

Called to Witness

Bible Background • [ACTS 6-7](#)
Printed Text • [ACTS 6:1-7](#)
Devotional Reading • [ACTS 2:14-28](#)

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EXPLAIN the ministry challenges of evangelism and benevolence in the first-century church; DESCRIBE how the church today balances efforts of outreach with other needs; and SHARE some ways to honor your specific ministry call with the needs of your community.



“If I have to attend one more meeting this week, I’m going to change professions,” Rev. Morrison half-joked to his administrative assistant. “Yes, there has been more to do since we opened the child care center, the food pantry, and after-school program,” replied Vera. “Do you think there’s anyone who can help you with these added responsibilities?” Reverend Morrison had been asking himself that question as well. He realized the importance of caring for the needs of his congregation, but his passion and gift were preaching. He couldn’t remember the last time he had prepared a new sermon. Mostly he was recycling messages from a few years back. But what troubled him more was his decision to cancel his annual retreat. Over the past ten years, he had never missed his week of prayer and reflection in that mountain cabin. There in the quiet, his soul was restored and his spirit refreshed. “Vera, call a special meeting of the church board,” Rev. Morrison said. “I’m going to get them working on some new staff positions. I need a meeting that will end some of my meetings!” They both laughed, and Vera thanked God for answered prayer.

Prioritizing our time and resources is a continuous challenge. In today’s lesson, we’ll see how the apostles addressed this concern so that they could make the best use of God’s gifts. How do you choose to prioritize your time and resources?

Keep in Mind

“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” ([Acts 6:3](#)).

KJV

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 ministration.

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.

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.

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 of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch:

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

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.

NLT

Acts 6:1 But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.

2 So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, "We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program.

3 And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility.

4 Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word."

5 Everyone liked this idea, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (an earlier convert to the Jewish faith).

6 These seven were presented to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them.

7 So God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too.

The People, Places, and Times

Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews. The growing number of believers turning to the disciples' teachings were comprised primarily of Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews. This pairing was odd because the two groups' friction with each other was well known. One easily noticeable difference was their languages. Palestinian Jews spoke Aramaic for communication and used Hebrew in worship at the synagogues and Temple, while the Hellenistic Jews, who had dispersed and mixed with cultures along the Mediterranean, were accustomed to Greek. These Greek-speaking Jews were often seen as inferior by Jews in Palestine. The conversion of a large number

of Greek-speaking Jews on the day of Pentecost now brought these two groups into community as God drew people from all cultures, backgrounds, ethnic groups, and socioeconomic statuses to Christ.

The Seven. To alleviate any hint of partiality, the apostles allowed the community of believers to select the individuals who would oversee the dispute regarding food distribution. The criteria for selecting these people were their reputation, wisdom, and obedience to the Holy Spirit. The apostles, Jews from the Palestinian area, approved the people's choice even though none of the new administrators was a Palestinian Jew. All seven selected had Greek names. One of the seven, Nicolas, was not even Jewish by birth, but a proselyte, converting from paganism to Judaism and then becoming a believer in Christ. For the apostles, the integrity of the seven was more important than their ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

Background

Although the context was between two different cultures, the first disagreement among believers was about fairness regarding a practical matter. The poor and widows who came from outside Jerusalem felt that they were not receiving an evenhanded share of the daily food distribution. No one likes to be treated unfairly, and grumblings in any organization can quickly tear it apart, especially one in its early development. When the discontent of fellow believers reached the apostles' ears, they took action. They called the entire community together, sharing with them their focus on spreading the Gospel and their concern that everyone be fairly cared for, especially the needy and vulnerable. The apostles offered a solution that the community approved. To manage the daily food distribution, the community would select seven men whom they felt were fair, competent, and obedient to God's Holy Spirit. The apostles affirmed the community's selection by praying for and conferring a blessing on the new administrators. The seven men had different cultural backgrounds from the apostles, but the qualification for service was not culture, but character. The dispute was successfully resolved. The community had individuals who would establish a system of care for the entire group. The apostles were able to keep preaching and teaching as their priority. And, the community continued to grow and welcome new believers as more people saw God's impartial love in action.

At-A-Glance

1. Problem and Priority ([Acts 6:1–2](#))
2. Solution and Selection (vv. 3–5)
3. Growth and Greatness (vv. 6–7)

In Depth

1. Problem and Priority ([Acts 6:1–2](#))

Starting on the day of Pentecost with Peter's compelling message about a risen Savior, the apostles had been vigilant about sharing the Gospel message. Huge numbers of individuals were identifying themselves as believers and formed a community where they shared their life and possessions. It had to be a wonderful sight to see people of different cultures coming together. To live out true Christianity, people came to realize that their most important identity came from

their relationship to Christ, not their nationality. This lesson was taught from a problem that arose in the early church. Jewish believers from outside Jerusalem started to complain about unfair distribution of resources in the community. Such criticism could not be overlooked if the apostles wanted to maintain unity and build bonds of peace among all believers. Yet, the apostles knew that their primary call was to share the Gospel.

2. Solution and Selection (vv. 3–5)

When one has several good things to do, the question turns to the best way to use one's time and resources. The apostles had to make that kind of decision. They chose to continue to spread the Gospel. But they refused to neglect the needs of the growing and diverse body of believers that was forming, many of whom had left family and possessions to follow Christ. They turned to those affected by the problem to find the solution. They realized they couldn't do everything themselves, but could get everything done by recruiting the gifts and talents of those in their community. The members of the community knew the true character of the people among them, and chose seven men whom they trusted to be administrators. The early church community was not without its problems, but its answers were also provided by the community.

3. Growth and Greatness (vv. 6–7)

Through prayer and bestowing blessings, the apostles confirmed the people's selection of the seven administrators. These seven men managed the daily affairs of the community and the apostles preached with unhindered consciences, knowing that any new converts would enter a community prepared to serve them. The community continue to grow; even Jewish priests were converting to the faith. In addition, the seven were not limited by their roles and assigned tasks. God gave Stephen, one of the seven, the ability to perform miracles and signs. His knowledge of Scripture, skill as a debater, and submission to the Holy Spirit were examples for church leaders then and now. Like those who preach and teach, those who hold other positions in ministry have a responsibility to be competent, devoted, and sober-minded servants for Christ.

Search the Scriptures

1. Did it sound harsh for the apostles to say that they were going to spend their time preaching and teaching and others would have to administer the food program ([Acts 6:2](#))? Why or why not?
2. What were some of the outcomes of the apostles maintaining specific priorities (v. 7)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Are preachers and teachers of the Gospel more important than those who care for the material needs of a congregation?
2. Are there specific moral and spiritual requirements people should meet to serve in ministry today?

Lesson in Our Society

Highly effective people know that they must put first things first to accomplish their tasks. They also know that to live in community, they must not only care about themselves but also consider the needs of others. To do that, they think win-win. They listen with open minds to others' concerns and create safe, creative spaces for people to find workable, mutually beneficial solutions to problems. By incorporating the group's strengths and resources, they accomplish more than they could by themselves. Problems in our homes, at work, or church are often

opportunities to learn new skills and develop new relationships, experiences needed for personal and spiritual growth.

The twentieth-century theologian Howard Thurman once said, “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” What makes you come alive? What gifts and talents do you enjoy? What are some ways your joyous talents can meet the needs of your community and world?

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Acts 6:1-7

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 ministration.

God caused the church to grow tremendously in the early days of its existence. Such growth was a sign of His presence, power, and truth. The unbelieving world had to admit, if nothing else, that something extraordinary was at work. Of course, believers today understand that the church, and its growth, is fueled by the presence and power of God through the Holy Spirit, and by the truth found in Christ (see [1 Corinthians 12:13](#); [Acts 1:8](#)).

The believers in the church at Jerusalem (v. 7) were called “disciples,” which comes from the Greek word for “learners” or “pupils.” The early church members were trying to learn about the new way of life they had adopted. They were pupils and students of the ways of God as expressed through Jesus Christ. Modern-day Christians must also become serious “pupils” who learn about God and His Word.

These Greek-speaking disciples began “murmuring” against the Hebrew-speaking (i.e., Aramaic-speaking) disciples, because Greek-speaking widows were not getting their share of the daily distribution of church services, or “ministrations” (*diakonia*, **dee-ah-koe-NEE-ah**). In those days, the church did not just hold a worship service for a couple of hours on Sunday and

Wednesday for those who wanted to attend. For the early saints, Christianity was truly an all-encompassing way of life. They were a community that shared property and food (see [Acts 2:44–47, 4:32–35](#)). Therefore, the “daily ministrations,” which were allegedly withheld from Greek-speaking widows, was of serious importance.

The “murmuring” or “grumbling” was a way for Satan to destroy unity and cause a problem within the church. Satan loves to cause problems in relationships. As believers from different languages and cultures squabbled over the treatment of each other’s widows, there was fertile ground for a split in the church.

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.

Like all good church leadership, “the twelve” got all the followers of Christ together, Greeks and Hebrews, in order to prevent further problems. “The twelve” refers to the original men who followed Jesus during His earthly ministry. They were Jesus’ original disciples, with the exception of Judas, who had been replaced by Matthias ([Acts 1:23–26](#)).

The twelve leaders suggested to the congregation that it was better for them (the leaders) to spend their time praying and proclaiming the Gospel than on the church’s other daily services, such as passing out food (i.e., “serving tables”). This was wise thinking, because at that early point in church history, not many men knew as much about Jesus as those original disciples. So, it was better for them to spend time passing on what they knew, rather than acting as waiters. Though it might not always be possible for pastors to minister full-time today, a church that can support its pastor and his family puts itself in a better position to get his full devotion to study, prayer, and the delivery of God’s Word. Dedicated pastors who are true to the Bible certainly deserve to be supported by those they serve ([1 Corinthians 9:7–14](#)). The disciples recognized the importance of a pastor’s total dedication to ministry. A wise church today, which is financially able, will do the same.

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.

The twelve then delegated to the congregation the responsibility of selecting seven men to whom they would, in turn, delegate responsibility for the proper distribution of daily church services. The ability to properly delegate responsibility and authority is another hallmark of good leadership. In this case, it served the function of promoting the most efficient use of time by the leaders. One good reason for delegation of duties is to get better results due to expertise in a given area. The Holy Spirit distributes various “spiritual gifts” to everyone in the body of Christ ([1 Corinthians 12:4, 11](#)). Thus, some believers are more gifted in certain areas than others. They are the ones who should be given duties in the area of their gift(s).

Delegation also can serve the function of sharing the workload so that leaders are not prematurely burned out. Moses was one of the first Israelite leaders to delegate work to prevent an overload ([Exodus 18:17–26](#)).

Finally, the twelve leaders stated the qualifications for the seven men who were to be selected by the congregation. They had to be “of honest report,” or have good reputations, so that the people would respect and trust them. Furthermore, they had to be “full of the Holy Ghost” so that they had the proper servant’s heart and were led by God’s Spirit in their work. Last, they had to be men of “wisdom,” so that they had sound judgment and made godly decisions.

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

The twelve leaders restated that their primary function was to teach the Word. The root word for give ourselves continually (*proskartereo*, **proce-kar-teh-REH-oh**) means to be devoted to or give unremitting care to something. To gain proper spiritual insight, they had to be “continually [in] prayer,” as all good Bible teachers must be. The deep things of God can only be revealed by the Holy Spirit ([1 Corinthians 2:10](#)), and an effective teacher of the Word must “pray without ceasing” so that he or she will be guided by the Spirit into God’s truth (see [John 16:13](#); [1 Thessalonians 5:17](#)).

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 congregation universally agreed to follow the recommended leadership, bringing everyone on one accord regarding this issue. Not much is said of the seven men who were selected. Evidently, the congregation felt that they fulfilled the qualifications set forth by the leaders. But they are given the honor of being forever recorded in the annals of Scripture. Two of the men, Nicolas and Stephen, are described more fully in the text. Nicolas was probably of Greek descent and was a “*proselyte*” (*proselutos*, **pro-SEH-loo-toce**). Now a believer in Christ, he was from the city of Antioch in Syria. The first Gentile church was established there ([Acts 11:19–26](#)), and Antioch was where believers were first called “Christians” ([Acts 11:26](#)). Stephen is mentioned first among the seven men and his strong spiritual qualities are emphasized. He was “full of faith and of the Holy Ghost.” Both of those qualities were essential for him because he became the first Christian martyr, the first follower of Christ put to death because of his beliefs. He was such a mighty man of God that the Jews hated him and brought him into court on phony charges ([Acts 6:9–15](#)). His treatment was reminiscent of the way Jesus was railroaded before His own death ([Matthew 26:57–66](#)). The full extent of Stephen’s faith and his submission to the Holy Spirit’s power and guidance is evidenced by his brilliant testimony concerning God at the rigged “trial” ([Acts 7:1–53](#)). Needless to say, he was thereafter condemned to death because of his strong stance upon his faith ([Acts 7:54–60](#)).

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

The congregation presented the seven men whom they had selected to the Twelve. Those seven men were the forerunners of what now are called “deacons” (see [1 Timothy 3:10–13](#)), and, “the twelve” here are identified as the first “apostles.” At that time, the seven deacons were installed in their office in a ceremony before God. The apostles prayed for them and their new undertaking, and the apostles “laid their hands upon them.” This practice was similar to the ordination ceremonies many churches hold now.

The laying on of hands by the apostles was similar to how the Old Testament prophet Samuel anointed Saul and David with oil when God installed them in office as kings (see [1 Samuel 10:1](#); [16:13](#)). It stems from the Old Testament practice laying hands on an animal to cover sins (see [Leviticus 1:4](#); [3:2](#), [8](#), [13](#); [4:4](#)). The practice symbolized a transfer of one’s sins to the sacrificial offering. So, too, the apostles in our study text were anointing the seven deacons for the Lord’s service and conducting the flow of God’s power into their lives.

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.

Having averted the potential split in the church, everything was in the proper order. As a result of the church at Jerusalem's newfound peace, order, and efficiency, its ministry bore tremendous fruit. Since the apostles were focused only on prayer and preaching, we are told that "the word of God increased." The apostles taught others the Gospel and preached with more power. We have already alluded to the fact that today's pastors can do greater works if they are true to the Bible and able to put in full-time work. The testimony of this Scripture proves the point of such a possibility.

Furthermore, "the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem." The preaching of the Gospel produced many new converts, a phenomenon similar to Jesus' parable wherein He alluded to a sowing of seed which produced "fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold" ([Matthew 13:8](#)).

In modern times, we can look around our community and see thousands of people lost and under the heavy yoke of spiritual oppression. We see them on the street corners, in bars and dope houses, and in our jails. As Jesus said, "The harvest truly is plenteous" (from [Matthew 9:37](#)).

There are enough lost souls in our communities across urban America to bust the seams of every church in sight. But, like the apostles and the early church, we must spread the Gospel message with power. Therefore, we must focus on our mission and devote ourselves to our spiritual gifting, whether that be preaching, teaching, studying, or evangelizing.

Finally, many of the religious leaders who formerly opposed the spread of the Gospel began to accept it. This change of heart shows the awesomeness of God and His Word. The Bible says, "Through the greatness of thy power shall thine enemies submit themselves unto thee" (from [Psalm 66:3](#)). Truly the conversion of "a great company of the priests" confirms the truth of Scripture.

Furthermore, the fact that these men were obedient to the faith (see also [Romans 16:26](#)) after their conversion speaks volumes about the life-changing power of the Gospel. They decided to conform their ways to what

Say It Correctly

AProselyte. **PRAH**-suh-lite.

Prochorus. prah-**KO**-rus.

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Jesus Commissions Disciples

([Acts 1:1–11](#))

TUESDAY

Matthias Chosen to Replace Judas

([Acts 1:15–17](#), [20–26](#))

WEDNESDAY

The Holy Spirit Descends upon the Disciples

([Acts 2:1–13](#))

THURSDAY

First Converts Called to the Faith

([Acts 2:37–44](#))

FRIDAY

Stephen Arrested While Serving

([Acts 6:8–15](#))

SATURDAY

Stephen Stoned to Death While Praying

([Acts 7:54–81a](#))

SUNDAY

Called to Witness

([Acts 6:1–8](#))