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THE LOOKOUT

OCTOBER 2023

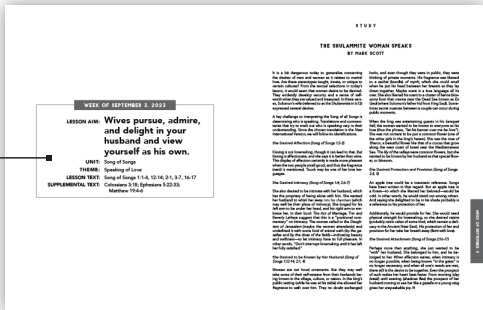
Unit: Acts (Part 1)

Theme: The Church Begins

Overview: Since the creation of Adam and Eve, God has always had a people, but he has not always had a church. Even though the church was envisioned in the great commission of the Old Testament (Genesis 12:1-3), predicted by the prophets during a locust plague (Joel 2:28-32), and promised to the apostles at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:13-20), she was not actually born until the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-41). But after her birth, the church spread like fire across the Roman Empire. In this first part of our study of Acts, students will learn about that birth, how the early disciples shared their possessions with any who had need (especially widows), and how Philip the evangelist and Peter the apostle stretched that early church to be more inclusive.

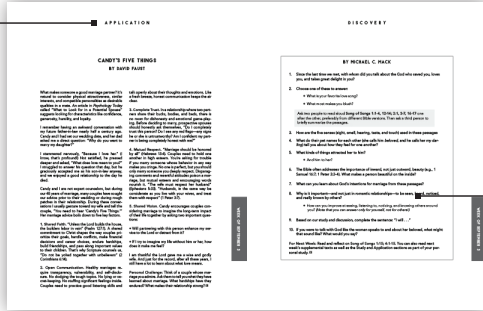
HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Each page has a **tab** indicating the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF OCTOBER 15, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Look for creative solutions to church problems.**

UNIT: Acts (Part 1)

THEME: The Church Begins

LESSON TEXT: Acts 2:44-47; 6:1-7

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: James 1:27; 1 Timothy 5:3-10, 16;
Deuteronomy 24:17-22; 26:12

THE WIDOWS AND THE SEVEN

BY MARK SCOTT

The main text for this lesson has often been considered a template for selecting leaders in the church—particularly deacons. But perhaps that is not its purpose at all. Maybe it is a template on how the early church resolved problems. Technically, deacons are not even mentioned in the passage (though the Greek verb for “serving,” from which we get our word “deacon,” is mentioned). Luke seemed content to refer to them as the *seven men*.

The New Testament describes the selection of church leaders in various ways. Jesus handpicked them (Luke 6:13), Paul and Barnabas “appointed” (literally “to raise the hand”) elders in the church (Acts 14:23). Titus likewise was instructed to “appoint” (“to cause to stand”) elders in every city (Titus 1:5). So there seems to be some fluidity in how the earliest church selected their leaders. In our lesson text, the congregation played a role, as guided by the apostles.

The Precedent for Widow Care

Acts 2:44-47

Two emphases provided the precedent for widow care. First was the Old Testament itself. The Law of Moses made it abundantly clear that widows, sojourners, and the fatherless were to be cared for (Deuteronomy 24:17-22; 26:12). They were not to suffer from misapplied or perverted justice, and garments were not to be taken in pledge from them. During harvest, fields, olive trees, and vineyards were not to be stripped bare. Leftovers were to be intentionally left for those in need. They were also to receive (along with the Levites) a portion of the tithe that was collected from the harvests every three years (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

The second precedent was the practice of the early church. Miracles were quite common in those early days (v. 43). *Wonders* (miracles that cause great surprise) and *signs* (miracles that point to greater spiritual realities) were being *performed by the apostles*. Just as stunning, perhaps, was the tender and unselfish care the church provided to everyone in the body. People experienced the wonder of unselfish love as they shared all things in common. This showed in the way believers sold properties and gave the proceeds to *anyone who had need*. They met in large gatherings (*in the temple courts*) and in *homes* (where they shared common tables). They shared in the breaking of “the” bread—Communion (Acts 2:42)—as well as the breaking of bread, or the sharing of meals, in each other’s *homes*. It was an exciting community as they rejoiced, praised God, and enjoyed the *favor*

(*grace*) of all the people. No wonder God *added to their number daily those who were being saved*.

The Proposal for Widow Care

Acts 6:1-7

The number of disciples was increasing during the days of the earliest persecutions of the church (Acts 4:3, 18, 21; 5:41-42). Some scholars estimate that the church could have grown to 20,000 people by the time of this complaint about food distribution. External conflict for the church is not pleasant, but internal conflict is more deadly. When the integrity of the believers’ speech breaks down, the mission of the church cannot help but be compromised (Acts 5:1-11). Likewise, when charges of prejudice are made (whether founded or unfounded), someone is hurting.

Hellenistic Jews were those who had been heavily influenced by the Greek or Hellenistic culture spread by Alexander the Great. These were Jews who had become Christians—but they had come under the umbrella of Greek culture, language, and philosophy. These folks *complained* (murmured or grumbled) against the more native *Hebraic Jews*, who might be called “true-blue Jews.” They were Christians but still heavily steeped in their Jewish traditions.

J.K. Jones said, “There is a grain of truth even in unjustified criticism.” Whether it was true or not, some felt that prejudice was being shown. Hellenistic widows were being *overlooked* in the “Meals on Wheels” program of the early church. *The Twelve* called a congregational meeting. They explained the dilemma: they were being distracted from the praying and preaching that Jesus called them to do. They suggested a plan to solve the problem that consisted of the believers choosing *seven men* to handle this responsibility. The *whole group* selected the men, then presented them to the apostles who ordained them (laid hands on them) to the work.

All of the seven men chosen had Greek names, which was a risky yet innovative way to solve the problem since, coming from that background, they would be more sensitive to the needs of those widows who had been overlooked in the distribution of food. All of those chosen had to be *known as men full of the Spirit and wisdom*. The result was church growth. The gospel spread because the apostles could go back to preaching and prayer. *The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly—even to the point that a large number of priests obeyed the faith*. What a creative solution! ■

APPLICATION

USEFUL LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM ACTS 6

BY DAVID FAUST

It's been said, "When the Lord starts blessin', the devil starts messin.'" Right when the gospel was taking root and "the number of disciples was increasing" (Acts 6:1), an internal dispute threatened the fledgling church.

Feeding hungry widows was a noble goal, but hints of injustice and prejudicial treatment tainted the process. Some complained that the widows with Grecian backgrounds weren't receiving their fair share, while the Hebrew widows were being favored. If one of those overlooked, under-served widows happened to be your aunt or your next-door neighbor, you would have been upset, too. This simmering conflict could have blown the young church wide open.

We can learn a lot from the way the apostles handled this potentially explosive situation.

THEY LISTENED TO THE PEOPLE

The apostles didn't ignore the complaints. They took them seriously.

Admittedly, some ideas are bad ideas, and some church members are never satisfied. Whiners whine and complainers complain. Leaders can't please everyone. But good shepherds know their sheep. They understand the legitimate concerns and real-life issues that threaten and worry the flock. Leaders make better decisions when they engage in active listening.

THEY CLARIFIED THE CHURCH'S PRIORITIES

Elders and ministry leaders should have servants' hearts and be willing to get their hands dirty, but that doesn't mean they must dive in personally and fix every troublesome issue that comes along. It's important to have boundaries.

The apostles said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables" (Acts 6:2). Without minimizing the importance of feeding the poor, they found a creative way to address the problem. The apostles needed to focus on "prayer and the ministry of the word" (v. 4), while others could care directly for the widows.

THEY DELEGATED RESPONSIBILITY TO QUALIFIED INDIVIDUALS

It was time for others to step up. The apostles told the gathered congregation, "Choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3). Wise, godly servant-leaders could be trusted to handle the food distribution.

Too many churches today—even ones that affirm the ministry of all believers—act as if their paid staff are the important performers. In this flawed model, the congregation is little more than a passive audience. Instead, leaders ought to be equippers who treat "lay" volunteers as valued coworkers to be prepared, empowered, and released for ministry. As Moses learned from his father-in-law Jethro in Exodus 18, delegation lightens the leadership burden, involves others in ministry, and helps to prevent burnout.

THEY CLEARED THE WAY FOR THE CHURCH TO GROW

The "proposal pleased the whole group" (Acts 6:5), making this one of the most positive congregational meetings in church history! Wise leadership prevented a molehill from becoming a mountain. Instead of drifting into rancorous division, this forward-looking and faithful, proactive, and prayerful church experienced explosive growth. "The word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith" (v. 7).

Listen well. Clarify priorities. Delegate wisely. Confront obstacles that stand in the way of unity and growth. Seek creative solutions that engage the congregation. These are not flashy ideas, but God blesses leaders who understand them and put them into practice.

Personal Challenge: Does an unresolved conflict or a festering problem currently threaten your church? Take at least one proactive step (active listening, supportive prayer, creative problem-solving, encouragement of stressed-out leaders, recruiting additional people to serve) to help resolve it. ■

DISCOVERY

BY DOUG REDFORD

1. Did you keep a journal of God's grace this past week (as was suggested last week)? Share one example of how God's grace was evident to you during the week.
2. Think of a time when you saw a person in need and could have helped them, but you didn't. What kept you from reaching out and helping in that situation?

Ask two people to read aloud **Acts 2:44-47; 6:1-7** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

3. The early Christians "broke bread in their homes" (Acts 2:46). What is there about sharing a meal with others that often encourages open conversation?
 - In today's culture, what makes planning these kinds of meals a challenge?
 - What steps can you take to increase the likelihood that such meals happen in your life?
4. The Christians in Acts 2 were "enjoying the favor of all the people" (Acts 2:47).
 - What did the early church do that earned them such "favor"?
 - Why does such "favor" in today's church seem to be lacking?
5. David Faust describes the church in Acts 6 as "fledgling."
 - What problems might newer churches have that older, more established churches do not?
 - What problems might older, more established churches have that newer churches do not?
6. Certain widows were being overlooked in the Jerusalem church's food distribution ministry.
 - In what areas of today's society can widows often find themselves overlooked?
 - What other groups today are often overlooked and neglected?
7. The apostles desired to devote themselves to "prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4).
 - Why were these two items so important to the apostles?
 - Why should they be given such priority today?
8. What criteria would you use to determine whether someone is "full of the Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3)?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. David Faust says, regarding finding a solution to the dilemma facing the church in Acts 6, "It was time for others to step up." Think of a place in your church's ministries or in your community where you can "step up" and become more involved. Or if there's a need in your church or community that is being overlooked, consider speaking to one of your church's leaders about stepping up to address that.

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Acts 8:4-24**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■