

Although the word “deacon” is not used in this chapter, it is commonly accepted that Acts 6 documents the establishment of the office. The focus quickly turns to Stephen, who was not only among the original deacons but also became the first Christian to be martyred for Jesus Christ.

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## Acts 6

1 And 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 ministration.

**“And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied”** – The early church was growing by leaps and bounds with many thousands being saved and adding to their number. This growth created many logistical problems. Since they didn’t have large church buildings in which to meet, they had to meet in smaller groups in people’s houses for worship. They were also still learning how to manage the large scale distribution of food and other provisions to those in need within their growing ranks.

**“there arose a murmuring [secret debate; private complaining] of the Grecians [Hellenists] against the Hebrews”** – The Grecians were Jews that had been born outside of Judea and raised under the influence of the Greek culture. The Greek culture and language had spread over much of the territory and Jews living outside Judea had absorbed this culture. The Hebrews were the Jews that were born and raised in Judea and had not been influenced significantly by Greek culture. The Hebrews considered the Grecians to be inferior Jews, which may have led to the Grecians’ complaint. They evidently were complaining among themselves about unequal treatment.

**“because their widows were neglected [overlooked] in the daily ministration”** – The church provided regularly for those who had needs (Acts 4:34-35). Widows were typically among the more needy due to the fact that they had no husband to provide for them and so it was particularly important that food and other necessities were provided for them. It’s unclear if this neglect was intentional or an honest mistake, but it seems that some of the Grecian widows were being overlooked when the food and other provisions were being distributed. This situation had the potential to cause division in the early church, an opportunity that Satan no doubt wanted to exploit.

2 Then 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.

**“Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples *unto them*”** – The “twelve” refers to the twelve apostles, who call a meeting with the church (“the disciples”) in order to deal with the problem. Presumably the apostles are acting under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

**“and said, It is not reason [pleasing; agreeable] that we should leave [neglect; forsake] the word of God, and serve [minister to physical needs] tables”** – It seems probable that the twelve apostles had been managing the distribution of provisions and the task had grown until it was drawing the apostles away from their central calling. The neglect of the Grecian widows may have been caused by the apostles attempting to balance their time between studying and teaching the word of God and managing the distribution. The apostles realized that it would not be right for them to neglect their responsibility of meeting the spiritual needs of the church while trying to meet its physical needs. The expression “serve tables” has the idea of bringing food to a table of hungry people. The apostles were not saying that serving tables was beneath them, but that doing so was not what God had called them to do. The same thing can be said of pastors, who often are stuck with the menial tasks that could be handled by others. These tasks can distract a pastor from the spiritual ministry that God has called him to do.

3 Wherefore, 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.

**“Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you”** – The apostles’ solution was for the church to choose men from among their own number. The apostles could not be accused of choosing their favorites since they did not choose these men.

**“seven men of honest report [good reputation], full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom”** – Seven men are to be chosen, likely because seven represented the number of completion (i.e. a full complement of men). Each of these men are to have a good reputation, to be full of the Holy Ghost (guided by the Spirit) and are to be full of wisdom (spiritual as well as practical intelligence).

**“whom we may appoint over this business”** – Once the church has chosen these seven capable men, they will be given the responsibility of managing the distribution of provisions to those in the church who need it.

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

Having been relieved of the responsibility of managing the distribution, the apostles would then be free to devote themselves to seeking God in prayer and ministering the word to the people. Such should be the priority of not only the apostles but also of every minister of the gospel. We should do what we can to enable our pastors to focus their time on the more important job that they have been called to: gospel ministry.

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

**“And the saying pleased the whole multitude”** – The entire church found the apostles’ proposal to be acceptable and decided to act upon it. The seven men named here all have Greek names, implying that they were all Grecian. The church may have chosen Grecian deacons as an act of love to insure that the Grecian widows were properly served.

**“and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost”** – The latter half of this chapter and the next focus on this man and his martyrdom, who apparently stood out for his faith and zeal for Jesus Christ.

**“and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch”** – Philip has a significant preaching ministry later (Acts 8:4-24, 26-40). Scripture tells us nothing of the remaining five men.

**“Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid *their* hands on them”** – The church brought these seven men before the apostles, who laid hands on them as a way of blessing them for the ministry. Notice that the apostles prayed before laying hands on these men, perhaps in order to verify God’s approval or ask for His blessing of these men before appointing them to their new role as deacons.

7 And 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.

Satan could easily have driven a wedge in the church between the Grecians and the Hebrew believers, but the quick resolution to the issue at hand removed the conflict as well as enabling the apostles to focus their time on prayer and teaching the word of God. The result was that the church continued to grow and even a good number of priests, who historically were opposed to Jesus Christ, had come to faith in Christ.

**Verses 8-15:** God blessed Stephen, who had become a powerful preacher of the gospel. Certain Jews opposed his preaching in the synagogues but they could not contradict his use of the scriptures. Since they could not discredit him with scripture, they convinced false witnesses to bring accusations of blasphemy against Stephen in order to turn the people against him. They used these accusations for an excuse to arrest him and bring him before the Sanhedrin council.

**Acts 7:1-53:** After hearing the accusations, the high priest asks Stephen if they were true. Stephen defended himself by reminding them of the history of God's dealings with Israel, beginning with the call of Abraham and God's promise to give the land of Canaan to him and his descendants. Stephen then brings the history lesson up to the point when God was ready to fulfill this promise to Abraham (v. 17) by raising up Moses to be the deliverer, although Israel originally rejected him (v. 35). Israel continued to rebel against Moses, the one God had sent, by worshiping the golden calf and later the gods of the Canaanites. Moses predicted the coming of Jesus Christ (v. 37 - "a prophet shall the Lord your God raise up"), another deliverer that Israel has rejected. Stephen declares that his listeners are just as guilty of rebellion against God as their ancestors. Their ancestors had persecuted the prophets that were calling them to repentance and now they (the Sanhedrin) were continuing to rebel against God by murdering Jesus Christ, the Just One sent by God.

#### Acts 7

54 When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with *their* teeth.

**"When they heard these things"** – Stephen was calling out their sinful rebellion against God.

**"they were cut to the heart"** – Stephen's preaching was hitting close to home for they knew they were guilty. Holy Spirit conviction was gripping their heart but they do not respond in repentance.

**"and they gnashed [to grind the teeth] on [on; at; against] him with their teeth"** – Instead of repenting, the members of the Sanhedrin respond with anger. Some have interpreted this verse to mean that they literally bit Stephen, but the Greek wording indicates that they were grinding their teeth in anger against him, perhaps even snarling. It demonstrates how their hatred and rage were building before it finally explodes in v. 57.

55 But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, 56 And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.

**"But he, being full of the Holy Ghost"** – The fact that Stephen was full of the Holy Ghost was the reason he was able to boldly preach this sermon, see the vision of God's throne, and pray unselfishly for those who were killing him.

**"looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God"** – Stephen was given a vision of God's throne with Jesus standing on God's right hand (the position of honor). Since this vision apparently elevated the fury of the Sanhedrin to the point that they killed Stephen rather than merely beating him, why was it given to him? A likely reason is that Stephen's death seems to have resulted in Saul's persecution of the church. This persecution scattered the church so that it fulfilled God's intention that they take the gospel to the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 8:1-4). Jesus is usually portrayed as sitting on the right hand of God, so why is He standing here? Some commentators suggest that Jesus was preparing to welcome His faithful servant home.

**"And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God"** – Stephen is so overcome by what he is seeing that he is compelled to describe it to those listening. The term "Son of man" was one of Jesus' favorite names for Himself.

57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, 58 And cast *him* out of the city, and stoned *him*: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.

**"Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord"** – The members of the Sanhedrin apparently understand that the "Son of man" refers to Jesus and so Stephen's statement enrages them to point that they can no longer sit still. They begin screaming at Stephen, covering their ears so that they could not hear anything else that he said. Their rage is so intense that they do not call for the temple guards but ran at him themselves to forcibly drag him out of the council chamber.

**"And cast *him* out of the city, and stoned *him*"** – They bring Stephen outside of the city and proceed to stone him. The Romans did not allow the Jews to exercise capital punishment, which is why they had brought Jesus to Pilate to be crucified (John 18:31). However, it seems that Stephen has so infuriated the members of the Sanhedrin that they cast caution to the wind and illegally execute him without a trial.

**"and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul"** – Jewish law required that the witnesses of the crime be the first people to throw stones at the person being stoned. The members of the Sanhedrin apparently consider themselves to be witnesses of Stephen's "crime" so they lay their outer clothing (so that they can throw stones unencumbered) at a young man's feet named Saul. He is to take care of their clothes until they return for them. This is the first reference in Acts to Saul of Tarsus, later known as the apostle Paul after his conversion. Acts 8:1 tells us that he approved of the stoning of Stephen and even applauded it.

59 And they stoned Stephen, calling upon *God*, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. 60 And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, *Lord*, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

As he was being stoned, Stephen called upon and committed himself to God. The Holy Spirit enabled Stephen to emulate Jesus as he prayed for his executioners (Luke 23:34). The expression "fell asleep" is sometimes used in reference to physical death (John 11:11-14; 1 Th. 4:13-17). Stephen died and his spirit was received by the same Savior (v. 59) that he saw standing to welcome him home (v. 55).