

Selfless
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Allen Power

Acts 6:1-10 (Prologue - 6:11-8:3)

This is an account that unfolds verse by verse in our Bible. Luke laid this episode out very methodically and the scholars who inserted the verse divisions divided it accordingly. It gives us a great opportunity to truly study this passage verse by verse. The theological term for that is **exposition** or **expository** teaching.

As I read these verses I outlined them as follows:

- The SITUATION
- The SOLUTION
- The SERVANTS
- The SUCCESS
- The SELFLESS SERVANT, STEPHEN
- The PAINFUL POSTSCRIPT

This is a passage that gives us two important “firsts”: the first volunteer servants in the church, and the first martyr of the church.

Big idea #1: Followers of Christ are called to be selfless servants. The family of God is not a “spectator sport.” There’s a task for every believer.

Big idea #2: Problems lead to solutions, which require servants. Serving increases our Spiritual growth as God equips us for that service.

Let’s begin our observation with “the situation” in verse one:

Seven Chosen to Serve

6 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

- The early church was experiencing “growing pains.”

- Some scholars believe the words “these days” could indicate as much as five years had passed since the church began at Pentecost.
- “The disciples” which were increasing in number, refers to the members of the early church (as opposed to the twelve apostles.)
- The complaint had multi-cultural implications. Greek speaking widows were being neglected in the distribution of food. There was a potential for a division between the minority Hellenists and the majority Hebrews.
- Hellenists were Greek speaking Jews. They may have been Jews who were dispersed and took on the Greek language and culture. Some believe they were Greeks who converted to Judaism. Either way, there were cultural and language differences and tension with the Hebrews.
- The twelve apostles “nipped this in the bud” before it grew. They summoned all the disciples and laid out the SITUATION in verse two:

² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.

- **Were the apostles implying that serving food to these windows was unimportant? Why do you think that? What WERE they pointing out about their primary task? What is the basic idea of delegation?**
- Imagine if you pulled up for church on Sunday morning and Pastor Johnny was in the parking lot directing traffic. Then you see him get in the pulpit saying, “I only have a ten-minute message this morning because I spent all week cleaning the sanctuary.” **What would you think? Isn’t parking a big deal here? Don’t we want a clean sanctuary? What’s the point?**
- The fact that the apostles had been personally overseeing these financial matters of providing food for the widows indicates the importance of the work. The quandary: there were only twelve apostles and a growing congregation.
- Verses three and four show the proposed SOLUTION:

³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

- Verse four reinforces the priority and the true calling of the apostles: prayer and ministry of the word. Everyone is called to prayer but not everyone is called to teach. **Why was teaching the word even MORE important in these early days of the church?**
- Verse three is the proposed solution. I love the fact that the apostles addressed this to “brothers.” This was a problem in the family that needed a family meeting and a family solution.
- **What method did the apostles propose to staff this need? I wonder why seven?** (For more study on “seven” in the Bible: <http://www.gotquestions.org/number-7-seven.html>)
- D.L. Moody used to say that it was better to put ten men to work than to try to do the work of ten men.¹ **Why is that quote both true and profound? Why is it good for both the leaders and the whole group?**
- **How does this speak to having focus when using Spiritual gifts?**
- Look at the qualifications for this task. **What is “good repute?”**
- We again see the theme of Acts: being filled with the Spirit. **How would you determine that someone was “full of the Spirit and of wisdom?”**
- Every believer has a role to play in the church. However, it’s crucial that church leaders pass a higher standard of qualification. **Why is that?**
- Sadly, out of enthusiasm or a shortage of help, churches sometimes appoint people to leadership positions who don’t meet the high standard of scripture. Sometimes we’re also slow to remove those who fall short.
- If we want God’s blessing on church leadership we must raise up leaders who are wise and Spirit-led. (Note: the qualifications for deacons are given in 1 Tim. 3:8–13²)
- **How do people usually respond when you give them the authority to solve a problem in their group?** The solution called for SERVANTS:

⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

- **What do we immediately note about Stephen versus the other six?**
- Based on the criteria given in verse three, we assume they all were “full of faith” and full “of the Holy Spirit. **Why was Stephen singled out?**
- Wiersbe: The emphasis in Stephen’s life is on *fullness*: he was full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3, 10), full of faith (Acts 6:5), and full of power (Acts 6:8). In Scripture, to be “full of” means “to be controlled by.” This man was controlled by the Spirit, faith, wisdom, and power. He was a God-controlled man yielded to the Holy Spirit, a man who sought to lead people to Christ.³
- What a great model for us! It leads to a convicting question: What controls my actions and reactions? **How can we become more like Stephen?**
- This multi-cultural problem led to a multi-cultural solution.
- The Hebrew leaders and the predominantly Hebrew members selected six men who were Hellenists and one man who was both a Gentile and a proselyte!⁴ They were sensitive to cultural nuances of the needy group.
- Incidentally, the word for “distribution” in verse one is the Greek word **diakonia**; meaning *service, ministry*. That developed to **diakonos** a *servant, a minister*. From that came our term “deacons.” Were these the first deacons in the church or was this a temporary assignment? We don’t know for sure. But the office of deacon emerged to do this kind of service.⁵
- Focused use of Spiritual gifts by a larger team led to great SUCCESS:

⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

- I wish I could tell you this was the “happy ending” of this story.

- It was a little too happy to suit Satan. When God's people begin to accomplish the mission in great ways, Satan always attacks.
- In this case he attacks one of these selfless servants.
- That leads to a PAINFUL POSTSCRIPT and the first Christian martyr.

⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

They didn't just hate Stephen. They hated what he represented: the power of Christ that was taking the world by storm. They didn't just hate Stephen; they wanted him dead! If you read through chapter seven the painful story unfolds.

“Summoned before the Sanhedrin, Stephen was accused of blasphemy and rejection of the Law of Moses. He responded with a recitation of Israel's history beginning with the call of Abram and stretching beyond the rule of David. He compared the religious leaders in the Sanhedrin to the unbelieving and violent persecutors of the prophets in Israel's history. Enraged by his accusations, the Sanhedrin responded by having Stephen stoned to death (6:8–7:60). Stephen became the first member of the church to be martyred for his faith in Christ.”⁶

⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” And when he had said this, he fell asleep. ⁷

And standing to the side, not participating but approving the execution was another important Bible character. He was not yet a follower of Christ. He was a persecutor. Acts 7:58 tells us: “*And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul.*”⁸ We'll hear more about him; a lot more!

So, What's the Takeaway?

- The Christian life isn't a "spectator sport" it's a life of selfless service.
- Are you "sitting and soaking" or are you "serving and growing?"
- Using your Spiritual gifts to serve doesn't just solve a "staffing problem." It deepens your relationship with other servants; develops your gifts and talents; and, it honors and glorifies God in the process.
- You also need to know that being more Spirit-controlled and more obedient in using your gifts makes you a bigger target for Satan.
- You may not lose your life but you can expect to encounter difficulties and challenges. Take the advice of the Apostle Paul in Galatians 6:9 (ESV)
⁹ And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.
- Don't just sit and soak...get busy serving; growing; and pleasing God!

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 429). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

² Merkle, B. L. (2003). Offices in the New Testament. In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (p. 1213). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

³ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, pp. 429–430). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

⁴ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 429). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

⁵ Thomas, R. L. (1998). *New American Standard Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek dictionaries : updated edition*. Anaheim: Foundation Publications, Inc.

⁶ Lifeway. (n.d.). *Explore the Bible Leader Commentary - ACts 6*.

⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Ac 7:59–60). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2001). (Ac 7:58). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.