

# Seeing Privilege, Addressing Discrimination, and Sharing Power

BY DOMINIQUE DUBOIS GILLIARD

As Acts 6 opens, the disciples believed they were functioning as a healthy, missional, interconnected body of Christ. They were actively making disciples, fulfilling the Great Commission, and welcoming new members into God's family. However, they were oblivious to the injustice happening along the margins of their community, to the discrimination in their midst.

In accordance with God's character, we who are God's people are called to sacrificially love our neighbors, particularly to care for the most vulnerable. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel did this via gleaning laws and practicing Jubilee. In Acts 6 the disciples sustained this tradition by instituting a food distribution program for vulnerable widows. A challenge ensued, however; the food program served widows of two different cultural backgrounds, and those two groups of widows had divergent experiences within the program.

The Hebraic widows were cultural insiders with direct access to the city and church's dominant culture, customs, and language. The Hellenistic widows were Jews who lived most of their lives in Greek-speaking cities and towns outside of Jerusalem and returned to the city as cultural outsiders. The Hellenist widows felt as if their outsider status was causing them to be overlooked and marginalized in the church's distribution of food.

The Hebraic widows had advocates at the table of power, as well as a cultural, linguistic, and relational advantages that led to them receiving superior treatment. They had privilege. Meanwhile, the Hellenistic widows lacked representation at the decision-making table and were without an advocate in leadership who saw their suffering and identified with their marginalized experience.

Consequently, the church did not care for Hellenistic widows with the same care, intentionality, and love as it did for Hebraic widows. The exclusively Hebraic leadership had a blind spot, and the distribution disparity went unacknowledged until Hellenistic Jews brought a formal complaint. This matter was one of the earliest challenges the church faced as it started becoming multicultural.

Once the complaint was raised, the disciples assessed the institutional structure and program. They demonstrated their maturity in Christ through their response to the complaint. Instead of being defensive, denying the problem, or trying to cover it up, the disciples conducted a sober assessment of the program and determined that the discrimination claim was legitimate. They did not try to explain away the problem or cast the Hellenistic widows as being divisive for raising the complaint. Not only did the church's leadership acknowledge there was a problem, but they also confirmed that it was systemic. Then they took proactive steps to address it.

To ensure the discrimination problem did not recur, church leadership called a communal meeting and collectively discerned how to address it. They determined there was a need for a

council to oversee the food distribution program. The disciples tasked the community with selecting seven men who were known to be full of the Spirit and wise to oversee the program. The overwhelmingly Hebraic community met and selected seven men—Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas—who were all Hellenist. These seven leaders resolved the problem and became an ecclesial model for confronting privilege, addressing discrimination, and sharing power.

As a result of the church's maturity, verse 7 explains, "The word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith." The church's willingness to confront privilege and address discrimination led to the spread of the gospel in Jerusalem and beyond. The newly constructed Jerusalem Council, led by Hellenists, became a crucial bridge that expanded the kingdom, enabling the gospel to reach the gentile world. Acts traces this progression "from Cyprus and Cyrene" going north to Antioch, where members of the council were the first to preach the gospel directly to non-Jewish Greeks (11:19–21). This is a beautiful story illustrating why we must humbly respond to discrimination complaints, address privilege in our midst, and equally prioritize the Great Commission and the Greatest Commandment—we are called to fulfill both, not just one or the other.

*Excerpt from Subversive Witness by Dominique DuBois Gilliard. Copyright © 2021 by Dominique Dubois Gilliard. Used by permission of Zondervan. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com).*