

Study 8: Acts chapter 6

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Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

Should we lay hands on people today?
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What was the reaction of Stephen to his arrest?

Read chapter 7 in preparation for next week’s study.

Notes for study 8: Acts chapter 6

Introduction

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

There is no definitive timing connection between chapters 5 and chapters 6, although there is a natural connection flow of the events. The time was probably not too great, since Luke uses the term "*in those days*". He describes the events of the number of the disciples as multiplying, so there is likely to be some time between, rather than just a flow on straight after the last chapter.

Paul's conversion is dated at AD34, and the events are approaching the time of that conversion. The timing is probably therefore late AD 33, or early AD 34.

Content: *What are the major events?*

Dispute between the Greeks and Jews over benevolence. 7 Deacons are chosen. Apostles laid hands on the deacons. Miracles are worked by Stephen. Stephen accused of teaching against God & Moses.

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Apostles, the 7 deacons, Stephen.

Body of the Study

The problem –the reason for the “daily distribution”

People had come from all over the world, and had delayed their return to their homeland because they had become christians. They had “run out of credit on their AMEX card”, and needed help to live (the problem would soon be self-solved by the dispersion in Acts 8).

Some of these Jews were of Greek *origin*. They had been dispersed from their homeland, and had partially assimilated into the society where they lived, but they *were still Jews*. It is quite probable that they spoke more Greek than they did Hebrew. Remember what was said in 2:8 – what they heard was the *language from where they were born*. They may have been Jews, *but they were not born in Palestine*, and they most likely used the Septuagint in their synagogues.

Whilst there was a considerable strengthening of the disciples as a result of the events of Ananias and Sapphira, the internal problems in the church continued. Partiality and resentment was being expressed between some of the members. (*They were starting to “get to each other”*), and if not resolved, the problems would fester. It must have been taking a lot of energy on the part of the apostles to try to hold things together in the congregation of so many thousands, especially when their numbers were not just *growing*, but *multiplying*.

The NIV Bible Commentary on 6:1 adds some considerable background information which helps us to understand the setting to these events:

This verse is not only one of the most important in Acts, it is also one of the most complicated and discussed verses in the entire book. What one concludes regarding the identity of "the Grecian Jews," their relation to "the Aramaic-speaking community," and their circumstances within the church largely affects how one understands the material in Luke's second panel (6:8-9:31) and the whole course of events within the Jerusalem church. It is important, therefore, to understand as precisely as possible what Luke says *and* implies in describing "the Grecian Jews" (i.e., the

Hellenists) within the early church, a group he introduces by the phrases "in those days" and "when the number of disciples was increasing."

As for differentiating the Hellenists from the believers of Hebrew background, scholars have made various suggestions: the Hellenists are (1) Greek-speaking Jews of the Diaspora who settled in Jerusalem among the native-born and Aramaic-speaking populace, (2) Jewish proselytes from a Gentile background, (3) Jews who were related in some manner to the Essene movement in Palestine, (4) the Samaritans, and (5) Jews (whether by birth or as proselytes) who spoke only Greek and no Semitic language such as Hebrew or Aramaic. Of these choices, the last one seems the best. It hurdles the difficulty of how Paul could call himself a Hebraic Jew even though he was from the Diaspora (Php 3:5), it provides an explanation as to why Hellenistic synagogues were required in Jerusalem, and it offers an insight into the problem of why two of the seven men chosen in 6:5 (Stephen and Philip) appear almost immediately thereafter as evangelists within their own circle when they had actually been appointed to supervise more mundane concerns.

Probably, therefore, "the Grecian Jews" in Acts 6 were originally Hellenized Jews who had come from the Diaspora but who were now living in Jerusalem and had come under some suspicion (by reason of their place of birth, their speech, or both) of being more Grecian than Hebraic in their attitudes and outlook. Many of them, no doubt, had originally returned to the homeland out of religious ardor and today would be called Zionists. Perhaps they tended to group together because of their similar backgrounds and common language, as the many Hellenistic synagogues in Jerusalem would seem to indicate. Since coming to Jerusalem, they had become Christians. But since attitudes and prejudices formed before conversion are often carried over into Christian life--too often the unworthy more than the worthy ones--some of the problems between the Hebraic Jews and the Hellenistic Jews in the church must be related back to such earlier differences and prejudices.

In 6:1-6, Luke tells us that the Hellenists' "widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food." Judaism had a system for the distribution of food and supplies to the poor, both to the wandering pauper and to those living in Jerusalem itself. The early Christian community at Jerusalem likewise expressed its spiritual unity in communal sharing of possessions and in charitable acts (cf. 2:44-45; 4:32-5:11). Apparently with the "increasing" number of believers and with the passing of time, the number of Hellenistic widows dependent on relief from the church became disproportionately large. Many pious Jews of the Diaspora had moved to Jerusalem in their later years in order to be buried near it, and their widows would have had no relatives near at hand to care for them as would the widows of the longtime residents. Nor as they became Christians would the "poor baskets" of the national system of relief be readily available to them. So the problem facing the church became acute.

The issue about the distribution of food may not have been all that disrupted the fellowship. It is likely that it was only the symptom of a larger tension between the two groups, opening up earlier prejudices. If the Hellenists spoke mostly in Greek, they may have required separate meetings within the Christian community, and these too could have brought back old resentments. (NIVBC)

What was the prime role of the apostles?

Their prime role was "...the word of God..." (6:2), and they were being distracted by having to "...serve tables...". There was no substitute for their eye-witness account and testimony. Others could fulfil the secondary role of looking after the needy, but those others could not fulfil the apostle's major role of preaching and teaching the word of God, from which they were being distracted.

Looking after the daily needs of people is also important, and rather than dismissing it or dealing with it themselves, the apostles recognised it, and appointed others to deal with it.

Rather than nominating the men themselves, the apostles asked "the multitude" to determine who the seven men should be. These were to be men in whom the church would have confidence in their administration. Whilst the *nomination* was made by the church, the *ordination* (or the appointment) was done by the apostles. We are not told the *method* that was used to make the selection, but we will soon see the method of ordination.

The qualifications required for the men

- Of good reputation

They were going to be put into a position of trust. There was no room for people with “shady traits” and reputations, who could be falsely charged with mis-appropriation of the responsibility that they were given.

- Full of the Holy Spirit

They were to demonstrate the fruit of the spirit (Gal 5:22-25) – ie the things that develop in our lives when the spirit is planted. The spirit was planted in their lives when they became christians (Acts 2:38).

Some think that this requires them to have the demonstrated miraculous powers, however, we have noted that up until this time, no-one except the apostles worked miracles. That situation would soon change – with the ordination of these men. But this event has yet to occur, and they were to be full of the Holy Spirit *before* they were chosen and ordained.

- And of Wisdom

Whilst some think that this may refer to the spiritual gift of wisdom, the same argument applies as that above. They must be prudent men, who had the respect of the people that they were to serve, and who also demonstrated the action and power of God within them. They were to be able to make wise decisions in the exercise of their ministry.

Some argue that this was not a general appointment of deacons as described in Paul’s letter to Timothy (1 Ti 3:8-13), but was simply the appointment of men to address a specific task. However, the use of the Greek word *diakonos* (in its various forms) in this passage is identical to the description that is made in 1 Tim. (Refer to Wigram’s Englishman’s Greek Concordance of the New Testament, for word Nos 1247, 1248, and 1249).

It is clear that these men were appointed as deacons, and the qualifications specified are not dissimilar to those required by Paul. Whilst Acts 6 does not state every characteristic and qualification, this does not mean that these men did not meet the qualifications that Paul said were required. It simply means that Luke did not mention it, or that those in Jerusalem plainly understood what was required and it did not need to be mentioned.

What do we know about the seven men who were chosen?

The seven men chosen all have names with Greek origins. This is a great vote of confidence by the Hebrew brethren to those who were visiting, and so much so, that they had total trust that the Greeks would not overlook the Hebrews in the daily administration! This is not a conclusive argument, as some of Jesus disciples (notably Andrew and Peter) had Greek names. Some have concluded that three of those appointed were Hebrews, three were Greeks, and one was a Proselyte – however such an argument is also inconclusive.

We know nothing more about four of these men – **Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas** – and there is no material on which to base any probability.

It is said by some that the sect of the Nicolaitians arose from **Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch**. This is conjecture, and based solely on the use of the name, with some writers well removed from the early church (AD 300) suggesting the idea. Nicolas is the only man of whose home city is named, most likely due to Luke’s interest in that city as the story of Acts unfolds, and perhaps because it was also Luke’s home city.

Stephen is described as a man full of faith, and of the Holy Spirit. He was a man who had a firm grasp of the teachings of Jesus, and was settled in his convictions. He will demonstrate this later in this study, and in chapter 7.

And **Philip**. We will see Philip's work in chapter 8, and again in chapter 21. Like Stephen, he was a man who had a good grasp of Christ's teachings.

Both Stephen and Philip will demonstrate the remarkable powers which were about to be conferred on them.

How are they appointed for the work?

They were "...*set before the apostles...*" (6:6), who then prayed, and laid their hands on them. This suggests there was some degree of formality involved here. It does not sound like an ad-hoc appointment, but rather a ceremony where the seven (after being selected by the church) are formally presented to the apostles.

The prayer most likely asked for the blessing of God on the special work of these men, and that they would discharge their responsibilities and service in an appropriate way.

The apostles laid their hands on them. Sometimes the term "*laid their hands on them*" can refer to an arrest or a physical attack. However this is clearly *not* the case here. This is the first instance in the New Testament where the laying on of hands is mentioned. There are three purposes for the laying on of hands in the New Testament, and two of them are achieved in the ceremony recorded in this event.

- It was a sign of approval.

By laying their hands on the seven, the apostles formally appointed them to their ministry, and also showed their approval to the men being appointed to the office, and their formal recognition of the roles to which they had been appointed.

- It passed on the miraculous measure of the Holy Spirit.

By receiving this measure, these men were able to work miracles. We will see more of this in chapter 8, however later in this chapter (vs 8) we will note that Stephen is now able to perform miracles. In chapter 8, we also see Philip working miracles. This is in stark contrast to the pattern that we have observed up to now, that *only the apostles* were the ones working miracles.

We should note, that it was the apostles who were the ones here who were performing the laying on of hands, and it was "...*through the laying on of the apostles hands that the Holy Spirit was given...*" (8:17, 18). When combined with the observation of only the apostles working miracles before this event, and both Stephen and Philip working miracles after the event, there is overwhelming evidence that this was more than just a ceremony of ordination.

The third purpose of the laying on of hands in the New Testament is to heal the sick (Mk 16:18, Js 5:14). In this case, the one doing the healing is one who has the miraculous gift of healing, and is able to perform the task.

As a result of this event, the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly. The apostles were now freed to devote themselves to the Lord's work of teaching and preaching, so the result should not be surprising. This is the first record that we have of the Priests being converted.

How is the conversion of the Priests described?

They were "...*obedient to the faith...*" (6:7). This is a noteworthy statement in that it shows that there is something about *faith* to be *obeyed*. These people did not just have a head knowledge faith of God, but based on their knowledge, *they obeyed* the gospel. Such obedience requires the response that Peter called for in 2:38 – repentance, and baptism (immersion in water) for (so that) our sins might be forgiven.

What did Stephen do, and what equipped him to do it?

“...Stephen was full of faith, and power...” (6:8). The context of the chapter leaves no doubt that the power came through the laying on of the apostles’ hands (and the Holy Spirit as a result), although he was already “...full of faith...” (6:5) before this. He was “...doing great wonders and signs amongst the people...” (6:8). This is the first recorded instance of miracles other than those performed by the apostles. We need to remember that Luke, describing these events, was a physician, and that he investigated them carefully before he wrote about them (Lk 1:3). It is inconceivable that he would describe something as a miracle if there was a natural explanation.

The opposition to the gospel now increases a notch. Up until now, the opposition had largely been threats. But Christianity, instead of going away, is now “multiplying”. It is now no longer just the apostles who are the leaders, but Stephen has now emerged as a leader & “teacher” (at least in the perception of the Jews, he appears to now have joined the apostles).

The politically motivated Sadducees have led the persecution up to now. This time the perpetrators are the Pharisees – the leaders in the synagogues.

These men are of “...the synagogue of the Freedmen...”(6:9). There is much debate about who these people were, and it has been suggested that they were Jews who had been at some stage in captivity, and had come to Jerusalem for religious freedom. Some of them had come from various parts of the world – Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia. They were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit with which Stephen spoke. This may refer to his own *natural ability*, or it may refer to the Holy Spirit working through Stephen. Like much of scripture, it probably refers to both, and hence there is no wonder that the Holy Spirit working through a naturally gifted man was not able to be resisted! His arguments were unanswerable!

How did the Pharisees respond to this?

They secretly bribed men to give false testimony about what Stephen said. They charged him with teaching:

- against God, and
- against Moses.

Moses was regarded as the pinnacle of the Jewish religion, and his laws were regarded as “unchangeable”, or “the ultimate revelation of God”. Therefore to speak against Moses was to speak against God.

This charge was falsely laid. Stephen of course, was not speaking against either Moses or God! Rather his message was that the evidence shows that God has fulfilled Moses through Jesus.

They then stirred up the (Jewish) people, the (Jewish) elders, and the scribes. The result was Stephen’s arrest. This is the first time that it is *the people* who are against the apostles, rather than the Jewish leaders. Until this time, the people have been on the side of the apostles, which caused great caution in the case of the arrest and trial of the apostles in chapter 5.

Stephen before the Sanhedrin

Once again, false witnesses are set up against Stephen. This mirrors of the trial of Jesus, where false witnesses were also established. He is accused of speaking blasphemy against the Temple, and against the Jewish Law. He is rightly accused of wanting to change the customs which Moses delivered, and such a change would be a fair conclusion from the implementation of Christianity.

Stephen’s face is said to be like that of an angel, unlike most people who would have appeared before them – whose faces would have reflected the terror and the scorn that they were facing, Stephen appears undaunted, and with the radiant experience of a person with God on their side.