

ACTS AT A GLANCE
A Thirteen-Lesson Overview of the Book of Acts

Lesson Six – Chapters 6-8

1. Hellenist Widows are Neglected (Acts 6:1-2)

- 1.1. The church at Jerusalem had by this time grown to be quite large – over 5,000 men (Acts 4:4). Among those were
 - a. Orphans and widows with no means of support
 - b. Natives of Jerusalem and visitors from afar. Perhaps some of these came for the Passover Feast, were converted to Christianity, and then stayed in Jerusalem.
 - c. Many of these visitors were Greek speakers who had been brought up in quite different environments than the Hebrew speakers who had been more immersed in traditional Jewish culture. They were called “*Hellenists*” (Acts 6:1).
- 1.2. The sharing of resources described in Acts 4:32-37 financed a daily distribution of food to the needy Christians – e.g., widows (Acts 6:1).
- 1.3. While intentions were good, the execution of this work was deficient. The widows of the Jerusalem area were probably well known to those giving out the food why some of the visitors were not. Consequently the local women were better cared for than the visiting women. This eventually resulted in complaints by the Hellenists that their widows were being “*neglected*” (Acts 6:1).
- 1.4. This matter came to the attention of the apostles who dealt with it effectively and immediately.
 - a. They had no desire to see the Hellenist widows or anyone else mistreated.
 - b. They certainly knew that, in the words of James, “*If you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors*” (James 2:9).
 - c. They knew that trouble in the church left to fester would only get worse.

2. Deacons are Appointed (Acts 6:3-7)

- 2.1. Now one solution for this problem might have been for some or all the twelve apostles to get intimately involved in the management of this work. But they had been especially empowered and charged to serve as “*witnesses*” for Jesus (Acts 1:8). And to neglect that God given work to distribute food would be unwise, wrong, and “*undesirable*” – especially since others could handle the food distribution.
- 2.2. What can we learn from this?
 - a. Don’t have the same members do everything just because they are the most qualified – especially if it leaves them so overloaded that they must neglect the more important tasks.

- b. Assign people to the tasks where they can make the most contribution to the work of the Lord. Don't assign the preacher and elders the work of cutting the grass and maintaining the copier; especially if doing so inhibits the performance of their higher priority work.
 - c. Remember the lesson taught Mary and Martha about choices in John 10:42: *"Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her."*
- 2.3. The inspired solution? *"Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business"* (Acts 6:3).
- a. They were to be of good reputation. This reminds us of the qualification later given by Paul for deacons: *"But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless"* (1 Tim 3:10).
 - b. They were to be full of the Holy Spirit. This probably refers to being filled with the influence of the Spirit – i.e., *"fruits of the Spirit."* Paul wrote, *"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness"* (Gal 5:22). The power to perform miracles seems to have come later. *"Whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them ... And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people"* (Acts 6:6, 8).
 - c. Certainly to be *"full of the Holy Spirit"* would include being full of the scriptures revealed by the Spirit and the *"wisdom"* they provided.
 - d. The names of the seven men chosen are Greek rather Hebrew indicating that they were likely Hellenists themselves. This demonstrates trust on the part of their Hebrew brethren and represented a strategy very likely to lead to a quick resolution of the conflict.
- 2.4. Let us note a few things about the selection process.
- a. The need for these special workers, their qualifications, and the selection process originated with inspired apostles (Acts 6:2-3). To no less degree, the selection of special workers (i.e., deacons) in churches today is guided by the same inspired words as recorded in of Acts 6:1-6 and 1 Tim 3:8-13.
 - b. The *"whole multitude"* (i.e., all members of the local Jerusalem congregation) participated in selecting men who met the qualification (Acts 6:5). As a minimum, this serves as an approved apostolic example for the selection of church officers.
 - c. The congregation set these men *"before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them"* (Acts 6:6).
 - The apostles enjoined the help and approval of God as they did with the selection of Matthias (Acts 1:24-25).
 - The laying on of hands was used to (a) execute healings – Luke 13:13, (b) to appoint to a special work – Acts 13:3, or (c) to convey the power to perform

miracles – Acts 8:17. In this case, the last two purposes were probably in mind (Again, see verse 8).

3. The Church Grows Even More (Acts 6:7-8)

- 3.1. The growth of the Jerusalem church might have been inhibited had this inequity not been quickly addressed. No local congregation with internal conflict is likely to grow and reach its full spiritual potential.
- 3.2. But the problem was addressed at Jerusalem and the church continued its unabated growth. *“Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem” (Acts 6:7).*
- 3.3. As another measure of the phenomenal growth of the gospel, Luke reported that, *“A great many of the priests were obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7).*
 - a. This demonstrates the power of the gospel to call even the hearts that we might judge most unlikely to repent.
 - b. Note that there was something to be obeyed about the faith. The priests did not just come to have faith (alone). They were also *“obedient to the faith.”*

4. Stephen is Brought Before the Council (Acts 6:8-15).

- 4.1. Luke’s focus in Acts so far has been primarily on Peter. Now in Acts 6:8 through 8:40 the focus will change to two of the men chosen as deacons at Jerusalem – Stephen and Philip. In addition to ‘serving tables’, both of these men were proclaimers of the gospel.
- 4.2. Following his appointment, Stephen *“full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people” (Acts 6:8).* He also preached the gospel with great wisdom and powerful (Acts 6:10).
- 4.3. On one or more occasions, Stephen discussed the gospel with Jews of the Freedman Synagogue (Acts 6:9). This group was composed of ex-slaves who had been freed by the Romans.
- 4.4. In spite of their best efforts they could not prevail against the wisdom of Stephen. But instead of being convinced and converted, they reacted with vicious anger.
 - a. They induced men to make false charges against him – some of which were similar to charges made against Jesus before His death (Acts 6:11-14; Matt 26:61).
 - b. Some of the people were convinced by these false charges. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:12).

5. Stephen Preaches to the Council (Acts 7:1-60)

- 5.1. The High Priest asked Stephen, *“Are these things so?” (Acts 7:1).* The *“these things”* were the false charges leveled in chapter six. Stephen then began a dissertation on Hebrew history and its implication for the current situation.

- 5.2. The approach used by Stephen is not easy to understand – especially for the early portions of his sermon. But where he ends up is crystal clear. These Jewish leaders were rebelling against their God and Savior just like their fathers had.
- 5.3. In the first 34 verses, Stephen recorded the history of the Jewish nation from the time of Abraham until Moses. This review should have reminded his audience of the goodness of their God and how He used His gracious providence to accomplish His eternal purposes. In this, they should have been reminded of both His graciousness and His sovereignty. They should have also been reminded that the only proper reactions to God’s greatness were thanksgiving and humble obedience.
- 5.4. But of course we know that this was not how their fathers reacted to God’s goodness nor was it their response. And they should have known this. Certainly Stephen did his part to show them that this was true in the next half of his sermon.
- a. The first hint of where Stephen is headed appears when he said: *“This Moses whom they refused, saying, ‘Who made thee a ruler and a judge?’ The same did God send to be a ruler and a deliverer ...”* (Acts 7:35). And he added, *“Whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt”* (Acts 7:39).
 - b. And this God-appointed ruler whom they rejected and disobeyed was the very one who prophesied of an even greater ruler whom God would send saying: *“This is that Moses who said to the children of Israel, ‘The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your brethren. Him you shall hear’”* (Acts 7:37).
 - c. And Stephen will later show that, just like they rejected Moses, so now that have rejected One who is even greater than Moses.
- 5.5. Stephen continues with his recital of Jewish history through verse 50. At that point the tenor of his discourse radically changes. It is as though he is overcome with indignation or perhaps overcome by the callous reaction of his audience.
- 5.6. He rebuked them saying in effect, ‘You are stubborn and wicked men and just like your fathers in that you also have rejected God’s anointed ruler – you have murdered *“the Just One.”* Or in Stephen’s own words: *“You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers, have received the law by the direction of angels and have not kept it”* (Acts 7:51-53).
- 6. The Reaction of the Council to Stephen’s Words (Acts 7:54-60)**
- 6.1. *“And when they heard these things they were cut to the heart”* (Acts 7:54). There was a strong emotional reaction to Stephen’s rebuke
- a. The hearts of those at Pentecost had also been *“cut to the heart”* (Acts 2:37). But their emotion caused them to have a godly sorrow, to repent, and to obey the Lord (Act 2:38-41).

- b. The emotion of those hearing Stephen was quite different. It represented terrible raw hatred as they furiously *“gnashed at him with their teeth”* (Acts 7:54).
- 6.2. At that moment, Stephen experienced a great miracle. He was allowed and enabled to see into the throne room in heaven where the resurrected Jesus was standing at the right hand of God! Stephen then shared this wonderful vision with listeners in the council (Acts 7:55-56).
 - a. Such a vision must have been most comforting to Stephen in the final minutes of his life. And for Stephen to speak of such things under imminent threat of death should have raised questions in the minds of the Jews.
 - b. But instead, *“They cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord!”* (Acts 7:57).
- 6.3. Then they drug Stephen outside the city and stoned him to death.
 - a. Some actually did the stoning while others served as official *“witnesses.”* Saul, who was later to be Paul the apostle, guarded the clothes of the witnesses (Acts 7:58).
 - b. As Stephen was stoned to death he exhibited his godly character by his final words:
 - He called on God saying, *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit”* (Acts 7:59). This was similar to the words uttered by Jesus on the cross, *“Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit”* (Luke 23:46; Psa 31:5).
 - *“Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep”* (Acts 7:60). This also was like the final words of Jesus: *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do”* (Luke 23:34).
 - The final words of Jesus were noted by some as an indication of his character (Luke 23:47). But, in the case of Stephen, there is no evidence of a favorable reaction by anyone to his words.
 - c. In the death of Stephen we see the continuing ratcheting up of the persecution of Christians. First there were threats (Acts 4:17), and then there were beatings (Acts 5:40), and now stoning. As we will see as our study of Acts progresses, the persecution was only going to get worse.

7. Saul Persecutes the Church (Acts 8:1-4)

- 7.1. About the time of Stephen’s death, persecution against the church in Jerusalem increased greatly.
- 7.2. So intense and deadly was it that many members of the church left the city of Jerusalem and *“they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria”* (Acts 8:1). But they did not just look for a safe place to hid and avoid persecution. Instead, *“those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word”* (Acts 8:4).

This reminds us of the Lord's charge to His apostles, *"You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"* (Acts 1:8).

- 7.3. If the book of Acts were outlined according to this charge of Jesus, then chapters 8-12 would relate to evangelism outside Jerusalem and in Judea and Samaria.
- 7.4. Note that according to Acts 8:1, the apostles did not leave Jerusalem at this time. They continued to preach with boldness there in the midst of that caldron of hate and violence.
- 7.5. In verse three, the second mention is made of Saul. The scriptures provide the following information about him:
 - a. A real 'blue blood' Jew (Phil 3:5)
 - b. Raised in the city of Jerusalem (Acts 22:3)
 - c. A very religious man and a Pharisee (Phil 3:6)
 - d. A student of Gamaliel, a influential member of the Sanhedrin (Acts 22:3, 5:34)
 - e. A participant in the death of Stephen (Acts 7:58, 8:1)
 - f. A leader in the newly intensified persecution of the church. *"As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison"* (Acts 8:3).

8. Philip Preaches to the Samaritans (Acts 8:5-25)

8.1. See the map at the end of this lesson.

8.2. Conversion of the Samaritans (Acts 8:5-8, 13)

- a. Philip, one of the seven chosen to manage the distribution of food in Jerusalem, went down to Samaria to preach Jesus (Acts 8:5).
 - He went *"down"* even though it was to the northwest because he descended from the central mountains to the lower hills nearer the costal area.
 - Perhaps Philip was one of those dispersed by the fierce persecution in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). In any case, if most of the Jerusalem congregation left the city, then the need for his work of food distribution would be alleviated.
 - This is the first record of the gospel being preached outside the Jerusalem area. Remember that the gospel was prophesied to come forth from Jerusalem (Mic 4:2) but then to be delivered to *"all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"* (Acts 1:8).
- b. Philip *"preached Christ to them"* (Acts 8:5). But such strange words from a stranger might have met deaf ears except for the supporting work of the Holy Spirit in confirming this preacher and his message.

- Philip performed great miracles including healings and casting out demons (Acts 8:6).
 - The purpose of these miracles was to communicate to the rational thinker with a good heart the following: ‘This man is performing works that could not be performed without the empowerment and approval of God. And if God approves him, then He also approves his message.’
 - As a result of these miracles, the multitude listened to Philip and believed his words (Acts 8:6-7).
- c. Their faith led them to *“heed the things spoken by Philip”* (Acts 8:6). What were those things that they ‘heeded?’ Luke wrote, *“But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized”* (Acts 8:12).
- d. Some this example of conversion involved men and women (a) hearing and believing the gospel then (b) obeying it by being baptized.

8.3. Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:25)

- a. Previously the people had followed a man named Simon, a sorcerer. He had astonished the people with his tricks. They even called him *“the great power of God”* (Acts 8:9-11).
- b. But when the people learned about the gospel, they left Simon and turned to Christ. Then Simon himself was converted exactly like the others had been. He *“also believed; and ... was baptized”* (Acts 8:13).
- c. When the apostles at Jerusalem heard about the conversion at Samaria, they sent down Peter and John. They prayed and laid hands on these new Christians that they might receive gifts of the Holy Spirit and be able to perform miracles.
- Note that this was not a gift that every Christian received automatically when they were baptized (Acts 2:38). These people were baptized believers yet had not yet received such gifts (Acts 8:16).
 - From our past studies we know that the purposes of this miraculous power was to reveal the word and to confirm/certify it as being valid and of God. Such miracles played a vital role in evangelism and edification in the early church.
 - Also note again how such miraculous powers were transferred. It was only by the prayer and laying on of the apostles’ hands. Philip was clearly unable to give such gifts.
- d. *“And when Simon saw that through the laying on of the apostles’ hands the Holy Spirit was given, he offered them money, saying, ‘Give me this power also, that anyone on whom I lay hands may receive the Holy Spirit’”* (Acts 8:18-19). Yes Simon was a saved man, a member of the church, and a Christian but he sinned. He remembers the adoration from the people that he enjoyed before Philip came.

Now here was a way to regain his influence. His covetousness then overwhelmed his conscience.

- e. Peter soundly condemned Simon and commanded him to *“repent”* (Acts 8:20-22).

9. Conversion of the Ethiopian Treasurer (Acts 8:26-40)

9.1. In the remainder of chapter eight, the focus turns back to Philip and his conversion of a visitor from Ethiopia.

9.2. The Lord’s messenger commanded Philip to go to the desert region south west of Jerusalem and there meet up with a man from Ethiopia. The following is revealed about this unnamed man:

- a. He served under Candace the queen of Ethiopia as Head of the national treasury (Acts 8:27).
- b. He was a very religious proselyte to the Jewish faith. On this occasion he was returning from a trip to the temple in Jerusalem to worship. Also, when Philip approached him, he was reading the scriptures (Acts 8:27, 30).

9.3. At the Lord’s command, Philip joined the Ethiopian’s chariot and began to teach him the gospel.

- a. The Ethiopian was reading a passage from Isaiah 53 that prophesied about the death of the Messiah. He questioned Philip about the meaning of the passage: *“I ask you, of whom does the prophet say this, of himself or of some other man?”* (Acts 8:32-34). Then Philip *“beginning at this Scripture, preached Jesus to him”* (Acts 8:35).

- Perhaps he started with a direct answer to his question. The prophet Isaiah was speaking of Jesus the Messiah and His sacrificial death for sinners.
- But ‘preaching Jesus’ involved more than a discussion of prophecy or about his death, and resurrection. How do we know this? Because the Ethiopian’s response to this preaching was to request baptism (Acts 8:36). He clearly came to understand that the blessings identified in Isaiah 53 were only available to those who obeyed him and that such obedience must include baptism.

9.4. The Ethiopian asked Philip *“See, here is water. What hinders me from being baptized?”* (Acts 8:36).

- a. *“Then Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may’”* (Acts 8:37). Only believers can be effectively baptized into Christ. It must be a rational and purposeful act. This excludes the baptism of children. It also excludes the baptism of the religiously ignorant – i.e., those who do not see their baptism as being for the forgiveness of sin.
- b. Then the Ethiopian confessed (and professed) his faith by saying, *“I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God”* (Acts 8:37). This is the only example in the

scriptures of such a confession. But Paul wrote, *“If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation”* (Rom 10:9-10).

- c. Then *“both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him”* (Acts 8:38). The wording of this passage helps us understand that the baptism of Acts was a burial in water – not pouring and not sprinkling.

9.5. The Ethiopian then *“went on his way rejoicing”* (Acts 8:39). Before he was full of questions. Now he knew of the Christ and His salvation. He knew that he had met the Lord’s conditions for receiving that salvation. He had every reason to rejoice!

10. Philip continued his evangelism as he preached from Azotus up the coast through various cities until he came to Caesarea (Acts 8:40).



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Questions on Lesson Six – Chapters 6-8

1. Why was caring for needy Christians such a challenge in the early Jerusalem church?

What particular group was being overlooked? _____. Who were they?
_____ (Acts 6:1).
2. What would have been the likely result had this complaint been ignored? _____
_____.
3. The apostles could have competently handled this issue on their own but they chose not to. Why? (Acts 1:8) _____.
4. What are some practical lessons that we can learn from this wise judgment by the apostles?
_____.
5. What was the Holy Spirit inspired solution to the problem? _____.
6. In what way was this new position similar to the one later called “deacon” and in what way was it different? _____
_____.
7. What was the first qualification of this position? (Acts 6:3) _____.
What phrase in Paul’s list of deacon qualification is the same as this one? (1 Tim 3:10)?
_____.
8. What does “*full of the Holy Spirit*” mean in this context? _____
_____.
9. Where would one get the “wisdom” required by verse 3? _____.
10. Who devised the plan for this new position and what gave them such an idea? _____.
Who developed the qualifications for the position? _____. Answer the same question for the information about deacons presented in 1 Tim 3:8-13. _____.
Is it consistent with what you know about the scriptures that the Lord would mandate different ‘helper’ position with different qualifications in different congregations of his

church? _____. Is Luke in Acts 6 and Paul in 1 Tim 3 describing the same or different positions? _____ (Also see the general principle of 1 Cor 7:17).

11. Who was involved in nominating candidates for these positions? _____.

Compare this with Acts 1:15-16, 21-23. Any similarity in this regard? _____.

12. Who did the appointing? What was involved (Acts 6:6)? _____
_____.

13. As a result of the apostle's quick actions, a need of the church was successfully addressed, potential conflict was quieted, and the congregation became more effective in its work. Can you see any connection between these facts and the words of verse 7: "*And the word spread?*" Explain. _____
_____.

14. About Stephen:

14.1. What tribe was he of? (Acts 4:36) _____

14.2. Where was he from? _____

14.3. What was he called by the apostles? _____

14.4. What was his position in the Jerusalem church? _____

14.5. What is identified about his character (v3,8) _____
_____.

14.6. Name three things he was busy doing (a) From v 3 _____,
(b) from v8 _____ (c) from v10 _____.

15. How did the Jews first try to counter the teaching of Stephen? (Acts 6:9-11) _____
_____. What was their 'plan B'? _____.

16. How did Stephen use Jewish history to build a foundation for his strong rebuke? (e.g., Acts 7:35, 39, 42, 51) _____.

17. How was the reaction of Stephen's audience like and unlike those of the day of Pentecost? (See Acts 2:37 and 6:54) _____
_____.

- 18.** What two dying statement of Stephen indicate (a) knowledge about the details of the death of Christ and (b) a strong desire to be like his Lord? (Acts 7:59-60) _____
_____.
- 19.** Who consented to the death of Stephen and how did he participate? _____
_____.
- 20.** What words are used to describe the effectiveness of the persecution of Christians pursued by Saul? (Acts 8:3) _____.
How did Christians react to this persecution? (Acts 8:1, 4) _____
_____.
- 21.** In Acts 8, the second phase of witnessing/evangelism began (see Acts 1:8) when _____
preached in what city? _____. How did the people react to his preaching? (Acts
8:6) _____. What grabbed their attention and gave credibility to the
preacher and his message? (Acts 8:6-7) _____.
- 22.** List the actions/reactions of the people in response to the work of Philip.
- 22.1. (v6) _____.
- 22.2. v12) _____.
- 22.3. (v12) _____.
- 22.4. (v14) _____.
- 23.** What did Jesus say would be the result when men believe and are baptized? (Mark 16:15)

What happened to such men? (Acts 2:47) _____.
- 24.** After their conversion by Philip's preaching, apostles came down from Jerusalem for what
purpose? (Acts 8:14-17) _____.
How (if at all) was this related to their salvation? _____.
- 25.** What was Simeon's sin? (Acts 8:18) _____.
What was the cure for this sin? _____.
- 26.** Why did Philip seek out the Ethiopian eunuch? _____.
What was the eunuch's job? _____. What was his religion?

_____. Is there any indication of the level of his
devoutness? Explain. _____.

27. How did the eunuch's current area of Bible study provide an opening for Philip to preach
Jesus to him? (Acts 8:32-35) _____.

28. What specific commandment was involved in "*preaching Jesus?*" (Acts 8:35-36)
_____. What prerequisite to this act did Philip identify?
(Acts 8:37) _____. What does this indicate about the rightness of
infant baptism? _____.

29. What about the actions that follow indicate that pouring and sprinkling were not involved
(Acts 8:38) _____.

30. Answer these true-false questions (Acts 8:40, 21:8):

30.1. Philip left Samaria and settled down in Azotus? T__ F__

30.2. Philip married and had a family? T__ F__

30.3. His family included six sons who were miraculous healers? T__ F__

30.4. Paul demonstrated his disapproval of the actions of Philip and his family? T__ F__