

Bible Study July 14, 2021

ACTS 6 (NEW LIVING TRANSLATION)

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.

When we read the descriptions of the early church—the miracles, the sharing and generosity, the fellowship—we may wish we could have been a part of this “perfect” church. In reality, the early church had problems just as we do today. No church has ever been or will ever be perfect until Jesus and his followers are united at his second coming. All churches have problems. If your church’s shortcomings distress you, ask yourself, *Would a perfect church allow me to be a member?* Do what you can to make your church better. A church does not have to be perfect to be faithful to Jesus.

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.”

As the early church increased in size, so did its needs. One great need was to organize the distribution of food to the those who were poor. The apostles needed to focus on preaching, so they chose others to administer the food program. Each person has a vital part to play in the life of a church (see 1 Corinthians 12). If you are in a position of leadership and find yourself overwhelmed by responsibilities, determine your God-given abilities and priorities and then find others to help with the other tasks. If you are not in leadership, you still have gifts that can be used by God in various areas of the church’s ministry. Offer these gifts in service to him.

“The Twelve” are the 11 original disciples plus Matthias, who had been chosen to replace Judas Iscariot (1:26).

This administrative task was not taken lightly. Notice the requirements for the men who were to handle the food program: They were to be well respected and full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. People who carry heavy responsibilities and work closely with others should have these qualities. We must look for spiritually mature and wise men and women to lead our churches.

The apostles’ priorities were correct. The ministry of the Word should never be neglected because of administrative burdens. Pastors should not try—or be expected to try—to do everything. Instead, the work of the church should be spread out among its members. Churches can use the model of the early church to establish ministries and appoint leaders who meet the same guidelines established by the apostles.

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.

Spiritual leadership is serious business and must not be taken lightly by the church or its leaders. In the early church, the chosen men were ordained or commissioned (by prayer and the laying on of hands) by the apostles. Laying hands on someone, an ancient Jewish practice, was a way to set a person apart for special service (see Numbers 27:23; Deuteronomy 34:9).

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.

Another internal problem developed in the early church between the Hebrew-speaking Christians (probably local Jews who had come to faith) and the Greek-speaking Christians (probably Jews from other lands who had been converted at Pentecost). The Greek-speaking Christians were complaining that their widows were being unfairly treated. This favoritism was probably not intentional and was more likely caused by the language barrier. To correct the situation, the apostles put seven respected, Greek-speaking men in charge of the food distribution program. This solved the problem and allowed the apostles to keep their focus on teaching and preaching the Good News about Jesus.

Jesus had told the apostles that they were to witness first in Jerusalem (1:8). In a short time, their message had infiltrated the entire city and all levels of society. Even some Jewish priests were being converted, an obvious violation of the wishes of the high council. We should be encouraged that these priests, dedicated students of the Old Testament, were willing to endanger their positions because they were confident that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, who fulfilled all the Law and the Prophets.

The message of Jesus spread like ripples on a pond, spreading wider and farther with each passing day. The Good News still spreads this way. You don't have to change the world single-handedly; even a small pebble dropped in a pond causes ripples all the way to the shore. Every inch of shoreline can be touched and impacted by one small pebble. Don't ever feel that your part in God's Kingdom work is insignificant or unimportant. Your actions in service to God reach out farther than you realize.

Stephen Is Arrested

⁸ Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people. ⁹ But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia. ¹⁰ None of them could stand against the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke.

The Synagogue of Freed Slaves was a group of former Jewish slaves who had been freed by Rome and had formed their own synagogue in Jerusalem.

¹¹ So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, "We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God." ¹² This roused the people, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council.

These men lied about Stephen, causing him to be arrested and brought before the Jewish council. The Sadducees, the dominant party in the council, accepted and studied only the writings of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy). In their view, to speak blasphemy against Moses was a crime. But

from Stephen's speech (Acts 7), we learn that their accusation against him was false. Stephen based his review of Israel's history on Moses' writings.

¹³ The lying witnesses said, "This man is always speaking against the holy Temple and against the law of Moses. ¹⁴ We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

When Stephen was brought before the council of religious leaders, the accusation against him was the same that the religious leaders had used against Jesus (Matthew 26:59-61). The group falsely accused Stephen of wanting to change Moses' customs because they knew that the Sadducees, who controlled the council, built their belief system on Moses' laws.

¹⁵ At this point everyone in the high council stared at Stephen, because his face became as bright as an angel's.