

Acts 6: The Disunity and Diversity

1. Distribution of food and clothing to widows and other needy members of the community was a Jewish practice followed by the early church. Pentecost saw an influx of Hellenistic Jews, straining the safety net. As a result, Hellenistic Jewish widows were falling through the cracks.

The apostles could have recruited more people to help with the distribution, or called on members of the church to be more generous in their support. Instead they appointed *new leaders*, with qualifications which went far beyond that of food distribution—“of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” is what you look for in those who will need to interface with outsiders and make wise decisions for the community, not those who will organize the community food shelf or hand out bread during the community meal.¹

Given their stellar qualifications, we are not surprised to see the first two of the seven presenting an eloquent defense of the gospel to the Sanhedrin (Stephen) and sharing the gospel with a foreign dignitary (Philip).² Having approved them, the twelve don't just appoint them to a committee; they ordain them with laying on of hands, elsewhere used to ordain Joshua for leadership (Num 27:12-23) and commission Saul and Barnabas for their missionary journey (Acts 13:3).³

Why did the twelve choose such clearly **overqualified** people to organize distribution of food? What is going on here?^{4,5}

2. This passage revolves around **food and hospitality**. In Luke-Acts, food comes up repeatedly at key times (think of the feeding of the 5,000, the Last Supper, Zacchaeus, parables of wedding feasts and dinners, the road to Emmaus and the post-resurrection meal at the beach--the list goes on and on).

This reflects the important role food and hospitality played the ancient world: food was used to include and exclude (as in the kosher laws; and food sacrificed to idols in the epistles), to form lasting bonds (as in acts of hospitality), to care for loved ones and as a sign of devotion (e.g. Martha, Peter's mother-in-law, etc.), and Luke notes that food was at the center of the life of the new Christian community in Acts (2:41-47).

How does food function in your social and spiritual life? How does your regular use of food make or break bonds, and draw social boundaries? How do you use food to show love and devotion (or even as a form of outreach), and how do others in your life do the same?

3. Church **disunity** can lead to either *open hostility and conflict* characterized by anger, blame, and lack of forgiveness; or to an *internalized resentment* characterized by indifference and lack of trust.

¹ “If the Seven had been tasked only to serve the poor, one would expect stories like Jesus feeding the five thousand, Dorcas making blankets, Judas giving money to the poor, and Paul collecting money for famine relief. Yet, in three full chapters, there is not a single story of their helping the poor either inside or outside their church” [John Juedes, *Lutheran Mission Matters*, 26, 2 (2018), p. 276].

² Even late in Acts these “Seven” appear to be remembered as special leaders of the community (Acts 21:8).

³ Laying on of hands was also used for the conferring of the Holy Spirit in new believers (Acts 8:17), which is not relevant here given the qualifications of the Seven.

⁴ See also the clue of the best parallel passage, Number 11:13-30. Did Moses appoint table waiters or new leaders? *Bonus question: Is it right to see in this passage the elder/deacon hierarchy of the pastorals (see Fun Fact)?* Are the Seven deacons or elders?

⁵ Some, like Joseph Tyson, see the high qualifications as an indication that the community meal was held in very high regard (“Acts 6:1-7 and dietary regulations in early Christianity,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 10, Nu. 2, 1983, 145).

In the latter, we tolerate those things which hurt or bother us, and try to focus on the parts of “church” which we still care about. Whereas those experiencing open hostility due to conflict often leave the church altogether, the latter group stay, protecting their hearts by keeping others’ length.

Countless church-goers end up in one of these two conditions. Unfortunately, disunity is not a victimless crime. Jesus, in his high-priestly prayer, prayed specifically for unity among his followers both because this unity was needed for them to mature as disciples⁶ and as the means by which unbelievers come to know Jesus (see John 17:22-23).

- a. Where are you on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is indifference and disconnectedness from fellowship, and 10 is trust and strong engagement with others in the church?
 - b. If you are trending towards 1, why? What happened?
4. This passage provides a template for **inclusion** in the body of Christ. The major fault lines for division in our culture are racial and political. While American churches tend to be homogeneous racially and ethnically, and only somewhat diverse in age and wealth, many, like ours, are politically diverse. However, sharing a roof does not necessarily imply unity. True unity is missing if we only talk about politics with our political tribe.

Consider the following template for achieving true unity:

First, **call out the extremes** on both sides (*Christian nationalists and progressive extremists alike*).⁷ There were undoubtedly extremists in the Acts 6 community, Hebraic Jews who saw the Hellenists as culturally compromised and Hellenists who bristled at the superior attitude of the Hebraists. Biblical teaching should point out explicitly where extremists on both sides violate the teachings of Christ.

Second, **validate biblical views** of both sides. *E.g. those who argue for big or small government should be able to make their cases in a biblical way. If this is done well, neither side can say, “a true Christian can’t belong to the other party” just as a Hebraic Jewish Christian couldn’t say that a Hellenistic Jewish Christian was not a true believer.*

Third, **model and make space for open dialogue**; *silence is an indication of dysfunction.*

Fourth, **make sure Council and committee heads** represent the full (biblical) political spectrum.

- a. Is this consistent with the example of Acts 6? What would you change, add, or remove?
- b. Is this even possible in a culture where even basic facts can’t be agreed upon? What’s to be done?



Fun fact: The Seven are never referred to in this passage as “deacons” (διάκονος, *diakonos*). In fact, the cognate verb, *diakoneō* (διακονέω), is used both of the Seven’s role “serving” tables (v. 2), and the Twelve’s role “serving” the word of God (v. 4).

⁶ See also the “one-another” passages in Paul’s letters; e.g. <https://overviewbible.com/one-another-infographic/>.

⁷ It is not enough to create a false parity and pretend both sides are equally flawed if they are not; we may need to hearken back to John McCain and other never-Trumpers.

Background and Leader's Notes:

So why do we care about this passage? It appears to be devoted to correcting a simple logistical oversight. There is unsurprisingly more here than meets the eye.

The context: after Pentecost, a large number of Hellenistic Jews stayed and joined the church, stretching the ability of the existing infrastructure to support the needy (as was Jewish custom). (Note also that Acts 2:41-47 indicates that the early church was engaging in some sort of regular table fellowship.) The result was Γογγυσμός, *gongysmos*: “a muttering, murmuring, grumbling.” When this word crops up, things are turning sour quickly. In perhaps the best parallel passage, Numbers 11, the grumbling also led to appointment of leaders.

In terms of context, note that this passage follows Luke's pattern of peace/threat/resolution/restoration—cf. Joseph B. Tyson, “Acts 6:1-7 and dietary regulations in early Christianity,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 10, Number 2, summer 1983, 145-161 for a complete list and analysis of the threats to the early church. A question on this might look like the following:

1. Early Acts shows the way the early church responded to a series of challenges, including (but not limited to):

Persecution (by the Jewish leaders)

Hypocrisy (Ananias and Sapphira)

Loss of integrity (neglect of Hellenistic Jewish widows)⁸

Disunity (Gentiles and the Jerusalem council)

Corruption and worldly competition (Simon Magus)

Which of these is the greatest threat to the modern church in America, and to our church in particular?

So the context tells us to look for the threat and the resolution, which along the way tells us both what a healthy church looks like (unified but respecting the needs of minorities, for instance) and how to respond to the threat (listen to the minority, share power).

This passage is typically used as a model for the deaconate, a class of leaders who do everything *but* teach/preach, and who focus on service. However, this ignores a giant mystery in this passage, which is that the qualifications for the deacons were much higher than those who table servants. In fact, they read like a list of qualifications for leaders. We also read the names of the Seven to show that the apostles were wisely allowing them to all be Greek Jews to ensure the needs of the Hellenistic Jews were protected. A more natural explanation is that the apostles saw the need for more leaders for the Hellenistic Jewish community and ordained the Seven. Being conservative, they set them first to the task of managing the charitable distribution—perhaps as an internship?

What can we learn, then, about this passage? The questions here focus on some central themes:

- The centrality of **food** for community and outreach! Such a big topic and one of the ways our culture shares some common ground with ancient culture, at least in that food hospitality is still an acceptable form of outreach
- **Disunity**: It's worth noting that grumbling can lead different places, and many of us have impaired relationships with our communities because our complaints were never adequately addressed. We don't

⁸ These are introduced by Luke with the conjunction δέ, *de*, which can mean “but”, “moreover”, “and”, etc.

leave the church, but we disengage from community, crippling both our potential for growth and ministry and the church's outreach.

- A model for **inclusion**: Keener points out that the Hellenistic Christians were crucial to the expansion of the church, inviting modern parallels. If we consider valid parallels in our times:
 - Our churches often are homogeneous racially and ethnically, somewhat diverse in age and wealth, and (depending on the church) diverse in politics.
 - The major fault lines for division in our culture are racial and political.

Even if we don't adequately address the racial homogeneity in our churches, if we are able to handle our political diversity well we have the chance to be a true witness to a broken culture. How would this passage serve as a model for this? First off, we need to allow that we can't move forward by ignoring grumbling; it's not enough to have warring parties under the same roof; they have to be in genuine fellowship. And to do that, we need to be willing to call out the extremes on both sides (Qanon followers and progressive extremists alike). It is not enough to create a false parity and pretend both sides are equally flawed if they are not. Being realistic, we may need to hearken back to John McCain and other never-Trumpers.

There were surely extremists in the Acts 6 community—Hebraic Jews who saw the Hellenists as culturally compromised and Hellenists who bristled at the superior attitude of the Hebraists. In our modern case we need to be able to identify validly biblical views on both sides. We also need to acknowledge that neither side can say, "a true Christian can't belong to the other party" any more than a Hellenistic Jew couldn't say that of Hebraic Jews (and vice versa). Finally there needs to be open dialogue. Truly here silence is an indication of dysfunction. A template for diversity is given as a strawman in the questions above.

Extra questions to work in as able:

1. Read Numbers 11:13-30. How is the appointment of the Seven the same or different?
2. How would the spread of the gospel in the first century have been impacted if the church leaders had not been attentive to the needs of the minority group? Describe the alternate universe in which this was bungled (remembering the effects of Stephen's brief ministry).
3. The apostles here acknowledge the importance of table service in addition to service of the word (see Fun Fact). How do we reconcile this with the story of Mary (the Word) and Martha (table service)? (Would need to work on that wording!)
4. Keener writes about this passage,

In contrast to the Council, which (like most institutions) preserved the vested interests of tradition (5:28), the believing community here proves flexible and ready to adapt to the new situation. *Those at least somewhat at home in more than one cultural sphere form here a bridge to the church's future.*⁹

Among what groups (ethnic, economic, social, racial, etc.) is the church growing in 21st century America? Is there a group of believers who are at home in both worlds? What worlds do you bridge?

⁹ Keener's smaller commentary, 227; emphasis added.