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Deacons Anointed for Service

6: 1-7

31-33 AD

The events of Acts 3-8 transpire with mounting concern on the part of the Jews, and especially the Jewish authorities in Yerushalayim. The rising tension resulted in vigilante action taken against Stephen, and then an authorized effort under Rabbi Sha'ul to disrupt and destroy that new Messianic movement, involving persecution and even death of the believers. The persecution led various believers such as Philip to go to Samaria and bear witness of Yeshua.

Deacons are appointed **DIG**: Given what the Bible says in Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32, how could the widows be overlooked in the daily support? How do the apostles resolve this problem? Why would the Messianic community choose seven Greek speaking Jews to fill this ministry? Looking at 6:7, 5:42, 4:32-35, and 2:42-47, how would you sum up what has happened in the book of Acts so far? How does that relate to 1:8?

REFLECT: What secondary issues prevent your place of worship from fulfilling Acts 1:8? What are the dangers of putting people who are not spiritually minded in places of leadership? What principles here might help free it for its real mission? You don't have to be a deacon or deaconess to serve others. How can you serve others this week?

In the book of Acts, **the Adversary's** attacks on **the Messianic Community** have come on several different fronts. **The devil** tried to corrupt **Messiah's Community** from within (**to see link click At - Ananias and Sapphira Lie to the Ruach**), and **he** attempted direct opposition and intimidation (see **Au - The Apostles are Persecuted**). But these strategies had failed. Therefore, **the ruler of demons (Matthew 12:24)** now tries to "divide and conquer" by raising one group in **the Community** against another.

The problem: Now in those days, following the second persecution of **Chapter**

5, when the disciples (the early name for believers) **were multiplying** because of the teaching and preaching about **Messiah, grumbling arose among the Hellenists against the Hebrews. The Hebrews** were those **Jews** more inclined to embrace the **Jewish** culture and were mostly from Judea. **The Hellenists** were those **Jews** more inclined to embrace the **Greek** culture and were mostly from the Diaspora (all over the Roman Empire). For the most part, **the Hebrews** tended to regard **the Hellenists** as unspiritual compromisers with the **Greek** culture, and **the Hellenists** regarded **the Hebrews** as “holier-than-thou” traditionalists. There was already a natural suspicion between the two groups, and the Adversary tried to take advantage of that standing suspicion.¹²⁸

A problem **arose because the Hellenists’ [Greek speaking] widows were being overlooked in the daily support** from the common fund **(6:1)**. Apparently, some of **the Hellenistic Jews** believed that **the widows** among **the Hebrew Jews** were receiving better care. This didn’t mean that the oversight was deliberate. It was more a problem of very rapid growth and poor supervision. Although **widows** always received special protection under the Torah **(Deuteronomy 14:29, 24:19, 26:12)**, **they** were often ignored under Pharisaic rule **(Mark 12:38-40)**. But the Messianic Community in **Jerusalem** had a special concern for the welfare of **their widows (James 1:27)**.

The early Messianic community took its responsibility to help support **the widows** seriously. The basic biblical definition of **a widow** doesn’t necessarily have anything to do with **her** marital status, but a woman who no longer has any means of support, and is therefore in need of special protection **(First Kings 17:12)**. Many well-known biblical women – such as **Ruth, Orpah, Naomi, Abigail, and Bathsheba** – are never referred to as **widows** because **they** presumably possessed some source of income. Therefore, a woman became **a widow** only if and when **she** had no one obligated to support **her**. The case of **Tamar** suggests that being sheltered within Onan’s house prevented **her** from being called **a widow. She** was only called **a widow** after **she** left **her** Judah’s house **(Genesis 38:11)**.¹²⁹

A closer look at the Hellenists: Here **Luke** introduces a mysterious group of people called **Hellenists**. This terminology is found again in **(9:29)**, and possibly also in **11:20**). Since the term **Hellenist** (Greek: *elleniston* meaning, *a Greek-speaking Jew, that is, one who can speak Greek only and not Hebrew or Aramaic*) is not found in any literature prior to **Acts**, one must rely on the context of the term to help us understand what **Luke** means. If one takes all the clues that **Luke** gives in

Acts Chapters 6 through **11**, it appears that **he** uses the term “Hellenist” to refer to Diaspora Jews or their descendants who have migrated back into the land, living in or around **Jerusalem** whose primary language was Greek and who attended synagogues where they worshiped in **Greek** (such as **the Synagogue of the Freedmen** in **6:9**). Without minimizing the differences that existed between **the Hebrews** and **the Hellenists** in regard to the care of **their widows**, which was essentially a practical matter, it must be said that there is nothing here that suggests a significant doctrinal rift between the two groups of believers.¹³⁰



The solution: **So, the Twelve**, functioning as the elders in the Messianic congregation, **called together the whole group of the disciples and** said: **It is not right for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve** (Greek: *diakonos*, meaning *to deconize*) **tables (6:2)**. **Great respect was accorded to the Sages who belonged to the “holy brotherhood” and divided their day into three parts - a third for Torah, a third for prayer, and a third for mitzvot, or good deeds (Eccl.R. 9.9.1)**. In this context, **the apostles** wanted to devote most of **their** time within **their two-thirds of Torah-study and prayer** rather than with practical issues that legitimately lay within the duties of the disciples. This didn't mean that **the apostles** considered ministry to **the widows** beneath **them**, **they** just didn't have the time to do it properly. This reminds us of Moshe's selection of capable men to assist him in judging the people (see the commentary on **Exodus Cy - Moses Chose Capable Men From All Isra'el**). They needed people to **serve** tables, but there were qualifications to meet.

They wisely delegated these responsibilities. **So, brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this duty (6:3)**. The number seven and the candidates qualifications parallel the committee of seven “best men of the city, or administrators” who

represented and governed the city's affairs. **As rulers, let each city have seven men long showing integrity and the pursuit of justice (Josephus Antiquities 4.214).**¹³¹ **They** asked the disciples to nominate **the men, they** wisely wanted the congregations input, but the final decision actually rested with **the apostles**.

Nowhere in this chapter of Acts are these men called **deacons**, but later when the Messianic Community grew, and Gentiles entered the Church these men were called **deacons** (*diakonos* in **Greek** or *shammash* in **Hebrew**) as seen in **First Timothy 3:8**, and **in the same way, their wives** also served as deaconesses (**First Timothy 3:11 NIV**), like **Phoebe, a deaconess** (*diakonos* in **Greek**) of **Messiah's community at Cenchrea (Romans 16:1)**. The word **deacon** simply means *servant*, and those **men** were certainly *servants*. **They** could claim the promise for faithful service that **Paul** specifically makes to **the deacons** in **First Timothy 3:13**, **"For those who have served well as deacons** (Greek: *diakonos*) **gain for themselves a good standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Messiah Yeshua.**

But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the service of the Word, which are actually inseparable (**6:4**). Messianic rabbis, pastors, and teachers of **the Word** must permeate their teaching and preaching in **prayer** or their messages will be superficial and dry. They must pray constantly that their people will apply the truths they reveal to them. The men and women of **ADONAI** must also pray that they would be a pure channel through which **God's** truth can flow.

The greatest proclaimer of **God's Word** who ever lived, **Paul**, was a man devoted to prayer. **He** assured the church in Rome that **for God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the Good News of His Son. How unceasingly I make mention of you, always pleading in my prayers (Romans 1:9-10a)**. **He** told the church in Ephesus: **I never stop giving thanks for you as I mention you in my prayers (Ephesians 1:16)**. To the church in Philippi he wrote: **I thank my God at every memory of you, always praying with joy in every prayer of mine for you all (Philippians 1:3-4)**. **Paul** also prayed constantly for the Colossian church: **For this reason also, ever since we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We keep asking God that you might be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding (Colossians 1:9)**.

Paul also served as a great model of the commitment to **the Word**. In his farewell

speech to the Ephesian elders, he said: **You yourselves know how I have behaved among you all the time from the first day I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and tears and trials which fell upon me through the plots of the Jewish leaders. I did not shrink back from proclaiming to you anything that was profitable, teaching you publicly as well as from house to house, testifying to both Jewish and Greek people repentance to God and trust in our Lord Yeshua (20:18-21).**

Acts 19:9-10 describes **Paul's** ministry at Ephesus: **Paul went into the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, debating and persuading them about the kingdom of God. But when they were hardening and refusing to believe, speaking evil of the Way before the whole group, Paul withdrew from them, taking the disciples with him, debating daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord - Jewish as well as Greek people. Imprisoned in Rome, people came to him at his quarters in large numbers. From morning until evening he explained everything to them, testifying about the kingdom of God, trying to persuade them about Yeshua from the Torah of Moshe and the Prophets (Acts 28:23).**¹³²

The statement that the apostles would devote themselves to prayer and to the service of the Word pleased the whole group; and they chose Stephen (Greek: *Stephanos* meaning *crow*), a man full of faith and controlled by the Ruach ha-Kodesh, and Philip the evangelist (Chapter 8). Nothing definite is known about the remaining five men: **Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch,** all Diaspora **Jews** so they could not be charged with favoritism against **the Greek widows (6:5).** Once again, we see **Luke's** literary skills as **he** subtly introduces two major figures, **Stephen** and **Philip,** both of whom will soon figure in a significant way in the story just as **he** had done earlier with **Barnabas (4:36),** and will soon do with **Sha'ul (7:58).** An abundance of evidence exists regarding **Jerusalem** residents who immigrated from the Diaspora **(2:5).** On the basis of the number of Greek-inscribed tombstones discovered, the number of **Greek-speaking** residents of **the City** is estimated to have been between ten to twenty percent of the total population.

*We should count it as a privilege to serve **the Lord** in these basic, practical ways, instead of seeing it as a burden. You don't have to be a deacon or deaconess to serve others, and you should never use that as an excuse. Apart from the cross, **Jesus** showed the ultimate measure of love by merely washing **His apostles** feet*

(John 13:1-5).

The apostles first act was to pray. **They placed these men before them; and after praying, they laid hands** (Hebrew: *s'mikhah*) **on them**, conferring the duties and privileges of their office in the traditional Jewish manner **(6:6)**. The practice of laying on hands originally was part of the ritual for sacrifices brought to the Tabernacle, and later the Temple **(Leviticus 1:4, 3:3, 4:15 and 8:14ff)**. **The Oral Law interpreted the biblical text to mean that the individual was required to press both hands down with all of his or her strength on the head of the animal to be offered (Betza 2:4, Men. 9:7ff, Temple 3:4, Kel. 1:8, Meg. 16b)**. In its basic form, the rite appears to have represented a pouring of one's own being into another. In the Second Temple period, the practice developed into a means of rabbinic ordination.¹³³

The principle: A vital principle is illustrated in this incident that is of urgent importance to Messianic congregations and churches today. It is that **ADONAI** calls all **His** people to ministry, that **He** calls different people to different ministries, and that **those** called to **prayer and the ministry of the word** must never allow **themselves** to be distracted from **their** priorities.¹³⁴

This is a transition statement that provides reasonable clues to the development of Luke's material that follows, which are the beginnings of the Messianic Community in Yerushalayim. The result: Because the situation was handled with wisdom and sensitivity to those who were offended, a potentially divisive issue was defused, and the gospel continued to go forth. **The word of God kept on spreading, and the number of disciples in Jerusalem greatly multiplied (6:7a)**. The two verbs **spreading** and **multiplied** are in the imperfect tense, meaning that **the spreading of the word** and **the growth** of the Community were continuous. The devil's strategy failed. He tried to divide the Messianic congregation, and it didn't work. But the devil's second strategy also failed. **The apostles** were not distracted from the focus of ministry **ADONAI** had for **them**.¹³⁵

Even a great number of the cohanim were becoming obedient to the faith (6:7b). Although most of **the cohanim** are presented in the B'rit Chadashah as being opposed to **Yeshua**, this was not true of all. There were holy men in the priesthood such as Zechariah the father of John the Immerser (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ao - The Birth of John the Baptist**). There is a theory that **the cohanim** who came to believe in **Yeshua** were not part of the establishment

but those who had become disenchanted with it and had gone off to join the Essenes in Qumran. The reasoning is that the theology of the Dead Sea Scrolls is much closer to the New Covenant than that of the Pharisees who controlled the **Jerusalem** priesthood. But that theory lacks evidence from the B'rit Chadashah to support it. Moreover, since the activity of the messianic believers had not yet spread to other parts of the Land, it seems more likely that **the cohanim** becoming obedient to the faith at that time were those who made it their business to be in **Yerushalayim**, rather than retreat to the desert. For **God** even can reach the hearts of people whose ties and associations might be expected to lead them to oppose **Messiah**. When we come to **15:5** we are informed of believing **cohanim**.¹³⁶