

# August 6 Lesson 10

## Called to Witness

Devotional Reading: [Acts 2:14-28](#)

Background Scripture: [Acts 1](#), [6](#), [7](#)

### ACTS 6:1-8

<sup>1</sup> In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. <sup>2</sup> So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. <sup>3</sup> Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them <sup>4</sup> and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”



<sup>5</sup> This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. <sup>6</sup> They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

<sup>7</sup> So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

<sup>8</sup> Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

### KEY VERSE

*Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them.—*

[Acts 6:3](#)

# LESSON OUTLINE

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## Introduction

### A. Waiting On ... What?

When dining at restaurants in Los Angeles, I would often hear a young server say, "I'm an actor. I'm just waiting tables between acting gigs."

Some of them made good livings by serving tables, but they did not see themselves as waiters. The outer self waited tables while the inner self waited for a big break into stardom. By contrast, I never met a person who had a successful acting career but was biding his time until he got his "big break" to get into waiting tables! This reveals something about cultural values.

Today's lesson is also about values. The apostles, the primary leaders of the first-century church, had been taught a value of the kingdom of God: that serving others was not beneath them ([Mark 9:33-35](#); [10:35-45](#); [John 13:14](#); compare [Philippians 2:5-8](#); etc.). But there was more than one value at issue in the situation addressed by today's text. The apostles' handling of it has been seen as marvelously insightful through the centuries, and still is.

## B. Lesson Background

Today's lesson focuses on the earliest days of the Jerusalem church, when the memory of Jesus was still vividly strong. [Acts 6](#), from which our text is drawn, reflects a time when the church consisted of Christians from a Jewish background only, since the gospel had yet to be extended to Gentiles (compare [Acts 10:1-11:18](#)).

A common religious background did not mean uniformity in doctrine and practice, however. The Judaism of Jesus' day had divided itself into four sects: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots, as described by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus. As Jews accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah, they brought into the church their various (and sometimes contradictory) expectations. Some had to be modified or abandoned altogether.

For example, the Scriptures clearly stated God's desire that widows and other needy people be cared for ([Isaiah 1:17](#); etc.). But there was not a uniform understanding on how benevolence programs were to be funded and who was eligible to receive aid. Regarding funding, Josephus interpreted [Deuteronomy 14:28, 29; 26:12](#) to mean that support was to be funded by a third tithe brought every third year (*Antiquities* 4.240). Jesus had harsh words for a tradition that allowed one to redirect a gift to avoid supporting a needy parent ([Mark 7:9-13](#)). The lack of consensus on eligibility could have been one aspect of Paul's need to address the topic later ([1 Timothy 5:3-16](#)).

The first-century church in Jerusalem recognized its obligation to provide food daily to its widows. That was quite an undertaking for a church that numbered in the thousands ([Acts 4:4](#)), and direct oversight of this complex ministry was shouldered by the leaders of the congregation, the apostles. But complaints were being heard, and the nature of this important task consumed their time. Something had to be done.

## I. Growing Pain

([Acts 6:1-4](#))

### A. The Thorny Problem ([v. 1](#))

<sup>1</sup> In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

It is easy to misunderstand the nature of this conflict of *the Hellenistic Jews ... against the Hebraic Jews*. All are of Jewish background (see the Lesson Background). The distinction is that some identify themselves secondarily with the Greek language and culture that predominates outside the borders of Israel, while others identify more with the Hebrew language and culture that predominates within Israel proper. (The issue at hand is therefore not the same as Peter's problem in [Galatians 2:11-13](#), which involves Jews and Gentiles.)

Jerusalem is a magnet for Jews all over the Roman world, and many come for extended stays. For example, Barnabas, a Levite from the Greek-speaking island of Cyprus ([Acts 4:36](#)), resides

in Jerusalem at this time. The apostles in Jerusalem from Galilee have at least some ability to speak the Greek language, but they probably identify more with the Hebrew group. A charge of bias on the part of *the Hebraic Jews* regarding *the daily distribution of food* to widows therefore lands in their laps. Something must be done, and quickly! Some issues may resolve themselves over time, but this is not one of them.

## B. The Wrong Solution ([v. 2](#))

<sup>2</sup> So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.

*The Twelve* are the apostles chosen by Jesus, minus Judas, plus his replacement ([Acts 1:15-26](#)). Acts gives us the picture that these men have assumed the role of leaders for the congregation in all things since the beginning of the church on the Day of Pentecost (chap. 2). These leaders recognize a brewing crisis that can divide the church. Disaster looms unless something changes.

Some preliminary observations are in order. First, whether the neglect of certain widows is an issue of objective fact or an issue of subjective perception, something must be done. Second, any charge of intentional bias on the part of the apostles is surely untrue, since they are honorable, godly men (compare [James 2:1-10](#)).

Even if the complaint has a factual basis, the cause for the unequal treatment may simply be a lack of adequate time and manpower as the apostles both *wait on tables* and attend to *the word of God*. (The latter refers to the ministry of teaching and preaching; see [Acts 5:42](#).) The apostles are the best qualified to preach and teach; others can manage the food distribution.

So a congregational meeting ensues as the apostles call *all the disciples together*. While [Acts 2:41](#) and [4:4](#) indicate that thousands of people have believed and been baptized, those actually responding to the summons may be a core group of a few hundred. The place of assembly is undoubtedly outdoors, perhaps in a public meeting area such as Solomon’s Colonnade ([Acts 5:12](#)).

No mention is given of the complaint of the Grecian Jews that has precipitated the crisis. Rather than frame this as a need for avoiding factional strife in the congregation, the Twelve realize the root problem is their inability to perform this food ministry well, given their other responsibilities. We might say they wisely want to treat the disease (inadequate manpower for food distribution) rather than the symptom (complaints of bias).

## C. The Right Solution ([vv. 3, 4](#))

<sup>3</sup> “Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them

The apostles do not ask for a strategy to resolve the problem. They have already decided what they themselves need to do: focus on preaching and teaching. What they ask of those gathered is that they select men from among them to be appointed over *this responsibility* of food

distribution to widows. Realizing that those chosen will be important functionaries in the church, the apostles specify several criteria for the selection process.

First, the number is set at *seven*. Seven is an important symbolic number in the Bible, the number of perfection or completion (example: [Revelation 15](#)). Whether or not symbolism is present here, the apostles know—either by analysis or divine inspiration—that seven is the right number.

We should note that the text does not say that the seven will be the only ones involved in distributing food to widows, since the wording *turn ... over to them* may imply that the seven will have the authority to exercise full control of this ministry. Thus the seven might supervise others they choose to assist.

## HOW TO SAY IT

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Antioch *An-tee-ock*.

apostolic *ap-uh-stahl-ick*.

Aramaic *Air-uh-may-ik*.

Barnabas *Bar-nuh-bus*.

Cyprus *Sigh-prus*.

diakonos (*Greek*) *dee-ah-ko-nawss*.

Gentiles *Jen-tiles*.

Grecians *Gree-shunz*.

Hebrews *Hee-breus*.

Nicanor *Nye-cay-nor*.

Nicolas *Nick-uh-lus*.

Parmenas *Par-meh-nas*.

Pentecost *Pent-ih-kost*.

Prochorus *Prock-uh-rus*.

proselyte *prahss-uh-light*.

Sadducees *Sad-you-seez*.

synagogue *sin-uh-gog*.

Tarsus *Tar-sus*.

Timon *Ty-mon*.

The men must have positive reputations, their character evident to all. They are not unknown quantities, but are to be men acknowledged as being *full of the Spirit and wisdom*. These men are being authorized to assume duties in which a considerable amount of money may be involved, and the church has recently experienced a troubling incident of deceit with regard to money ([Acts 5:1-11](#)). A high degree of accountability along with proven spiritual and life-experience

maturity are musts (compare [1 Timothy 3:6, 7](#)). All this will help them be spiritually attuned to the needs of the widows while remaining above reproach in administrating a large operation.

Finally, the word *we* establishes that the apostles retain for themselves the final stamp of approval regarding congregational selections. How that approval is communicated is the subject of [Acts 6:6](#), below.

4. “and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

Not only do the apostles need time for *ministry of the word* (their teaching and preaching of [Acts 5:42](#)), but also time for *prayer*. Mention of the latter introduces a topic thus far unaddressed in Acts: proper attention to prayer requires time.

We assume that our church leaders are people of prayer. But would we think highly of a minister who declined to help with a project (like feeding widows) because he was booked for prayer all morning? The ministry of prayer can and does take time and planning.

This episode in Acts is often seen as the origin of the office of deacon in the church. Our term *deacon* comes from the Greek noun *diakonos*, which is not used in [Acts 6](#). Therefore the seven men are “deacons” only by inference. However, a variation of the word *diakonos* is behind the translation *ministry*, which describes the functions the apostles have chosen to focus on.

In effect, the apostles are saying, “Let us focus on serving as deacons/ministers of the Word, and let the seven serve as deacons/ministers of the tables.” Titles in the New Testament describe functions more than offices. The question should be “Who will serve as a deacon?” more than “Who will be a deacon?”

## II. Pleasing Consensus

([Acts 6:5, 6](#))

### A. The Candidates ([v. 5](#))

5. This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

Of the seven chosen, all but Philip have distinctively Greek names. This is likely a deliberate effort to assure everyone that the Grecian widows will receive adequate food.

Two of the names become more prominent as the storyline of Acts unfolds. The ministry of *Stephen* is the focus of the rest of chapter 6 and all of chapter 7. The ministry of *Philip* is discussed throughout chapter 8. (He is “Philip the evangelist” [[Acts 21:8](#)], not the apostle Philip.)

For the man named *Nicolas* to be identified as *from Antioch, a convert to Judaism* indicates he is a Gentile who has embraced the Jewish faith. His mention foreshadows the expansion of the

church to Gentiles and to the important city of Antioch (see [Acts 13:1-3](#)). No additional information exists regarding the other four men named.

Delegating the oversight of feeding widows is easy to see in today's lesson. But we should not fail to notice that the apostles also delegate the task of choosing the seven men to head up the program. This serves to create a sense of ownership by *the whole group*. Wise leaders know the importance of delegating (compare [Exodus 18:13-26](#)).

## B. The Consecration ([v. 6](#))

<sup>6</sup> They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The men chosen are *presented ... to the apostles* for a ceremony to inaugurate their ministry. This is a time of prayer for the men, accompanied by the apostles laying *their hands on* the seven. This act of praying while hands are on the shoulders and heads of the men is a way of granting them authority and giving them a commission for their work (compare [Acts 13:3](#); [1 Timothy 4:14](#)). This public event takes place in the presence of the whole body of believers. The commissioning is presented as something done with dignity and reverence.

Although the word *ordain* is not used here, we often see [Acts 6:6](#) as a model for the church's practice of ordaining ministers, elders, and/or deacons. Ordination is the church's way of setting chosen individuals apart for a designated area of ministry. Ordination should be done with the approval of the congregation and the blessing of the church leadership. It should be a time of solemn dedication, yet also a joyous time of commissioning people for the service of Christ's church.

## III. Marvelous Result

([Acts 6:7, 8](#))

### A. The Multiplication ([v. 7](#))

<sup>7</sup> So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

We come to three summary statements regarding the progress of the church after the seven are chosen (compare [Acts 2:47](#)). First, the fact that *the word of God spread* indicates that the apostles are indeed able to dedicate their time to preaching and teaching. Second, the result of that focus is a significant growth in *the number of disciples*; but so far this growth happens only *in Jerusalem*. Persecution will soon push the gospel beyond the environs of the city ([Acts 8:1b, 4](#)).

Third, the growth in disciples includes a significant *number of priests* (compare [John 12:42](#)). These are likely Sadducees, the elites of Jerusalem: wealthy, educated, and cultured. This party of the Jews is known for its denial of the possibility of resurrection ([Luke 20:27](#); [Acts 23:8](#)). To become *obedient to the faith* includes dropping this skepticism, for there is no gospel without the resurrection of Jesus (see [1 Corinthians 15:16, 17](#)).

An implication of these summary statements is that the growth of the church, stalled by the widow controversy, has now resumed. Unity and harmony in a congregation do not ensure it will grow. But disunity and division form a reliable recipe for a church to decline. Our energies should be pointed at increasing the ministry of the Word and making disciples ([Matthew 28:19, 20](#)).

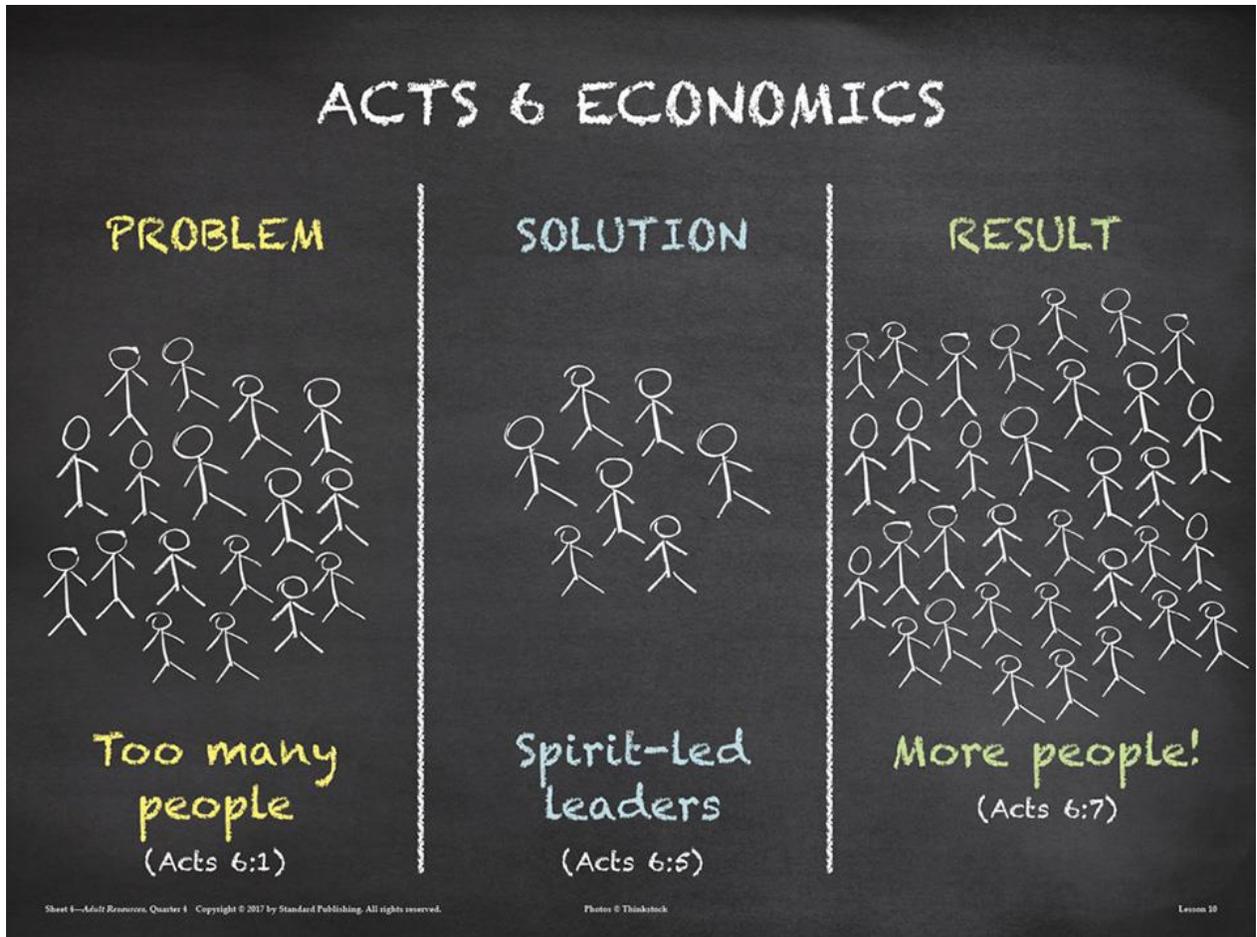
## **B. The Miracles ([v. 8](#))**

<sup>8</sup> Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.

*Stephen* is described in [Acts 6:5](#) as "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit." Here the description is reworded: he is a man *full of God's grace and power*. The power he has is that of the Holy Spirit.

Stephen seems to move quickly from overseeing distributions of food to something more like the apostles' ministry of the word. He is now out *among the people* where the *great wonders and signs* he does can be witnessed by many. This parallels Stephen's ministry with those of Jesus ([Acts 2:22](#)) and the apostles in general ([5:12](#)). The parallels cause us to realize that primary among the miracles are healings.

The story about Stephen that follows offers further parallels between him and Jesus (compare [Acts 6:11, 13, 14; 7:60](#) with [Matthew 26:59-61, 65; Luke 23:34](#)).



Visual for Lesson 10. "What was a situation where you saw this actually happen?"

## Conclusion

### A. Needed: A Culture of Change

A growing church is like a living organism in that difficulties encountered must be addressed before they become crippling. Adaptation may result in unforeseen consequences, both good and bad. People may be given chances to serve in modest roles, and some (like Stephen) rise to this challenge and go beyond. But this also implies meeting the challenge of filling the modest role that is vacated as a result. There are always problems to address, but also potential new leaders whom God is preparing to help do so.

Within scriptural boundaries, methods for ministry are subject to change. Consider how the benevolence ministry of the first-century church changed as we trace it from [Acts 2:45](#) to [Acts 4:34, 35](#) to [Acts 6:1-6](#) to [2 Corinthians 8:13-9:15](#) to [1 Timothy 5:3-16](#). A church willing to change may be a church poised for growth.

### B. Prayer

Father, grant us wisdom to see when changes in methods are necessary and courage to implement them so our church can fulfill the Great Commission. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

A successful church cannot be a one-person endeavor.