

# THE DIVIDED BELIEVERS

## + SESSION OUTLINE

1. Division and strife threatens the church (Acts 6:1).
2. Diversity of roles strengthens the church (Acts 6:2-4).
3. Acting in unity advances the church (Acts 6:5-7).

Background Passage: Acts 6

## + WHAT WILL MY GROUP LEARN?

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

## + HOW WILL MY GROUP SEE CHRIST?

When division and strife threatened to fracture the early church, its leaders stepped in and developed a plan to preserve its unity. Sin separates people from God and one another, but God sent Jesus to step in and fulfill His plan to bring people together with Him and one another. All who trust in Jesus—from every tongue, tribe, and nation—are united as one people, the bride of Christ.

## + HOW SHOULD MY GROUP RESPOND?

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

# GROUP TIME

**Group content** found in the Daily Discipleship Guide is included in the shaded areas throughout the session.



## SCRIPTURE HANDOUT

Scan this QR code for a reproducible handout of this session's Scripture passages.

## INTRODUCTION

**ASK:** As participants arrive, ask: **What are some sacrifices you have seen Christians make for the sake of others?** (their finances, time, and talent to support young moms or those in crisis; their time and resources in fostering kids; their finances in supporting ministries and missions; their lives in serving rough neighborhoods or third-world countries)

**TRANSITION:** Some look back on the early church and wrongly think it was a period of growth without difficulties. However, the early church encountered numerous difficulties, from false teachers to inward division. Here in Acts 6, we see an important issue arise in the early church and how the gospel unites God's people.

**SUMMARIZE:** Help your group understand the **setting** for this session.

- 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.



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# POINT 1

## DIVISION AND STRIFE THREATENS THE CHURCH (ACTS 6:1).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 6:1** from his or her Bible.

**1** Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

**INSTRUCT:** The early church was growing, but with growth came problems because they were still broken and sinful people—like believers today. The early church had factions based on culture: Hellenistic Jews versus Hebraic Jews. Ask your group, “What are some common factions in our churches and society today?” (Democrats versus Republicans; black people versus white people; conservatives versus liberals; those with contrary platforms)

**HIGHLIGHT:** Point out in **verse 1** the following idea (Daily Discipleship Guide [DDG] p. 30):

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

- The Hellenistic Jews spoke mostly Greek, and very few Hellenistic Jews would have spoken Aramaic or Hebrew. Many of the native Hebrew-speaking Jews would have looked down on the Hellenistic Jews. The Pharisees would have refused to associate with them. These cultural problems existed before the church was established, but the gospel would begin to break down these dividing walls of hostility (Eph. 2:14).
- Notice that this is the first time the word “disciples” appears in the book of Acts. As the church grew rapidly, the apostles persisted in preaching and teaching Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 5:42). Hellenistic Jews heard and believed the gospel as well. The gospel was crossing cultures so that Greek-speaking Jews were trusting in Jesus as the Messiah.
- Greek-speaking Jews noticed that their widows were not being properly cared for. The problem, perhaps, was not that they did not have enough workers to meet the demand. It’s possible that it was due to some cultural discrimination—an offense to the gospel that unites people through faith in Christ.
- Some scholars also believe that the overlooking of the Hellenistic Jews may have been unintentional; however, even if it was, the unity of the church was being threatened.
- During this time, widows had no other means of financial assistance. There was no state welfare system. Many widows were simply left on the street or lived in poor conditions. If they did not have money or family support, they would suffer. The church’s failing to rightly care for these widows was a huge deal! James wrote, “Religion that is pure and

### HELLENISTS

Hellenists, or Hellenistic Jews, were probably Greek-speaking Jews who likely were born and lived outside of Israel in other parts of the Roman Empire, due to the Diaspora, the dispersion of Jews throughout the ancient world because of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests. They also could have been those Jews who adopted Greek culture or proselytes who converted to Judaism who had now become disciples of Jesus.

### 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.”<sup>1</sup>

—Rudolf Gwalther  
(1519–1586)

undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction” (Jas. 1:27).

- Luke made mention in Acts 4:34 how there was not a needy person among the early church, but now we see division to the point that widows were being neglected. The complaint would be brought to the whole church.

**ASK:** (DDG p. 30)

**Why was it so important that all widows be treated equally in the early church?** (favoritism is an affront to the gospel; God does not show partiality and neither should Christians [Acts 10:34-35; Rom. 2:11; Jas. 2:1]; God’s people should love and serve the complete body of Christ)

**LIST:** Write on the board “People of God.” Ask, “What are characteristics of the people of God?” and invite the group to shout out answers. Then in groups of 2-3, share responses to the question, “How easy or difficult is it to be these characteristics and why?” (answers may include: patience, kindness, self-control, caring for those inside and outside the church, gentleness, other fruits of the spirit; it’s difficult to be these things because we’re still sinful people as Christians or it’s easy to be these things because the Holy Spirit is in us)

**DEFINE:** Invite a volunteer to read the key doctrine “People of God” in their DDG (p. 30).

**Key Doctrine #80: People of God:** Scripture describes the church as “the people of God” (2 Cor. 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.

**DISCUSS:** (DDG p. 30)

**What protections can churches put in place to make sure that those in need are being cared for?** (putting into place a strong deacon care ministry; developing members who seek to help meet needs; having leaders who model and teach the importance of serving one another, especially those marginalized or in real need)

**TRANSITION:** This problem threatened the unity of the church. The widow’s complaint was taken to the apostles, who would model how to rightly unite the church.

# POINT 2

## DIVERSITY OF ROLES STRENGTHENS THE CHURCH (ACTS 6:2-4).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 6:2-4** from his or her Bible.

**2** And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. **3** Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. **4** But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

**EXPLAIN:** We might not fully understand how serious caring for the poor and widows was in Bible times. Today we have social security, retirement, and even life insurance to help widows. But this was a serious matter, and the twelve apostles came together to figure out a solution. Using **verses 2-3**, explain the following (DDG p. 30):

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

- The Twelve assembled “the full number of the disciples,” meaning they assembled the church. They wanted everyone to hear the need and be a part of the solution.
- This text is an important starting point for understanding ecclesiology. All members have a part to play in the church. Believers are all priests in God’s service. First Peter 2:9 says believers “are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.” Every Christian has the Holy Spirit dwelling inside of them. Church membership is important because it keeps track of who is responsible for helping and ministering to the members of the body.
- The apostles’ chief concern centered on “preaching the word of God” (Acts 6:2). The ministry of the Word is of primary importance in the life of the church. Churches can do a lot of things to serve their communities, but the primary way the church should serve is by preaching the Word faithfully.
- The apostles suggested finding seven men of “good repute” that others looked up to (v. 3). Being full of the Spirit meant that these men were led by the Spirit and wise. They were going to face difficult tasks in making sure everyone’s needs were being met.

**DIG:** The selection of these men is likely the prototype for the office of deacons. Read 1 Timothy 3:8-13 and ask the group, “How do these qualifications help churches select faithful deacons?” (worthy of respect; not hypocritical; not drinking a lot of wine; not greedy for money; holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience; tested and proved blameless; not slanderers; self-controlled; faithful in everything; able to

manage their children and their own households) These qualifications should really be characteristics that all Christians strive for.

**ASK:** (DDG p. 30)

**What possible needs in the church can you think of that aren't usually being filled?** (serving single moms or foster families; teaching new believers; discipling or mentoring individuals; caring for the elderly, disabled, or homebound)

**HIGHLIGHT:** Using **verse 4**, highlight the following idea (DDG p. 31):

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.

- Upon first reading, verse 2 may sound a little odd: "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables." Does this mean the apostles were not wanting to serve the church? That is not what the apostles were saying. The apostles were not being lazy or selfish. Rather, they knew the calling that God had given them to serve the church through preaching and teaching.
- The church had grown so much that if the apostles tried to do everything, there would be areas of the church neglected. If the apostles tried to meet all the needs in the church themselves, then the ministry of the Word would suffer, and the whole church would suffer as a result. The choice before the church was not either be strong in their service or teaching; rather, God had equipped the church to do both!

**DISCUSS:** (DDG p. 31)

From Day 2 in the DDG: **How might you be able to serve your church?** (provide a description of specific areas of need in your local church or specific roles that people in your group could fill; or have the group think of additional needs in your church. Consider talking with a pastoral leader who could help your group fulfill those needs, individually or as a group)

**TRANSITION:** The early church faced a serious problem that involved picking out godly leaders to serve the widows in need. Thus, new leaders were sought out to help the church. When the whole church is using their gifts, the church will be stronger together.

# POINT 3

## ACTING IN UNITY ADVANCES THE CHURCH (ACTS 6:5-7).

**READ:** Invite a volunteer to read aloud **Acts 6:5-7** from his or her Bible.

**5** And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. **6** These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. **7** And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

**EXPLAIN:** The church was “pleased” with the apostles’ decision. Using **verses 5-6**, discuss the following idea (DDG p. 31):

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

- The church appointed seven men to serve in this new leadership role. Stephen’s name was listed first, probably because he would be very important in the coming chapters in the book of Acts. Another recognizable name is Philip, who would also be important especially in chapter 8.
- The rest of the men mentioned are not well-known. However, all having Greek names, it was likely all these men were Hellenistic Jews, put in charge of figuring out how to help the Greek-speaking widows. The beauty of Christ’s church is seen in that people from all backgrounds are brought together into one family. Revelation 7:9 says this reality will finally be realized when people from every tribe, tongue, and nation will gather to worship Christ. Here in Acts, the church chose leaders out of the neglected group to make sure everyone’s needs were met. The church is not built on earthly power, but the power of God to unite people together through faith in Christ.
- The men were commissioned to serve, or to literally “deacon” (v. 6). The word we have for deacon literally means “to serve.” The seven men were brought before the apostles, who laid their hands on these men. The laying on of hands was a way of recognizing that the church set these men aside to serve in this special role.

**ASK:** (DDG p. 31)

**What does the selection of these men teach us?** (the church and its leaders should reflect the diversity of its neighborhood; the gospel crosses cultural barriers; unity can be found in diversity)

### THE 7 MEN CHOSEN

All 7 of the names are Greek names. It is highly possible that these men were all Hellenistic Jews. At the very least, Stephen and Nicolaus are Hellenistic Jews. Wisdom was shown in choosing these men as they would have been able to relate better with the Hellenistic widows who needed help.

**INTERACT:** Ask your group to look back at Acts 6:2,4. Note the apostles' main concern and the result of the church appointing deacons in **verse 7**. As a group, discuss, "What would have happened if the apostles had taken it upon themselves to fix the food problem?" (something in the church would've been neglected; they would have possibly burnt out; they would not have been able to raise up other leaders; the gospel would not continue to spread in a mighty way)

**HIGHLIGHT:** Discuss the main idea below as it refers to **verse 7** (DDG p. 31):

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

- The church continued to grow despite persecution. It continued to grow because they were dedicated to the ministry of the Word of God, prayer, and meeting one another's needs in a unified way.
- The end of verse 7 says "a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith." Darrell Bock wrote, "The priests came to Jesus as previous opponents, so they must have assessed the claims of the apostles and found them convincing. Second, they would have checked the Scriptures carefully before deciding that the claims the apostles made about Jesus and God's salvation program were true. Third, they would have been aware of the harsh view Jewish officials took on Jesus, and so their daring to come to faith indicates their conviction was strong enough that they were willing to suffer the scorn their conversion would invite. Finally, in converting from the camp of opposition, the priests were able to supply the faith community with insider information on the official priestly assessment of Jesus and his followers. Such information supports the conclusion that the NT accurately represents what the Jewish leadership thought of Jesus and the church."<sup>2</sup>
- A large number of priests coming to faith is a remarkable demonstration of God's grace and love.
- Seeing the priests come to faith would cause alarm with the rest of the Jewish leaders, which is why we will see the persecution escalate in the coming chapters.

**DISCUSS:** (DDG p. 31)

**How can unity advance the church today?** (in a divisive culture, unity is unique and people are drawn to it; you can do more together for God's kingdom than apart; being unified in Christ is being obedient for the cause of Christ)

**TRANSITION:** As the church united together in selecting more leaders to serve, God blessed the church to further spread the gospel.



# MY RESPONSE

**SAY:** When division and strife threatened to fracture the early church, its leaders stepped in and developed a plan to preserve its unity. Sin separates people from God and one another, but God sent Jesus to step in and fulfill His plan to bring people together with Him and one another. All who trust in Jesus—people from every tongue, tribe, and nation—are united as one people, the bride of Christ. 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:

The early church saw how the sin of favoritism divided Christ's church. However, all who trust in Christ are meant to be united as one people under the lordship of Jesus Christ. When we come to trust in Christ, we should lay down all pride and seek to serve one another. Does your view of the gospel humble you to serve others who are different than you? If not, then it is not the gospel we see in Scripture.

**How does the gospel remind you to love and serve all those around you despite differences?**

## HEART:

What we see in Acts 6:1-7 is how the good news of Jesus Christ crosses all sorts of cultural boundaries. Through common faith in Christ, the church is meant to be united for a common purpose to spread the good news to the ends of the earth. However, we can easily give into the desires of the flesh and allow division to keep us from being united and spreading the gospel.

**What in my thoughts can lead to a lack of unity in the church and how can I change it?**

## HANDS:

When we come to faith in Christ, we are to use our gifts in order to serve and build up the church. The church is made up of people from all different backgrounds who have placed their faith in Christ (Rev. 7:9). Therefore, we should not allow worldly categories to divide us. Rather, we should seek to be united as we serve Jesus together.

**How can I use my gifts and talents this week to build up the church?**

**PRAY:** Father, may there be no obstacles inside the church that would hinder the ministry of the Word. Forgive us of our pride that we might serve each other as we seek to reach our community with the gospel of Jesus.

### VOICES from THE CHURCH

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

—Joni Eareckson Tada

## **POINT 1: DIVISION AND STRIFE THREATENS THE CHURCH** (ACTS 6:1).

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### **COMMENTARY**

“This unit is set off by an emphasis on the church’s growth with the verb ‘increase’ appearing at the beginning in 6:1 and at the end in 6:7. The increased membership brings new problems. Luke has emphasized the togetherness as a crucial aspect of the community’s life from the beginning (2:42–47), and one can assume that he presents it as a model for his readers to emulate. The enormous response to the apostles’ preaching means that the growing church no longer is composed of those who came from the same area, socioeconomic background, and linguistic heritage. Greek culture had penetrated the Palestinian world since the conquests of Alexander. Nearly all Jews during this period spoke some Greek, but the Hellenistic Jews from the Diaspora spoke only Greek and did not know Hebrew or Aramaic, the mother tongue of the disciples. It is possible that the “‘hellenists” probably found participation in the (Aramaic) worship of the original disciple-group difficult, and started to develop as a more independent community.’ The church’s togetherness comes under threat. The tightly knit group is beginning to show signs of unraveling.”<sup>4</sup>

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### **COMMENTARY**

“Problems among different ethnic and cultural groups have been common in the church. Barclay thinks that in Jewish society the Hebraic Jews looked down on the Grecians. Longenecker thinks that pre-Christian prejudices may have reasserted themselves in the church. All of this contributed to the complaining that took place in the church. The word translated ‘complained’ (gongysmos) is an unpleasant word, used in the lxx for the murmuring of the Jews against Moses in the desert (Ex. 16:7; Num. 14:27). The church was now in danger of splitting. The problem might aggravate if it was not handled sensitively.”<sup>5</sup>

# EXTRA

## + ILLUSTRATION

“Christians are often likened to an army: we sing ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’ and read, ‘Put on the whole armor of God.’

Imagine Christ reviewing the troops, who are supposed to be fresh and ready for battle. But some have fairly recent wounds, nicks in their armor, arms in slings, casts, etc.

He asks, ‘What’s the matter here? Why are they wounded already?’

‘Oh, they’ve been fighting in the barracks again.’”<sup>6</sup>

## **POINT 2: DIVERSITY OF ROLES STRENGTHENS THE CHURCH** (ACTS 6:2-4).

## + COMMENTARY

“The appropriate way for people to enter public office in the church is to be elected by common consent. However, the apostles did lay down what kind of men should be chosen: men of proven trustworthiness, endowed with wisdom and other spiritual gifts. This is a middle way between tyranny and disorderly license. On the one hand, nothing can be done except through the approval of the people; and on the other hand the pastors set out with their authority and hold in check the desires of the people, to prevent their enthusiasm from overstepping itself. It is also worth noting that the principle here is that the faithful should only appoint somebody who is suitable. We do God a great injury if we accept an unsuitable person to govern his household. Therefore, the greatest care must be taken that nobody is chosen for this sacred office in the church unless he has already proved himself.”<sup>7</sup>

## + OPTIONAL TEACHING ACTIVITY

Discuss different gifts that God has given to people in the church and how these gifts can be used to serve the ministry of the Word. Place inside a pillowcase an oven mitt, lightweight hammer, Bible, leader guide, and other items that can be used in ministry. Invite volunteers to take turns reaching inside the pillowcase to pull out an item. Guide the volunteer to describe ways he or she can use that item to serve others within the church or community.

## **POINT 3: ACTING IN UNITY ADVANCES THE CHURCH** (ACTS 6:5-7).

## + COMMENTARY

“The apostles did not focus attention on the complaining attitude toward the leadership. Nor did they talk about the priority of the spiritual and the relative unimportance of earthly food, as some may have done. There was a genuine problem, and the best way to quell doubts about prejudice was to solve the problem first. Thus, the apostles made an administrative decision. Thereby they not only averted a serious crisis of disunity, but also led the church to take a significant leap forward in terms of organizational structure. Though Luke does not use the word ‘deacon’ here to describe the Seven, this decision laid the foundation for the diaconal

order, which, while taking different forms in the history of the church, has rendered great service in mediating Christ's love to needy people."<sup>8</sup>

## + COMMENTARY

"The satisfactory resolution of the conflict in the Jerusalem church made it possible for this ministry of the gospel to flourish and for church growth to take place even more rapidly (sphodra). Church growth continued because the word of God had free course among the believers, and outsiders were able to witness its practical effect in a loving, united community, as well as hear its challenge from the lips of the apostles."<sup>9</sup>

## + ILLUSTRATION

"Dr. Srinidhi Varadarajan wanted to build a world-class supercomputer. But if he were to do so, it would have to be on a budget. Dr. Varadarajan teaches computer science at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and came up with an innovative idea. He knew that the new Apple G-5 Mac had two 64-bit processors that made processing lightening fast for desktop computers. What if he were to bundle the computers together to form a supercomputer?

In a matter of weeks, faculty and students at Virginia Tech smart designed System X, a 'supercluster' of 1100 Power Mac G5 computers. They presented their plan to Apple Computer Corporation and in the fall of 2003, the 1100 computers were delivered to the campus. One month later, on October 21, System X became the third fastest computer in the world, computing 7.41 trillion operations a second. Supercomputers traditionally cost \$100 million to \$250 million and take years to put together. The team at Virginia Tech built theirs for a fraction of that cost for \$5.2 million. And they did it in a month using off-the-shelf equipment!

The Lord has also made us to work in unity to do great things for Him."<sup>10</sup>

### References

1. Rudolph Gwalther, quoted in Esther Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts: New Testament*, vol. VI, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 73.
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3. Joni Eareckson Tada, *A Step Further* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 33.
4. David E. Garland, *Acts*, ed. Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 63.
5. Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 226.
6. Unknown Author, "Fighting in the Barracks," Galaxie Software, 10,000 Sermon Illustrations (Biblical Studies Press, 2002) [Logos].
7. J. I. Packer, "Introduction," in *Acts*, ed. Alister McGrath, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1995), Ac 6:3.
8. Ajith Fernando, 226.
9. David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 236.
10. Peter Kennedy, "Strive for Unity," *Preaching Illustrations*, vol. 1 (WORDsearch, 2009), 217.