

Acts 6:1-6

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To make sure all believers receive fair treatment and charity, the apostles arrange for the church to choose seven men of godly character to manage the food and funds. One of these men is named Stephen, well regarded as a man full of faith and the Spirit.

In Acts 6:1-6, Luke records the establishment of Deacons in the church (transliterated from the Greek “diákonos,” meaning “servant”). The church of believers in Jesus was growing rapidly in Jerusalem. On the day of Pentecost, 3000 people were added to the number of believers (Acts 2:41), and not long afterward the number grew to 5000 (Acts 4:4). Luke reports elsewhere in more general terms that the believers’ numbers grew daily:

“And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.”
(Acts 2:47)

“And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number.”
(Acts 5:14)

The first church was more involved than a once-a-week service. It was a community that worshipped and fellowshiped together daily. People were “selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need” and “breaking bread from house to house...taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart” (Acts 2:45-46).

But at this point the believers had grown to such a size that some were starting to feel mistreated. Luke writes, *Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.*

The *complaint* was from *the Hellenistic Jews*, the Jews who spoke Greek and studied the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. Apparently some of the *native Hebrews*, the Jews who spoke primarily in their native tongue (and possibly refused to assimilate), were causing the *widows* among the *Hellenistic Jews* to be *overlooked* when *food* was served each day. Perhaps there was some prejudice within the church, where the *native Hebrews* felt superior to the *Hellenistic Jews* for having stuck to the traditions and language of their forebears. Or perhaps it was simply a matter that had not been noticed.

In any event, to show partiality went against Jesus’s teaching. It was contrary to the idea of serving others and loving one’s neighbor as one’s self (John 13:12-15, Matthew 7:12). Luke does not cast doubt on the *Hellenistic Jews*’ claim of being *overlooked*, so apparently there really was discrimination in practice by those *servicing the food*, whether or not intentional.

The *twelve* apostles called a meeting to resolve this issue. They *summoned the congregation of the disciples*, the entirety of believers. Luke calls them *disciples*, because this term extended to every believer, not just those who had followed Jesus during His ministry. Just before ascending to Heaven, Jesus told the apostles to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19-20). The idea is that believing in Jesus is only the beginning of our restored relationship with God.

The Greek word translated *disciples* means “learner.” As *disciples*, believers are learners or students of Jesus. We are learning to be like Him and choose obedience to God daily through faith. We must grow and learn how to reject the power of sin in our lives each day. Even though we are now freed from the power of sin, we must learn how to walk in that freedom (John 8:34-36). The entire group of believers is called the *congregation of disciples* because each believer was learning, growing, coming to know how to follow Christ and His ways. Learning clearly requires effort. The *twelve* will now expend effort to lead the *congregation of disciples*.

With the entire *congregation of disciples* gathered together, the *twelve* apostles exercise their leadership, saying, *It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables*. The *twelve* acknowledge that something needs to be done. But they also recognize that their time is limited, and they need to prioritize their actions. In this case, the twelve consider their top priority to be spending time in *the word of God*. It is worth noting that at this time in history, *the word of God* only included the Old Testament. However, this is not a problem, because the entire scripture speaks of Jesus, as He stated:

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me.”
(John 5:39)

When Jesus spoke these words, the only written scriptures existing were those of the Old Testament. But as Jesus states, these Old Testament scriptures speak of Him. We also saw this when Jesus opened the Old Testament scriptures to the disciples on the road to Emmaus to speak of Himself (Luke 24:25-27). Therefore, when the *twelve* devote themselves to the *word of God*, they would have understood that the Scriptures spoke of Jesus.

The *twelve* said that to *serve tables* would use time that would cause them to *neglect the word of God*. Spending time on the *word of God* could include study, preaching, and teaching the *word of God*. Even though the twelve did not have educational credentials (Acts 4:13) that did not prevent them from studying, preaching and teaching. Luke’s record shows us that the word of God is for all people. Here the “uneducated” people are getting the Bible correct, and the “educated” theologians (the Pharisees) are opposing the true meaning of the scripture.

The *twelve* make this determination: *Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.*

Essentially, the apostles are delegating the issue to be solved by the church itself. The responsibilities and roles within the church are apparently not completely figured out at this time. The church is young, and its structure appears to be developing. Thousands have already joined

through their expression of faith in Jesus, and new believers are joining every day. The apostles clearly define their ministry role; they *will devote* themselves to *prayer and to the ministry of the word*.

The apostles' job is to commune with God in *prayer*, and to accomplish the *ministry of the word*. This *ministry of the word* could include studying the *word of God*, as well as teaching the good news about His Messiah, Jesus. The Greek word translated ministry in this phrase *ministry of the word* is the same Greek root translated "*servicing*" in Acts 6:1, in the phrase *overlooked in the daily servicing of food*. The Greek root is "diakonia" from which we get the English word "Deacon."

The apostles are unwilling to *neglect* serving *the Word of God* to people hungry for spiritual food *in order to serve tables* of those in need of physical food. This is not to demean the need for someone to *serve tables*, to distribute physical food and make sure physical needs are met. But that is not the apostles' role. That is not where their strengths and gifting will best serve the *congregation of disciples*. Further, the *twelve* had learned from Jesus, their master, that spiritual food is more important than physical food. Jesus mentioned this a number of times. When Jesus was tempted by Satan to turn rocks into stone in order to feed Himself, He quoted Deuteronomy 8:3, "Man shall not live on bread alone but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). The disciples might also have had in mind this episode recorded in the gospel of John, where Jesus made clear that spiritual nourishment is more important than physical nourishment:

"Meanwhile the disciples were urging Him, saying, 'Rabbi, eat.' But He said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples were saying to one another, 'No one brought Him *anything* to eat, did he?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to accomplish His work.'"

(John 4:31-34)

It seems that while following Jesus, the *twelve* were oblivious to the priority that should be given to spiritual sustenance. However, now in Acts, it appears they embrace that principle completely, and are organizing in such a manner as to honor the priority of spiritual nourishment while still attending to the reality of physical needs.

Further, the *twelve* show complete willingness to share leadership, and note that there are certainly men among the congregation who are well suited for the *task*. *Therefore*, the apostles tell the *brethren* to *select from among* them *seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task*. These men needed to have *good* character, to be trustworthy, for they would be doing more than simply putting food on *tables*. They would help oversee the donated money given to the church for the needy. They would manage the helpers who were distributing the food and make sure no *widows* were *being overlooked*, whether they were *native Hebrews* or *Hellenistic Jews*. They were essentially going to run the charity branch of the church, a job which might attract dishonest men who might embezzle funds for themselves, as Judas Iscariot did during Jesus's ministry (John 12:6).

The apostles wisely put it to the *congregation* to make the decision, to *select from among* them the *seven men* whom they could trust, *men* who had a *good reputation* among their peers, rather than let any potential swindler volunteer for the task. Already in recent history there had been an incident where some believers lied to the church about money, due to their greed (Acts 5:1-4). The Bible teaches that we should be above reproach both in reality as well as in appearance (1 Thessalonians 5:22).

The *statement* given by the apostles was well received: Luke writes that it *found approval with the whole congregation*. Everyone agreed with the *statement's* practicality going forward. So, *they chose from among* the entire body of *disciples* these *seven men*: *Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas*.

Luke singles out *Stephen* especially, describing him as *a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit*.

The only other man given any biographical information is *Nicolas*, who was *a proselyte from Antioch*. A *proselyte* is someone who was not a *native Hebrew*, but a convert into Jewish culture and society. A Gentile who decided to become a Jew. *Antioch* was a large city in modern-day Turkey, hundreds of miles north of Israel. A second church would emerge there in the near future, after the martyrdom of Stephen. Barnabas would serve as an elder there, and ultimately bring Paul into the fold of believers there (Acts 11:19-25, Acts 11:26). The term “Christian” (Greek, “Christianos,” someone who is of Christ, a follower of the Anointed One) would originate in Antioch (Acts 11:26).

Philip the Deacon (also called “the Evangelist”) would go on to spread the gospel in Samaria, and to an African, and along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea (Acts 8:5, Acts 8:35, Acts 8:40).

And these they brought before the apostles. The apostles ordain these men before God to serve the needs of the church members by *praying* over them, after which *they laid their hands on them*. In this case the laying on of hands designated these men as having a ministry stewardship. Just as Moses laid hands on Joshua in order to commission him to lead Israel, the apostles now laid hands on the deacons/servants, commissioned to serve the church as leaders in managing their benevolence charity (Numbers 27:22-23). The laying on of hands was also applied for other purposes. It was done by Jesus as a part of dispensing a blessing (Mark 10:16) and to heal (Luke 4:40). The disciples laid hands on Samaritan believers so they would receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17).

This service role in the church to which these men were ordained later came to be called “Deacon” after “diakonia” the root word for “servant/minister.” The Apostle Paul, in writing to Timothy, provides a more detailed look of what the church requires of those who are appointed as servants, or Deacons, in the church,

“Deacons likewise must be men of dignity, not double-tongued, or addicted to much wine or fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things. Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own

households. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”

(1 Timothy 3:8-13)

Presumably these sorts of character traits were required of *Stephen* and the other six *men*.

This started the office of Deacon (Greek “diákonos,” meaning “servant”) who are to assess and direct the care of widows and orphans, assess and direct benevolence requests, and serve where needed or requested in the body.

Biblical Text

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. 2 So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” 5 The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. 6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.