

# SPirit INSPIRED DIVERSITY

## ACTS 6:1–7 AND THE STORY OF EARLY CHURCH LEADERSHIP

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When the topic of diversity in church leadership is broached—including equal representation of women and men—one of the first questions I get is, “Aren’t we just being influenced by worldly teaching and cultural pressures rather than staying true to the Bible?”

I appreciate people’s desire to stay faithful to the Scriptures, which is why it’s always a great opportunity to teach them that we need not abandon faithfulness to the Bible in order to pursue diversity in church leadership or a radical egalitarian position! Indeed, the biblical vision *demands* that we move toward more diversity in church leadership roles.

Among other things, the book of Acts tells the story of the expansion of diversity in leadership within the church. Acts 6:1–7 highlights the Spirit-inspired diversity of leadership *needed* for the church to continue to grow and multiply. Acts teaches that *when God’s Spirit moves, we should expect Spirit-inspired diversity in the leadership of the church.*

### SETTING THE SCENE: GROWTH IN NUMBERS

A key development in the Spirit-inspired diversity of leadership in the early church happens in Acts 6:1–7, which starts in v. 1 with a description of a growing church: “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing . . .”

In Acts 2:44–45 we learn how the early church shared all things in common and took care of those in need. As a result, they add to their number *daily* those being saved (Acts 2:47). But as the young church grew, it began to face challenges.

### THE CHURCH’S FIRST PROBLEM: GROWTH IN DIVERSITY

The church in Acts grew not just in number but also in diversity. It expanded beyond an initial and smaller homogenous group of Jews from a singular location (in Jerusalem) to more diverse groups of people from many different locations, including Hellenistic Jews.<sup>1</sup> This presented a problem: “In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food” (Acts 6:1).<sup>2</sup>

These two distinct groups, Hebraic Jews and Hellenistic Jews, together made up this early version of the church. The leaders would have been Hebrew or Aramaic-speaking Jewish men, making it easy to inadvertently overlook the Greek-speaking widows in the church who were not “one of them.” This oversight may not have been intentional, but that does not make it any less problematic.

What is the church, led by and dependent on the Spirit, going to do as they face what was perhaps their first ever internal problem or dispute? Here is what unfolds in vv. 2–5:

So the Twelve [Hebraic Jewish leaders] gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

## THE BIBLE DEMANDS THAT WE MOVE TOWARD MORE DIVERSITY IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP ROLES.

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

Notice: *all seven of these men have Greek names.* In other words, they were likely all Hellenistic Jewish Christians, with one even being a Gentile convert (Nicolas in v. 5).

The Greek-speaking widows were overlooked by the Aramaic-speaking leaders, so what is the church's solution as led by the Spirit? It is to appoint Greek-speaking Hellenists to their leadership team to accurately represent the makeup of this growing church! Before diversity and inclusion became modern buzzwords, Spirit-inspired diversity in leadership was already a first-century church value. This was not just diversity for the sake of diversity. Like all Christian and Spirit-inspired values, it was diversity born out of love for and service to others.

It was important to the Spirit that the people being ministered to were well-represented by those ministering to them. The diverse makeup of a church should be reflected in its leadership as much as possible, whether regarding gender, ethnicity, ability, language, socio-economic status, or so on. This then brings up an obvious question and glaring issue from this text: why is it all men that were chosen?

### GROWTH IN REVELATION

The nineteen leaders mentioned at this point in the early church, the twelve disciples and the seven appointed here, are all men. This is clearly not yet a picture of equal representation and diversity.

This is *very early* in the unfolding story of God's church, and the first followers of Jesus are progressively learning what it means to be in this new covenant of God's people and what that newness should look like. They are coming out of a patriarchal culture dominated by men; that is all they know.<sup>3</sup> Appointing men is likely the only option that even exists in their minds at this point.

THE DIVERSE MAKEUP OF A CHURCH SHOULD BE  
REFLECTED IN ITS LEADERSHIP AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE.





THE SPIRIT FIRST EXPANDED  
THE LEADERSHIP



THE SPIRIT THEN  
DIVERSIFIED LEADERSHIP



THE SPIRIT THEN DEEPENED DISCIPLESHIP

They do not even fully realize that the gospel is also for the Gentiles! It's not until Acts 10, the story of Peter and the Gentile Cornelius, that Peter realizes it's okay to associate with and even visit a Gentile *man* in his home.

We take the acceptance of Gentiles for granted now, and probably most of us reading this are of Gentile descent. But that took *time* and adjustment. Peter learned it through the revelation of the Spirit and concluded afterwards that "God does not show favoritism" (Acts 10:34) and "who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" (Acts 11:17).

By chapter 16 in Acts, Paul is preaching to Gentile *women* (16:13), including Lydia. She responds to the message, is baptized, and invites the apostles into her home (16:14–15). At the end of that chapter, Paul and Silas are released from prison and go straight to Lydia's house where "they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them," suggesting that she's either leading or at least hosting this new church (16:40). Acts 18 then goes on to describe Priscilla, quite possibly a *Gentile* woman,<sup>4</sup> teaching and discipling a *Jewish* man, Apollos (18:2, 18–19, 24–26). It is no wonder the early Christians were considered such troublemakers (Acts 17:6) as they turned upside down the typical hierarchies and social order!

Paul's letters name many early women leaders in the church, including Phoebe who is given the *exact same title* or description as the seven men in Acts 6 of a "deacon (*diakonos*, meaning overseer) of the church" (Rom. 16:1). In that same chapter, Paul also recognizes Junia as an "outstanding" preacher or leader in the church (Rom. 16:7).

Within the book of Acts, there is progressive revelation and understanding of what the Spirit was doing and how the Spirit was expanding God's kingdom. The Spirit first expanded the leadership of the early church by moving from a select group of Aramaic speaking Jewish men in Jerusalem to Greek speaking Jewish men from other places. The Spirit then diversified leadership further to include Gentile men, then Gentile women, then finally to the point where a Gentile woman leads a Jewish man into deeper discipleship (18:26). It is an amazing development in the first century.

This example of the progressive revelation of diversity in leadership is why the Bible must be read in the context

of its larger unfolding story.<sup>5</sup> We cannot take isolated passages and say, “Do exactly as they did here.” There is a progressive revelation to consider as context and culture are transformed under Spirit leadership.

A Spirit-inspired movement will lead to Spirit-inspired diversity of leadership that accurately represents the people being served. As renowned scholar Amos Yong puts it: “Effective leadership and ministry must represent and respect the perspectives and languages of the people who need to be served.”<sup>6</sup>

What happens when this diversity occurs? What was the result in Acts, and how do we know this is such important teaching? Our story in Acts 6:1–7 shows us the outcome of Spirit-inspired diversity in the final verse: “the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly” (Acts 6:7).

## WHOLENESS: THE NEED FOR DIVERSITY IN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

One of the main take home questions to ask is, “Does the leadership of my church or Christian organization reflect the diversity of the people it serves?” If most congregations have an equal number of women as men, this should be reflected in the church’s leadership at every level, including the pastors. Just as in the early church, a limited leadership may miss out on the needs of the congregation; even a well-intentioned male pastor may not think as readily of the needs of his female congregants. Some congregants may have suffered abuse and may feel safest confiding in a pastor of their same gender. Having both women and men in church leadership helps protect and shepherd the entire flock.

The body of Christ is made up of both women and men with different spiritual gifts. In spite of claims otherwise, church growth and revitalization throughout history (including in the New Testament) almost always includes the emergence or resurgence of women leaders.<sup>7</sup> It is part and parcel of the outpouring of the Spirit which includes “sons and daughters . . . both men and women” (Acts 2:17–18). An Acts-type of Spirit-filled church will be moving in the direction of equal and fair representation in its leadership, not only for the sake of ministering to diverse groups or demographics, but also to learn from different voices and perspectives.

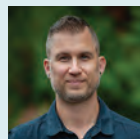
The Holy Spirit flips the script, turning our hierarchies and social norms upside down, whether through a Gentile woman teaching a Jewish man, or a pastoral staff full of women and men from diverse backgrounds and experiences. I have recently witnessed men, young

and old, prayerfully and worshipfully responding to the preaching of a sixteen-year-old female intern or twenty-two-year-old woman pastor fresh out of Bible college. That is a sign of the Spirit at work in breaking down barriers!

If we want our churches to grow, to bring healing and restoration, to draw people to Christ, then we must pray for Spirit-inspired diversity that reflects the makeup of our churches to become the norm.

## NOTES

1. Hellenistic Jews were Jews who assimilated Greek culture and language in the Ancient World; Hebraic Jews were in Jerusalem and spoke Hebrew or Aramaic and were more steeped in Jewish culture.
2. This oversight by the Hebraic Jews probably involved more than just the distribution of food. The Greek noun used here, the daily *diakonia*, means “service” and probably refers to general ministry, not just the distribution of food. *Diakonia* gets translated “distribution of food” in v. 1 based on the reference to serving at a food table in v. 2 (where the verb form of *diakonia* is used). See Amos Yong, *Who Is the Holy Spirit? A Walk with the Apostles* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2011), 70. The rest of Acts potentially confirms that the people being overlooked was about more than just material distribution of food, for it only highlights these seven men’s more vocational type of ministry, such as the preaching of Stephen and Philip. We learn that these seven were “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (v. 3) and Stephen was “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (v. 5) and “full of God’s grace and power” (v. 8). They were carefully chosen based on their ministry gifts.
3. The argument that Christianity emerged from both a religious (Jewish) and cultural (Greco-Roman) patriarchal system is well supported by biblical and historical scholars. For a summary of how Christianity was (slowly) learning to be resocialized from widely accepted patriarchal boundaries into a new communal identity, see Lisa Sowle Cahill’s chapter “Sex, Gender, and Early Christianity,” in her *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 121–65 (esp. 141–54).
4. As is argued by Mimi Haddad in “Priscilla, Author of the Epistle to the Hebrews?” *Priscilla Papers: The Academic Journal of CBE International* 7, no. 1 (Winter 1993), <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/priscilla-author-epistle-hebrews/>.
5. This is my primary biblical argument in Joseph Lee Dutko, *The Pentecostal Gender Paradox: Eschatology and the Search for Equality* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2024), where I identify an eschatological-egalitarian narrative thread in Scripture and develop a corresponding eschatological authorizing hermeneutic for reading biblical texts on gender. Simply put, I propose that reading the Bible with an eschatological lens leads to the full and unhindered participation of women in church leadership.
6. Yong, *Who Is the Holy Spirit?*, 73.
7. There are lots of revival stories throughout history that illustrate this truth, such as the Pentecostal revivals of the early twentieth century. For the story of how women rose to prominence in those revivals in the US and Canada, see my historical chapter in Dutko, *Pentecostal Gender Paradox*, 55–89.



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