

INTRODUCTION

Today in our study, we come to Acts, chapter 6. The church has been born. The church has grown dramatically and supernaturally. The church has been led by but apostles, divinely gifted by God to both teach and heal. Yet the church is still confined to the area of Jerusalem, and is primarily composed of Jewish followers of Christ.

Now it is time to move outside the boundaries of one city and the confines of one people group., with new Spirit-filled leaders. The gospel and the church is meant by God for all the world and for all nations. Enter Stephen.

Your knowledge of Stephen might be quite limited. After all, his story is only told in two chapters of the Bible: Acts 6 and 7, with only passing mentions in Acts after that. Your understanding might be limited in knowing that he was one of the appointed seven men to help in the distribution of food to widows, and that he was stoned in martyrdom. But there is so much more to know. In word and in deed he paved the way for the next wave of Christianity to grow. Today let's learn the legacy of a martyr, and in doing so, learn how God might want our Christian perspective to grow and expand.

6:1 THE PROBLEM

The church was growing fast. Growth and complaints seem to go hand in hand. So we read:

"while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose"

Hellenistic Jews were complaining that their widows were being neglected – perhaps and probably deliberately – in the distribution of food. But clearly, better administration was needed. God has long before promised in the Old Testament to defend the cause of the widow who could not work and provide for herself (Ex. 16:7, Num. 14:27, 1 Cor. 10:10). The Hellenistic Jews were Jews by faith who geographically has grown up outside the Jerusalem culture and spoke Greek, rather than Aramaic, and practiced Greek ways more than Hebrew ways. They had heard of the Messiah, Jesus, and had put their faith in Him as their Lord. They were a part of the growing church. But there was a class distinction, between them and the native Hebrews, which bred prejudice. Here was the first hurdle to overcome in the spread of the gospel "to all peoples."

6:2-6 THE SOLUTION

Note that the 12 did not impose a solution on the church, but rather pointed out the problem to them that they might help find a solution. This is good "family" leadership. It was agreed that the 12 should devote themselves to the spiritual ministry ("diakonia") of prayer and teaching, while the newly appointed seven would devote themselves to the practical ministry ("diakonia" – same word) of administering the distribution of food to widows. Of the seven that were then chosen, little is known, except of the first two mentioned: Stephen and Phillip, whose stories we read about in the next number of chapters of Acts. These two were the pioneers that moved the church outside the boundaries of Jerusalem and Hebrew upbringing.

It is interesting to note two things about this list of 7 men. One: all of the names are Greek names, not Hebrew. This was possibly because they were chosen to better represent the Hellenistic Jews. Or it may just be Luke's way of explaining the story of the spread of the gospel outside the limits of traditional Judaism. Two: The last name mentioned of Nicolas is said to have been a "proselyte from Antioch." This tells us that he was a Gentile converted to the Jewish faith, who then became a follower of Christ. This is a sign of what is to come. That he was from Antioch is also of interest, since we later learn that followers of Christ were first called "Christians" at Antioch (11:26). The story is unfolding. It is often said that these 7 were the "first deacons." "Diakonia," as we have seen, means literally "service" or "ministry" and can be applies to either teaching "ministry" of helping "ministry."

Yet this does show that the church leadership expanded beyond the 12. And the “deacons” are a church office later mentioned in the pastoral books of Timothy and Titus, as those who focused on the church’s practical needs. So though it doesn’t specifically specify in Acts 6 that these seven men were “deacons.” It is reasonable to assume that they were first in the line of what became “deacons” in the church – those who helped the spiritual leaders in practical ministry.

By the way – it should be noted here that our Oaks Bible Church presently has 7 deacons – those who have shown themselves to be particularly strong in the practical ministries of the church. Our group has 4 men and 3 women. *(here introduce them to the church)*

6:7 CHURCH PROGRESS REPORT #1

So the problem is solved by better church administration, and thus ends Luke’s account of the first phase of the growth of the Christian church. We know this, because here he gives his first of six progress reports on the church given throughout Acts.

Acts 6:7 The word of God kept on spreading and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

So Phase One ends with these three significant markers:

1. SPREADING – the church was rapidly growing in number and strength of the Word
2. JERUSALEM – to this point, the church was basically confined to the Jerusalem area
3. PRIESTS – Jewish spiritual leaders of the line of Levi were coming to faith in Jesus

6:8-15 STEPHEN

Stephen is described in a few wonderful words – each giving a picture of his godly character.

In 6:8 - “full of grace and power” and “performing wonders and signs”

In 6:10 – “wisdom and the Spirit”

In 6:15 – “his face like the face of an angel” (before the Sanhedrin)

Though he had been chosen to administer the physical needs of the growing church, he was clearly a teacher and evangelist as well, who had a special message of God to bring to the people.

We see the gist of his message in 6:11 and 6:13-14, which caused such controversy and caused him to be brought before the Sanhedrin Council. (Here we go again – first Jesus, then Peter and Paul, then the 12 apostles, now Stephen)

1. He spoke “against” Moses and God
2. He spoke “against” the holy place – i.e. the temple
3. He spoke “against” the Law
4. He spoke “against” the Jewish customs

From these brief comments coupled with his comments before the Sanhedrin in chapter 7, we can deduce that he had been teaching the people along the lines of the following:

1. Moses was not the “end game” of faith – Jesus is!
2. God cannot be bound by a “house” – the temple will be destroyed (as Jesus predicted) and God’s “house” will extend far beyond Jerusalem
3. The Law is not the “end game” of faith – is it fulfilled in Jesus and His kingdom laws
4. Jewish customs are only that – God wants to move beyond the confines of Judaism

No wonder Stephen was “making waves!” But he was speaking the truth that needed to be told. He truly was the pioneer of Christian evangelism. He may have never set foot outside of Jerusalem, yet his message paved the way for Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, Luke and many others to follow to take the gospel message to the “ends of the earth.”

7:1-50 STEPHEN'S HISTORY LESSON

The Sanhedrin high priest (Caiaphas) simply asks Stephen, "Are these things so?" (7:1)

If they were so, he was a dead man. These things, in essence, were so. Of course, he had not been speaking "against" any of these things of which he had been accused. But he had been teaching that the Jewish way of looking at Moses, the temple, the Law and Jewish customs had to change. Jesus was the fulfillment of all things Jewish. He was the Messiah.

Stephen undoubtedly knew that apart from God's intention to save him, these would be his last words. So, led by the power of the Holy Spirit, he gave the Sanhedrin a Jewish "history lesson."

Now, many commentators find this 50 verse "defense" of Stephen, a rambling, unorganized history dissertation of what the Sanhedrin would already know anyway. They see it as little other than what surely resulted in getting Stephen stoned to death.

But I am convinced that there is order and purpose to what Luke records Stephen as saying. It served a specific purpose for the Sanhedrin, and it serves a specific purpose for us as the listener 2000 years later. I believe this because (1) I believe that God doesn't waste the words of Scripture – all are given for our benefit, and (2) there are distinct similarities between Stephen's message that got him arrested (chapter 6) and what he speaks regarding Abraham, Joseph and Moses that paves the way to the future spread of the gospel. So let's investigate and learn.

The history lesson outline:

1. Abraham (v. 2-8)
2. Joseph (v. 9-16)
3. Moses (v. 17-43)
4. Postlude: Joshua, David, Solomon (v. 44-50)

And what are the key similarities and themes of these 3 primary accounts?

1. Each "went out" to be used by God in a special way
2. Each was stretched out of his "comfort zone" in order to be grown into an effective tool of the Lord
3. Each went to an unknown land beyond his cultural norm
4. Each found meaningful worship of God outside the confines of a "temple"

Abraham, by faith, left Mesopotamia to go to an unknown land that God would reveal. As such, he became the pioneer and father of the Jewish people – "Father Abraham." He was called to be an "alien in a foreign land" – just like God wanted the new Christian church to launch out to be "aliens in a foreign land" for the sake of the spread of the gospel. Abraham had no temple, or even a tabernacle, but God met him and provided for him constantly.

Joseph was sold into slavery to Egypt by his own brothers. He went out that God might use Joseph to ultimately save his people, Israel, from a great famine. He was persecuted, yet became the second in command in Egypt, greatly used by God. Joseph had no temple in which to worship, but worship and follow God he did – with no mention in the Scripture of any sin committed. He was a "type" of the perfect, sinless One to follow – Jesus.

Moses was raised in an Egyptian home. When he realized his heritage as a young man of about 40, he defended one of his own from an Egyptian protagonist, killing him. In a real sense, like Jesus, "he came unto his own, but his own did not receive him" and Moses "went out" to the plains of Midian for the next 40 years of his life, where God prepared him for greatness. At age 80, Moses worshipped God, not at a temple, but at a burning bush. And he was again "sent out" to minister for God in Egypt. Ultimately, he became the "savior" of his people as he led them "out" of Egypt into the wilderness, bound for the promised land.

The “postlude” of the history lesson speaks of the tabernacle (ark) in the wilderness that Moses was directed to build, and Joshua took into the promised land – a place to encounter God without a “temple.” David conceived of a permanent “home” for God, and Solomon built it – the temple which the Sanhedrin were enjoying and clinging to. But Stephen’s final words are a quote from the prophet Isaiah who quotes God as saying:

Acts 7:49-50 *“Heaven is My throne, and earth is the footstool of My feet. What kind of house will you build for Me?” says the Lord, “Or what place is there for My repose? Was it not My hand which made all these things?”*

In other words, God is saying: “I don’t need a house built with hands.” “The earth is my home.” And now He resides in the home of the hearts of men and women that receive Him as their Lord, through His Son Jesus.

And in Stephen’s message God is saying: “Don’t be so concerned with your comfort and your culture. I want you to go outside of your comfort and culture and share my message of reconciliation for all. It is when you are stretched that you will grow more into my likeness.”

The Sanhedrin, like so many of us, were caught up in wanting to preserve their comfortable way of life revolving around the temple, their customs and their following of rules laid down by Moses. They could not imagine that God wanted them to “get out” like Abraham, Joseph or Moses, even though they were heroes of their faith.

So we see that Stephen’s words are very orderly and purposeful. And having given this very specific message through history, he now rebukes them – surely knowing that this will seal his fate, but be exactly what God asks of him.

7:51-60 THE REBUKE AND MARTYRDOM

He calls them “stiff-necked” – unyielding in their opinions and willingness to change

He calls them “uncircumcised in heart and ears” – not allowing God to be Lord of their heart or mind

He calls them “just as your fathers” – disobedient and incurring the wrath of God

He calls them “persecutors” – like their fathers, now of Jesus, the apostles and soon to be Stephen

He calls them “not keepers of the law” – the law of love, justice and mercy

We see Stephen described as:

1. Full of the Holy Spirit (v.55)
2. Seeing the glory of God, with Jesus standing (to receive him?) (v.56)
3. Calling of Jesus to receive his spirit - as did Jesus (v. 59)
4. Asking for God not to hold this sin against them – as did Jesus (v. 60)

The first Christian martyr was Stephen. He taught us much, and is a hero of our faith.

May we emulate his pioneer spirit and reaching outside of our comfort zone for the sake of Jesus!

He was humble enough to serve Greek, Jewish widows. Yet he was bold enough to stand before the Supreme Court of spirituality and call them to repentance.

He paved the way for Philip to reach into Africa, Peter to reach into Samaria, Paul to reach in to Asia and Europe, and for missionaries through history to reach to every corner of the world.

What a legacy! And what will be our legacy?