

# The Deaconate?

## *The First Seven Appointed Leaders of the Early Church*

**Acts 6:1** Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

**2** And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

**3** Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

**4** But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

**5** And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch.

**6** These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

**7** And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of **the priests became obedient to the faith.**

**8** And **Stephen, full of grace and power,** was doing great wonders and signs among the people.

**9** Then some of those who belonged to **the synagogue** of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.

**10** But they could not withstand **the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.**

**11** Then they **secretly instigated** men who said, “**We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.**”

**12** And **they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes,** and **they came upon him** and seized him and brought him before the council,

**13** and they set up **false witnesses** who said, “**This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,**

**14** for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change **the customs that Moses delivered to us.**”

**15** And gazing at **him,** all who sat in the council saw that his face **was like the face of an angel.**

### **Acts 6:1-15**

# A Priestly Duty

In the beginning, God made a man. He then **took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to cultivate and keep it (Gen 2:15)**. At least, that's what **most of the translations say**. And, of course, it makes sense, because it is a garden after all. What do you do with gardens? You cultivate them and take care of them.

However, the word for “**cultivate**” is used often of *the priesthood*, especially in relation to their **serving** the tabernacle-sanctuary (e.g. Num 4:23, 24, 30, 35, 39, 43, 47). In fact, this word (*ʿābad*) is usually translated as “**to serve,**” and is in fact always translated that way in a temple context.

The paired word “**keep**” (*shāmar*) can also be translated as “**guard.**” It appears one more time in the Garden story when **the cherubim are said to guard** the way to the tree of life (**Gen 3:24**). It also appears throughout the tabernacle contexts later in Numbers, for example when, “**Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest was to be chief over the chiefs of the Levites, and to have oversight of those who kept guard over the sanctuary**” (**Num 3:32**).

The two words sometimes appear together elsewhere (cf. Num 3:7-8; 8:25-26; 18:5-6; 1 Chron 23:32; Ezek 44:14). When they do, Beale says, “Without exception they have this meaning and refer either to Israelites ‘serving and guarding/obeying’ God’s word (about 10 times) or, more often to priests who ‘serve’ God in the temple and ‘guard’ the temple from unclean things entering it.”<sup>1</sup> So for example, in Numbers 3 we read, “They shall *keep guard* over him and over the whole congregation before the tent of meeting, as they minister at the tabernacle. They shall *guard* all the furnishings of the tent of meeting, and keep guard over the people of Israel as *they minister* [other trans. “do the service] at the tabernacle” (Num 3:7-8).

Meredith Kline gives us a little more when thinking of this same context,

*Shāmar* [keep/guard] unmistakably signifies the maintenance of the sanctity of the garden... Elsewhere in the bible, especially in passages dealing with the functions of the priests and Levites in Israel, the verb *shāmar* occurs frequently in the sense of guarding the holiness of God’s sanctuary against

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Beale, “Eden, The Temple, and the Church’s Mission in the New Creation,” *JETS* 48:1 (2005): 8.

profanation by unauthorized ‘strangers’ (cf., e.g., Num 1:53; 3:8, 10, 32; 8:26; 18:3ff.; 31:30, 47; 1 Sam 7:1; 2 Kgs 12:9; 1 Chr 23:32; 2 Chr 34:9; Ezek 44:15ff., 48:11)...<sup>2</sup>

When you understand that the **tabernacle was actually a man-made replica of the Garden of Eden**, with its cherubim in the curtains, animals engraved into the furnishings, colors matchings the sky and the earth, it’s law and budding tree (Aaron’s rod) in the ark in the Most Holy Place, then you can see why scholars like Kline and Beale conclude that “**Genesis 2:15** contains an explicit reference to the entrusting of man in his **priestly office** with the task of defending the Edenic sanctuary against the intrusion of anything that would be alien to the holiness of the God of the garden or hostile to his name.”

Now, with Adam, he was given the task to both serving and guarding. By the time we get to the tabernacle, **this task had bifurcated** into two overlapping yet distinct groups. As we have seen in our study of Acts, when God came to Mt. Sinai, he told the people to prepare themselves in a ritual baptism, because they were going to be a **kingdom of priests**

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<sup>2</sup> **Meredith Kline**. *Kingdom Prologue* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 86.

and a holy nation (**Ex 19:6**). But something terrible happened while Moses was still up on Sinai.

The people turned against God and his intercessor and decided to take things into their own hands. They committed great idolatry, trying to worship God through a golden calf. When Moses came down and heard the noise, he was furious, threw the tablets of the covenant to the ground, shattering them, and demanded the people rise up to God's side for there was about to be a holy war. Only the tribe of Levi came to his side (**Ex 32:26**).

This event was part of a long chain that began with the second and third sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, who started a holy war against Hamor and Shechem for raping their sister Dinah. Jewish traditions say that for this, Levi would eventually be awarded the priesthood (see for example, the Testament of Levi). This is one of the reasons God chose Moses and Aaron for the tasks they were given, for they were both from the tribe of Levi (**Ex 6:16-20**).

At one point, God gave Aaron the high priesthood (**Ex 28:1**). He and his sons would *serve God as priests, keeping and guarding* the holy places. Yet, his cousins, others from the

tribe of Levi, would be given other tasks around the tabernacle. From the three sons of Levi—**Gershon, Kohath, and Merari**—God would dedicate this entire tribe to service in the tabernacle—effectively replacing the nation of priests with this single tribe. These became known as the Levites.

Generally speaking, **the priests** would oversee the teaching, the worship, and the sacrifices of the tabernacle and later temple. They served God. **The Levites** would oversee the physical work—taking down the tent, transporting it, putting it back up, getting things ready, and so on. Theirs was very much a job of *servicing* the community.

This is one aspect of the division of work that we find in the Torah. But there is another which is very important to understanding our passage. Before the tabernacle was made, Moses met his father-in-law **Jethro** somewhere near Mt. Sinai (**Ex 18:5**). After exchanging pleasantries and getting the recap of the events of the Exodus, Jethro watched as Moses began to judge the people. From morning till evening Moses would hear their complaints. Moses and Moses alone.

This did not make Jethro happy and he said, “**What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone,**

and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?” (14). Jethro, full of wisdom, told Moses to “look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs” (21).

Later on, in the book of Numbers, once the tabernacle had been set up and was implemented among the people, the people, a mixed multitude, complained about all their misfortunes (Num 11:1). They wanted food to eat (4). A little later in that chapter, the Lord commands Moses, “Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel ... and let them take their stand there with you” (16). God says he will put the Spirit that is on Moses and put it on them so that he may share his burden (17). This is precisely what happens (24-25), though something also unexpected occurs—two of them begin to prophecy in the camp (27). The result of all this is that the multitudes are fed (31).

We saw in Luke 9 how Jesus fed a multitude near Bethsaida (Luke 9:10). Like Moses, immediately after, he appoints seventy disciples (Luke 10:1) who will go out and proclaim the Gospel after the twelve. The priests, the elders,



the servants, the division of labor, all of these ideas are circulating now around our passage today.

## Acts 6:1-16—Context and Structure

**Acts 6:1-7** tells the story of setting apart seven men for some kind of special service in the church. **Acts 6:8-15** complements it by focusing in on one of those men, a man named Stephen, who will go on to be the tragic hero of the entirety of the very long ch. 7. It therefore makes sense to look at all of ch. 6 together.

Each half of the chapter is its own independent unit of thought, as can be seen in the headings of most of your Bibles. The first is chiastic:

- A. “the disciples were increasing in number” (6:1)
- B. “preaching the word of God” to serve tables (6:2)
- C. “Pick out from among you seven men” (6:3)
- D. “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the to the ministry of the word” (6:4)
- C’. “They chose Stephen and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus” (6:5)
- B’. “the word of God” increased (6:7a)
- A’. “The number of the disciples multiplied” (6:7b)



The structure of the second is much more elusive and could be a very rough abcb'a' or an abb'a' pattern.

More important for the context, it is important to remember that from the beginning of Acts until this very moment, we have had much in the way of Luke harkening back time and again to [the OT temple](#). From the 120 in the upper room, to the Spirit descending as he did on Sinai on Pentecost and later on the tabernacle and temple, to the tongues, to the idea of the Christians “gathering” together, to his use of the word “church,” to Ananias and Sapphira story that emulates Nadab and Abihu, to the fact that the disciples are constantly hanging out in the temple (when they are not sitting in prison). This does not leave us in chapter 6, though it changes form [from Temple to synagogue](#) ([Acts 6:9](#)), but still the place of worship and therefore holy. This all helps in our understanding of exactly [what the apostles were up to in choosing these seven men](#). But let us also keep in mind that this is Acts, a history book. It is not a systematic theology, but a book that tells us what happened. Our job is to discern the implications this has for us today.

## Acts 6:1-7—The Magnificent Seven

The chapter begins with a dispute. “Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution” (Acts 6:1). Keep in mind the Numbers story and how the people were complaining about food before the seventy were allotted and they were fed. We’ve seen how fast the word of God was spreading. The wildfire a couple years ago that spread through Louisville was blazing fast, but even it could not keep up with the rapid speed of the growth of this early church.

“Hellenists” refers to those Jews who had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost from Greek-speaking nations. Meanwhile, the Hebrews were the natives of Jerusalem and Judea and spoke Aramaic. Along with clear cultural differences, this explosion of Christianity among different cultures created—as it does even to this day—challenges. Those challenges seemed to focus on the idea of discrimination. As the church was distributing to everyone who was in need, the Hellenists were complaining that their widows were being

neglected. Ah, utopias. Even in the church they never quite seem to be fully realizable. Christians still sin.

So the twelve Apostles of Jesus “summoned the full number of the disciples” (6:2). It becomes clear immediately that the twelve of them are, like Moses, simply not able to oversee all of the conflicts between so many Christians by themselves. We don’t know if this is the 120 who were in the upper room or if it was even more who were called to this meeting.

Their message was, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables” (2). The wording, “serve tables” is *diakonein trapezais*. Perhaps you can hear in this verb *diakonein* hints of an English noun—deacon or deaconate. They are the same root. Now, the noun “deacon” is not in fact used in this chapter. Its first appearance in the NT is in **Philippians 1:1** where Paul writes to the saints at Philippi “with the overseers [*episcopas*] and deacons.” This is where we get the first hints of two offices in the churches variously called elders and deacons.

It should be pointed out that though the noun is not used in Acts 6, **this verb**, while in its comprehensive usage means

“to serve,” often has the very specific use of “to wait at table,”<sup>3</sup> precisely what Peter says here. It also has this meaning in **Luke 17:8**, “Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and *serve me* while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink?’” In **Acts 6:2**, the idea isn’t something like working as a waiter at a restaurant, but rather overseeing the daily preparation and organization of the distribution of bodily sustenance. Organizational and administrative skills focusing on seeing that the physical needs of especially the marginalized (i.e. widows) is in view.<sup>4</sup>

Curiously, this kind of a statement might have itself caused a ruckus among the different cultures. For in Greek eyes, serving someone was not dignified. Ruling and not serving is proper to man, according to Plato (*Gorg* 492b). The Sophists said, “How can a man be happy when he has to serve someone?”<sup>5</sup> But to Jews and those living in the Middle East, it was often considered a high honor to serve someone, though whether widows were the object, that might not

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<sup>3</sup> Hermann Wolfgang Beyer, “Διακονέω, Διακονία, Διάκονος,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 82.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

have been the case. The point is, this could have caused disruption simply in the statement itself. Are the twelve saying that they are above serving? Are they about to demand that others take this lowly job because they're too important? That's how a lot of pastors today act!

It's interesting that there's **no hint** here, however, of **complaining or an argument** ensuing. They continue, "Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit of Wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty" (**Acts 6:3**). The important things here are **the character of the men** and that they are **full of wisdom**. That is, they must have a good reputation among the people. They must not choose men who are scoundrels or self-absorbed. But they must also have wisdom, and this refers not merely to a kind of organizational wisdom, but also to a wisdom that understands the needs that are before them. That is, they are to have great care and concern for those in need, no matter who they are, because this reflects **the fear of the Lord**. This was a high calling that they were being set apart for.

The twelve conclude their speech by saying, "**But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the**

word” (Acts 6:4). Now, this is the very obvious center of the structure. Everything else after it will be repeated. This then shows us that the apostles do not feel themselves superior, but rather they must be busy with prayer and the ministry of the word. Ministry is service! In fact, it is the word *diakonia* (as opposed to *diakonos*, which is “deacon”). The Apostles are in fact servants!

We have and will have much to discuss here. First, this passage has often been used in the church as a kind of proof-text for the earliest account of a division in the church of the two offices of elder and deacon. The deacons “serve tables,” that is administer the physical needs of the congregation. The elders (represented by the Apostles) pray and preach the word. Some have used this as an excuse to never be involved in the physical affairs and daily lives of their people. They think their job is just to sit at home and study.

But before we go turning this into a theological proof-text, let’s remember two things. First, these are the twelve apostles. They are not called the “elders” of the church here. They are the “foundation” of the church in other places, and some of them will later serve as elders in churches (for example, apparently John did at Ephesus and Peter calls himself

a fellow elder; [1Pet 5:1](#)). Second, as Apostles of Jesus, they had [a very unique role in church history](#). They were the eye-witnesses, the source material for all that we have about Jesus. As such, some have suggested that their praying and ministering the word had at the very least the very special function of [preparing the documents we know today as the NT](#).<sup>6</sup>

This does not mean that there's nothing to the general idea that elders service the spiritual needs and deacons service the physical needs of the church. Those ideas are not bad at all, so long as they are kept in balance. And we are about to see some other things that must also be considered with regard to exactly what is going on in this chapter vs. decades later in the early church. [The ministry of the word](#)—especially its proclamation, is the singular most important thing the church engages in, with [prayer being a close second](#). It must be taken seriously and God gifts to his churches special men that have the reputation and wisdom to carry it out too. But this should bring caution that we need to be careful about reading later theology into this historical document known as Acts. Let's continue.

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<sup>6</sup> This was proposed in the studio panel discussion on, "[Episode 342: A Crisis of Leadership & Stephen the Martyr \(Acts 6-7\)](#)," *The Theopolis Podcast* (2020).



As we saw, in **vs. 3**, the twelve wanted the disciples to **pick out seven men**. That verse ended by saying, “... **whom we will appoint to this duty**.” Keep this in mind now as we read the parallel. **Acts 6:5** says, “**And what they said pleased the whole gathering**.” In other words, there was no bickering, no protesting over serving others. The words of the twelve were themselves the epitome of wisdom, just as it was when Moses did something similar all those years earlier.

What happens next serves Luke’s purpose of especially introducing us to two men whom he will discuss in the next two chapters. “**And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch**.” **Seven men**—just like they were told. I think it is interesting how Moses chose seventy and they choose seven. The difference is only one of degree, but root of “seven” is the same.

**Stephen** is first, because he is one of the two that Luke will focus on later. His name means “**Wreath; Crown**.” Philip is next. He is the second of the magnificent seven (might as well mention another Steve McQueen movie after

last week) that Luke will tell us about. **Philip** means, “**Lover of Horses; Warrior.**” **Phochorus** means, “**Choir-Director.**” **Nicanor** means, “**Conqueror; Victorious.**” “**Timon**” means, “**Honorable; Deemed Worthy.**” **Parmenas** means, “**Standing Firm; Faithful.**” **Nicolas** means, “Santa Claus.” Just kidding. It means, “**Conqueror of People.**”

Is there **anything discernable** here in the meanings? **Four of them** have some kind of overlap with conquering and being victorious. **One** is an overseer-administrator who directs others. **One** is about a good reputation. **The last** is about faith. Whether Luke had anything in mind with these names, it does appear that they are quite appropriate for men of reputation, wisdom, and faith to be chosen in order to bring order and right to the churches. Perhaps more interesting is that most scholars think these men were all Hellenist Greek speaking Jews, which would have appeased the problem from **vs. 1**. There was **no home-team bias** going on here and it shows the outreach of the early church working its way down to the organizational level—much here for **missions minded** people to keep in mind.

**Vs 6** is the parallel to the apostles appointing them. And it is very interesting. “**These they set before the apostles, and**

*they* prayed and laid *their* hands on them.” The most natural reading of this is not that the apostle’s laid hands on them, but that all the congregation did.<sup>7</sup> And this leads to a very important point about the church.

What is being done here is in fact *a church function*. This is very clearly something that is helping to establish *the church*. It isn’t a parachurch organization, much less a rag-tag group of individuals who do nothing together because they are all “the church.” The NT knows nothing of that kind of rugged individualism Christianity. It’s completely foreign to both Testaments—under normal circumstances. And Acts is about showing us how *normal* circumstances came to be codified.

The church chose these men amongst themselves. *The twelve did not choose them*. They were brought to the apostles who gave their blessing, but then (most likely) the congregation laid their hands on them and prayed for them. As a good Baptist, this does my heart good, for the church’s leadership is supposed to come from the church itself—and

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<sup>7</sup> “While it is possible that the actions of the participle and main verb should be attributed to the apostles alone (Fitzmyer 1998, 351), without an explicit change of subject it is difficult to argue for this position from the syntax (cf. Barrett, 315–16).” Martin M. Culy and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, Baylor Handbook on the Greek New Testament (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 110.

not from some top-down hierarchy that chooses for them. At least, that's how it was in this first instance.

In **6:2** we saw that the apostles were so busy preaching **the word of God**, that they simply weren't able to oversee the distribution of the money to all in need. In **vs. 7**, "**the word of God**" returns. And it says that because of what the church did here, it "**increased.**" God blessed their resolution to the problem. The story then completes itself by returning to where it began. As the disciples were increasing in number in **vs. 1**, so also **the number of the disciples multiplied**. The point here is not that men were responsible, but that men were *faithful*. The apostles delegated their authority to others, just as Moses had done. The church has responded well, doing what they were told. Like Indiana Jones, they *chose well*, too. And God was pleased through their faithful obedience to continue multiplying the work that began at Pentecost.

Now, there are **some theological questions**, especially as it pertains to officers of the church, that are raised by this story. But before thinking about them and the implications for the church today, we should really look at **the next story**, because it compliments the first as Luke now focuses our attention on Stephen.

## Acts 6:1-7—Stephen

The second half of the chapter begins, “**And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people**” (8). This is fascinating for how we just ended our thoughts on the first half, because **it is not usually thought of deacons that their job is to go out doing signs and wonders** among the people! How interesting that Luke does not tell us, “**And Stephen was daily delegating funds for widows,**” but instead tells us about his doing great signs and wonders.

**The explanation** for this won't be able to be fully appreciated until we come to the end of Acts 7, but I'll telegraph it here for you. In saying this, Luke is beginning **a comparison of Stephen—not merely to the twelve, but to Jesus himself**. For this is precisely what Jesus' three-year ministry did. The point being, what God had been pleased to grant to the twelve, we are now told, is spreading to others.

Now, we actually saw this when **Jesus sent out the seventy**. They came back rejoicing at the miracles they were able to perform. And it is quite possible that this is a reflection on their ministry. **Hippolytus** (170 - 235) gives us a list

that tradition says composed those seventy, and **his sixth man is Stephen**. So it appears that Stephen may very well have been with Jesus throughout his ministry. (In fact, after Stephen, he **lists the next six as these same six chosen in our passage**).<sup>8</sup> This should give us caution for saying that God is giving *every* new convert the power of signs and wonders, for clearly, Stephen was special. But at the same time, it isn't merely the twelve who are doing amazing things in those days. It just makes me wonder, what in the world it must have been like to have been in Jerusalem in those months after they put the Lord to death.

**Vs. 9** introduces **our second conflict** of the chapter. And it moves us for the first time out of the temple and **into the synagogue**. “Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those who Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.”

This verse is **historically confusing** and we aren't sure exactly what was happening. We know that there was **at least one synagogue** called the Synagogue of the Freedmen. This refers to **emancipated Jewish slaves** from Rome who

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<sup>8</sup> Hippolytus, *On the Seventy Apostle's of Christ*. See “[Seventy Disciples](#),” *Wikipedia*.



likely migrated back to Jerusalem and banded together to form their own synagogue where they could worship God in Greek.

Luke then gives **four other groups**: **Cyrenians** (the capital the North African province of Cyrenaica in modern Libya); **Alexandrians** (the capital of ancient Egypt and the most important administrative center of the Mediterranean world next to Rome); **Cilicia** (modern Turkey located along the Mediterranean coast, including Tarsus where Paul was born); and “**Asia**,” which is Asia Minor (and included the seven church cities of Rev 2-3).

Because two of these are in Africa and two are in Turkey, it is possible that there were **two more synagogues**, divided by Greek and non-Greek languages. Or, we could have **four more synagogues**, and each group had their own, making five total.<sup>9</sup> The point is, **these are all Hellenized and non-Jerusalem Jews** that have some bone to pick with Stephen.

Why? Because of his miracles? No. Because apparently, where he was going (to them), he was also **preaching about**

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<sup>9</sup> See both **Simon J. Kistemaker** and William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 17, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1953–2001), 228–29; **Clinton E. Arnold**, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: John, Acts.*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 264–65.



Jesus in the synagogues, which again is precisely what Jesus used to do (Luke 4:44, etc.). And it says, “But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking” (Acts 6:10). Remember, they were to pick out men “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (vs. 3). Now you see why. This not only allowed the widows to be taken care of, it was an integral part of the church’s spreading message. You wonder why the church doesn’t spread in a given time period? Perhaps it is because this is taken so nonchalantly in churches that they just pick anyone who “likes to talk about God,” which, what does that say for everyone else in those churches! Wisdom and the Spirit? Who cares. He’s a good worship leader!

At any rate, now we see that Stephen, appointed to “serve tables,” is actually doing the same things that the apostles were doing—signs, wonders, and *preaching the gospel*. This is not how we traditionally understand the role of the deaconate. Yet, we usually call him Stephen *the Deacon*. More on that later.

The point here is that the church really did choose wisely with this man. Not only did he have the gifting that was required to administer that affairs of the food in those

days, including the ability to not show partiality. But he also excelled in rhetoric and speech and knowledge and love and fear of the Gospel of Jesus. How do we know this was what he was talking about?

“Then they secretly instigated men who said, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God’ (11). This is our next contact with Jesus, for now they are bringing false witnesses against Stephen, just as they did with his Lord. We will see how he responds to these charges in the next chapter, where we will find out that yes, those supposedly “blasphemous words” had as their core message the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

“And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council” (12). Still more tie-ins to Jesus. It’s as if Jesus has been reincarnated in this man. But of course, there is no such thing as reincarnation, and Stephen actually knew Jesus personally, so that’s impossible by that count alone. But we know that it is the Holy Spirit who oversaw Jesus in his ministry that is the same Spirit Stephen now has. And the message he is proclaiming is the same that Jesus proclaimed.

Vv. 13-14 give us the context of his preaching. “And they set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.’” Jesus said these very things in his famous sermon(s) on the last-days. He predicted that Jerusalem would be destroyed, and all Stephen is doing is communicating that message.

But this was profoundly subversive, because as the temple is destroyed, it will necessitate a change of action among the Jews. They will no longer be able to sacrifice animals at the temple, because it will be gone. But they are twisting his words, saying that Jesus is coming to obliterate everything about Judaism. That was true in one sense, for it was Jesus—as God—who was behind Jerusalem’s destruction. But Stephen isn’t calling for political subversion and uprising to destroy anything. That’s the Jews projecting their own political fears, just as we saw the priests doing in the previous chapter.

The final verse is most interesting. “And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face

of an angel” (Acts 6:15). “Gazing” is a Lukism, and it is found outside of Acts only in 2 Corinthians 3. “And while they were *gazing* into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes” (Acts 1:10). “Peter directed *his gaze* at him [the lame man], as did John” (Acts 3:4). “But [Stephen], full of the Holy Spirit, *gazed* into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55).

Each of these has some **other-worldly aspect** to the gaze, be it an angel, Jesus, or a miracle about to happen. Curiously, in 2 Corinthians it is the Israelites who could not gaze at Moses’ face (2Cor 3:7, 13), and Moses is in our passage here. Again, it is an **otherworldly encounter**. Something that must have been simultaneously frightening and spectacular.

Here, they say **Stephen’s face was like the face of an angel**. We saw that in the first gazing, up at Jesus as he ascended into the clouds, that **two angels** came in his place and spoke to the disciples. In his speech in the next chapter, Stephen will mention **The Angel** appearing to Moses in the bush (Acts 7:30, 35), **The Angel** speaking to Moses at Sinai (38), and **angels** delivering the law of Moses which the people did not keep (53). Along with Stephen at the moment of his

death gazing up into heaven and seeing Jesus at the right hand of God (55), this idea that his face is like an angel strongly evokes both Jesus and Moses with his shining face. Truly, Stephen is a remarkable figure of church history, and as we know, it will result in his soon departure from the earth as the first Christian martyr.

## Reflections on Chapter 6

So what are we to think about this chapter, and what implications does it have? The main thought is obvious concerning church officers. First, I want us to think about the origin of where the apostles might have gotten this idea. We've already seen how Moses delegated authority as a precursor to this. Those particular settings were rulers and elders of the people. And there are overlaps even in the authority given to the seven here.

But this idea of a “servant” is also interesting, especially in light of all the temple language of these chapters. Serving God is the primary duty of the priests and Levites. And in some ways, those are also predecessors to the offices of elders

and deacons in the churches. “Serving” is a one-to-one category, especially with the word “deacon,” which while not used in the LXX in any temple settings, nevertheless uses Hebrew equivalents such as *leitourgein* (from which we get “liturgy”) and *douleuein*, from which we get servant/slave.<sup>10</sup>

One particularly interesting connection is found in **King Ahasuerus’ court** where seven eunuchs served (*diakonein*) the king. In fact, they are actually all listed by name, just as the seven are here (See Est 1:10 LXX). This gives it a more political flavor, but not the politics of this world. For our seven are serving in the court of the Kingdom of heaven.

Another connection, and this one might have the most direct connection, are the **two officers of the Jewish synagogues**. These were the *archisunagōgos* or **ruler/elder of the synagogue**. His job was to select the readers and teachers of the synagogues and to examine the discourses of the public speakers to see that everything was done with decency and order. The other was the *hupēretēs*. A word that also means “servant,” he was the **“under-rower”** or subordinate rower who was an assistant and carries out penalties. As such, his

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<sup>10</sup> Beyer, 83.

job was one of administrator. These are probably the closest models we have to the officers of the churches.<sup>11</sup>

But whether or not Acts 6 is the first creation of the traditional offices, that's another story. In fact, Stephen and Philip will do things that are not usually equated with deacons, and if anything, are more equated with elders. Yet, they are clearly servants of the church. So perhaps a better question we should ask ourselves is one that is raised by this and the preceding context of the priests who arrested the twelve and threw them into prison, especially in light Acts 6:7 which tells us “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” That is, they became believers in Christ and followed him and bowed to his kingship.

This question is, what leadership are you going to follow? In Israel, the priests were the authority. But in the church, the *apostles* are. Yet, their Head is not themselves, but Christ. This is evidenced by the early Christians gladly placing leadership responsibilities into the hands of men they ordained for the good of all. For all servants of the church are servants of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 91.



That was supposed to be the way of it in Israel too. But of course that became so utterly perverted, that **the priesthood became the most corrupt of all institutions in first century Judaism**. Over 2,000 years, we've seen much abuse in **the offices of the church** in ways that parallel that of the Jewish priesthood. But that isn't the fault *of the idea of offices*. It is the fault *of sinful men (and women)*, who usurp their roles as servants and take for themselves positions of authority that are not theirs to take, since Jesus is the authority of our faith.

Therefore, **Acts shows us the way forward, by pointing us backward** to a time when servants of the church served and the disciples of Jesus in the church gladly received their servant-leadership over them. This takes **humility** on the part of all involved, including **repentance** when needed and the **willingly spirit** to let others lead, who are gifted and full of the Spirit of Wisdom. Both servant-leaders and those they lead must have the right hearts about all this for it to work. But that's why God gives us his Spirit, for he is able to create such things out of people who normally would not be so willing.

None of this is to say that Christians aren't **equal in the eyes of God**. It is to say that **God has given gifts to his church**

for its benefit. Leaders are just one of those gifts. And while the church can't exist without them, it can't only be full of them. Sometimes the Reformed act as if everyone should be a fully educated doctor of the church. Each Christian has their part in the role of the body. **Find your gifting** and use it to the glory of God in the building up of his church.

And **use wisdom** in choosing your leaders. Frankly, the wisdom and reputation needed is **easy to spot by the majority**. It is self-evident when someone has the churches or their own interests in mind. It is singularly obvious when a man of wisdom is in your midst or when someone is a foolish person who lives only to hear themselves talk and have their own name be called upon by others.

God has given his church **the greatest task**—to **usher in the kingdom of heaven** here on earth. She is **the door** through which anyone enters, for she is the body of Christ himself. If we would again know the power of those early days, it **must start with faith** in the same God and his unchanging nature. It must start with us having **the same Spirit and attitude** as these early Christians who, while not always agreeing, were all of one mind to see Jesus glorified and exalted. It must start with us trusting anew in **his way of doing**

church rather than our own. And who knows? If these things were to happen today, what power might once more be unleashed upon the world of men, bringing about the miraculous conversion of so many souls so lost in darkness, but now seeing the light of Christ through his Body which wants nothing more than to glorify the Son before the world of men.

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