27:23; Deut. 34:9), and the setting aside of priests (Num. 8:10).

—Laying on of hands in the New Testament (not all verses):

- [Mat 8:3 NASB20] 3 Jesus reached out with His hand and touched him, saying, "I am willing; be cleansed." And immediately his leprosy was cleansed.
- [Mat 9:18 NASB20] 18 While He was saying these things to them, behold, a [synagogue] official came and bowed down before Him, and said, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay Your hand on her, and she will become alive again."
- [Mat 19:13 NASB20] 13 Then [some] children were brought to Him so that He would lay His hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them.
- [Act 8:17-19 NASB20] 17 Then they [began] laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit. 18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, 19 saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."
- [Act 9:12 NASB20] 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him, so that he might regain his sight."
- [Act 13:3 NASB20] 3 Then, when they had fasted, prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.
- [Act 19:6 NASB20] 6 And when Paul had laid hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them and they [began] speaking with tongues and prophesying.
- [Act 28:8 NASB20] 8 And it happened that the father of Publius was lying [in bed] afflicted with a [recurring] fever and dysentery. Paul went in [to see] him, and after he prayed, he laid his hands on him and healed him.
- [1Ti 4:14 NASB20] 14 Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was granted to you through [words of] prophecy with the laying on of hands by the council of elders.
- [1Ti 5:22 NASB20] 22 Do not lay hands upon anyone too quickly and thereby share [responsibility for] the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin.

—Laying on of hands in the New Testament is for healing, imparting the Spirit, commissioning missionaries, appointing elders, and imparting spiritual gifts. There is symbolism in human touch. God can "speak the word" and heal, even at great distances (Matt. 8:8), but He loves to use touch. We see the power of this when Jesus touches the leper (8:3). The leper would have grown accustomed to lacking human touch. Touch communicates love and compassion when it relates to healing. It communicates affirmation when it comes to commissioning and impartation. In every expression, it communicates divine and human connection.

—The apostles devoted themselves to preaching and prayer, and here they pray over the new leadership team that serves under them. They are living out their calling.

7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

—"the word of God continued to increase" (6:7). This language is similar to several other passages in Acts, which collectively tell us something about Luke's view of the Word.

- [Act 12:24 ESV] 24 But the word of God increased and multiplied.
- [Act 13:49 ESV] 49 And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.
- [Act 19:20 ESV] 20 So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.
- [Act 20:32 ESV] 32 And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

—It's not just that disciples are increasing in number; it's that the Word is increasing and multiplying. The Word is spreading. The Word is prevailing. The Word is what builds them up and sanctifies them. The Word is portrayed as a divine actor.

—Schreiner (quoting Peterson): "The real hero of Acts is the *logos*, the Word... The ascended Lord Jesus is the central figure in the narrative, and he employs his word and his Spirit to advance his purpose through human agents in the world."

—Schreiner: "The centrality of the word in Acts can be seen not only in the explicit emphasis on this theme but also in the form in which Acts was written. About one third of Acts is comprised of speeches or evangelistic preaching."

—Schreiner: "In each text, the word multiplies in the midst of opposition. This theme continues throughout Acts as a whole. The first appearance of 'word' occurs in Acts 4:4 in Jerusalem where it states many believed the word and the number of men came to about five thousand. However, the immediately preceding verse pairs this growth with Peter and John's incarceration" (4:3).

—The "word" (Gk. *logos*) is a theme of 6:1-7, appearing in 6:2, 4, and 7 to describe the Gospel:

- 6:2: 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.
- 6:4: But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the **word**."
- 6:7: And the **word of God** continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

—Luke is making the point that because the disciples devoted themselves to the Word, the Word multiplied. How sensible! And yet how hard to enact. Most preachers I know are overworked and burdened with a thousand responsibilities. The multiplication of God's Word is a team project. The Word won't spread if table servers don't rise up. Preachers must delegate, and people must volunteer.

—"priests became obedient to the faith": now God is reaching into the heart of the beast—the corrupt priesthood—and redeeming them too. No one is outside the grace of God. The more we share the load of ministry, honoring the pain of some church members and the calling of others, the further into darkness God's Word will spread.

—Schreiner: "the word births the church, the word changes the church, and the word grows the church."