

THE DIVIDED BELIEVERS

+ **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

When strife threatened to divide the early church, the church acted quickly and selected additional servants to preserve unity.

+ **BACKGROUND PASSAGE:**

Acts 6

+ **SETTING:**

The book of Acts tells of the growth of Christianity in the early church, partly due to the way in which Christians cared for people from all backgrounds. From the beginning, a defining characteristic of Christian service has been caring for people physically, spiritually, and financially. In Acts 6, the early church faced a problem of caring for widows in the church, specifically the Hellenistic widows. For a variety of possible reasons, the Hellenistic widows were being neglected. Our text in Acts 6 is going to explain how the early church's work would cross different barriers.

DAY 1

READ:

Acts 6:1

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 6:1

NOTES

Have you ever wondered how Christianity could grow from a small group of disciples to a worldwide movement? We have seen how this happened in the first few chapters of Acts. The Holy Spirit emboldened the disciples to witness to the resurrected Christ despite the persecution they faced.

Secular historians have often wondered how Christianity grew so rapidly. As they look at the growth of the church, one thing that amazed historians—even those who are not Christians—is how Christians have always sought to care for those in need. Throughout history, as nations were plagued with disease and famine, the church stood strong and cared for those in great need. In the third century, a devastating plague swept through the Roman Empire, and Christians tended to be the only ones caring for the sick. Many of them cared for the sick at the risk of their own lives.

How could Christians do this? How could they risk their lives to care for those with diseases, knowing that they could contract those diseases as well? Christians serve this way because they know that their hope is not found in this earthly life. They get to spend their eternity with Jesus. Caring for those in need physically, spiritually, and financially has always been a defining characteristic of Christianity. This is what we've already seen taking place here in Acts.

How can I care and witness to those around me in order to share Christ's love?

DAY 2

READ:

Acts 6:2-4

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 6:3-4

NOTES



KEY DOCTRINE #80: PEOPLE OF GOD

Scripture describes the church as “the people of God” (2 Corinthians 6:16). Comprised of both Jew and Gentile, the church is created by God through the atoning death of Christ. The term “church” is used in two senses—of individual local churches composed of people who have covenanted together under the lordship of Christ and of the universal church composed of all believers in Christ in all times. As the people of God, the church seeks to live under God’s ruling care while we are protected and cared for by Him.

God has gifted everyone in a different way. And when we use our different gifts for the sake of building up Christ’s church, it’s a beautiful thing!

No one, of course, is gifted at everything in the church. Some are gifted to serve the church by singing, others are gifted for teaching, and still others are gifted to work with kids. Maybe you are gifted to serve the church through physical labor. There is not one person who is gifted in every single area of service the church needs. If you think you are gifted at everything, then you are wrong. (And if you think you are gifted at nothing, you are also wrong!)

We see from the apostles that they needed help in the church. The church had grown so much that if the apostles tried to do everything, then their original calling to preach the gospel would be neglected. But if they tried to only preach and pray, then the widows would be neglected.

Therefore, they asked the church to find godly, Spirit-filled men to lead by serving the widows who were not being cared for. For when more people use their gifts to serve the body, more can be accomplished.

How might you be able to serve your church?

DAY 3

READ:

Acts 6:2-4

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 6:4

NOTES

Notice how the proposal of the apostles “pleased” those who were there. In other words, the whole body of the disciples agreed that the apostles should focus on the ministry of the Word and prayer. The early church was adamant that teaching of the Word and prayer be the top priority for the leaders of the church. Would you say this is a top priority of many churches today?

We live in a day where the preaching of the Word is sometimes no longer primary in the church service. Additionally, many churches use prayer in the service as a transition time instead of seeking God’s will for the church. There are some who think that a sermon should be short and prayer meetings even shorter. However, that was not the case in the early church. In the church, as in our lives, the study of God’s Word and our intimate connection with Him through prayer should be prioritized.

What can you do to make sure the Word and prayer are primary for your Christian walk?

DAY 4

READ:

Acts 6:1-7

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 6:3-6

NOTES

“Service ministry” can sometimes be looked down upon by people in the church. However, those who think that serving is for those who are “lesser” in the kingdom of God are not informed by Jesus’s way of thinking, but by the unbelieving world. The unbelieving world thinks that those who are important are served and shouldn’t spend their valuable time serving themselves.

For Christians, we have to understand that service is not some small task we do, but a life we are called to. Christians must think this way because of who our Savior is. Jesus Christ is the ruler of all, yet He served all of us by dying on the cross. If the Savior of the world laid down His life for us, then there is no service too small for us to be a part of. Jesus said He did not come to be served but to serve (Mark 10:45), and as His followers, we should do as He did.

How might my views of “serving” be more informed by the world than by Jesus Himself?

DAY 5

READ:

Acts 6:2-7

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Acts 6:7

NOTES

In this whole situation, the church needed to deal with the neglect of the widows. However, the apostles also recognized the temptation to leave the Word. In verse 2, the apostles said that it would not be right for them to neglect the Word of God. In other words, if they tried to manage by themselves every single problem that arose in the church, they would not have the time or energy for preaching and teaching God's Word. So they asked the church to select seven men of godly character to serve the widows.

After they solved the problem of serving the widows, Luke reported in verse 7 that the gospel spread and the church in Jerusalem multiplied. The Word was preached, and people came to trust in Christ. Therefore, when everyone in the church is working together to accomplish the needs of the church, growth happens, as even those who formerly were resistant ("the priests" [v. 7]) came to faith and obedience in the Lord.

What am I doing to help the growth of God's kingdom?

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"Faithful deacons are an asset to any congregation and an asset to any pastor's labors. Pastors, elders, and deacons, together with the membership of the local church, labor together in the cause of Christ. Those deacons who labor faithfully as deacons earn the respect and esteem of their pastor and of the church (1 Timothy 3:13)."¹

—Don Fortner (1950–2020)

GROUP

NOTES

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"[It] is to be observed that this grudge arose when the number of Christians increased, when they ought most to have acknowledged God's grace and to have embraced unity. But this is always seen where there is a multitude; there is also murmuring and confusion, because it is impossible in such diversity and desires of minds to satisfy all people's wishes."²

—Rudolf Gwalther (1519–1586)

POINT 1: Division and strife threatens the church (Acts 6:1).

Division threatened the unity of the early church. The church was called to care for all its members despite cultural differences.

? Why was it so important that all widows be treated equally in the early church?

KEY DOCTRINE #80: PEOPLE OF GOD

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? What protections can churches put in place to make sure that those in need are being cared for?

POINT 2: Diversity of roles strengthens the church (Acts 6:2-4).

When needs arise in the church, the church develops more roles and servants, according to their gifts and character, to meet those needs.

? What possible needs in the church can you think of that aren’t usually being filled?

Some are called to prayer and the ministry of the word and others to serve in other capacities. The body works together to accomplish a variety of ministries.

? From Day 2: **How might you be able to serve your church?**

POINT 3: Acting in unity advances the church (Acts 6:5-7).

Unity in diversity is a hallmark of the church, in the body and in its leaders.

? **What does the selection of these men teach us?**

When God's people care for the body and are unified, God blesses them and increases their number.

? **How can unity advance the church today?**

MY RESPONSE

Because Jesus has provided salvation for all peoples, we cast aside every cause for division within the church and strive to live as one.

- **HEAD:** How does the gospel remind you to love and serve all those around you despite differences?
- **HEART:** What in my thoughts can lead to a lack of unity in the church and how can I change it?
- **HANDS:** How can I use my gifts and talents this week to build up the church?



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Believers are never told to become one; we already are one and are expected to act like it."³

—Joni Eareckson Tada