

The Spirit-Filled Servants of the Church  
Read Acts 6.1-15

## INTRODUCTION / CONTEXT / CONNECTIONS

1/ **Ch 6** begins a new section of Acts that will extend through **ch 8.40**. If you read this section through at one sitting, you can see what Luke is doing: **ch 6** describes the choosing of the church's 'servants / deacons,' which gives the occasion to introduce Stephen, who became the first martyr of the New Testament era churches; the martyrdom of Stephen, in turn, will give occasion to introduce '**a young man named Saul [of Tarsus]**,' who will be called by Christ to become the apostle Paul [**ch 7.58; 8.1**].

2/ Going back to **ch 6.5**, Luke will also include **Philip** as one of the seven 'servants / deacons' of the church in Jerusalem. Then, he will also relate in **ch 8.5** how this same Philip was called by the Holy Spirit to begin carrying the Gospel of Jesus Christ to **Samaria**, thus beginning to fulfill Christ's mandate in **ch 1.8** to be His witnesses "**in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**" So in this extended section [**ch 6.1-8.40**], we can see Luke's progressive, careful, and meticulous recording of the spread of the Gospel from Jerusalem to **Samaria [ch 8.4-8]** and **to the end of the earth [Ethiopia/Egypt]** and also through the ministry of **Saul/Paul** in the chapters that will follow.

3/ I know this is kinda intricate, but really it is quite obvious when you follow it step by step, name by name. We'll talk more about that *historical-redemptive progression* of the Gospel outreach when we get to those chapters. It was Christ's purpose, plan, and mandate that the Gospel go to the nations [including us!], and He will so arrange and work out all the providential circumstances to make that world-wide Gospel proclamation come to pass! So now, let's go back to **ch 6...**

### I / vv 1-7 | The Spirit-filled 'servants / deacons' of the church

1/ I am calling these first 'deacons' of the church 'Spirit-filled servants' because that's who and what they were. They were 'servants' because in **v 2**, they were chosen to relieve the apostles from the practical responsibilities that were required to 'serve' the needs of providing for the needy widows who were members of the church. They needed to be 'served,' but the apostles were so committed, absorbed, and engaged in the primary ministry of **preaching the Word of God [v 2]** and **to prayer and the ministry of the Word [v 4]**, that they couldn't fulfill that primary ministry and **serve tables** at the same time. So they instructed the church to **pick out from among you** these seven 'servants' to serve the needy widows. We are calling them 'deacons' because these two words, 'serve' and 'deacons' are both forms of the same word. 'Serve' is the verb form 'diakoneo'; and 'deacons' is the noun form 'diakonos' that is used in **Philippians 1.1 & 1 Timothy 3.8-13** to describe their office and function as it was established in the early churches. We'll get back to that here shortly...

2/ **v 1** / **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.** This is yet another mention of the numerical growth of the Jerusalem church in those earliest days, especially since Pentecost [**see chs 1.5; 2.41, 47; 4.4; 5.14; 6.1, 7; 9.31**]. Luke records these growth updates to point out the extraordinary blessing of Christ upon His witnesses and the evident, invincible power of the Holy Spirit upon them.

3/ **BUT**, as is always the case, along with growth of the church and the addition of numerous members, there is the inevitable friction and personal conflicts that come with it. In this case, it 'arose' between two culturally-different communities of believers within the whole unified community of the church. It is so easy for groups of church members to start thinking in terms of 'us' and 'them' – or 'ours' and 'theirs.' This 'complaint' or conflict developed or 'arose' in the course of the church doing what they had been doing – taking care of the needy ones among them, and especially their widows [**see chs 2.44-45; 4.32-35**]. The 'widows' were especially considered because, in their culture, widows had no means of support they could draw from. There were no social services established specifically to take care of their aged

widows: no Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, pensions, etc. As you study the Old Testament, there are numerous commandments in the Law and community society to see that the care of their widows was not overlooked [Exodus 22.22; Deuteronomy 14.29; 24.19-22]. Likewise, some of the most stringent accusations and charges against them throughout the generations of their national history were levelled against them because they either neglected, oppressed, or mistreated their widows. *God cares for the weakest and most vulnerable among us!* So, the Jerusalem church was distributing to the needs of the widows **in the daily distribution** of the contributions that were being given by the other members of the church.

4/ *Who were these ‘Hellenists’ or ‘Grecians’?* These were Greek-speaking Jews who were ‘Jews indeed,’ or just as much Jews as those who spoke the native Aramaic or Hebrew language. But they had come to their covenant homeland from other nations where they had been born and raised in Greek-speaking cultures. They would have been the descendants of the Jews who had been dispersed during the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities hundreds of years before. But now they returned to live in Israel. But they brought back with them a different language they had grown up with. They were ‘different’ in that way. And since **the daily distribution** to the widows was being performed by the ‘Hebrews’ who more locally-born and raised among them, there may have been some unintentional, inadvertent biases and preferences being shown. Whatever the case, the slight and oversight was noticeable by the Hellenists members of the church. So, they protested and brought their complaint to the apostles for redress.

5/ *Just a side-note here before we move on:* this practice of caring for the widows in the church who are ‘truly widows’ is a God-given ministry of the church and was incorporated into the church’s ‘ecclesiology’ [doctrine of the church: what it is and how it functions] as in **1 Timothy 5.3-16**.

6/ vv 2-3 / So, what the apostles did was to call the whole church together and present this need before them – and give them instructions on how to address and resolve it.

[1] First, they reminded the church that their [the apostles] primary calling and role was not to do the daily distribution of needed funds among them, but **to preach the Word of God: “It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables.”** Not that they didn’t care about the widows or want to be ‘bothered’ by taking care of them. They did. The widows must be served – adequately, sufficiently, and fairly. But they [apostles] couldn’t give sufficient attention to that ministry without neglecting their primary role.

[2] Second, they instructed the church to choose men from among them – leaving up to the preferences and choice of the church members – who would serve their widows with the offerings and contributions.

*NOTE: that is exactly how we choose our deacons here in our own church – names are presented to the church membership, and the church members choose [vote for] who they want to be our deacons.*

[3] The spiritual and practical qualities and qualifications of these ‘servants / deacons’ are presented to the church: **men of good repute** [who have a good reputation for integrity, character, and conduct]; **full of the Spirit** [spiritual men who are governed and guided by the Holy Spirit]; **full of wisdom** [men who are trained in the Scriptures, seek the will of God in all areas of their lives, and willing and capable of doing practical services for others].

[4] They [the apostles] would formally and solemnly **appoint** or ‘ordain’ these ‘servants / deacons’ **to this duty**.

7/ v 4 / **But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.** We must do everything we can to free up our pastors to fulfill this most essential, indispensable, foundational ministry for the good health and unity of the church: **pray for us and the ministry of the church and preach and teach God’s Word to us.** We must bless God that all our pastors whole-heartedly embrace this calling and responsibility and fully commit themselves to it.

8/ vv 5-6 / This proposal **pleased the whole gathering**. The gathered church members then chose the seven men who are named here: **Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolaus**. As I said earlier, one of the purposes of this narrative is to introduce Stephen and Philip to us. Stephen will be first in the next section and **ch 7**. We will also meet **Philip** in **ch 8**. Since Luke specifically says of

Stephen that he was **a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit**, we will highlight him first in the section immediately following in vv 8-15. But here, Luke is telling us that Stephen was not only eminently suited for the role of serving the widows as a deacon, but also that he was available and useable to the Holy Spirit to preach and bear witness to Christ and the Gospel. Not all deacons are called upon to fulfill these dual roles and ministries – but Stephen [and Philip also] was. The apostles then publicly, before the gathered church, **prayed and laid their hands on them**. This ‘laying on of hands’ is what we would call our public ordination service.

9/ NOTE: before we leave this section, let’s learn from all the emphases that Luke is including in his on-going narrative. Here is an important reiteration on the **prayer** that was an indispensable element and exercise of the church. I have just jotted down some of the specific references to **prayer** that Luke has intentionally recorded: **chs 1.24; 2.1 [assumed], 42; 3.1; 4.24, 31; 6.4, 6**. So what do we learn from this – both about the Jerusalem church and also about us? [1] For sure, prayer was not just a form or formality for them. [2] There was no ministry at all without the Presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit – they didn’t make anything happen. Christ did through the power of the Holy Spirit. The same is true, and will be true, about us and the ministry of our church as well. [3] These instances of **prayer** and Jesus’ response to their **prayers** was His faithful response to specific promises He had given them earlier, not only all throughout the course of His ministry among them, but especially and more recently in His ‘Farewell Discourse’ in the upper room: **see John 14.12-14; 15.7, 16; 16.23-26, et. al.**

10/ So, let’s summarize the roles of these ‘servants / deacons’ in the Jerusalem church – and then later, as the office and roles of deacons will be institutionalized and incorporated into the churches that followed them:

- [1] Serve the practical and financial needs of their fellow church members, especially widows;
- [2] Assist and relieve the church’s pastors of these responsibilities and activities so they can devote themselves to their first and primary calling of **prayer and the ministry of the Word of God**;
- [3] Seek to preserve and promote the unity of the church body and membership – keep the church’s focus on the primary mission of witnessing to the Gospel. *NOTE: when the ‘whole church’ chose these seven men, they specifically chose men with Greek names – not traditional Hebrew names. Since the perceived discrimination had been against the Greek widows, the ‘whole church’ wanted Greek-named men to serve the widows of their own cultural background – thus intentionally preserving and promoting unity in the church body.*

11/ **v 7** / Here is another one of those ‘numerical growth markers’ that Luke records from time to time [see the note above...]. And again, we need to ask ourselves: “*What made the church grow? What the ‘church growth strategy’ they employed?*” And we will note it is always in proportion to **the Word of God**. The Holy Spirit will continue to bless and use what He has always blessed and used: **the faithful preaching and teaching of the Word of God and the prayers of the church!** HOWEVER, there is an interesting distinction that Luke points out here when he describes who was believing and being saved: **...and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith**. We want to be careful here to point out that **priests** may or may not be synonymous to the **chief priests** we have seen so often mounting the fierce attacks and opposition against the apostles, the Gospel, and the witness concerning Jesus. **The chief priests** were the ruling class [cabal, even] that controlled all the activities of the temple services. But, the **priests** were those who served in rotating groups, day by day, over the services that were performed in the temple. They were the descendants of the Levites, the clans of the tribe of Levi, who were appointed under the Law to serve these roles [see **Luke 1.5, 8-9**]. Some of them also would have been present on the day of Jesus’ crucifixion and death to witness the tearing of the veil to the Most Holy Place. Now, they are hearing and witnessing the Gospel of Christ which was accomplished on that day. They believe the Gospel.

12/ *I want to add just one more parenthetical side-note here concerning Luke’s deliberate and intentional writing of every word and name.* I have already told you that one of Luke’s purposes for this section is also to introduce **Stephen and Philip** to us because Philip especially will serve not only the local Jerusalem church in his role as a deacon, but he will also be called by the Holy Spirit to begin taking the

Gospel further out from Jerusalem to **Samaria** to begin the fulfillment of Jesus' world-wide mission mandate in **ch 1.8** [see INTRODUCTION, 2/]. But there is more...go back and look at the names of the chosen seven deacons again in **v 5** [see I, 8/]. Do you see that name '**Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch**'? What Luke is doing here is giving a hint before-time that not only was this Nicolaus a 'proselyte,' that is, a Gentile who had converted to the Jewish faith, but he was from 'Antioch.' This same Antioch would become the launching church to begin carrying the Gospel to the wider outside Gentile world through the ministries of Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Silas, and Barnabas and John Mark [see **ch 13 ff.**]. The Holy Spirit always knows what He is doing when He sovereignly, Providentially, strategically, and methodically places us where He wants us and knows He can best use us to serve Christ's Gospel purposes!

## II / vv 8-15 | Stephen's Gospel ministry – and his antagonistic arrest

1/ **v 8** / As we have said before, Stephen not only served in the role of serving the widows of the church, but he was also a Spirit-filled and able preacher of the Gospel. He was **full of grace and power** of the Holy Spirit. He also **was doing great wonders and signs among the people**. We have noted previously that in almost every instance, these miracles were being performed by the apostles themselves. Stephen was not an apostle, but the apostles had **laid hands** on him, thus commissioning him to serve alongside them to assist them.

2/ **vv 9-10** / Again, fierce antagonism and opposition mounted against Stephen's working of miracles and preaching the Gospel of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This time, however, the opposition didn't come from **the chief priests, scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees** as it had before. This time, it came from certain other religious factions and sects from within the larger Jewish community: **Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenian, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen**. These were culturally distinct communities of Jews who lived in Israel, but they had emigrated into Israel over time from other nations and localities outside of Israel.

3/ They began to violently disagree with Stephen, argue with him, and seek to 'shut him up and shut him down.' Then they brought Stephen **before the council** [the same council as in **chs 4 & 5**], **and they set up false witnesses...** But since Stephen was **filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom** [v 3], **'they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.'**

4/ **vv 11-14** / So, like the chief priests, scribes, and elders before them had done with Jesus, **"Then they secretly instigated men who said, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.'"** And **"This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place** [meaning, the temple] **and the Law** [meaning, the Torah, especially the authoritative and governing words of Moses], **for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."** We need to pay special attention to these two religious 'icons' that these Jewish enemies of the Gospel were pretending to be defending: the temple and Moses. When we get to Stephen's message in **ch 7**, we will see that Stephen masterfully will weave these two elements of their self-assumed allegiance into his Scriptural expose' of how the Jewish nation have historically rejected both the Presence of God among them and the very Prophet whom Moses had promised them would come to teach them about God. But, we'll get into that in our next lesson...

5/ But, in this moment, as they were violently and slanderously accusing them of promoting an 'insurrection' against everything they pretended to hold most dear and defend, **"And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel."** Stephen was not just 'calm, cool, and collected,' but he was bearing witness that he was in communion with God, with Christ, with Heaven itself.

6/ His message of response is recorded in **ch 7**, and we'll outline and summarize his defense and counter-accusations against the Jewish nation in our next lesson.

**"...And the Word of God continued to increase..."**