Called To Serve
Acts 6:1-8
SS Lesson for 08/06/2017

Devotional Scripture: Matt 20:25-28

OUTLINE

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OVERVIEW AND KEY VERSE OF THE LESSON

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Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary
Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

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From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

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- A commitment to meditate and study God's word (Deut 6:6-9)
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Introduction

Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson examines facts to clearly see how God often calls people within the church and the outcome of those who are Called to Serve. The study's aim is to show that God is at work in our day and calling people to serve in the church. The study's application is to be alert to how God might be calling us to serve.

(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: Acts 6:3

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

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

6:1. The Grecian Jews could not speak Aramaic, the native tongue of Jews living in Israel. They probably were reared outside the land and were bilingual, speaking both Greek and their native tongues (cf. 2:5-11). Probably Gentile proselytes to Judaism who later became Christians were also in this group. The native Jews were also bilingual in that they spoke Aramaic and Greek (cf. 21:40). In the Jewish world tensions existed between the Grecian Jews and the Aramaic-speaking Jews; tragically these strains were brought into the church.

6:2. The tables (trapezais) may refer to tables used for serving food or to money tables, that is, banks. Probably it was used here to refer to the place where funds and supplies were administered for the widows. The Twelve recognized their proper priorities in the ministry of the Word of God and prayer (cf. v. 4).

6:3-4. The apostles mentioned three qualifications for those who would be enlisted to serve: they must (a) be full of the Spirit and (b) be full of wisdom (cf. v. 10). In addition they were to (c) be known for these things, that is, the previous two qualifications were to be their reputations. All three were necessary for the handling of finances. (Faith, v. 5, is not another qualification, for belief is simply the means of being filled with the Holy Spirit.) Selecting seven men may go back to the tradition in Jewish communities where seven respected men managed the public business in an official council. By choosing these seven, the Twelve could give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word (cf. v. 2).

6:5. The suggestion of the Twelve pleased the whole group of the disciples. Significantly all seven men had Greek names, implying they were Hellenists. Nicolas, the last one named, was not even a Jew but was a convert to Judaism and then to Christianity. The early church evidently felt the problem of the unintentional neglect of Grecian Jewish widows would be best solved by the Hellenistic Jews; certainly they would not neglect the Aramaic-speaking widows. The introduction of these seven (cf. 21:8) prepares readers for the ministries of Stephen and Philip, the first two men listed. Furthermore, the reference to Grecian Jews looks ahead to the wider spread of the gospel outside the circle of Jerusalem and Judea. (Nothing else is known about the other four: Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas.)

6:6. Though the Christian community selected the Seven, they were commissioned by the apostles. This was done by prayer and the laying on of hands. The practice of laying hands on others was a gesture signifying commissioning and granting of authority (cf. 8:17-19; 13:3; 19:6; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22; Heb. 6:2). Were these the first deacons? Which church office is in view here? Three answers are given to these questions.
(1) Some say these were the first deacons. Several factors are used to support this viewpoint. First, the office of deacon is assumed in Paul’s letters (cf. Phil. 1:1). If Acts 6:1-6 is not an account of their beginning, it is argued, when and where did deacons originate? Second, several words related to deacon (diakonos) are found here: “distribution” (lit., “service”) in verse 1 is diakonia, and “to wait” in verse 2 is diakonein. However, these men were never called “deacons” (diakoni) as such. Much later they were called “the Seven” (21:8). Furthermore, the words “distribution” and “wait” do not seem to have a technical sense here. These words in the Greek New Testament are commonly used in a nonspecialized sense.

(2) Others hold that these were precursors to the office of elder. This is not a common interpretation, but it gains its support from 11:30, which refers to relief money being given to the elders. If deacons handled these funds earlier (chap. 6), it is argued, they must have later become the elders (chap. 11). However, the office of elder has its origin in the Jewish synagogue.

(3) A third view is that these seven men held a temporary position for the purpose of meeting a specific need. This seems to be the best approach for a couple of reasons. First, these men were chosen for a particular task, not an overall one. Second, they were in a temporary responsibility because of the communal nature of the church at Jerusalem. Even so, these men do illustrate the role and function of the office of deacons.

6:7. This verse contains another of Luke’s progress reports. The church was rapidly growing in numbers (cf. 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1; 9:31), with even many Jewish priests becoming believers (obedient to the faith; cf. Rom. 1:5). With the appointment of these men, readers are prepared for the work of Stephen and Philip and the proclamation of the gospel outside Jerusalem.

6:8. Like Christ and the apostles, Stephen was full of God’s grace and power (cf. 4:33; Luke 2:40, 52). Interestingly Stephen was “full of” or controlled by five factors: the Spirit, wisdom, faith, grace, power (Acts 6:3, 5, 8). What an outstanding leader! Furthermore, he did great wonders and miraculous signs (cf. 2:22; Luke 24:19; also cf. Acts 2:43). These evidences of God’s grace were in addition to his responsibilities in the daily ministration to the widows.

Commentary from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

We read in the Bible of God speaking in various ways to call prophets and people like the Apostle Paul to their unique ministries. We should not think this is the norm, however, either in biblical times or our own. The norm is for people of God to step forward to serve Him voluntarily in response to what His Word teaches, in gratitude for what He has done, and in answer to needs that exist. We see this pattern in the New Testament, where the church is directed to choose its own leaders but is given specific qualifications those leaders must meet (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). Rather than wait for some new supernatural revelation, the church is to apply to the selection process the biblical revelation of what leaders should look like. Probably the earliest example of this is found in Acts 6, from which our text comes. The rapidly growing church demanded the full attention of the apostles. They saw the need to devote themselves to teaching and to prayer, but the physical needs of the widows among them needed attention as well, especially when there seemed to be some disparity in how the church was providing for them (Acts 6:1-2). Rather than being distracted from their primary responsibilities, the apostles told the congregation to choose seven men from among them that they could "appoint over this business" of distributing money or food to the needy widows. There were three qualifications these men had to meet. First, they had to be of "honest report." This simply means a good reputation. They had to have exemplary and consistent character. In other words, they were to be godly men about whom nothing bad could be said. Second, they were to be "full of the Holy Ghost." Every believer enjoys the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, of course (Rom. 8:9), but what seems to be described here are persons characterized by genuine sensitivity to the Spirit’s work and direction. They were to be spiritually mature men. Finally, those selected for this work also were to be "full of... wisdom." This describes more than mere managerial know-how; it speaks of the ability to apply biblical principles to life. They were to be examples of godly living. What is striking is that these qualifications were so lofty; not everyone in the early church could meet them. Yet the job itself was quite simple. While a certain level of management and even mathematical skill might be required, almost any reliable person could have handled it. The lesson here is that God does not want people who are merely willing to serve; He wants godly, spiritual, biblically wise people who are willing to serve Him in any role in His church. We should not sit and wait for a divine voice to direct us into service. There are opportunities to serve if we are willing to serve, and they are often revealed to us in the form of needs—the needs of people and the needs of the church—are often revealed to us by church leaders. Our responsibility...
is to prepare ourselves to serve by developing godly character, growing in wisdom, and submitting to the work and leading of the Holy Spirit.

Lesson Introduction and Background
From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

When dining at restaurants in Los Angeles, I would often hear a young server say, “I’m an actor. I’m just waiting tables between acting gigs.” Some of them made good livings by serving tables, but they did not see themselves as waiters. The outer self waited tables while the inner self waited for a big break into stardom. By contrast, I never met a person who had a successful acting career but was biding his time until he got his “big break” to get into waiting tables! This reveals something about cultural values. Today’s lesson is also about values. The apostles, the primary leaders of the first-century church, had been taught a value of the kingdom of God: that serving others was not beneath them (Mark 9:33-35; 10:35-45; John 13:14; compare Philippians 2:5-8; etc.). But there was more than one value at issue in the situation addressed by today’s text. The apostles’ handling of it has been seen as marvelously insightful through the centuries, and still is.

Today’s lesson focuses on the earliest days of the Jerusalem church, when the memory of Jesus was still vividly strong. Acts 6, from which our text is drawn, reflects a time when the church consisted of Christians from a Jewish background only, since the gospel had yet to be extended to Gentiles (compare Acts 10:1-11:18). A common religious background did not mean uniformity in doctrine and practice, however. The Judaism of Jesus’ day had divided itself into four sects: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots, as described by the first-century Jewish historian Josephus. As Jews accepted Jesus as the promised Messiah, they brought into the church their various (and sometimes contradictory) expectations. Some had to be modified or abandoned altogether. For example, the Scriptures clearly stated God’s desire that widows and other needy people be cared for (Isaiah 1:17; etc.). But there was not a uniform understanding on how benevolence programs were to be funded and who was eligible to receive aid. Regarding funding, Josephus interpreted Deuteronomy 14:28, 29; 26:12 to mean that support was to be funded by a third tithe brought every third year (Antiquities 4.240). Jesus had harsh words for a tradition that allowed one to redirect a gift to avoid supporting a needy parent (Mark 7:9-13). The lack of consensus on eligibility could have been one aspect of Paul’s need to address the topic later (1 Timothy 5:3-16). The first-century church in Jerusalem recognized its obligation to provide food daily to its widows. That was quite an undertaking for a church that numbered in the thousands (Acts 4:4), and direct oversight of this complex ministry was shouldered by the leaders of the congregation, the apostles. But complaints were being heard, and the nature of this important task consumed their time. Something had to be done.

Major Theme Analysis
(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Characteristics of a Servant Leader (Acts 6:1-4)

1 Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a murmuring against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.
2 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.
3 "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;
4 "but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."
Has a commitment to God's Word (1-2)

**A commitment to mature through constant use of God's word (Heb 5:11-14)**

11 We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. 12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! 13 Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. 14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

**A commitment to correctly interpret and apply God's word (2 Tim 2:15)**

15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

**A commitment to meditate and study God's word (Deut 6:6-9)**

6 These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

**A commitment to search God's word to validate what has been heard (Acts 17:11)**

11 Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

**A commitment to faithfully study word to be equipped for good work (2 Tim 3:14-17)**

14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

**A commitment to allow the Holy Spirit to teach the meaning of God's word (Luke 24:45)**

45 Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

**A commitment to heed the warning of God's word (1 Cor 10:9-11)**

9 We should not test the Lord, as some of them did-and were killed by snakes. 10 And do not grumble, as some of them did-and were killed by the destroying angel. 11 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.

Selects and follows godly leadership (3)

**Select leadership that doesn't lead into sin (Mark 9:42)**

42 "And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.

**Select leadership that is accountable (James 3:1)**

1 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

**Follow leadership that follows and teaches the truths of the faith (1 Tim 4:6-8)**

6 If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. 7 Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. 8 For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.
Follow leadership that teaches about the kingdom of God (Matt 13:52)
52 He said to them, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."

Follow leadership that is faithful to the trust given them (1 Cor 4:1-2)
1 So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.
2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

Follow leadership that are ministers of the new covenant (2 Cor 3:6)
6 He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant-- not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Select leaders that are above reproach (1 Tim 3:2-7)
2 Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. 5 (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. 7 He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

Follow leaders that are selected by the Holy Spirit as overseers and shepherds (Acts 20:28)
28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

Follow leaders that are willing and eager to serve (1 Pet 5:2-3)
2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

Follow and submit to leaders so that their work is a joy (Heb 13:17)
17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Has a devotion to prayer and ministry (4)

Devotion to prayer to keep from anxiousness (Philip. 4:6)
6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Devotion to prayer because it can be powerful and effective (James 5:16)
16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

Devotion to prayer because it pleases God (Proverbs 15:8)
8 The Lord detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.

Devotion to prayer to aid in finding God's desires (Jeremiah 29:13)
13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

Devotion to prayer because it is God's will (1 Thes. 5:16-18)
16 Be joyful always; 17 pray continually; 18 give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.
Devotion to prayer because it is commanded by Jesus (Luke 18:1)

1 Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

Devotion to ministry because it will reap a reward (Gal 6:9)

9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Devotion to ministry because it is never in vain (1 Cor 15:58)

58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Devotion to ministry because it leads to eternal life (Rom 2:7)

7 To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.

Devotion to ministry is profitable both for the giver and the receiver (Titus 3:8)

8 This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone.

Devotion to ministry results in praise and thanksgiving to God (2 Cor. 9:12-13)

12 This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. 13 Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.

Power of a Servant Leader (Acts 6:5-8)

5 And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch,
6 whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.
7 Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.
8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

A ministry filled with faith (5-7)

Filled with faith results in unity of the Church body (Phil 1:27)

27 Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel

Filled with faith provides spiritual strength (Col 2:6-7)

6 So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, 7 rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

Filled with faith is commanded for a Christian (1 Tim 6:11-12)

11 But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. 12 Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Filled with faith is relying on God (2 Cor 1:9)

9 Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.
Filled with faith expresses itself through love (Gal 5:6)

6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Filled with faith is being certain of things not seen (Heb 11:1)

11 Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Filled with faith is accompanied by deeds (James 2:17)

17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

A ministry with power (8)

Power that is glorious (2 Cor 3:7-11)

7 Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, 8 will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? 9 If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! 10 For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. 11 And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

Power that is at work in us (Gal 2:8)

8 For God, who was at work in the ministry of Peter as an apostle to the Jews, was also at work in my ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles.

Power that comes from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:4-5)

4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

Power that is part of the kingdom of God (1 Cor 4:20)

20 For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.

Divine power (2 Cor 10:3-6)

3 For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. 4 The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. 5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. 6 And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.

Power that strengthens the inner being (Eph 3:16)

16 I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.

Power of the gospel (1 Thess 1:5)

5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.

Power that keeps one from being ashamed to testify about God (2 Tim 1:8)

8 So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God,
Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

As we have seen from earlier statements in Acts, the church continued to grow, in spite of opposition and persecution. Here, I believe that Luke calls our attention to the growth of the church because it was part of the problem the apostles must deal with. Church growth was a factor in the friction that was surfacing in the church due to discrepancies in the care of its widows. Growth has its benefits, but it also has its pitfalls.

In order to understand the problem that had arisen in the growing church in Jerusalem, we must be aware of the differences between “Greek-speaking Jews” and “native Hebraic Jews” (Acts 6:1). A “native Hebraic Jew” was most likely born and raised in Israel. In Texas, you will see cars with a bumper sticker that reads: “Native Texan.” I’ve seen others that read, “I wasn’t born in Texas, but I got here as fast as I could.” “Greek-speaking Jews” were most likely born and raised in one of the Greek-speaking countries outside of Israel.

It was not just a matter of the place of one’s birth, but of one’s native language. “Native Hebraic Jews” would have spoken Aramaic (closely related to Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament). “Greek-speaking Jews” would have spoken Greek and also the native tongue of their country. These would be the languages in which those gathered at Pentecost heard the praises of God:

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven residing in Jerusalem. 6 When this sound occurred, a crowd gathered and was in confusion, because each one heard them speaking in his own language.

Beyond one’s place of birth and language, there were other distinctions between these two groups. Most notably, there would be significant cultural differences. They did things differently. No wonder that there were many synagogues in Jerusalem (as we will shortly see in Acts 6:9). These Hellenistic Jews met for teaching and fellowship in synagogues with people of the same place of birth, language, and culture.

The “native Hebraic Jews” may very well have been in the majority. If now, they at least had many advantages over the others. This was their turf. They were the ones who could, and would, speak with greater authority. No doubt, they tended to look down on those “late comers” who could not even speak Aramaic.

The growth of the church was one reason why the number of widows the church cared for was large. But there was another reason. Many “foreign” (i.e. “Hellenistic”) Jews felt that the end times were near, and thus they wanted to spend their last days in or near Jerusalem. This was the place where it would all come to a head. And so many widows seem to have spent most of their resources getting to Jerusalem. They may very well have left their families behind, which means their source of support was left behind. With such a growing population (it wasn’t just widows who wanted to relocate to Jerusalem), property in Jerusalem was scarce, and prices were undoubtedly high. The widows may have been forced to find housing outside of Jerusalem proper, perhaps in some of the “suburbs.”

While we are not told the ways in which the Greek-speaking widows were overlooked, it is not difficult to imagine some possibilities. There could have been geographic issues, like distance from Jerusalem proper. Perhaps the feeding tables were set up in Jerusalem proper, but many of the Greek-speaking widows lived too far away (and there were no “Meals on Wheels” available). Perhaps language played a part. What if the announcements as to where and when feedings would occur were written in Aramaic? The Greek-speaking widows would be left in the dark as to where to eat.

The discrepancy in the care of the widows does not seem to be intentional on the part of the native-Hebraic saints. The recent disaster with Hurricane Katrina provides us with an illustration. If I understand it correctly, it seems that shortly after the hurricane struck, the only way for people to apply for help was on-line. Now, how could someone whose home was destroyed apply on-line? The poor would not have had a computer in the first place, and they surely would not know how to use one. Help was available, but it was not equally available to
all. Some inadvertently (it would appear) were given preference over others. And there was complaining as a result. No wonder.

There was grumbling going on in the church at Jerusalem, and the apostles learned of it. The grumblings were not the grumblings of the Greek-speaking widows; they were the grumblings of the Greek-speaking saints, who took up the cause of their widows. The grumblings were not against the apostles, but against the native-Hebraic Jews, whose widows were faring far better.

We are not given a report of the entire process, but only of its conclusion. The apostles called the believers together to announce the solution they had reached. They first set aside any expectation that the twelve should neglect the teaching of the Word in order to personally correct the neglect of the widows. It would be wrong for them to allow this problem to redirect their priorities. The apostles could, however, correct this inequity by delegation. And so they laid down the requirements for those to whom this task would be given. The men of the church should select seven men, who will oversee “this necessary task.”

The apostles do specify that these seven men must be highly qualified. They must have a good reputation, and they must be “full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” The apostles do not specify that these men must be Greek-speaking Jews, and yet the names of all seven are Greek names. One of these men – Nicolas – was a proselyte, a Gentile who had converted to Judaism. The church seemed to recognize that these Greek-speaking widows would best be represented and cared for by Greek-speaking men.

It is noteworthy that Stephen is named first, and that he is further described as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5). The second person listed is Philip. It is these two men – Stephen and Philip – who will greatly contribute to the advance of the gospel through evangelism. Both are being introduced by Luke, in preparation for further descriptions of their ministries. Stephen will follow immediately (Acts 6:8–7:60); Philip will reappear in Acts chapter 8.

The seven men were placed before the apostles, who laid their hands on them and prayed. The laying on of hands seems to have signified the identification of the apostles with these men and their ministry. In other words, these seven men were acting on behalf of the apostles. This is similar to the laying on of hands in Acts 13:3, where the church at Antioch identified with the ministry of Barnabas and Saul (Paul), when they went out as missionaries. In addition, the laying on of hands in conjunction with prayer may also involve the bestowing of gifts necessary for the task. We find this indicated in 1 Timothy 4:14 and 2 Timothy 1:6.

We should probably note that these seven men are not called “deacons” (diakonos) in this passage, although the same root word for service or ministry (diakonia – noun) is found in verses 1 (“distribution”) and 4 (“ministry”), and the verb (diakoneo) is found once in verse 2 (“to wait on”). I am therefore willing to see the apostles as functioning something like elders, and these seven as functioning as deacons. The deacons enable the elders to more effectively carry out their primary mission by relieving them of other important areas of oversight.

In verse 7, Luke gives a summary report, indicating the impact of the apostles’ decision to appoint these seven leaders.

The word of God continued to spread, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

Three things are indicated here. First, the “word of God continued to spread.” This same expression is found later in Acts 12:24 and Acts 19:20. Luke is not describing church growth here, but rather the ever widening circle in which the gospel is proclaimed. A similar statement is made in Acts 19:

This went on for two years, so that all who lived in the province of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:10).

The Word of God was not restricted, either by the opposition of the Sanhedrin and the Jewish religious leaders, or by the threatening crisis in care for the widows.

Second, the church continued to grow in numbers: “The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly, . . .” (Acts 6:7). Nothing, it seemed, could stop the growth of the church. In the light of Gamaliel’s counsel to his brethren (Acts 5:34-39), this should suggest that God was in this movement. By now, the reader is hardly surprised to read of the church’s continuing growth.

Third, we are told that many of the priests came to faith in Jesus, or rather that they became “obedient to the faith.” I have often pondered why Luke would choose to tell us this here, in this context of caring for the widows. I would note first of all that the expression “chief priests” occurs frequently in the Gospels and in
Acts. Almost always, the chief priests are spoken of in a negative way. They were leaders in the opposition to Jesus, and in His death. When the simple term “priest” or “priests” is found, it is not nearly as negative. My friend remarked after this message that the priests were the “deacons” of the Old Testament system. They were, in one sense, “investigators.” Priests and Levites were sent to check out John the Baptist by “the Jews” (John 1:19). When Jesus healed a leper, He sent them to the priest to be declared clean (see Luke 5:14; 17:14). The priests routinely worked with those things which were the “shadow of things to come, the substance of which was Christ” (Colossians 2:17). The writer to the Hebrews would expand this in much greater detail. The priests would look upon the veil that was torn at the time of our Lord’s death (Matthew 27:51).

The priests would, by virtue of their work, have observed first hand the hypocrisy of the Jewish religious leaders, who talked piously, but whose actions were an entirely different story:

40 They devour widows’ property, and as a show make long prayers. These men will receive a more severe punishment” (Mark 12:40; see also Matthew 23:13-30).

Surely James was right when he wrote:

Pure and undefiled religion before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their misfortune and to keep oneself unstained by the world (James 1:29).

If this is so, then the priests would recognize the faith of the gospel as true religion, and Jesus as the true Messiah.

I am reminded here of the doubts of John the Baptist, the question he asked of Jesus through his disciples, and our Lord’s response in Matthew 11:2-6. In effect, Jesus answered John’s question, “Look, John, at what I am doing, and judge for yourself if this isn’t the work of Messiah.” It wasn’t just what Jesus said, but also what He did, that was so compelling. The apostles were not only proclaiming the words of Jesus; they were practicing the works of Jesus. This was compelling proof for those who had eyes to see. Many of the priests therefore came to faith in Jesus, in part due to the way the church responded to the needs of its widows.

(Adapted from URL:https://bible.org/seriespage/11-growth-pains-acts-61-15)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

A growing church is like a living organism in that difficulties encountered must be addressed before they become crippling. Adaptation may result in unforeseen consequences, both good and bad. People may be given chances to serve in modest roles, and some (like Stephen) rise to this challenge and go beyond. But this also implies meeting the challenge of filling the modest role that is vacated as a result. There are always problems to address, but also potential new leaders whom God is preparing to help do so. Within scriptural boundaries, methods for ministry are subject to change. Consider how the benevolence ministry of the first-century church changed as we trace it from Acts 2:45 to Acts 4:34, 35 to Acts 6:1-6 to 2 Corinthians 8:13-9:15 to 1 Timothy 5:3-16. A church willing to change may be a church poised for growth.

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary

1. Effective ministry meets both spiritual and physical needs (Acts 6:1)
2. Wise leaders delegate duties to qualified workers (vss. 2-3)
3. We must pray for God’s guidance in all things (vs. 4)
4. It is important to select faithful people who are filled with the Holy Spirit to lead God’s people (vss. 5-6)
5. Ministry flourishes with quality leaders (vs. 7)
6. God works miracles through faithful people by the power of the Holy Spirit (vs. 8)