



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for October 12, 2008
Released on Wednesday, October 8, 2008**

“Discerning Gifts for Leadership”

Lesson: Acts 6:1–5, 8–15.

Devotional Reading: Acts 1:3–11.

Background Scripture: Acts 6:1–15; 8:1–8.

Read: Acts 6:1–15; 8:1–8.

Places: Jerusalem

Time: A.D. 32 or 33

GOLDEN TEXT: “Look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom” (Acts 6:3).

HOW TO SAY IT

CILICIA. *Sih-lish-i-uh.*

CYRENIANS. *Sigh-ree-nee-unz.*

LIBERTINES. *Lib-er-teens.*

NICANOR. *Nye-cay-nor.*

PARMENAS. *Par-meh-nas.*

PROCHORUS. *Prock-uh-rus.*

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT:

Acts 6:1–15; 8:1–8

1And 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 ministrations.

2Then 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.

3Wherefore, 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.

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

5And 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:

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

7And 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.

8And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people.

9Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen.

10And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake.

11Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God.

12And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council,

13And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law:

14For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.

15And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to see how and why the first seven deacons were chosen and how Stephen was opposed by the Jewish Council.

Principle: to show that individuals willing to do humble service for Christ might also aspire to other forms of service.

Application: to help believers learn to do humble service in whatever Christ requires of them in His church.

INTRODUCTION

"CHURCH GROWTH AND LEADERSHIP"

What sort of organizational structure should a church have? Who should its leaders be? How should the structure and the leaders be put in place? These are ongoing questions for any church. It is natural that a church will reflect some of the leadership and organizational traditions of her culture. There are, however, biblical principles that *must* serve the church in any situation or age.

The book of Acts is rightly seen as something of a template for us-the church. This is because the first-century church was largely formed by the efforts of the apostles. They were authorized by Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit to establish the church. We must presume that the apostles understood Jesus' intentions and that their decisions to meet the challenges that confronted the first-century church are

still valid ways of understanding how to deal with issues that arise from church growth today.

Today's lesson involves the trials that arose in a growing church. Church growth brings both blessing and difficulty. What do you do when you outgrow your assembly space? How do you assimilate new believers from diverse backgrounds into the body of Christ? What happens when your church outgrows her leadership structure? Perhaps a church of 20 can make consensus decisions after a dinner on Sunday afternoon, allowing all members to present their opinions and ideas, but does this work for a church of 500 or 5,000?

Acts does not give definitive answers to these specific questions. But the principles we find in Acts 6 still are required reading for guiding the church in its selection of leaders. Let's take a look at these principles.

QUESTIONS

DISCIPLES INCREASED—Acts 6:1—2

The timing of this story is indefinite, but we assume it is several months after the great events of the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. The church has continued to grow, despite opposition from the temple leaders in Jerusalem. The total number of believers is apparently in the thousands (see Acts 4:4).

1. Who were the "Grecians" and the "Hebrews," and what problem arose (Acts 6:1)?

The "Grecians" (Acts 6:1) were Hellenists, or Greek-speaking Jews, whereas the "Hebrews" were native-born Jews. The former were complaining "because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations." This resulted from the Hebrew widows being given preferential treatment in the food distribution. We too must be careful not to treat people differently because of their ethnic background or social standing (cf. James 2:1—9).

Those who expect to find a conflict-free history in the apostolic church of the book of Acts will be disappointed. As long as there is sin in the world, human egos and agendas will lead to conflict. We are naïve to think we can avoid all conflict. We are wise to study godly ways to resolve disputes, however, and not to let them wreck a congregation.

2. What was the main function of the apostles at this time? Why did they not want to leave this work? (v. 2)

At this earlier stage in the church, there was no organization beyond the leadership of the twelve apostles. Consequently, the apostles summoned the entire church together to suggest a course of action to alleviate the present problem. Presumably, this meeting occurred in the temple courts, where the Jerusalem church was meeting at this time (2:46; 5:42).

First, "the twelve" do some prioritizing: they decide that the ministry of *the word of God* is their own primary task. Nothing else should distract them from this. Having done this analysis, they bring the findings to the larger congregation. In effect, they say, "We can't do everything and we shouldn't neglect preaching and teaching, so we need to find some other people to *serve* the food."

The word "serve" in Acts 6:2 is the Greek *diakonein*, which is where we get the word "deacon." Although this word is frequently used of general service in the New Testament, there was also an office of deacon (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8—13).

DEACONS INSTALLED—Acts 6:3—5

3. How were the men selected who were to help meet the needs of certain widows? (v. 3)

While the apostles were quite capable of choosing men to supervise the food ministry, they decided to involve the whole congregation in this process. Member involvement always increases when they are permitted to be a part of the decision-making process.

That the apostles laid down some basic qualifications for the first deacons indicates that this was not just a popularity contest among the church members. Too often people are chosen for ministries or elected to church offices based on their personalities or their standing in the community. While some of these people may also be qualified to serve in church ministries, it is critical to make sure that leaders and workers meet both spiritual and practical qualifications.

4. What three qualifications were laid down for these men?

Those chosen were to be men of good reputation. This probably indicates that they were also to be well thought of even among the unsaved (1 Tim. 3:7). It is sad that some church leaders have bad names among their neighbors and coworkers.

The men chosen were also to be filled with the Holy Spirit. They were to be spiritually minded and mature men living by the Spirit (e.g. Gal. 5:22–23).

Wisdom would also be needed in dealing with the widows. Making sure that all were treated fairly and that genuine needs were being met would require wisdom on the part of those chosen to serve.

5. Were the apostles proud to serve tables?

The twelve could now devote themselves to prayer and preaching (v. 4). The apostles were certainly not above serving tables, but that was not what Christ had called them to do. Even today, pastors are often expected to do things others could do. When a leader's time is consumed with tasks others could perform, he is unable to fulfill his ministry (2 Timothy 4: 1-5).

6. How many men were selected? (v. 5)

Seven men were selected by the congregation to meet the needs before them. How the congregation chooses these men is not specified. In democratic societies, we assume this is done through some type of election. More likely, however, is that it is done through acclamation and consensus during the group meeting.

The list is significant for three reasons. First, all of the men have Greek names, indicating a special concern to accommodate the Hellenistic widows. Second, the first two are destined for larger roles in Acts. Stephen's story as a fiery preacher follows almost immediately. Philip's story as an evangelist comes in chapter 8. Philip reappears briefly much later as the father of four remarkable daughters (Acts 21:8, 9). Third, the man *Nicolas* is identified as being from Antioch. This is a foreshadowing of the great city to the north of that name, which plays a pivotal role in the later events of Acts (see Acts 11:19–30).

Whether the number seven had some spiritual significance of this was simply the number needed to carry out the work is a matter of debate. Either way, seven men were chosen to administer the distribution of food.

7. What was the result of this new ministry (vs. 6,7)? Not in lesson text-extra credit).

The commencement of this new ministry is signaled by a public ceremony of installation. The seven are prayed over by the leaders (*the apostles*). This is accompanied by the physical act of laying *hands on them* (v. 6), an act of blessing and a symbolic authorization. This is an act of "ordination," meaning a setting apart of individuals for specific service for the church.

Unresolved church fights inevitably stop church growth. A church with feuding members is an unattractive place for potential participants. The Jerusalem church is able to overcome this bump in the road, however, and the result is significant growth.

DETRACTORS INFLAMED—Acts 6:8—15

8. Why were the opponents of Stephen unable to overpower his arguments? (vs. 8-10)

Stephen was a man who was full of God's grace and power, to the extent that he performed miracles among the people. Obviously, his ability to perform miracles was connected to his faith, for he is described as a man who was full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

The dispute the opponents of Stephen had with him apparently revolved around various "false" charges they had leveled against him, especially relating to the temple and Mosaic law (Acts 6:13). Even though Stephen's opponents disagreed with him, they were unable to "resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake" (v. 10).

9. What does it mean that Stephen's enemies "suborned men" (vs. 11, 12)?

Unable to refute Stephen's powerful arguments, the only recourse for these evil men was to set up false witnesses. That Stephen's detractors "suborned men" means that they secretly persuaded some men to come forward and falsely accuse Stephen, most likely by paying them bribes. Since such tactics were successful in securing the death of Christ (Matt. 26:59—62), the enemies of this servant of Christ employed a similar strategy.

The primary charge against Stephen is that he is a blasphemer on two counts (compare Jesus' trial, Matthew 26:65). To speak *against Moses* is to speak against the Jewish law; to speak *against God* is to deny the essence of the Jewish religion.

Using volatile accusations, Stephen's enemies "stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribe" (v. 12). Stephen nevertheless had enough opponents to have him brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin. This same body was responsible for Jesus' death and the recent persecution of the apostles (4:1—7; 5:26—29). Priests did make up part of this body and were usually aligned with the Sadducees.

10. What is blasphemy? (v. 13)

To blaspheme is to speak against God. When the charges are presented, a new item is added. Stephen is now presented as having made threats against the *holy place*, meaning the Jerusalem temple (compare Jeremiah 26:11).

The law stated that blasphemy was a capital offense. Leviticus 24:16 says, "And he that blasphemeth the name of the Lord, he shall surely be put to death, and all the congregation shall certainly stone him." This is what Stephen's enemies intended to do—and in the end they succeeded.

11. What charges were leveled against Christ? Where did they get these ideas about Him? (v. 14)

Stephen's accusers also reported that he had stated that Jesus of Nazareth would destroy the temple. They were, of course, distorting statements Christ had made. First, in reference to His own body, Christ had declared, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). This referred to His own physical body, which would be resurrected (v. 21). Second, Jesus said that the temple would be destroyed (Mark 13:1—2). This occurred in A.D. 70, when the Romans attacked and destroyed Jerusalem, even razing the temple.

Stephen's accusers also said that Jesus would "change the customs which Moses delivered us" (Acts 6:14).

Jesus was saying that the temple is not the only place for worship (see John 4:21–24). Paul will later say that God does not dwell in temples made by humans (Acts 17:24). Stephen will make similar points in his speech to follow (see Acts 7:47–49). The accusers pile on the charge that Jesus and Stephen advocate departure from the *customs of Moses*, meaning the law and its traditional interpretation. These charges are more than religious; they question the national loyalty of Stephen. Perhaps, this is the equivalent of charging a U.S. citizen with wanting to tear up the Constitution and raze the White House. It is treason.

What does an angel's *face* look like (Acts 6:15)? We wish we knew! Some think that this may be a type of glow or brightness. Others interpret it to mean Stephen has a look of supreme inner peace.

Whatever it is physically, we are to understand it as a supernatural presence that accompanies Stephen during his trial. At his time of greatest testing and challenge, God has not forsaken him.

CONCLUSION LEADERS IN TODAY'S CHURCH

Acts 6 does not serve as a precise blueprint as to how churches should put leadership into place, for it does not include many details that we would find useful. By observing the process, however, we can see the principles that churches today can follow in leadership decisions.

Stephen's experience was typical of what occurred in the early church and no doubt also today. The Holy Spirit will cause the message of the gospel to prevail even though Satan will throw up obstacles to stop it. Christ's church will prevail over the gates of hell (Matt. 16:18).

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. We must not allow practical problems to distract us from spiritual priorities (Acts 6:1,2).
2. In the church, even simple service requires spiritual commitment (v. 3).
3. Often times the answer to church problems is spiritual people (vs. 4,5).
4. Faithfulness in little things often leads to greater opportunities to serve (vs. 8–10).
5. Faithful service inevitably brings opposition (vs. 11–14).
6. Even if our message is rejected, our godly character will be a testimony to God's grace (v. 15).

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Use biblical principles to choose church leaders.

PRAYER

God, Your Son is our great leader and Your Holy Spirit is our guide. We seek to follow You and learn from You daily. We trust You to furnish leaders for Your church who are qualified and approved by You. We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior, amen.

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

As you study Acts 9:1–11 and 16–19, for next week's lesson, think of two personalities in the narrative. Saul, later to be renamed Paul, had a dramatic change in his life on the road to Damascus, but Ananias had to overcome his fear of Saul and help him in his new life.

October 19th's lesson is titled, "A New Beginning for Saul." The lesson text is Acts 9:1—11, 16—19a. Read Acts 9:1—31 in preparation for this lesson. *Good studying!*

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY

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