

Homiletics Analysis: Acts 6

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Acts 6 records two distinct but thematically unified movements in the early Jerusalem church. The first (vv. 1–7) addresses a crisis of neglect: Hellenistic Jewish widows are being overlooked in the daily distribution of food, producing grumbling within the community. The apostles respond not by abandoning their primary calling to prayer and the Word, but by convening the congregation to appoint seven men — men of good repute, full of the Spirit and wisdom — to oversee this ministry of service. The resolution produces remarkable fruit: the church multiplies, and a great company of priests becomes obedient to the faith. The second movement (vv. 8–15) introduces Stephen, one of the Seven, whose ministry explodes far beyond table-service into Spirit-empowered proclamation and signs. Opposition arises from Diaspora synagogues who cannot withstand his wisdom; they resort to false witnesses and bring him before the Sanhedrin on charges of speaking against Moses and the Temple. The section closes with Stephen’s face shining like that of an angel — a luminous anticipation of the defense and martyrdom to follow in chapter 7.

This Text — Intent

God intends through Acts 6 to demonstrate that the church’s vitality depends entirely on the priority of Word and prayer, and that when that priority is properly ordered — structurally protected and institutionally expressed — the gospel advances with irresistible power even through opposition and accusation. The chapter is not primarily about church administration or conflict resolution; it is about how the mission of God refuses to be contained. The appointment of the Seven is not a bureaucratic solution but a gospel solution: it liberates Word-ministry to do its full work while honoring the dignity of service. Stephen’s story then shows that the same Spirit who orders the church’s internal life also empowers its public witness beyond all institutional resistance. God is calling the reader to see that every obstacle — internal complaint, structural neglect, external opposition, false accusation — becomes the occasion for the gospel’s advance when the community is rightly ordered around the Word.

Subject Sentence: The Spirit-ordered church advances the Word through both structured service and bold proclamation.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that when His people protect the priority of Word and prayer — by rightly ordering both ministry and mission — no internal disorder or

external opposition can stop the gospel's advance; He calls the church to trust that structural faithfulness and Spirit-empowered proclamation belong together, not in competition.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Seven as Deacons The most common interpretive question in Acts 6 is whether vv. 1–6 constitutes the institution of the diaconate. The word *diakonos* does not appear; the Seven are never called deacons in Luke's text. What Luke emphasizes is their function: to serve (*diakonein*) tables so that the apostles may serve (*diakonein*) the Word. The parallel use of *diakonia* for both roles is deliberate — it honors both as genuine ministry while distinguishing them in focus. The Reformed reading acknowledges that this passage almost certainly underlies the later emergence of the diaconal office (reflected in 1 Timothy 3 and Philippians 1:1), and that the functional criteria established here — Spirit-filled, reputable, wise — are clearly prototypical. However, the text itself resists being reduced to an ordination narrative. Luke's interest is not primarily ecclesiastical polity but missiological momentum: the resolution of the crisis *results in* multiplied gospel advance (v. 7). The institutional dimension is real but instrumental.

Hellenist vs. Hebrew Tension Some interpreters read vv. 1–6 primarily through the lens of ethnic and cultural conflict — an early racism or tribalism problem in the church — and draw application primarily toward racial reconciliation and social justice. This reading is not wrong in what it affirms but incomplete in what it emphasizes. The ethnic dimension is real: Hellenistic Jewish widows (Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora) are being overlooked against Hebrew-speaking Jewish widows in Jerusalem. However, Luke does not frame the resolution primarily as reconciliation but as *structural reorganization for the sake of mission*. The congregation appoints men, notably all bearing Greek names (suggesting Hellenistic Jewish identity), to serve the overlooked community. This is worth noting — the church addresses injustice by entrusting leadership to those from the affected community. But Luke's interest moves immediately to the result in v. 7: the Word increases, disciples multiply, priests are converted. The ethnic justice dimension should be *acknowledged* as genuine and homiletically useful; the missiological framing must *govern*.

Stephen's Role and Gifts Pentecostal and Charismatic interpreters rightly note the prominence of signs and wonders in Stephen's ministry (v. 8) and Stephen's Spirit-fullness throughout. This reading is accurate and should not be minimized. The Reformed reading does not deny the Spirit's miraculous work but refuses to extract Stephen's signs and wonders from their narrative context: they serve the advance of the Word, they provoke opposition, and they ultimately lead to a martyrdom that scatters the church in precisely the way that will carry the gospel to Judea, Samaria, and beyond (Acts 8:1–4). The Charismatic emphasis on the *manifestation* of the Spirit in Stephen should be qualified by Luke's consistent emphasis on the *direction* of the Spirit toward proclamation and mission.

The two are not opposed — but Luke’s intent is not to give a theology of spiritual gifts; it is to trace the unstoppable advance of the Word.

The False Accusation and the Temple Some interpreters read the charges against Stephen (vv. 13–14) primarily as Jewish legalism resisting Christian freedom — an early Law/Gospel conflict in the Pauline mode. This is a Lutheran tendency that imports categories more native to the Pauline letters than to Acts. The charges are *false* (v. 13 — “false witnesses”), and Luke’s point is not that Stephen *was* attacking the Temple but that the opposition could find no legitimate ground and therefore manufactured charges. The irony is profound: Jesus Himself had spoken of the Temple’s destruction (Mark 14:58; John 2:19), and Stephen’s defense in chapter 7 will *engage* the history of Israel’s resistance to God’s redemptive purposes. But framing vv. 13–14 primarily as Law/Gospel polemic misreads Luke’s narrative purpose. The Reformed reading sees the false accusation as a christological echo (Jesus faced identical charges before the same Sanhedrin) and as the occasion for Stephen’s great sermon — the charges become the platform.

The Reformed verdict is that Acts 6 is primarily a *missiological* text, not primarily an ecclesiological, social-justice, or pneumatological text — though all three dimensions are genuinely present. The organizing principle is the advance of the Word: the Seven are appointed so that the Word is not hindered; Stephen’s gifts serve the Word’s proclamation; false accusation cannot silence the Word. Every element is in service of Luke’s governing thesis (Acts 1:8): the gospel must move outward, and it will.

Key Canonical Support

- **Acts 1:8** — The structural mandate for the whole book: the gospel moves from Jerusalem outward by the Spirit’s power. Acts 6 is the first major internal and external test of whether that advance can be stopped — and the answer is no.
- **Numbers 11:16–17, 24–25** — Moses, overwhelmed by the burden of leading Israel alone, receives seventy elders upon whom the Spirit rests to share the load. The structural parallel to Acts 6 is intentional: the apostolic community faces an analogous crisis of overextension, and the Spirit-led redistribution of responsibility liberates rather than diminishes the primary calling.
- **Exodus 18:13–26** — Jethro’s counsel to Moses to appoint capable, God-fearing men to handle lower-level disputes so Moses can concentrate on the weightiest matters. This is the Old Testament’s wisdom-precedent for exactly the structural reorganization Acts 6 depicts.
- **1 Timothy 3:8–13** — Paul’s qualifications for deacons reflect the same criteria established in Acts 6 (dignified, not double-tongued, full of the Spirit, tested) and confirms that the Seven’s appointment is the functional origin of the diaconal office, even if Acts 6 does not use the title.

- **Matthew 10:17–20; Luke 21:12–15** — Jesus’ promise that when His disciples are brought before councils and false accusers, the Spirit will give them what to say. Stephen’s appearance before the Sanhedrin in Acts 6:15 is the direct fulfillment of this promise — his luminous face and the Spirit’s evident presence confirm that the Lord’s word holds even in the face of manufactured charges.

Aim: To demonstrate that the church’s faithfulness to Word-priority and Spirit-ordered structure is not an administrative concern but the very mechanism by which the gospel advances — and to call the reader to order both their own life and their community’s life around that same conviction.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
6:1	The Hellenistic Jewish widows are being neglected in the daily distribution; the Hellenists grumble against the Hebrews	<i>Plēthunontōn</i> — “as the disciples were increasing” — the very growth causes the strain; <i>diakonia</i> first use; grumbling (<i>goggysmos</i>) echoes Exodus wilderness motif
6:2	The Twelve summon the full number of disciples; they refuse to abandon the Word of God to serve (<i>diakonein</i>) tables	Apostolic self-awareness of calling; “not pleasing to God” (<i>ouk areston</i>) that they leave the Word — strong claim; <i>diakonein</i> used for both Word-ministry and table-service
6:3	The apostles instruct the congregation to select seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and wisdom	Selection belongs to the <i>congregation</i> , appointment to the <i>apostles</i> — both are involved; criteria: reputation, Spirit-fullness, wisdom — character before competence
6:4	The apostles will devote themselves to prayer and to the ministry (<i>diakonia</i>) of the Word	The programmatic statement of apostolic priority; prayer listed <i>before</i> Word — foundational ordering

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6:5	The proposal pleases the whole congregation; they choose Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, Nicolaus	All seven names are Greek — likely all Hellenists; the affected community is given leadership in the solution; Stephen immediately identified as “full of faith and the Holy Spirit”
6:6	The Seven are set before the apostles; the apostles pray and lay hands on them	Laying on of hands = commissioning, not merely appointment; prayer frames the act
6:7	The Word of God increases; the number of disciples multiplies greatly in Jerusalem; a great many priests become obedient to the faith	The structural resolution <i>immediately</i> produces missiological fruit; priest conversions signal penetration into the temple establishment — remarkable
6:8	Stephen, full of grace and power, performs great wonders and signs among the people	Stephen’s ministry exceeds table-service immediately; <i>charis</i> and <i>dynamis</i> — grace and power, both Spirit-given; signs serve proclamation
6:9	Members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen and others from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia arise to dispute with Stephen	Diaspora synagogues — Stephen’s own cultural background — oppose him; note: Saul of Tarsus (from Cilicia) may well be among these disputants
6:10	They cannot withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen is speaking	Verbal echo of Luke 21:15 — fulfillment of Jesus’ promise; the opposition is not defeated by rhetoric but by the Spirit
6:11	They secretly instigate men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God”	When argument fails, false witness follows; <i>hypoballo</i> — “instigate secretly” — deliberate deception; the strategy mirrors the trial of Jesus
6:12	They stir up the people,	Popular agitation replaces

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
6:13–14	elders, and scribes; they seize Stephen and bring him before the Sanhedrin False witnesses charge Stephen with speaking against the holy place and the Law; they claim he said Jesus would destroy the Temple and change Mosaic customs	honest debate; the same bodies that condemned Jesus now oppose Stephen Luke explicitly labels these “false witnesses” (<i>martyras pseudeis</i>); the charges contain a kernel of truth twisted into accusation — Jesus <i>did</i> speak of the Temple (John 2:19)
6:15	All in the Sanhedrin see Stephen’s face as like the face of an angel	Luminous anticipation of his defense; echoes Moses’ radiant face after divine encounter (Exodus 34:29–35); the Spirit’s presence is visible

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	6:1–7	The Word Protected: Structural Faithfulness Enables Gospel Advance
2	6:8–10	The Word Proclaimed: Spirit-Empowered Witness Beyond the Seven’s Mandate
3	6:11–15	The Word Opposed: False Accusation Cannot Silence What the Spirit Sustains

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The Spirit-ordered church advances the Word through both structured service and bold proclamation.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating that when His people protect the priority of Word and prayer — by rightly ordering both ministry and mission — no internal disorder or external opposition can stop the gospel’s advance; He calls the church to trust that structural faithfulness and Spirit-empowered proclamation belong together, not in competition.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] — Reframe “administration” as gospel stewardship. The appointment of the Seven is not a concession to organizational necessity — it is an act of faith that the Word’s advance matters enough to protect. Many Christians (and church leaders) treat structural decisions about who does what as spiritually neutral, beneath the level of “real ministry.” Acts 6 refuses this. The apostles’ refusal to leave the Word to serve tables is not elitism — it is a theological conviction about where their irreplaceable contribution lies. Examine the implicit theology behind how you use your time and energy. When you treat “the important things” (prayer, Scripture, intentional discipleship) as whatever happens to be urgent today, you have functionally reversed the Acts 6 ordering. The structure of your life is a theological statement.

2. [Affections/Worship] — Feel the weight of what is at stake when the Word is marginalized. The apostles say it would be “not pleasing to God” (*ouk areston*) for them to leave the Word of God to serve tables — a startlingly strong statement. They are not merely describing an inefficiency; they are describing a kind of unfaithfulness. The grumbling in v. 1 was a real problem demanding a real solution — the widows’ need was genuine. But the apostolic response refuses to treat the crisis of the widows by creating a deeper crisis around the Word. Let your heart feel what is actually at stake when a church, a small group, a family, or an individual treats prayer and Scripture as residual activities rather than primary ones. This is not about scheduling — it is about worship. What you protect reflects what you treasure.

3. [Will/Behavior] — Name and address the specific neglect in your community before it becomes grumbling. The Hellenistic widows were not being willfully excluded — the neglect arose from the organic complexity of a rapidly growing community. No one apparently intended the injustice. But the apostles did not wait for the grumbling to deepen; they called the whole congregation together and addressed it structurally. Identify the category of person or need in your community that is most likely going unnoticed — not from malice, but from the momentum of the familiar. The congregation’s appointment of men from the affected community (all seven names are Greek) is a model: bring into leadership those who understand the overlooked. This week, name the specific neglect you are aware of and take one concrete step toward addressing it — not privately, but with others.

4. [Mind/Belief] — Recognize that opposition and false accusation are not signs of failure; they are signs of effective witness. Stephen’s dispute with the Diaspora synagogues arose because “they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking” (v. 10). The opposition is a direct measure of the effectiveness of his proclamation. When argument fails his opponents, they manufacture false witnesses. This is the pattern: the more clearly the gospel is proclaimed and the more irresistibly the Spirit attends it, the more determined the opposition becomes. The reader who encounters

opposition to faithful witness — at work, in the family, in the neighborhood — should interpret that resistance not as evidence that they are doing something wrong but as confirmation that they are doing something that matters. False accusation is the tribute that unbelief pays to genuine Spirit-empowered proclamation.

5. [Affections/Worship] — Receive the promise that the Spirit attends His witnesses in their most exposed moments. Stephen's face shone like an angel's before the Sanhedrin — the same council that had condemned Jesus. He was standing utterly alone before the most powerful religious institution in Jerusalem, charged with blasphemy based on manufactured evidence. And the Spirit made him luminous. Jesus had promised exactly this (Luke 21:12–15): "I will give you a mouth and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to withstand." The reader who fears the moments of exposure — the conversation where they must give account, the relationship where faithfulness will cost something — is invited to trust that Stephen's experience is not exceptional but paradigmatic. The Spirit who sustained Stephen in front of the Sanhedrin is the same Spirit who indwells every believer. You will not face those moments alone.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Acts 6 teaches that God's sovereign advance of the gospel does not bypass human structures and institutions but works *through* them when they are rightly ordered. The apostles' insistence on the priority of prayer and the Word is not a pragmatic preference but a theological claim about how God has chosen to work: through the proclamation of His Word, attended by His Spirit. The appointment of the Seven demonstrates that God builds His church through both the ministry of the Word *and* the ministry of mercy and service — not as competitors but as mutually sustaining callings. Stephen's ministry further reveals that the Spirit is not limited to ordained or institutional channels; He fills and empowers whom He will, and that empowerment is always in the direction of witness. The false accusation against Stephen confirms a pattern running through the whole canon: faithfulness to God's redemptive purposes provokes resistance from those whose religious and institutional identity is threatened by the gospel. God's purposes are not deterred.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Acts 6 is a foundational text for Reformed ecclesiology and missiology alike. The principle that Word and prayer occupy the irreducible center of the church's life — and that every other structure and ministry exists to protect and extend that center, not to displace it — is a governing Reformed conviction. The passage also displays the Reformed understanding of vocation: the Seven are not less called, less filled with the Spirit, or less vital to the gospel's advance for serving tables rather than preaching. They are differently positioned within a unified mission. Stephen's

subsequent ministry demonstrates that the Spirit distributes gifts sovereignly and that faithful service in one role does not confine the Spirit's work to that role. The result of structural faithfulness in v. 7 — multiplied disciples, converted priests — displays what Reformed theology consistently argues: when the means of grace (Word, prayer, rightly ordered community) are honored, God works through them with surprising and multiplied power. The gospel advances not by human strategy but by divine sovereignty working through human faithfulness.

Main Takeaway

The church that protects the priority of prayer and the Word — by rightly ordering who does what and why — will find that no internal grumbling and no external accusation can stop the gospel from advancing. Acts 6 is not about better church management. It is about trusting that God advances His mission through communities that keep first things first, and that the Spirit who empowered Stephen before the Sanhedrin is the same Spirit who sustains every faithful witness in every exposed moment today. Keep the Word central. Order everything else around it. Watch what God does.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing Acts 6:1–7 to a church administration text.** The appointment of the Seven is regularly preached as a lesson in delegation, leadership development, or organizational management — the “Moses principle” applied to church growth strategy. This domesticates the passage. Luke’s framing is explicitly missiological: the structure is reorganized so that the Word is not hindered, and the immediate result (v. 7) is explosive gospel multiplication. The organizational principle is real but entirely secondary to the theological claim. Preach the structure as an act of faith in the sufficiency of the Word, not as a business lesson in span of control.
- **Treating Stephen’s story in vv. 8–15 as merely introductory to chapter 7.** It is common to rush through the second half of Acts 6 as “setup” for Stephen’s speech and martyrdom. But vv. 8–15 carry their own freight: the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise about Spirit-given wisdom (v. 10), the pattern of manufactured accusation mirroring Jesus’ own trial, and Stephen’s luminous face as an anticipatory sign of divine vindication. These details are not throat-clearing for chapter 7 — they are Luke’s theology in miniature. The passage closes on a cliffhanger deliberately: what will happen when the Spirit-filled witness faces the supreme court of Israel?
- **Preaching the ethnic tension without the missiological resolution.** The Hellenist/Hebrew conflict in v. 1 is a real injustice, and contemporary applications around overlooked communities, structural blindness, and the church’s record on race are legitimate. But if the sermon ends at the diversity lesson without tracing the

passage's own resolution — which is not primarily reconciliation but reorganization for mission — it has replaced Luke's governing concern with a contemporary one. The diversity application is a valid sub-point, not the main claim.

- **Falsely separating “Word ministry” from “mercy ministry” as competing callings.** Some Reformed and evangelical exposition over-applies Acts 6 to argue for a sharp hierarchy in which proclamation ministry is inherently superior to service ministry. Luke does not say this. The apostles do not demean table-service — they call it *diakonia*, the same word used for their own ministry of the Word. What the passage argues for is *differentiation of calling*, not *hierarchy of value*. The Seven are Spirit-filled and appointed with prayer and laying on of hands — they are not lesser ministers. Preach the distinction without the condescension.
- **Missing the christological echo in the false accusation scene.** Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin on charges of speaking against the Temple and the Law, based on the testimony of false witnesses — an almost verbatim replay of Jesus' trial (Mark 14:55–59; Matthew 26:59–61). Luke intends this parallel. Stephen is not merely the first Christian martyr; he is the first to walk the path Jesus walked, before the same court, on the same charges. A sermon that does not at least note this parallel misses a major dimension of Luke's christological patterning. The church does not merely follow Jesus' teaching — it follows His suffering.
- **Over-individualizing the applications from this corporate text.** Acts 6 is fundamentally a community text: the whole congregation is summoned, the whole congregation selects the Seven, the whole congregation benefits from the structural reorganization, and the whole church is threatened by Stephen's accusation. Applications that reduce entirely to “what should I personally prioritize?” miss the ecclesial weight of the passage. The question the passage is pressing is not merely “how should I order my individual life?” but “how should we order our common life together around the Word?” Both are valid, but the corporate dimension must not be dissolved into individual application.