

Acts 6:1-7 NIV

“How God’s churches deal with controversies”

“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. ² So the Twelve 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. ³ Brothers, 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 ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.’

“⁵ 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. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

“⁷ So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.”

God’s church grew rapidly after Pentecost.

What caused this phenomenal increase?

To give credit where it’s due:

- First, highlighting Jesus’ Good News, the Apostles followed God’s Word and His Spirit.
- Second, before all other matters, God’s people put Him first.
- Third, God’s people loved one another and took care of one another’s needs.

God’s church helped its needy widows.

Societies then gave women few options for careers or making a living.

Widows enjoyed nothing like pensions, retirement benefits, or Social Security.

That’s why Jesus stated that if a husband divorced his wife, he forced her into adultery or fornication.

The church cared for its widows through daily food distribution.

Imagine purchasing, transporting, and distributing large amounts of food; doing that fairly, quickly, and efficiently.

We don’t know the type of foods the church provided.

They possibly gave grain such as wheat or barley, and lentils, maybe cheese.

Acts doesn’t tell us the number of widows the church helped.

Widows comprise a significant percentage of any general population.

Stats show that about 7% of a typical population over 18 will consist of widows and widowers.

Due to various factors, widows usually exceed the numbers of widowers.

Moderately estimate 4% being widows, in a group of 5000; their number would be 200.

How much planning and peoplepower does it take to feed 200 persons every day?

I suspect that the number of widows then exceeded 200; some likely frail and disabled.

The Apostles recognized the importance of caring for widows.

Sadly, the Apostles were spending their time waiting on tables or listening to complaints.

Accusations of prejudice arose.

The far more important assignment of telling God’s message suffered.

This glitch occurred at a time of increasing growth and required immediate attention.

Two crucial church questions surface here.

First what caused the controversy?

Second, how did the Apostles resolve the issue?

For church unity, for your salvation, and pleasing God, we need the facts in this matter.



How do we solve contested church matters?

“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.”

Who were these Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews?

The scholar F.F. Bruce noted that *Hellenist* comes from a Greek verb (ἑλληνίζω) pronounced hellānídzo, “(‘to speak Greek’) which was used of Greeks as well as of non-Greeks who affected Greek speech and ways.”¹

Hebraic probably derives from an ancient word abar, (עבר) which means across, probably referring to the fact that their ancestor Abraham crossed the Euphrates River in order to travel to the Promised Land.

Old Testament and secular history help us understand the terms.

Most of us recall the Ten Commandments, the covenant God made with the nation of Israel.

The Israelites didn’t put God first.

He punished them for breaking the solemn covenant they made with Him and one another.

¹ F.F. Bruce, The Book of Acts, THE NEW INTERNATIONAL COMMENTARY ON THE NEW TESTAMENT, Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, MI, page 128, footnote 8.

As a result, in about 920 BC, Israel divided into two kingdoms, North and South.

The northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 720 BC; the southern to the Babylonians 587 BC.

The Assyrians and Babylonians took many Israelites captive to the Fertile Crescent.

Not all the Israelites returned to the homeland.

Many stayed in foreign lands.

Others became travelling merchants.

Some fell victims to later wars and were moved to various parts of the world.

Because the southern kingdom was known as Judah (Judea in Jesus’ time), Israelites (Hebrews) were often referred to as Jews.

You likely know about Alexander the Great (356-323 BC).

Alexander was a Macedonian (the country north of Greece), son of Philip II of Macedon.

Philip hired the Greek philosopher Aristotle to tutor Alexander from the age of 13-16.

Alexander became enamored of Greek culture, science, language, medicine etc. and spread Hellenistic influence during his short life.

When Philip was assassinated, Alexander became king at age 20.

He was bent on conquest.

By the age of 33, Alexander conquered Macedonia, Greece, the Holy Land, Egypt, the Fertile Crescent--all the way to India—when he died suddenly of an unknown cause.

Wherever Alexander went, he spread Hellenism, Greek culture, and its language.



Greek became the language of trade, commerce, and also the arts.

The Greeks, and later the Romans, built amphitheaters all over the known world.

Alexandria, Egypt had a huge library and a large Jewish population.

Not all first Jews could read Hebrew.

Alexandrian Jews began translating the Hebrew OT into Greek, what we know as the *Septuagint*.

That Greek translation known as the *Septuagint* was widely used in Jesus’ time.

Luke quoted from it and so did the writer of the *Book of Hebrews*.

Hellenization of Jews spread.

You can see on the attached maps that Greek influence remained strong close to Israel.

Apostles Phillip and Andrew had Greek names--and Andrew was Peter’s brother.

Jesus gave Simon, son of Jonah, his Greek nickname, Peter.

On the east and southeast shores of the Sea of Galilee lay a league of cities known as the Decapolis, Greek for ten cities.

In short, it’s probably safe to conclude that when *Acts* refers to Hebraic Jews, Luke meant Jews from Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. Hellenized Jews probably referred to out-of-towners. Though it may have been a factor, we don’t need to conclude that distribution prejudice was involved. **Local people who know the area enjoy clear advantages.**

Making deliveries, driving to assignments, and giving directions while working for an oil company helped me learn Los Angeles streets.

Later, Norma and I discovered that Hollywood church members lived in all directions.

Visiting, following up on prospects, and making hospital calls, made me well acquainted with Los Angeles streets.

Our family enjoyed going to ball games at Dodger Stadium, which were much more affordable then.

If you’ve gone to ball games in Ames, Iowa City, or Kansas City, you’re familiar with traffic jams.

Many LA area people use the freeways or other busy roadways to access Dodger Stadium.

We found a back street out of the parking lot.

If we used that street and parked near its stadium exit, we could be home in minutes.

Finding your way in large cities like Jerusalem can be time-consuming and confusing.



When we first moved to Iowa, I got lost on the unmarked, rural roads. I think the Hellenistic-Greek Jews were clearly at a disadvantage because they

didn’t know the territory and its peculiarities. What can we learn from the “Widows” situation?

The Apostles kept Jesus’ Great Commission emphasis, which most churches neglect.

Our primary mission: tell Jesus’ Good News.

Jesus didn’t send us to correct social injustice.

He did not try to change government or society.

Jesus wants us to tell his victory over sin and death.

Everything else is secondary to the good news.

In the “widows” matter, the Apostles called everyone together so they’d be fully informed.

They did nothing secretly or behind closed doors.

In a local paper last week, we read the published minutes of a town council meeting.

A gathering concerning one costly, controversial matter was going to be by “invitation only.”

Some organizations do this sort of thing.

God’s people do not operate this way.

- **The Apostles didn’t appoint a committee to study the matter.**
- **They didn’t make a decision that favored the local folks.**

“Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

The men chosen to oversee the matter were reputable, wise and Holy Spirit-filled.

The seven chosen all had Grecian names,

The Twelve prayed and served God’s word.

Controversy didn’t divert them from Jesus’ Great Commission.

Persecution didn’t either.

The world prizes money, influence, and intelligence.

The Lord looks for honesty, humility, and utmost dedication to His truth and wisdom.

When I see plants force their way out of the ground—newly-planted seed pushing up crusty, heavy soil, I get excited.

How does the Lord pack such energy and life into such tiny seeds?

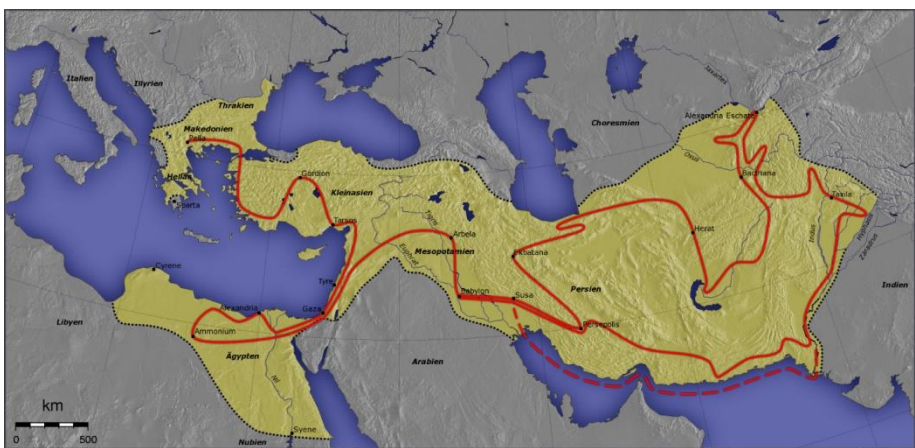
I marvel even more at the way God’s word changes hearts and minds.

“Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. But as for you, continue in what you have learned . . . the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”²
Pray that we’ll humbly dedicate ourselves to God’s Word and Spirit; they power righteousness and peace.
“So the word of God spread. The number of disciples . . . increased rapidly.”

Bob Blair,
PO Box 176
Cleghorn, IA 51014 www.robertblairbooks.com

² 2 Timothy 3:12-17 NIV



Map from *Alexander the Great: a New World and a Turning Point for Western Civilization* by Brewminate



Wickimedia Commons

Scythopolis (OT Beth Shan) above is west of the Jordan.



Legend -
 Ur of Chaldea
 Where Abraham
 crossed the Euphrates
 The Promised Land



Source - AlejandroMagno:geniomilitar: ENCLASE
 Try to count how many Alexandrias he established
 on his way from Macedonia to India.