

The Book of Acts: Verse-by-Verse Study Notes

Acts 6:1-7

As we come to chapter six, we find the apostles dealing with an entirely new set of problems. In the prior chapters we saw them grappling with persecution by the Sanhedrin and the deception of Ananias and Saphira. Now something new emerges ... that gives us insight into two things – a growing need for organization and a long-standing cultural issue.

- Hellenists and Hebraists: v. 1

“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.”

The almost idealistic harmony that the Church experienced in its opening days is now becoming a thing of the past! The former “pulling together” has been tested by outside persecution and inside attempts at prideful deception. Now, the Church will face a different kind of “pulling apart” – one that is based upon longstanding cultural attitudes.

Luke tells us that the Church was growing in numbers. Such growth should be expected to reveal any gaps in attitudes – and that’s what the Church was now experiencing.

In the Greek text, Luke says that although the believers were growing in numbers, there was a dreaded “goggysmos” - a complaint that is accompanied by murmuring.

Parallel: The same word is used in the Greek Old Testament to describe the murmuring of the Children of Israel against Moses and others in leadership.

The Hellenistic (Greek) Jews were murmuring about a situation involving impoverished Greek widows from their own group.

In the Old Testament, God placed a high value on his people taking care of both widows and orphans. See: Psalm 68:5; Deuteronomy 14:28-29; Malachi 3:5.

The early Church supported those widows who did not have immediate family to bear this responsibility. Some form of daily distribution of food was made available to the widows.

The Clash: The Hellenists were complaining that the Hebrew widows were being taken care of, but the Greek widows were not receiving the same level of attention. They may be insinuating that this situation exists because the “Hebrews” oversaw the distribution.

- **The Story Behind The Story:**

A movement towards a large-scale evangelization of Gentiles was taking place and the Hellenists were taking the lead. Historians note the Hellenist Jews came from the Jewish dispersion and settled in Palestine. They spoke Greek. Conversely, the Hebrews were natives of Palestine and spoke Aramaic.

As one scholar put it, the Hellenists “not only spoke Greek but thought and behaved like Greeks, while the Hebraioi not only spoke Aramaic but were deeply immersed in Hebrew culture.” – F.F. Bruce

The Hellenists Jews not only spoke Greek, they also attended Greek-speaking synagogues. The Hebrews spoke Aramaic and attended Hebrew speaking synagogues. Acts 6 demonstrates a rivalry between these groups in Jewish culture and worship.

A Parallel: The Jews and the Samaritans. A difference in culture fomented negative opinions of both groups by their opponents. See: Jesus and the Samaritan woman – John 4

The Samaritans were considered “half-breeds” because these Jews had intermarried with Gentiles during Israel and Judah’s two periods of captivity. They were neither fully Jews nor Gentiles. As such, fully genetic Jews had little regard for them.

Some of that same tension as well as discriminatory attitudes existed between the Hebrew Jews and Greek Jews.

- **More Than Cultural Tensions: vv. 2-4**

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

A matter of priorities: The apostles felt that organizing the widow’s distribution and keeping it functioning was important, but it could not be allowed to monopolize their time. Christ had specifically entrusted to them the tasks of preaching and teaching.

A delegated responsibility: The apostles gathered those who were involved with the issue and said, ‘Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom [JBP, “both practical and spiritually-minded”].

The apostles invited the Hellenists (and Hebraists) to select seven men who were filled with the Spirit and wisdom to deal with the daily feeding of the widows.

This designation of “The Seven” is often mentioned as the beginning of what we would commonly call the “diaconate”. While the Seven are not actually called “deacons”, the inference is still there.

The Choosing Of The “Seven”: vv. 5-6:

“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. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.”

“The proposal pleased the whole group...” – It did not satisfy only one contingent, but both groups.

The names of the Seven appear to indicate that all of them were from the Hellenists faction. These were probably the leaders of the Hellenists; as such they would have been obvious choices.

- Stephen is specifically described as “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.”
- Philip – We will encounter him again in Acts 9.

Luke does not give us any further information about the other five men chosen for this task. We can, however, learn something about them from Church tradition:

- Prochorus is said to have been an attendant of John the evangelist. He supposedly served as bishop of Nicomedia and was martyred at Antioch.
- Nicolaus: According to tradition, he was not Jew by birth, but became a convert to Judaism from paganism. He was from Antioch on the Orontes. Luke probably mentions Nicolaus because of his special interest in that city. Some scholars believe that Luke was himself from Antioch.

Church tradition holds that Nicolaus was later the founder of the Nicolaitans – a group that eventually spread false teachings. See: Revelation 2:6.

- **The Presentation and [Ordination]: vv. 6-7**

“They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. 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.”

While the entire community chose the Seven, it was the apostles who formally commissioned them by prayer and laying their hands on them.

The “Laying On Of Hands” – An ancient pattern within the Jewish community. We find the “laying on of hands” in various contexts throughout the Old Testament. This includes:

- The giving of some form of blessing: Gen. 48:13–20
- The identification of the one offering an animal sacrifice with the animal sacrifice: Leviticus 1:4; 3:2; 4:4; 16:21.
- The commissioning a successor: Numbers 27:23.

According to Jewish history, initiates to the Sanhedrin were admitted to that order by the laying on of hands. In the case of the Seven, the apostles’ imposition of hands formally identified these men as being commissioned to this task.

Next time: What followed the assignment of “The Seven”.