

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Part Six in a Series of Ten



6. The Spirit & Power Of Stephen

THE CURE FOR DIVISION

'caring for **PEOPLE** for **PEOPLE** matter to God' Romans 5:8

TENSION BETWEEN HEBREW AND GREEK-SPEAKING JEWS WAS OLD

THE CENTRAL STORY OF ACTS

1. The central story may usefully be summarised this way: God is at work in the person of Jesus Christ – and especially in his death, burial and resurrection – to bring life and salvation to all mankind through the People of God the Church.

DIVISION: NEGLECTING THE 'OTHER SIDE'

2. In **Acts 2** we read of a multitude of people of many different languages. They heard the gospel and about 3,000 of them said yes to Jesus as Lord (**2:41**). Then we were told they had all things common (**2:44-46**). Not long after this, Satan took a hand and trouble brewed between two groups in the Church at Jerusalem. The trouble was between the 'Hebrews' and the 'Grecian Jews' (**6:1**). It was over the distribution of necessities to the poor. The 'Grecian Jews' felt their widows were being neglected.

3. 'Grecian Jews' were Jews whose first language was Greek and who had been moulded by life outside Palestine. The 'Hebrews' were those Jews whose language was Hebrew or Aramaic. These were probably descendants of those who came back to Palestine under Ezra and others. Tension between Hebrews and Greek-speaking Jews was old. Hebrew suspicion about the orthodoxy of the other group was met with resentment that the Hebrews should think they had a monopoly on insight, truth and integrity.

WAS THIS THE UNITY THEIR MESSIAH BROUGHT?

THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE PROBLEM

4. This was a serious problem. The new Community had barely begun. They were proclaiming peace through Jesus Christ. He was the Messiah – the disciples claimed – the Messiah who would fulfil the prophets and bring the Jews back into unity under God (see **Ezekiel 37:1-22** as an illustration of this truth). Was this the unity their Messiah brought? Is this the nature of the Congregation the Messiah said he would build (**Matthew 16:18**)? It wasn't simply a matter of some widows who weren't being cared for. **The underlying problem was the tension between the two groups.**

THE CURE: SEVEN MEN WITH THE SPIRIT

5. The apostles wanted to kill the problem immediately and urged the choosing of seven men who would see that fairness prevailed in this matter (**6:3**). It wouldn't have been helpful for the apostles to neglect their ministry (**6:2**). This didn't mean the task given over to these seven was of little importance! The reverse is true! And that's why they chose seven men who were wise, who had a good reputation and were characteristically in step with the Spirit (**6:3**). Such a work couldn't be left to rash men about whom many people had doubts and whose spirituality was in serious question.

A CRISIS WELL HANDLED BECOMES A POSITIVE TESTIMONY FOR THE LORD

6. The choice was not made by the apostles (**6:3, 5**). The apostles prayed and approved the choice of the multitude. They laid their hands on them, appointing them to the task and commending them to the grace of God for the work they were undertaking (**6:6**).

The laying on of hands is often connected with conferring a blessing from God and appointment to a particular function (see, for example, Acts 13:1 and 14:26 which illustrate this point).

7. The whole situation must have been handled well for we read in connection with all this that the word of God increased – that is, its effects increased, more people including a great multitude of the priests turned to Jesus Christ (6:7). It is one thing to talk unity and it's another to work in unity and work to produce unity. In the situation reflected here, Luke is showing us what can be accomplished by people of wisdom, faith and the Spirit of God. If division is to be cured, we must have people who are willing to keep in step with the Spirit of Christ Jesus. The whole mission of God to the world (through the Church) could have ground to a halt or been slowed considerably if this disease had not been dealt with promptly. But it was handled! And a crisis well-handled becomes a positive testimony of the power of the risen Lord to unite people!

THE INFLUENCE & CHARACTER OF STEPHEN

8. It's easy to underestimate the influence of Stephen on the development of the Christian faith. He wasn't Peter or Paul, he wrote no books and his story takes up only two chapters in the entire New Testament. But so powerful was his influence at a critical period that a whole persecution took its rise in connection with his place in New Testament history (see 11:19). It was Stephen, not Peter or Paul, who first boldly put the temple and Judaism in the proper perspective. It was from his lips that people heard the message of a universal mission which made less of the temple and Judaism than the orthodox Jews would allow.

IT WAS FROM HIS LIPS THAT PEOPLE HEARD OF A UNIVERSAL MISSION

9. He was the right man for the right time and the right place. A dangerous place and a dangerous time. He was a 'Grecian Jew' in a 'Hebrew' city. The 'Hebrew' city! We're told he was full of faith and the Holy Spirit (6:5), he was filled with wisdom (6:3) and he was full of grace and power (6:8). The phrase 'full of' means he was characterised by these things. We speak of people being 'filled with hate' or anger or compassion. We mean they are dominated by one or more of these emotions. The same is true of being filled with the Spirit or faith or grace. (See 2:4; 4:8 and 13:9 as illustrations of men saying or doing something while under the Spirit's strong influence.)

This was a gracious, wise, powerful and spiritual man who had been raised up by God for an especially critical time. It does happen that richly gifted men sometimes use their gifts to feather their own nests. It also happens that people in places of influence sell themselves for ease. Stephen was everything that we all in our better moments long to be. And he's the assurance that by God's grace we can be gallant, gracious and bold.

IN THEIR BIGOTRY AND BITTERNESS THEY BRIBED MEN TO LIE ABOUT HIM

STEPHEN ARRESTED AND ACCUSED

10. As he taught, he was opposed by other synagogue members. The synagogue of the Freedmen (see 22:25-28). Some of them were from Cilicia which was Paul's home-place. (Was he a member of that synagogue?) His opponents had no answers and in their bigotry and bitterness they bribed men to lie about him (6:10-14). They had him arrested on a blasphemy charge, cunningly twisting his teaching to suit their purposes. (His experience is so like that of his Master – see Matthew 26:59-65.) He was accused of speaking evil against the temple and the law (see Matthew 5:17-18).

STEPHEN'S DEFENCE AND DEATH

11. The people are accusing him of undermining their place as the People of God since he is speaking (they say) against the temple and the Law (of Moses). They profess to be followers of Moses and people who give the temple its rightful place.

The substance of what Stephen says is this:

1) God had his People even before the promised land was given – 7:17.

2) God had his People before circumcision was introduced – 7:8.

3) God had his People before Moses or the Law came along – 7:20-43.

4) God had his People before the Tabernacle or Temple came along – 7:44-50.

All this being true, Stephen is saying, salvation can be independent of Judaism!

THEY WERE SHRINKING GOD BY TRYING TO CONFINE HIM

12. He also reminds them that their fathers were jealous of Joseph, hateful to Moses, worshippers of idols, rejecters of the Law and that they were shrinking God by trying to confine him to some building. **(It's very important that you read this whole chapter!)** Of course men aren't responsible for the sins of their fathers but if they have the spirit of their fathers, they will repeat them. That's exactly what these Jews did (see 7:51-53 and Matthew 23:31-35).

13. As he began to speak, we're told (6:15) his face had some kind of unearthliness. Moses had experienced something like this (Exodus 34:29). Jesus experienced it in a radical way (see Luke 9:29). As wonderful as that was, the prayer he prays as he dies is even more remarkable. Having confessed that he saw Jesus at God's right hand (see Matthew 26:64-65) he then prays that the sin of his murderers might be forgiven (7:60 and Luke 23:34). And as he dies he commends his soul to the keeping of Jesus Christ (7:59 and Luke 23:46). So many things about the character and closing hours of Stephen remind us of Stephen's Saviour. **It is important to Luke to remind us of the continuity between the Lord himself and his Church in which he continues to live!**

THE SPIRIT & POWER OF STEPHEN

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED IN PART SIX

- Christ's power as a Reconciler and bringer of Peace is tested by divisions between those who believe in Him!
- The cure for division lies in wise men who have the Spirit of Christ and who act promptly and fairly!
- Stephen's defence of his teaching led him to say that people could be God's People independent of the land, temple, Law and circumcision – independent of Judaism!
 - One noble, gallant person can forever change the world for the better!

EVALUATION SHEET

Please go ahead and fill in the evaluation sheet attached.

CONTACT DETAILS

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EVALUATION SHEET

Acts LESSON 6

(Please type or write your answers within the lines provided)

Name:

Home Address or Email address:

TRUE OR FALSE? (If the statement is true write T, if false write F.)

1. Laying on of hands is often connected with conferring a blessing! _____
2. The disciples (**rather than the apostles**) chose the seven men to look after the distribution problem! _____
3. Feeding widows is an unimportant job! _____
4. Feeding widows is less Christian than teaching the word of God! _____
5. A Grecian Jew was a Greek person who became a Jewish proselyte! _____
6. As distinct from Moses' Church, the Messiah (**Jesus**) said he would build His Church! _____
7. **Ezekiel 37:15-22** deals with taking care of the poor! _____
8. The fine way in which the Church took care of its needy is connected with many priests turning to Christ! _____
9. The synagogues of the Freedmen (**Libertines**) might have been men who got freedom through Roman citizenship! _____
10. '**Filled with the Spirit**' means acting under his influence! _____

WHO?

1. Was one party in the trouble of Acts 6? _____
2. Was the other? _____
3. Chose the seven men to see the dispute was settled? _____
4. Was the prophet who spoke of the Messiah uniting the Jew under God? _____
5. Said he would build his own Church? _____
6. Said: '**Lay not this sin to their charge**'? _____
7. Stood by approving while men stoned Stephen? _____
8. Laid hands on the seven men? _____
9. Was the man whose face looked like an angel's? _____
10. Filled Stephen? _____

PUT A TICK NEXT TO THE SCRIPTURES WHEN YOU'VE READ THEM:

1. Acts chapters 6 & 7 _____ 2. Ezekiel 37:15-22 _____ 3. Matthew 23:31-35 _____
4. Matthew 26:59-65 _____ 5. Acts 13:1 with 14:26 _____ 6. Matthew 16:18 with Acts 7:38 _____

COMPLETE THIS STATEMENT: (As found in the booklet.)

1. The underlying problem was _____

2. This didn't mean the task _____

3. 1) God had his People even _____

4. 2) God had his People _____

5. 3) God had his People _____

6. 4) God had his People _____

SENDING YOUR ANSWERS

Once we have received your evaluation sheet we will send you the next study in this series.

Please return your completed evaluation sheet as an email attachment to info@the-scriptures.co.uk