

Ministry of Grace Church

The Acts of The Apostles Chapter 6

Preface:

In chapter five, we learned about Ananias and his wife Sapphira who sold some property and donated a portion of the sale to the church. However, they lied, claiming that the amount they gave the church was the total amount of the sale. As a result, God judged both of them by taking their lives. The result of this harsh judgment from God was that the entire church knew “the fear of the Lord.”

Many signs and miracles were regularly done at the hands of the apostles, and more than ever believers were added to the Lord. The text tells us that the new converts included multitudes of both men and women. However, as is common whenever any Christian organization experiences dramatic success, troubles are not far behind. Since the apostles were preaching and teaching that the miracles and salvation were the result of faith in the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth, the High Priest and the Sanhedrin (being Sadducees, who don't believe in the resurrection) arrested the apostles and put them in prison. Almost immediately, the apostles were released by an angel (who the Sadducees don't believe in) and returned to preaching and teaching the very next day.

Because the Sanhedrin was comprised mostly of Sadducees, they were angry with the apostles. They flogged them for continuing to teach in the name of Jesus and warned them again not to teach in his name. But, rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer for the cause of Christ, the apostles returned to the task they had been commissioned to.

A Dispute Within the Church

Acts 6:1-4

¹Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ²And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

Notes:

As we have mentioned before, the initial church was made up entirely of Jews. However, there were two distinct groups of Jews within the church. (Slide 2 A) Much of the early church was made up of Jews raised in Israel. These were known as Hebrew Jews. The native tongue of these Hebrew Jews was Aramaic, (Slide 2B) which they learned as a result of the Babylonian captivity. The remainder of the church was made up of Jews from other countries, known as Hellenistic Jews. Their native tongues were all different, but everyone in the Roman Empire spoke Greek. (Slide 2C)

We learned previously, that some of the church members sold houses and land and contributed the proceeds to the church for distribution to those who had need. Apparently, this distribution was initially performed by the apostles themselves. The Hellenists complained, however, that their widows were being treated as second class citizens and were getting overlooked in the distribution. In all fairness, this may have been the result of a language barrier. Since all the apostles spoke Aramaic as their native language, it would have been easier for them to deal with other Aramaic speaking people. So, although it was probably not intentional, they would naturally prefer to deal with the Hebrew Jews whose native tongue was the same as theirs.

Add to this the fact that the primary responsibility of the apostles was to teach and preach. However, they couldn't do this as effectively when their time was divided between distributing funds and preaching. So, the apostles finally said, **"It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables."**

This has often been interpreted as the apostles saying that they were spending too much time serving food. However, there is a different meaning here. Keep in mind that within the Jewish culture, men typically did not serve food. That was the responsibility of the women. Also, consider this, the word translated "tables" is *trapeza*, which refers to something with four feet, a table or a chair. This word is often used in the New Testament in reference to a dining table, but it is also used in reference to a business table. You may recall, when Jesus cleansed the temple, he overthrew the "tables" of the moneychangers. As a matter of fact, in the first century, the word *trapeza* was used generically to refer to a bank or broker's office where money was deposited and loaned out.

So, when the apostles said that they should not give up preaching the word to serve tables, it was actually a reference to the tables where money was distributed (Slide 3) to those in the church who had financial needs.

Seven Men Chosen to Serve

Acts 6:5-7

⁵And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. (Slide 4A) ⁶These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

Notes:

There were seven men who were chosen to handle the responsibility of dispensing funds to those in need within the church. Six of these men had distinctly Greek names. They were Jews who had been raised in a foreign country. The seventh was not a Jew by birth. He is said to have been a proselyte of Antioch. A proselyte is someone who was converted to Judaism from another religion. None of these men were Hebrew Jews. (Slide 4B) Why is it significant that these men were all Greeks? Remember, that the division within the church occurred when the Hellenists (Greek speaking Jews) complained that their widows were being neglected? This group of distinctly Hellenistic men selected by the apostles would certainly make sure that the funds were distributed equitably.

The men chosen were recommended by the church body as a whole. The primary criteria for selecting them were that they were to be: men of good repute, men full of the Spirit, and men full of wisdom. It was important that these men each had a good reputation, because there is always the possibility of someone misunderstanding the intent of people making financial decisions on behalf of others. These misunderstandings would be minimized if the men making the decisions were known for being fair and equitable. The reason for needing men full of the Spirit is obvious. When it comes to spiritual matters, we want people who are filled with the Spirit to make the decisions. Likewise, decision makers need to be wise.

With regard to these seven men, nothing more is known about Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, or Nicolaus. We will become familiar with Stephen later in this chapter and in the following chapter of Acts. Then later, in chapter 8 of the book of Acts, we will see that Philip was instrumental in spreading the Gospel message to the Samaritans. Clearly, Stephen and Philip were strong men of faith and wisdom. We have to assume that the other five were just as eminently qualified.

In verse seven, we see Dr. Luke make a summary statement regarding the growth of the church. He makes these statements frequently in his writing ([Acts 2:41, 47](#); [Acts 4:4](#); [Acts 5:14](#); [Acts 9:31](#); [Acts 12:24](#); [Acts 13:49](#); [Acts 16:5](#); and [Acts 19:20](#)) The most interesting part of this current summary is the fact that a great many Jewish priests believed the Gospel and joined the church. On the surface, that may not seem significant. However, the priests all received their income from being priests in the Temple. Once converted to Christianity, they would have to renounce their position in the temple because there was no more need for sacrifices. (Christ died once for all – [Hebrews 7:27](#)) When priests became Christians, they lost their job! ([Slide 5](#)) Talk about stepping out in faith!

Let's talk about Stephen for a minute. There are two words for "crown" in the New Testament: *diadema*, which means "a royal crown" from which we get our English word "diadem"; and *stephanos*, the "victor's crown," which gives us the popular name Stephen. The *diadema* cannot be earned, it can only be inherited, but the *stephanos* crown must be earned. In the book of Revelation, we are told about the Crown of Life:

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. ([Revelation 2:10](#))

Obviously, Stephen earned this sacred crown. So – let's look at some of the personal character qualities of this man of God. First of all, *Stephen was a servant*. ([Slide 6A](#)) We commonly refer to these seven men as Deacons because the word in verse one that is translated "distribution" is the Greek word *diakonia* and the verb translated "wait" at the end of verse 2 is *diakoneō*. However, nowhere else in the book of Acts are these men referred to as "Deacons." These seven men were specifically chosen to be servants.

Stephen was also a witness. ([Slide 6B](#)) He did not limit his ministry to the serving of tables; he also won the lost and even did miracles. Up to this point, it was only the apostles who performed the miracles, but now God gave this power to Stephen also. This was part of God's plan to use Stephen to bear witness to the leaders of Israel. Stephen's powerful testimony was the climax of the church's witness to the Jews. After the Jews finally rejected the message, it would go out to the Samaritans and, after that, to the Gentiles.

Above all, *Stephen was a messenger.* (Slide 6C) We're even told at the end of this chapter that Stephen had the face of an angel. This is from the Greek word, *angelos*, meaning "a messenger." In the next chapter we will learn about Stephen's powerful message to the Sanhedrin. In that message he boldly pronounced judgment on the religious leaders and ended up paying the ultimate price for his faithfulness in delivering that message.

Stephen is Arrested

Acts 6:8-15

⁸And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹²And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." ¹⁵And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Notes:

Jews from many nations resided in Jerusalem in their own areas of the city, commonly referred to as "quarters," and some of these ethnic groups had their own synagogues. The freedmen, or "libertines," were the descendants of Jews who had previously been in bondage but had won their freedom from Rome. This group of rebels also included men from Cilicia. Since Paul came from Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 21:39), it is possible that he was part of this group of rebels (Slide 7A) and may have even debated with Stephen. However, nobody could match or resist Stephen's wisdom and power (see Luke 21:15). Their only alternative was to destroy him.

Notice the similarity between the way that Jesus was treated and the way that Stephen was treated. First, they hired false witnesses to testify against him. Then, they stirred up the people who accused him of attacking the Law of Moses and the temple. Finally, after listening to his witness, they executed him.

So What?

For several weeks now we have been looking at the early church. In fact, it was the beginning of the church universal and it was the first local assembly. They boldly witnessed to those around them about the resurrection of Jesus and about the salvation that only comes from him. And – when they encountered opposition from outside, they faced it head-on. However, when our adversary can't defeat the church from the outside, he often arranges attacks from within.

When this first dissention came from within the church, what did the apostles do about it? First of all, they didn't deny that there was a problem. In fact, they owned the problem. The apostles recognized that the source of the problem landed squarely on their own backs. They didn't try to blame others for not helping them. They saw the problem and the problem was that they were

trying to do too much themselves. Obviously, they were not on a “power trip.” Quite the opposite. They wanted others to get involved and they wanted others to share the load.

In the first church, however, it appears as though most of the people came to listen and to see. They basically saw themselves as Christian spectators. Yes, they had a saving faith, but it was a passive faith, not an active faith. Stephen and the others who were called upon to serve, developed an active faith. They didn’t stop witnessing just because they already had a “job” within the church. In fact, they took it upon themselves to increase their witness.

Notice that we’re not told anything about those who were “spectator” Christians. Notice that there is no mention in the New Testament of those who were faithful in their attendance, never missing a Sunday. On the other hand, there is much written about those members of the church who gave of their time and talents. In fact, the entire New Testament beyond the book of Acts is about, and was created by, people who were busy for the Lord.

Now What?

Don’t get me wrong. I greatly appreciate those of you who are here nearly every Sunday. You are an encouragement to Conie and me. However, in churches throughout this city and all across this country there are a lot of spectator Christians. They go to church every week to be entertained and pampered. If they don’t like the style of music or the subject matter of the preaching, they simply change the channel. They go to another church where the entertainment is more to their liking. They go somewhere else where the message has been watered down to make the church appear more “seeker friendly.” Why? I’ll tell you why. Because the Gospel message is offensive to those who reject it. Jesus didn’t water down His message to make it more seeker friendly and neither did Stephen.

I wonder how God sees us here in this church. Does He see us as spectators at his weekly “event?” Or, does He see us as subjects in His kingdom who gather together to focus on Him, to give Him the glory and praise; who gather together to learn more about Him so that we can fulfill our commission by serving. God doesn’t need, or even want, more spectators. He wants servants who are willing to take a chance and reach out to the lost. He wants servants who are more interested in pleasing Him by loving others more than we love ourselves. That’s the kind of church I want for us here.

So – here’s the question I have for each one of us. Do we come here every week to be spectators and to get our spiritual batteries recharged? Or do we come here every week to praise God, to give Him the glory, to learn how to be better servants of His? The bottom line is this. Who are we trying to please by coming here to church? Are we trying to please ourselves, are we here to make ourselves feel better, or are we trying to please God?

Let’s pray.

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