

The Book of Acts

Characteristics of the Early Church

Acts 6:1-15

The Choosing of the Seven

Acts 6:1-4. “In those days when the number of disciples¹ was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews² among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food³. 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,⁴ choose seven men from among you who are known of good repute, 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.”

The requirements for those who were to look over the distribution of bread or money matters were clearly spelled out by the Apostles. The five requirements: seven men, from among them, known by them to be of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. We also see that Stephen was said to be also full of faith.

Requirements for the Seven:

- Men
- Chosen from among them
- Known by them to be of good reputation
- Full of the Holy Spirit and Wisdom

First off, those who were to be chosen were men. This does not mean that women were not involved in the carrying out of the ministry since the ministry was to widows. However, it is clear that men were to be chosen as the overseers of this ministry. This was consistent with God’s pattern throughout the Scriptures. Next, the men were to be known to be of good reputation (to be trustworthy and wise) and chosen from among them. They did not go out of town to find men for the ministry –God raised up qualified men from among them. Assemblies today could learn from this pattern.

Acts 6:5-6. “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.”

¹ First occurrence of the word “disciples” as the followers of Jesus in the book of Acts

² Jews who had adopted the Greek language and culture. They also spoke Greek and had attended the Greek speaking synagogue. Whereas the Hebrews spoke Aramaic or Mishnaic Hebrew and had attended synagogues conducted in Hebrew.

³ Var. adds “because it was being administered by Hebrews”

⁴ Var. “Brothers and Sisters”

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One more requirement seems to be evident. All the names listed are Greek names. This was appropriate that they choose men from among the Greeks to minister to the Hellenistic Jewish Women. This showed great wisdom and respect for the culture in order not to create greater dissention and to show love and unity.

The 12 laid hands on them bestowing a blessing, and for expressing identification and for commissioning (cf. Genesis 48:13-20, Leviticus 1:4;3:2; 4:4; 16:21, Numbers 27:23, etc.). There is no indication that the laying on of hands in this instance was for the impartation of the Holy Spirit. The 7 were already said to be “full of the Spirit,” (v.3).

The seven’s primary function is best described as “almoners” or someone who distributes alms. Also included in the Greek literal meaning is “to serve at tables,” where the “tables” may have been used for either handing out food or (more probably) for distributing the money to buy food. It is important to note that in this case, it does not indicate one who is responsible for the financial affairs of the church. That would be stretching the role beyond what is intended here.

Acts 6:7. “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests⁵ became obedient to the faith.⁶”

The apostles continued to exhibit faithfulness to teaching and obeying God’s word to them. This resulted in the fruit of a crisis being diverted and of even more disciples being added in Jerusalem.

Stephen Seized

Acts 6:8-10. “Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen⁷(as it was

⁵ Var. “Jews”

⁶ That which is to be believed, i.e., the gospel.

⁷The Synagogue of the Freedmen is mentioned in Acts 6:9. The Greek term Freedmen is a loan word from Latin *libertini*, who were freed slaves. In the Roman world this was a reference to one’s social status, usually for the purpose of differentiating one from someone who was never a slave.

In seeking to understand the nature of this synagogue some scholars focus on the name Freedmen, who could have been Jews taken into slavery by the Romans under Pompey in 63 BC (Philo, Embassy to Gaius 23). The descendants of slaves who were freed were also called Freedmen. It is possible that these freed slaves were proselytes, enslaved non-Jews, who embraced the Jewish way of life. (Lexham Bible Dictionary).

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called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces⁸ of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.”

Acts 6:11-14. “Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, ‘We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous⁹ words against Moses and against God.’ So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth (cf. John 1:46) will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

Acts 6:15. All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”

The charge against Stephen focused on Moses, God, the temple and the law. Their false witness involved twisting Stephen’s message to support their agenda. Jesus had not claimed he would tear down the physical temple. He did say to his adversaries, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). As John 2:21 makes clear, “He was speaking of the temple of His body.” However, we do know that

⁸ Map of Cyrene and Alexandria



⁹ Blasphemy. Insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God; or the act of claiming the attributes of a deity for a mere man; or irreverence toward something considered sacred.

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the physical temple was destroyed by the Roman army in 70AD and temple sacrifices seized.

The Jews also brought a charge that Stephen was teaching that Jesus would alter their customs which Moses handed down to them. The apostles did teach that Jesus was the fulfillment of all that the Old Covenant ritual typified. The moral law remained but the ceremonial law was done away with. Reality had replaced ritual. Jeremiah had prophesied that the New Covenant superseded the Old, (cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34). In addition, It is obvious that if customs and rituals were abolished it would threaten the religious system's security and control over the people.

In chapter 7, we will see that Stephen's sermon showed great respect for Moses and the Law, (cf. Act 7:20-38). However, his sermon condemned their ancestors for their rebellion of idol worship and disobedience in worshiping pagan gods, (cf. Acts 7:39-43). He also condemned their temple worship by declaring, "The Most High does not live in houses made by human hands," (Acts 7:48).



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