



Servants of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:1-7)

Commentary: Week Thirteen

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

New American Commentary¹

III. The Hellenists Break Through To a Wider Witness

The first five chapters of Acts have presented the picture of a Christian community in Jerusalem that was still closely bound to Judaism. The outreach effort of this group was strictly to the Jews. There was no conscious breach with Judaism, and the temple was itself the major site for the church's evangelistic efforts. These first chapters thus comprise a development of Jesus' injunction in [Acts 1:8](#): "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem." Chapters [6–12](#) pick up this theme, showing the further realization of the commission—"in all Judea and Samaria." The ministry of Paul in chaps. [13–28](#) extends its fulfillment "to the ends of the earth." Chapters [6–8](#) may thus be described as transitional. They show Christianity breaking out from the bounds of its Jewish heritage, taking a first step toward its mission to the wider world. This is more than a story of the geographical spread of Christianity. It is much more the story of the gospel becoming a truly universal gospel, breaking the racial, national, and religious barriers in which it was born and carrying out a genuinely worldwide witness. It is the triumphant story of the inclusive gospel.

Paul was the key figure in Acts for the Christian witness to the wider world, but the story of his mission to the Gentiles does not begin in earnest until chap. [13](#). His mission was not fully recognized by the whole Christian community until the Jerusalem conference related in chap. [15](#). The development of the worldwide mission was a gradual one according to the picture of Acts. It involved controversy, resistance, and some hard lessons along the way. But ultimately the vision triumphed because the Spirit of God was in it. That Luke made infinitely clear.

The first decisive steps take place in chaps. [6–8](#), and they seem to have been taken by a particular group within the Christian community in Jerusalem whom Luke called "the Hellenists" (Greek, *Hellēnistai*). The name does not seem to have been a technical term, and Luke only employed it twice in all of Acts ([6:1](#); [9:29](#)). The NIV translates the term "Grecian Jews," and all evidence points to the correctness of this rendering. They seem to have been Greek-speaking Jews in contrast to the Jews who spoke the native Aramaic dialect of Jerusalem (*Hebraioi*, [6:1](#)). [Acts 9:29](#) describes the recently converted Paul as having disputed with Hellenists/ Grecian Jews, but their attempt to kill him indicates they were certainly

1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 174-182.

not Christians. [Acts 6:9](#) refers to a dispute between Stephen and those who belonged to the “Synagogue of the Freedmen” and lists the various areas of the Diaspora from which it drew its membership.

Putting this together, “Hellenists” would seem to indicate Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora who were living in Jerusalem. The seven Hellenists of [Acts 6:1–7](#) would have been Christian converts who came from this Greek-speaking Jewish community and had possibly themselves belonged to a synagogue in Jerusalem composed of Diaspora Jews, such as those with whom Stephen ([6:9](#)) and, later, Paul ([9:29](#)) disputed. That there would have been many such Diaspora converts in the Jerusalem Christian community is altogether likely, given the large number of them who were present at Pentecost ([2:5–11](#)). Although an integral part of the Jerusalem Christian community, their common language and upbringing in the wider Hellenistic world probably gave them some sense of cohesiveness as a group and a predisposal toward a more worldwide witness.

In any event these Greek-speaking, Diaspora Jewish Christians, who are the main characters in chaps. [6–8](#), seem to have been instrumental in first taking the Christian witness beyond Jerusalem. The story begins with the selection of the seven Hellenist “deacons” in [6:1–6](#). Among these were Stephen and Philip ([6:5](#)). Stephen debated with his fellow Diaspora Jews in their synagogue, was strongly opposed by them, arrested, brought before the Sanhedrin, and stoned to death ([6:15–8:1a](#)). He never left Jerusalem, and yet he was instrumental in the Christian mission outside Jerusalem that followed his martyrdom.

Stephen’s influence is exemplified in two ways. First, his speech before the Sanhedrin ([7:2–53](#)) was programmatic for the wider Christian mission, providing a critique of the Jewish resistance to the Christian gospel and an inclusive outlook on the promises of God. Second, his martyrdom precipitated a general persecution of the Christians, which forced them to leave Jerusalem ([8:1b](#)). Every evidence is that the primary target of this persecution was the Hellenist group.

In any event Philip, the second in the list of [6:5](#), was one of those forced to flee Jerusalem. He first went to Samaria and carried on an effective ministry there ([8:4–13](#)), thus fulfilling the witness to that territory commissioned by Jesus ([1:8](#)). Then he was led to the Gaza strip, where he led an Ethiopian eunuch to the Lord ([8:26–40](#)). This is the first explicit incident in Acts that treats the conversion of a non-Jew, or perhaps more precisely a non-Semite. Philip began the mission outside Jerusalem and beyond the confines of witness solely to Jews. He effectively put into action the program that was implicit in the speech of his fellow-Hellenist Stephen. It had been a Hellenist breakthrough. The wider witness had begun.

1. Introduction of the Seven [6:1–7](#)

(1) The Problem [6:1–2](#)

[6:1](#) Luke introduced the new section with a rather vague “in those days.” Luke generally was not concerned with giving precise chronological references, but from later data in Acts it may be concluded that this incident took place in the early to midthirties, perhaps five years or so after Pentecost. The Jerusalem Christian community had witnessed considerable growth; and as is so often the case with rapid increase, administrative problems developed. The particular difficulty involved a complaint from the Greek-speaking Christians against the native Aramaic-speaking Christians that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food (literally, “the daily ministry”). We may assume that at this point the Christian community consisted exclusively of Jews. The only exceptions would be the

“proselytes,” like Nicolas (v. 5), who were Gentiles who had converted to Judaism. The Gentile mission as such had not yet begun. Yet even though it could be considered a purely Jewish Christian community, the Jerusalem church was not fully homogeneous, as this mention of the “Hellenists” and Aramaic-speakers indicates. The Hellenists (“Grecian Jews,” NIV) were more than likely Jews who had come from the Jewish dispersion and settled in Jerusalem. Their language and probably many of their ways were Greek. They had their own synagogues (cf. v. 9), and funerary inscriptions excavated in Jerusalem attest to their extensive presence there. As so often with ethnic groups, they tended to associate with those who shared their language and cultural background. As the church increased and came to include more and more of these “Hellenist” converts, it is only natural that they would have formed close associations with one another, perhaps even meeting in home fellowships together. There is no reason to picture a breach or separation in the total Christian community—only the sort of “distancing” created by natural linguistic and cultural differences. Where the “distancing” manifested itself was in the very practical matter of the community’s charity. The Hellenist widows were being overlooked—certainly not deliberately neglected but inadvertently left out. There may have been a considerable number of such widows. Dorcas (9:39) probably was one of them, and [1 Tim 5](#) attests to the large numbers of them in the Pauline congregations.

In Jewish society widows were particularly needy and dependent, and the Old Testament singles them out along with orphans as the primary objects of charitable deeds. The Hellenist widows may have been a particularly sizable group. Diaspora Jews often moved to Jerusalem in their twilight years to die in the holy city. When the men died, their widows were left far from their former home and family to care for them and were thus particularly in need of charity. Many of them may have been attracted to the Christian community precisely because of its concern for the material needs of its members.

The Christian concern that “there be no needy among them” has already been referred to in Acts ([2:44f.](#); [4:32](#), [34f.](#)). The administration of community charity seems to have been in the hands of the apostles ([4:35](#)). As the church grew, they must have entrusted distribution to others, whom this text would indicate came primarily from the Aramaic-speaking constituency. Language barriers being what they are, it is easy to picture how some of the Greek-speaking widows were overlooked. In its charity the church may have followed somewhat the precedents already set in contemporary Judaism, which had a double system of distribution to the needy. The Jews had a weekly dole for resident needy, called the *quppah*. It was given out every Friday and consisted of enough money for fourteen meals. There was also a daily distribution, known as the *tamhuy*. It was for nonresidents and transients and consisted of food and drink, which were delivered from house to house where known needy were dwelling. The Christian practice seems to have embraced elements of both Jewish systems. Like the *tamhuy* it was daily, and like the *quppah* it was for the resident membership.

6:2 To solve the problem, the Twelve gathered all the disciples together. Even though the Hellenists had the main grievance, the problem involved the entire congregation; and the apostles wanted total participation in its resolution. This is not a bad precedent, particularly in matters where money is involved. As the spiritual leaders of the congregation and the ultimate administrators of the community funds, the apostles’ duty was to solve the problem. This is what is meant by their statement in v. 2 about it not being right for them to neglect God’s word to wait on tables. To oversee the distribution to the Hellenist widows would distract them from their primary responsibility of witness. The phrase “it would not be right” really means “not pleasing in God’s eyes.” Modern ministers sometimes misuse this statement as a biblical warrant for refusal to do the mundane administrative tasks in the church.

In context this passage deals with the apostles and their unique role. They alone in all of Christian history were the witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Their witness was unique, unrepeatable, and absolutely foundational for the Christian movement. Surely it was not fitting for anything to limit their bearing their witness. But what did they mean by “wait on tables”? Does the phrase permit a closer definition of the church’s charitable procedure? Actually, it is somewhat

ambiguous. The word “table” was characteristically used as a metaphor for a meal or for a table from which money was distributed. Either practice could have been followed by the church, just as both are found in the *tamhuy* (food) and *quppah* (money) of Judaism.

(2) The Solution [6:3–4](#)

[6:3–4](#) As the leaders of the community, the apostles proposed that the members choose seven men from among them to administer the charity to the Hellenist widows. The context suggests that the seven men were to be Hellenists. The system had broken down with their group, and they would know better who the needy widows were and be better able to communicate with them. The apostles, however, laid down basic qualifications which the seven had to meet. First, they were to be “full of the Spirit,” i.e., they were to have manifested a special degree of allowing the Spirit to work in them. Then they were to be known for their “wisdom,” probably referring to the kind of practical know-how necessary for the proper management of the charitable funds. One would assume that the seven would take over the administration of the charity among the Hellenist Christians and the apostles would continue to do so among the others. Verse [4](#) concludes the apostolic proposal. By selecting the seven, the apostles were free to carry out their primary responsibilities of preaching and bearing witness to Christ.

(3) Selection and Installation [6:5–6](#)

[6:5](#) The solution proposed by the apostles was pleasing to the whole group, which made its selection. It is important to note that the congregation made the selection. The apostles assumed the leadership in making the proposal, but they left final approval of the plan and selection of the seven to congregational decision. That they were all Hellenists is likely, given the nature of the problem and the fact that all seven names listed in v. [5](#) are Greek. Stephen was named first. He met the qualifications (v. [3](#)), being full of faith and the Holy Spirit. That Luke listed him first is no accident. He would be the primary character in the following narrative ([6:8–8:4](#)).

Next came Philip. He too would be a major figure in the story of the expanding Christian witness ([8:5–40](#)). The other five play no further role in Acts, and we have no reliable additional information on any of them. Early tradition connects Procorus with the apostle John, maintaining that he was John’s amanuensis in writing the Fourth Gospel, that he later became the bishop of Nicomedia in Bithynia, and that ultimately he was martyred in Antioch. We know nothing further on Nicanor, Timon, and Parmenas. Interestingly, Luke gave the additional note on Nicolas that he was a proselyte from Antioch. Some scholars feel he may have been Luke’s primary source of information about the Hellenists, who later seem to have centered around Antioch ([11:19–21](#)). The later Gnostic sect of Nicolaitans seems to have borrowed his name to gain authority for their teaching, but there is no evidence that he himself had any connection with them.

[6:6](#) The selection of the seven is followed by their installation. The congregation chose them and presented them to the apostles. The apostles confirmed the congregational decision by laying their hands on them. It is best not to read our current practices of ordination back into the text of Acts with regard to this gesture of hand-laying. In the Old Testament the laying on of hands deals with the transfer of some personal characteristic or responsibility from one person to another, as from Moses to Joshua ([Num 27:16–23](#)). The gesture is used in several ways in Acts: in healings ([9:17](#)), the gift of the Spirit ([9:17](#); [8:18](#)), and in commissioning to a task ([6:6](#); [13:3](#)). Even in the commissionings the emphasis is not so much on appointment to an office as to designation for a task. Often the present passage is seen to be the initiation of the diaconate. The word “deacon” (*diakonos*) never occurs in the passage. The word “ministry” (*diakonia*) does occur several times, but it is applied to both the ministry of the daily distribution (v. [2](#)) and the ministry of the word, the apostolic witness (v. [4](#)). In fact, the word “deacon” never occurs in Acts. The office generally referred to is “elder” ([Acts 11:30](#); [14:23](#), et passim). If one is inclined nevertheless to see the diaconate in this passage, that person should take a cue from Stephen

and Philip. In the rest of Acts, nothing is made of their administrative duties. What one finds them doing is bearing their witness, even to martyrdom.

(4) Summary and Transition [6:7](#)

[6:7](#) With the problem of the Hellenist widows solved, the community was once more at peace. The apostles were freed for their witness, and the word of God spread/grew. The strangeness of expression in describing the *word* as growing has often been noted. Perhaps the parable of the sower lies in the background. Here “the word of God” points to the proclaimed word as it was preached in wider and wider areas. The “word” grows when it is faithfully proclaimed and falls on fertile soil. In this instance it grew on unexpected soil—among the Jewish priests. There were many poor priests in Palestine, perhaps as many as 8,000. They received little support from the temple cult, had to support themselves primarily with their own hands, and had little in common with the Sadducean priestly aristocracy. From their ranks came these Christian converts. Luke’s mentioning them at this point in the narrative may be significant. The next event would be Stephen’s arrest and his stirring critique of the temple. Some of these priestly “insiders” may have shared the same viewpoint and longed for a purer worship of God.