



Walking Through the Scripture Together

March 2 - 8, 2008

Acts 6:1-15

## Chosen to Serve

**Text** Amplified Bible

<sup>1</sup> Now about this time, when the number of the disciples was greatly increasing, complaint was made by the Hellenists (the Greek-speaking Jews) against the [native] Hebrews because their widows were being overlooked and neglected in the daily ministrations (distribution of relief).

<sup>2</sup> So the Twelve [apostles] convened the multitude of the disciples and said, It is not seemly or desirable or right that we should have to give up or neglect [preaching] the Word of God in order to attend to serving at tables and superintending the distribution of food.

<sup>3</sup> Therefore select out from among yourselves, brethren, seven men of good and attested character and repute, full of the [Holy] Spirit and wisdom, whom we may assign to look after this business and duty.

<sup>4</sup> But we will continue to devote ourselves steadfastly to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

<sup>5</sup> And the suggestion pleased the whole assembly, and they selected Stephen, a man full of faith (a strong and welcome belief that Jesus is the Messiah) and full of and controlled by the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte (convert) from Antioch.

<sup>6</sup> These they presented to the apostles, who after prayer laid their hands on them.

<sup>7</sup> And the message of God kept on spreading, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem; and [besides] a large number of the priests were obedient to the faith [in Jesus as the Messiah, through Whom is obtained eternal salvation in the kingdom of God].

<sup>8</sup> Now Stephen, full of grace (divine blessing and favor) and power (strength and ability) worked great wonders and signs (miracles) among the people.

<sup>9</sup> However, some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (freed Jewish slaves), as it was called, and [of the synagogues] of the Cyrenians and of

the Alexandrians and of those from Cilicia and [the province of] Asia, arose [and undertook] to debate and dispute with Stephen.

<sup>10</sup> But they were not able to resist the intelligence and the wisdom and [the inspiration of] the Spirit with which and by Whom he spoke.

<sup>11</sup> So they [secretly] instigated and instructed men to say, We have heard this man speak, using slanderous and abusive and blasphemous language against Moses and God.

<sup>12</sup> [Thus] they incited the people as well as the elders and the scribes, and they came upon Stephen and arrested him and took him before the council (Sanhedrin).

<sup>13</sup> And they brought forward false witnesses who asserted, "This man never stops making statements against this sacred place and the Law [of Moses]; <sup>14</sup> for we have heard him say that this Jesus the Nazarene will tear down and destroy this place, and will alter the institutions and usages which Moses transmitted to us."

<sup>15</sup> Then all who sat in the council (Sanhedrin), as they gazed intently at Stephen, saw that his face had the appearance of the face of an angel.

### Thought

N.T. Wright was once asked to write a book entitled *Jesus at Sixty* — a book with the premise that if Jesus had lived another 20 or 30 years longer, his movement would have grown and he would have had to get into administration. He would have had to organize things, to delegate, to have rules and systems, and to do all the other things that middle-aged people do, theoretically taking the shine off his early vision and enthusiasm (the proposed angle for the book — a book that Wright never wrote).

Acts 6 shows clearly that Jesus wouldn't have had to wait 20-30 years to face the challenge.

The apostles are already there in a big way. The problem with growing things is that so often the growth hits us unexpectedly (duh, it's a *growing* thing, just what *did* we expect?); somewhat like preparing for one baby and then discovering at delivery there are two — or more. That seems to be about where the church in Jerusalem is, with the labor pains of racial/cultural tension thrown in for good measure. The apostles make one crucial right decision: they don't take matters into their own hands. They delegate. And in so doing they stay focused on what matters most. Not a bad idea...

## Small Group Discussion Guide

### Lean In

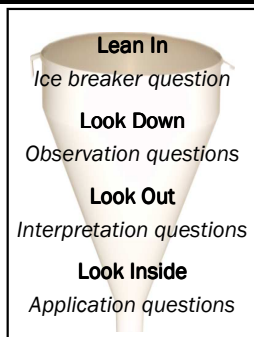
- Share a time when you had really bad service at a restaurant. What happened? How did you handle the situation?

### Look Down / Look Out

- What was the source of the “rumblings of discontent” in this early church environment? What factors do you potentially see sparking this conflict?
- What solution did the apostles propose? What did they recognize they couldn’t do? What did they see as their key priorities?
- What kept this church from getting stuck or blowing up over this issue of unfairness in food distribution? Why didn’t this problem slow the momentum of the church?
- What were the qualifications of the seven men chosen to serve?
- How is Stephen described? What did he do? What opponents did he encounter? How did he respond to them?

### Look Inside

- How do you tend to handle “discrimination” — those times when you feel unjustly overlooked or neglected? a) pout; b) shout; c) address the issue; d) play the martyr; e) take my ball & go home; or what?
- What personal qualifications do you see in yourself to serve in the body of Christ? To what areas of service do you presently feel called? How are you pursuing this call?



## Family Discussion Guide

### Day One

How well do you handle it when it feels like someone else is being treated better (getting a larger share, better stuff, more attention, etc.) than you are? What are some good and some bad ways of handling unfairness like this? What can help us to choose the good ways?

### Day Two

What special gifts and abilities do you feel you can use at home? At school? At church? What gifts and abilities would you like to grow and develop in your life?

### Day Three

How easy do you find it to serve and help others? If it comes easy for you to help, what do you think makes it easy for you? If hard, why is it hard? Who have you helped in some way this week so far?

### Day Four

How do you handle it when someone tries to start arguing with you? What can we do to help arguments not get out of control?

### Day Five

Can you think of a time when someone said mean things about you that weren’t true? What did you do? What can help us not try to get even when people say bad things about us?

## Bible Life & Times

### Hellenists & Hebraists

The first cultural barrier the early church faced was within the Jewish race — the barrier between Hellenists and Hebraists. *Hellenes* is the Greek word for Greece, and Hellenistic or Grecian Jews were those who embraced Greek culture, language and ways, while trying to maintain their Jewish identity at the same time. Typically they were born outside of the Holy Land in the Diaspora (the scattering of the Jews around the world).

*Hebraists* were the “purists” of the day — refusing all aspects of Greek thought and culture, refusing to attend the theater, the games, etc. They were typically born and raised in the Holy Land and spoke Palestinian Aramaic, speaking Greek only when necessary. Paul identifies himself as a “Hebrew of Hebrews” — he was an ultimate purist on the Hebraist side of the equation.

You don’t have to strain too hard to see parallels between this division and the division that exists in our culture between religious and political “liberals” and “conservatives.” Such a cultural barrier would go a long way towards explaining the “grumbling” we find in Acts 6.

Adding fuel to this first century culture war was the fact that the war for Jewish independence 200 years previous was over the forcing of Greek culture on Jewish society.



## details, details...

### Widows were being overlooked

In Jewish culture, widows and orphans represented the lowest, unprotected class of society. The fact is that without a husband, a widow had little voice. Even though she had the right to support from her husband’s heirs in Jewish culture, it didn’t always work out that way. This was made worse in the fact that when older couples from the Diaspora moved to Israel to live out their days and be buried in the Holy Land, the husband would typically die first leaving the Grecian widow to fend for herself among Hebraists who would scorn her.

### A proselyte from Antioch

Nicolas was a gentile who had fully converted to Judaism by being circumcised (=proselyte). In the second half of Acts, Antioch of Syria would become the center of Christian missionary outreach. It’s mention here is a significant telegraphing of what is ahead.

### Wait on tables

Our word “deacon” comes from this Greek word that is usually translated “minister” or servant.

### Laying on of hands

Biblically, the laying on of hands was a method used to convey blessing, to transfer guilt, or to commission someone to an office or work. Here is hopefully the first and third meanings that are intended by the apostles!

### Synagogue of the Freedmen

Most likely composed of descendants of captive Jews originally freed by the Roman general Pompey in 63 BC and resettled in Israel. Paul may have belonged to this group (his home town Cilicia is mentioned here).