

Acts 6:1–7 notes

Hallel Fellowship (<http://hallel.info>)

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Summary: The apostles, who were busy teaching and praying for the thousands of new believers in Yeshua the Messiah, appoint seven exceptional men as deacons to manage a dispute over “equal treatment under the Torah” of needy Greek Jews and Hebrew Jews in the congregation.

Acts 6:1 — disciples increasing, complaint over “deaconing” for Hellenist and Hebrew widows

- Some scholars of ancient Greek note that the suffix *ιστης*, from which we get *-ist*, as in *artist*, suggests inferiority.¹
 - They point to the distinction made between Pythagoreans, who were worthy disciples of Pythagorean teachings, and Pythagorists, who were deemed mediocre. Thus, these Jews spoke Greek but with Hebrew idioms.²
 - Some of that meaning remains in modern English with labels put on a person as an *activist*, *environmentalist*, *fundamentalist* or *religionist*.
 - Yet we use mostly use the suffix in its broader sense of “someone who advocates or engages in” something, as in *parachutist*, *realist*, *optimist*, etc.
 - Some translations, such as the New American Standard, use *Hellenistic Jews* to describe this group in verse 1, while others such as the King James, use *Grecians*.
 - Hellenist influence was blamed at the time of the Maccabees for welcoming Greek culture in art, architecture, and eventually worship.³
 - In Acts 9 we will see Hellenists in Damascus looking to kill Sha’ul because of his conversion.

What is a deacon?

- *διακονία* (*diakonia*) is translated as *service*, *ministry*, *obedience*, *mission*, and *relief*.⁴ Synonyms are *doulos* (*bondservant*) and *huperetes* (*underling*).
 - Yeshua’s apostles — which means “the sent ones” — described their roles with *diakonia*:
 - “And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain — 2 for He says, ‘AT THE ACCEPTABLE TIME I LISTENED TO YOU, AND ON THE DAY OF SALVATION I HELPED YOU’ [Isa. 49:8]. Behold, now is ‘THE ACCEPTABLE TIME,’ behold, now is ‘THE DAY OF SALVATION’ — 3 giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the **ministry** will not be discredited, 4 but in everything commending ourselves as **servants** of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, 5 in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, 6 in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, 7 in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, 8 by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; 9 as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, 10 as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.” (2nd Cor. 6:1–10; cf. Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:23)
 - “Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. 8 For I say that Christ has become a **servant to the circumcision** on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, 9 and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, ‘THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME’ [Psa. 18:49]. 10 Again he says, ‘REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE’ [Deut. 32:43]. 11 And again, ‘PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES, AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM’ [Psa. 117:1–2]. 12 Again Isaiah says, ‘THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE, AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES, IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES HOPE’ [Isa. 11:10].” (Rom. 15:7-12)
 - In Acts 6:1 there was a need for *diakonia* of food from common resources to widows.
 - The 12 were devoted to prayer and *diakonia* of the word of God (verse 3) and didn’t want to “leave behind”⁵ *diakonia* of the word for the *diakonia* of the needy in the population (verse 2).
 - There seems to be an interesting juxtaposition of *neglect* of the widows and the word and *service* of the widows and word.

1 Clarke, Adam. “Commentary on Acts 6.” *The Adam Clarke Commentary*.
<www.studylight.org/com/acc/view.cgi?book=ac&chapter=006>. 1832.

2 *ibid*.

3 Stern, David H. “Acts 6.” *Jewish New Testament Commentary*. Jewish New Testament Publications Inc., Clarksville, Md. 1992.

4 Thayer and Smith. “Entry for Diakonia.” *The New Testament Greek Lexicon*.
<www.studylight.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=1248>.

5 Thayer. “Entry for Kataleipo.” <www.studylight.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=2641>.

- Is the role of deacon only for a congregation? Are all believers to be deacons to their family and then the people around them unless the situation warrants the level of specialization called for in nurturing thousands of new believers?
- First-century synagogues commonly had at least three types of deacons⁶:
 - The *parnas* was a sort of judge in the synagogue, discerning doctrine and wisdom for judgment in things both sacred and civil. *Parnes* means to feed, nourish, support, govern.
 - Note that the 12 apostles required that the first seven deacons were to be (Acts 6:3):
 - Men of good reputation.
 - Full of the Spirit.
 - Full of wisdom.
 - Paul advised Timothy (1st Tim. 3:8–10) that deacons must be:
 - Not double-tongued.
 - Addicted to alcohol, i.e. sober.
 - Holding to the mystery of faith with a clear conscience (NASB).
 - Tested for integrity before installed in that role.
 - Husbands of one wife.
 - Manage their home and children well.
 - The *chazan* was the priest's deputy.
 - The *shamash* was, in some cases, the deputy of this deputy, or the sub-deacon.

The seven first apostolic deacons

- Selected from both the Hellenist and the Hebraic members.
 1. Stephen (name means “crowned”⁷). Described as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.
 2. Philip (“lover of horses”⁸)
 3. Prochorus (“leader of the chorus”⁹)
 4. Nicanor (“conqueror”¹⁰)
 5. Timon (“honorable”¹¹)
 6. Parmenas (“abiding”¹²)
 7. Nicolas (“victor of the people”¹³), a proselyte from Antioch
 - There were two main types of proselytes in first century Jewish synagogues¹⁴:
 - “Proselyte of the gate”
 - Someone who acknowledges the true God of Israel. While the person abides by the seven “noachide laws,” mostly listed in Acts 15, he doesn’t undergo circumcision and isn’t considered a convert.
 - Was not permitted to eat the Passover (Ex. 12:43).
 - Could be the “God-fearers” mentioned in the apostolic writings.
 - “Proselyte of the covenant” or “proselyte of injustice”
 - Someone who takes the acknowledgement of YHWH further by undergoing circumcision and abiding by all the Torah.
 - Is permitted to eat the Passover as a convert.
 - Nicolas appears to be of the second group of proselytes, because he is considered a representative of Jews.
 - Was Nicolas the inspiration of the much-despised Nicolaitans of Rev. 2:6&15?
 - Some, including early church leaders Irenaeus and Epiphanius, have postulated that this Nicolas was the precursor to the Nicolaitans.
 - Another view is that the name derives from *nicola*, which means “let us eat together” and is connected to the Epicurian spirit warned of in Isa. 22:13.

6 Clarke on “Verse 4. Ministry of the word.”

7 Thayer. “Entry for Stephanos.” <www.studydrive.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=4736>.

8 ibid. “Entry for Philippos.” <www.studydrive.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=5376>.

9 ibid. “Entry for Prochoros.” <www.studydrive.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=4402>.

10 ibid. “Entry for Nikanor.” <www.studydrive.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=3527>.

11 ibid. “Entry for Timon.” <www.studydrive.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=5096>.

12 ibid. “Entry for Parmenas.” <www.studydrive.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=3937>.

13 ibid. “Entry for Nikolaos.” <www.studydrive.org/lex/grk/view.cgi?number=3532>.

14 Clarke on “Verse 5. Nicolas, a proselyte of Antioch.”

verse 7 — great number of priests were becoming obedient to the faith

- As we've seen before, the temple was controlled by the Sadducees, who were Hellenists.
 - So these believing priests did respond to being “cut to the heart” during Peter's preaching and healing in the temple during Shavuot.
 - Those steeped in Greek influence that miracles are irrational, as the divine doesn't mix with the mortal, were softened by God's Spirit.
- In Acts 15:5 we will read that the “separatist” Pharisees could be softened by God's Spirit to accept proselytes of the gate until the Spirit took them further at His own timing.

Conclusions

- From Messiah to His messengers to His believers everywhere, humble service is the model for spreading and maintaining the kingdom of God. The “good news” is that God wants to reconcile the world to Himself and sent Yeshua on a mission to serve mankind when we couldn't reconcile ourselves.
- In God's kingdom, no task is too small. All people are important to God, and all service to the least of His children is important.
- God's power can turn a zealous persecutor into a proselytizer, an agnostic priest into a disciple.