



The Book of Acts - Chapter Six

Summary of Chapter Six

As opposition to the church increased, so God grew the church even more: <<You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder>> (Isaiah 9:3).

We see here an example that could have brought disharmony to the church, but what we see and can learn from it, is not the problem that had arisen, but how the apostles and church leaders found and implemented an appropriate solution.

The chapter starts on a note of potential conflict between the native Jews and those who had come to Jerusalem from various Greek-speaking countries. The problem was that, probably due to language difficulties, the poor among the Greek-speaking Jews were overlooked in the daily distribution of food and other basic necessities.

The apostles did not feel they were best equipped to deal with the issue, as their calling was to continue teaching the Word of God and to spending time in intercessory prayer for the growing church. Therefore, they had the church appoint seven God-gifted and Spirit-filled men, from among the Greek-speaking Jews, to deal with these issues.

One of the seven, Stephen, was also gifted in teaching and the Holy Spirit produced many miracles through him. He came into conflict with some of the Greek-speaking Jews, who opposed the faith and they made false accusations of blasphemy against Stephen, who was then arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin to face trial.

III. Acts 6:1-11:30 - The Witness beyond Jerusalem

Although it may seem strange for the next two chapters to appear in the section beyond Jerusalem, when all the events described occur within the city, it is organised this way as many of those affected were Grecian Jews, who had come to the city due to their poor financial state but then returned home once they had received their needs from the church, taking with them accounts of the faith and the way the church was operating so successfully, truly meeting the needs of people like them. Thus the Gospel was being proclaimed beyond the city gates.

Beginning with Greek-speaking, Jewish believers in Jerusalem (vv.1-7), the Gospel was proclaimed to an ever-widening circle – to Samaria (Acts 8:4-25), to an Ethiopian (Acts 8:26-40), to a Gentile God-fearer (Acts 10:1-48), and to the Gentiles of Antioch (Acts 11:19-30). Key figures in the outreach were the Hellenists Stephen and Philip, the apostle Peter, and eventually Paul and Barnabas. The stage was then set for Paul's ministry that would go: <<to the ends of the earth>> (Acts 1:8b).

II.a. Acts 6:1-7 - The choosing of the seven

The growth of the church created problems when a number of Hellenistic, i.e. Greek-speaking Jews responded to the Gospel. The resulting language barrier led to the neglect of some needy widows, and the apostles called upon the Greek-speaking community to choose leaders to meet their needs.

¹ In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Acts 6:1

In those days is often used by Luke, either as a generality for a period of time, or when the precise year is unknown, e.g. when writing of the time of Jesus' birth, the year of which is not recorded for us: <<In those days Cæsar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world>> (Luke 2:1), and between the ascension and Pentecost, which was known to him: <<In those days Peter stood up among the believers>> (Acts 1:15).

The Grecian Jews were from the Diaspora, i.e. Jews living outside of Palestine, mainly because of the historic exiles. Their primary language was Greek. The Hebrews were native Palestinian Jews, who spoke Aramaic as their primary language, and had attended the Hebrew-speaking synagogues. Not as fluent in Greek, they seemed to have overlooked the Hellenist widows unintentionally. Some scholars claim this verse is just the 'tip of the iceberg', indicating serious theological frictions between these two groups in the Jerusalem church, and that they had major differences over observance of the OT law and the proper role of the Jerusalem temple. But the text itself indicates just the opposite, for several places show essential unity in doctrinal understanding among the apostles and those who followed them, see Acts 15:1-35, Galatians 1:18-19, and Galatians 2:1-10. Any differences in emphasis were not major, but it does appear the Hellenists were less drawn to the temple, as Stephen's speech in Acts Chapter 7 suggests.

After the Bible's translation into Greek, the word Diaspora then was used to refer to the population of Jews exiled from Israel starting in 740BC by the Assyrians; from Judæa in 587BC by the Babylonians, with a remnant returning in 538BC; and again in AD70 by the Roman Empire.

The daily distribution. That is, of provisions for the poor and needy. One might expect that their spiritual needs were also being met: <<Give us each day our daily bread>> (Luke 11:3).

The church needs to ensure that it is not being put upon in cases like these, as families must not neglect their responsibilities: <<But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God>> (1 Timothy 5:4), **leaving the church to:** <<Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need>> (1 Timothy 5:3). **For we should:** <<learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow>> (Isaiah 1:17).

All churches, as they grow, go through organisational and administrative difficulties. This in itself is not a weakness; it is how the church identifies and implements solutions to these problems that is of real importance, and they should be judged on this, rather than the issues that do arise.

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.”

Acts 6:2-4

Full of the Spirit and wisdom. As always, it is important to identify people that God has raised up to oversee key ministries, rather than leave it to people who simply want to do it. This still leaves plenty of opportunities for others to serve in different capacities.

The church needs good administrators and people to undertake important tasks: <<Since Judas had charge of the money, some thought Jesus was telling him to buy what was needed for the Feast, or to give something to the poor>> (**John 13:29**), **but Judas was not a good one, for:** <<He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it>> (**John 12:6**). **Again, this shows the importance to selecting the right people:** <<But select capable men from all the people – men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain – and appoint them as officials>> (**Exodus 18:21a**).

Choose seven men. The number seven has special connotation for Jews as it represents perfection or completion. However, there is no need to read anything special into its use here.

Essential to the work of the apostles was their devotion to prayer and to the ministry of the word. The burgeoning ministry of charity was distracting them from this calling. The Greek-speaking Hellenists, from whom the seven were selected, were better equipped to serve and communicate with the widows.

It is important that our senior leaders are not distracted and do not take up valuable time serving in areas they are not called to. They should focus on what they are raised up for.

Some commentators believe the seven were from the 72, see Luke 10:1-17, but Jesus had trained them to teach the word and to proclaim the Gospel, so it would make no sense for them to subsequently serve on table, although we will see that Stephen had the gift to do both. By their names, they all appeared to be Jews from the Diaspora except for the one specifically mentioned as a proselyte. This too would have made it unlikely for Jesus to send them to native Jews in Palestine.

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.

Acts 6:5

Stephen and Philip will become prominent in the Acts narrative; the NT makes no further mention of the other five.

Nicholas has been unfairly charged as forming the Nicolaitans, referred to in Revelation 2:6 and 2:15, and whose practises were hated by Jesus. Not much is known of the Nicolaitans but tradition has it they took the words ‘had everything in common’ to include sharing wives! Early church fathers cleared Nicholas of being involved in any way with the forming of this group, although they may have taken his name in vain.

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

Acts 6:6

They presented shows that the Hellenists selected their own then brought them to the apostles for final approval.

The apostles confirmed the congregational election when they **prayed and laid their hands on them**. The laying on of hands is done in connection with several things in Acts: healing (Acts 9:17), the gift of the Spirit (Acts 8:18, 9:17 and 19:6), and commissioning to a ministry, both here and in Acts 13:3. We see this too when Jacob blessed Joseph's sons Manasseh and Ephraim by laying on hands (Genesis 48:14-20), so the apostles did to the seven: <<And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater>> (Hebrews 7:7).

Interpreters differ over whether these seven men should be considered the first deacons in the church. On the one hand, the noun deacon, Greek diakonos, does not occur here. On the other hand, the corresponding verb, Greek diakoneō, which means to serve, help, or render assistance, is used in v.2, and this same verb is used of those who serve as deacons in 1 Timothy 3:10 and 3:13. However, this is a common verb for service. It could well be, these men were called to deal with this issue and any like it. For ease of reference, the term deacon is used in the rest of this narrative.

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.

Acts 6:7

The number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. In spite of suffering and persecution (Acts 5:41), in spite of hypocrisy entering into the church (Acts 5:1-11), and in spite of potential conflict (v.1), the church continued to grow. It grew in the context of remarkable love among the believers in Jerusalem (Acts 4:32 and 4:35), frequent miracles (Acts 5:12), and the courageous proclamation of the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:29-32). Knowledge of the word of God continued to increase in spite of widespread opposition.

A large number of priests became obedient to the faith, i.e. followers of Jesus. While some were clearly drawn by the truth of the Gospel and made the links to the OT prophecies, the lower ranks of the priesthood numbered in the thousands, of whom many were poor and may have first been attracted to the disciples by their charity, under the guidance of the newly appointed deacons (vv.1-6).

Many priests overcame the pressures of tradition at the message: <<but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him>> (**Romans 16:26**). **Faith is an act of obedience:** <<And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us>> (**1 John 3:23**). **The design of the Gospel is to refine and reform our hearts and lives; faith gives law to us and we must be obedient to it.**

II.b. Acts 6:8-8:1a - Stephen bears the ultimate witness

The Greek word for witness is martyrs, which came to be associated with witnessing to the point of death, from which the word martyr derives. Stephen became the first such ultimate witness in the early church, circa AD34.

II.b.i. Acts 6:8-15 - Stephen seized

Stephen was the first listed of the seven Hellenists selected to minister to the widows (v.5). Like the apostles, he not only ministered to the needy but was primarily concerned with the ministry of the word. He preached the Gospel in the Greek-speaking synagogues of Jerusalem, where he was seized and dragged before the Sanhedrin.

⁸ Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.

Acts 6:8

Stephen is described as being filled with faith and the Holy Spirit in v.5, with God's grace and power here in v.8, and with wisdom in v.10. He is the first person after the apostles said to have performed wonders and signs. His power was not physical strength or worldly knowledge or influence but the power of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus had promised them: <<But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you>> (Acts 1:8a). Stephen not only discharges his duty as a deacon but also healed in Christ's name: <<Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much>> (Luke 16:10a); he was full of the power of the Lord: <<But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord>> (Micah 3:8).

⁹ Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) – Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, ¹⁰ but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.

Acts 6:9-10

Those to whom Stephen preached were Diaspora Jews and Greek-speakers like himself. There may have been only the one Synagogue of the Freedmen, with the various names designating its constituency, or those names may represent individual synagogues. Freedmen would refer to Jews who had been enslaved and then granted or purchased their freedom. The place names all point to the Diaspora: Cyrene and Alexandria represent North Africa, while those in Cilicia and Asia represent the area covered by modern-day Turkey, also a part of the Diaspora.



The map shows the main areas of the Diaspora that were also part of the Roman Empire. Other Jews were scattered further east and north by the Assyrians.

Freedmen or Roman Liberti and Libertini are foreigners who have been given their liberty by their owners, or slaves that have bought their freedom, like the Roman commander in Acts 22:28, or those that were not Romans but were born citizens by right, e.g. Paul, see Acts 22:27.

Some commentators say the Paul would have been a member of this synagogue and may even have led the group in disputing against Stephen, and we will see him again in Chapter 7 at the stoning of Stephen. It would make sense that they may have turned on Stephen if, as some say, he'd had the privilege of being taught 'at the feet of' Gamaliel and in their

eyes he would have been a traitor. Paul in particular may have been incensed by this, as he too was a student of Gamaliel, and a devout and dedicated Pharisee, for he has stated: <<They have known me for a long time and can testify, if they are willing, that according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee>> (Acts 26:5), and: <<circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee>> (Philippians 3:5). All this makes a good story but is only speculation.

Paul would not have been a member of this synagogue as he was a citizen by birth-right and chose to worship at the temple anyway. If Paul had played any role in the persecution of Stephen, beyond that written by Luke, then it is likely that too would have been recorded for us, for it is quite clear that Paul wanted the errors he made, at this time in his life, to be published for the benefit of others.

It is clear that Stephen spoke with wisdom and proclaimed a message that they could not dispute but would be confounded by. Stephen would be one of whom Jesus spoke of in Luke 21:15 <<For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict>>. They may have thought they would be a match for him in their debating and disputing. However, in reality it was not Stephen but the Holy Spirit they were disputing with, for which there is no match.

¹¹ Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.”

Acts 6:11

Secretly persuaded or instigated, the Greek word hypoballō, implies putting words into someone’s mouth or making false suggestions. The basic charge was blasphemy, speaking against Moses, i.e. the Law, and against God, that is, against the temple, God’s acknowledged dwelling place; as confirmed in vv.13-14. Jesus was accused of the same thing: <<The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked. “You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” >> (Mark 14:63-64).

Just as Jesus was falsely accused of blasphemy, e.g. John 10:33, so Stephen was wrongly accused here. He would never have said anything directly against God, and all followers of Jesus would quote Moses and the Law accurately and with respect, for he wrote under divine inspiration, but the hearers would misinterpret what was said, perhaps deliberately.

¹² So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin.

¹³ They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.

Acts 6:12-13

Stirred up the people. This is a typical tactic that is often used to incite a crowd, which then turns on someone that they probably know nothing about but are aroused and disturbed by what they have been told: <<But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead>> (Mark 15:11), and: <<When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, they went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up>> (Acts 17:13). Jesus too was accused of acting in this way: <<But they insisted, “He stirs up the people all over Judea by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here” >> (Luke 23:5); but of course, Jesus was speaking the truth. Powerful leaders also use this tactic: <<When he has gained power by his wealth, he will stir up everyone against the kingdom of Greece>> (Daniel 11:2).

The use of false witnesses is reminiscent of what happened at Jesus' trial: <<The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward>> (Matthew 26:59-60), and confirms Jesus' prediction that his followers would be persecuted as he was: <<If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me>> (John 15:18-21).

We should also ask the question of them, as Paul later did: <<You who brag about the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law?>> (Romans 2:23).

¹⁴ For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

Acts 6:14

Stephen must have referred to what Jesus said about destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days, see Mark 14:58, which John clarified as referring to the temple of Jesus' body: <<Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days." The Jews replied, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?" But the temple he had spoken of was his body>> (John 2:19-21).

The priests had long ago brought the temple into disrepute by turning it into a market place: <<To those who sold doves he said, "Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!" >> (John 2:16).

Solomon's temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians some 600 years previously under the direction of God and it was long prophesied before that God would do so if the Jews did not repent and turn back to him: <<and though this temple is now so imposing, all who pass by will be appalled and say, 'Why has the Lord done such a thing to this land and to this temple?'>> (2 Chronicles 7:21).

Stephen's words about Jesus may have been in the same vein as Isaiah's and Jeremiah's against those who refused to turn to God in their day and the time had come again.

¹⁵ All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

Acts 6:15

Stephen's face is described as being like the face of an angel. There was apparently a visible manifestation of the brightness of the glory of God in his face, as there had been with Moses (Exodus 34:29-30 and 34:35) and, to an even greater extent, with Jesus at his transfiguration (Matthew 17:2), which says: <<There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light>>. Or it could simply have been the serenity he felt by being at peace with God through his Lord and Saviour.

Judges would often study the countenance of a prisoner to see if they could detect innocence or guilt in them. Here, they notice that Stephen had 'the face of an angel'.