

# Acts 6-7

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## *Lesson 4*

This section begins in a way that will be all too familiar to those involved in church leadership, or for that matter perhaps just leadership in general, with a complaint. Complaints can either be times of distress and hand-wringing or opportunities to bring about changes that will allow the mission to proceed more effectively. Evaluation must first be made as to whether the complaining is true and warranted or not, but if it is and it is given with a genuinely loving, caring and constructive manner then it represents an opportunity for the church.

The complaint here relates directly to a scriptural command from the Old Testament. It is of great interest that this part of the Old Law was not disregarded by the church. The apostles immediately set about putting this shortcoming right and God is so actively involved in what happens next.

When we began this study we talked about the mission given to the church by Jesus at Acts 1:8 being “witnesses” for Christ to the world. This section will mark a new and deadly stage in that mission. In this section the council will demonstrate how far they are willing to go in order to retain their power and authority over the Jewish people. There is a feature of religious communities that makes them among the most conserving and traditionalist groups within society. Many religious groups today have even taken as their clerical vestments what everyday Romans wore in the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Church language is replete with words and terms from a past era.<sup>1</sup>

The church’s traditionalism may be partly due to its desire to retain the truth that has been entrusted to it. This can be seen in the desire of the early church to see fulfillment of the things that have been spoken previously through the prophets. The Pharisees and Sadducees on the council will have seen their efforts as efforts to protect the faith of their ancestors from innovation. However, in their

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, *Acts*, in the Interpretation series (Louisville KY: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 58.

efforts to conserve the truth, they, like the critics of Jesus before them, had missed the truth. In contrast to the tradition oriented council the Spirit-led community is ready to move beyond tradition and the past in order to remain obedient to the Spirit of God.<sup>2</sup> They must be obedient to the truth even though the comfort of a time-trodden path is not open to them.

This section has four parts of unequal length: 1. The selection of the seven (6:1-7), the seizing of Stephen (6:8-7:1), Stephen's speech (7:2-53), and the killing of Stephen (7:54-8:3). Once again the chapter separations let us down here. The date for the events of this section of Acts is likely in the early 30s A.D. The numbers of the disciples continues to increase and a problem has arisen in the daily distribution of food to the widows. The story introduces us here to two groups, on the one side the Hebrews and on the other side the Hellenists. The impression of the narrative is that the two groups are divided along linguistic lines and that the neglect is inadvertent. In the Old Testament it is

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<sup>2</sup> William H. Willimon, *Acts*, p. 58.

made clear that widows are a special group that are not to be neglected (cf. Deuteronomy 24:19-21; 26:12-13).<sup>3</sup>

The Hellenist widows may have migrated back to Judea after the death of their husbands in places outside Judea. There are a number of options within Judaism for widows, one of which was to marry the brother of her husband. It had however, become the case, by the first century A.D., that remaining a widow was considered an act of piety (cf. Luke 2:36-38; 1 Corinthians 7:39-40; 1 Timothy 5:9). It is important to note that it was considered the duty of the church to support widows and this support was not contingent upon whether or not all other means had been exhausted.<sup>4</sup>

The apostles quickly move to address this problem. It is of note as leaders of the church they lay out their proposed plan before the church and they include the body in the solution. The body will select men whom the apostles will then appoint to this task. The apostles lay out 3 criteria

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<sup>3</sup> J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary Series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2007), pp. 103-104.

<sup>4</sup> J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 103.

(v. 3): the first of these criterion is that men must be of “good standing” or “reputation.” The word translated as of “good reputation” is the Greek word μαρτυρουμένων, which is a word related to the Greek word often translated as “martyr.” The good reputation of these men is to be grounded in what others have witnessed about the lives of these men.<sup>5</sup>

This section has been much used by a great variety of people to condone an assortment of theories. They range from the appointment of the first ordained deacons to what many now call clergy. Part of this confusion grows from the fact that the seven are chosen to serve tables and yet there is no record given of them having performed this function. In verse 8 the text conveys the message that Stephen did great wonders and signs among the people and that (vs. 9) he argued with those belonging to the synagogue of the Freedman. Since they could not withstand his wisdom, given through the Spirit, they sought other means to rid themselves of him.

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<sup>5</sup> J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 104.

The purpose of this section appears plain enough, just as the apostles challenged the authority of the Jewish leaders at the temple now Stephen, from the Hellenistic community, does the same among the Hellenists. The Hellenists are Jews that do not speak Aramaic, at least as a first language, and have most often lived outside the confines of a Palestinian context. The power and authority of the leaders among this group are under attack and they instigated people to bring false accusations against Stephen. The imagery is of a pot put onto boil and the people are being stirred up more and more and then Stephen is seized and taken before the council. More false accusations are repeated and it is interesting that Luke describes the charge as destroying the temple and changing the “customs” (ἔθος = ethos) that Moses handed down to them.

The countenance or face of Stephen is like that of an “angel” and the proper response to such a countenance is reverence or respect. Despite this, the council ignores this

aspect of Stephen's face and they proceed.<sup>6</sup> This leads us on into chapter 7 where the inquisition of Stephen begins. The High Priest himself opens the questioning and asks Stephen if the charges being made against him are correct.

Stephen's speech is the longest in Acts and it says to his audience that they have some nerve to charge that he has violated traditions of Moses and the law. He tells the story of Israel going all the way back to Abraham.<sup>7</sup> He takes the opportunity offered to him by the High Priest not to defend himself against the charges made against him but to preach to the council and all of those listening. It is as if he cares not even a little for his own safety or what might be prudent. His entire horizon has become dominated by his desire to fulfill the vision that Jesus gave to the apostles to proclaim the gospel. He will do this boldly, fearlessly and without any concern for himself.

In verse 51 – 53 the tables are reversed and Stephen charges the council and those listening to him with as bold

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<sup>6</sup> Richard I Pervo, *Acts A Commentary*, in the Hermenia series (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2009), p. 170.

<sup>7</sup> William H. Willimon, *Acts*, p. 61.

of words as have ever been spoken. He speaks as if he were God himself speaking. The accusations are those that God makes throughout the Scriptures concerning Israel. The accusation includes murder and failing to keep the law of God ordained through angels. Israel's story was one of continual rebellion against God and Stephen boldly proclaims this fact to his audience.

Four themes will help to guide in reading Stephen's word to the council: 1. The presence of God is not tied to a particular place or to land; 2. The calling of God is for his people to worship him; 3. Israel's history is a story of rebellion, which is manifested most clearly in their rejection of those that God sent to deliver from false worship; 4. Israel's story anticipated and prepared the way for the coming of God's Messiah, Jesus Christ. The overall impact of what Stephen has to say is that the legitimate remnant of God's people is to be found in the followers of Jesus Christ and not in the Sanhedrin and its followers.<sup>8</sup> This message is

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<sup>8</sup> J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, pp. 111-112.



in total alignment with the intent of Luke to convey this message even from the first verses of Acts.

The accusations that Stephen makes enrage his audience to such a degree that they grind their teeth. Luke describes Stephen as having “ripped their hearts” (διεπρίοντο τὰς καρδίας αὐτῶν). His accusations enrage them but it is his recitation of his heavenly vision that drives them to murder. Acts 7:56 is the only place in the New Testament where someone other than Jesus uses the title “son of man” as a designation for Jesus. Jesus spoke of himself being “seated” at the right hand of the power of God. Here Jesus standing lends itself to two possible interpretations: 1. Jesus is rising to receive his faithful witness; 2. Jesus is rising in judgment against those who are about to kill Stephen.<sup>9</sup>

It should be noted that of these two possibilities the one that seems most likely is that Jesus is rising to welcome his faithful witness as Stephen prays for this sin not to be held against them. In a manner that is quite close to the

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<sup>9</sup> J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, p. 121.

words of Jesus at Luke 23:46 at his death Stephen, prays for Jesus to “receive my Spirit.”<sup>10</sup> Stephen also prays for his persecutors and asks for their forgiveness in much the same manner that Jesus did at Luke 23:34.

This section is also noteworthy for its introduction of the character, Saul, who will be extremely important in the remainder of this work.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard I Pervo, *Acts A Commentary*, p. 198.

# Synopsis

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This section begins with the church turning an internal complaint into an opportunity to continue to vigilantly pursue the mission given to them by Jesus Christ. It is interesting how the apostles handle this situation, which could have so easily become the creation of two groups rather than one group. The solution, the appointment of the seven, heightens tensions with those that were in leadership positions within traditional Hellenistic Jewish groups. At the same time as external tension is heightened the internal cohesiveness of the church is increased by these actions with the result that the “word of God continued to spread....”

The great wonders and the arguments of Stephen cause the leaders amongst the Hellenistic synagogues to stir up the people and to seize Stephen. It is of interest that they have no problem setting up false witnesses against Stephen as they bring him before the council. The accusations are put to him by the High Priest and the response from

Stephen rather than answering the charges actually reverses the roles and Stephen accuses the Jews of being a stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears. The charge makes it clear that just in the past Israel has failed to listen to the message of God through his prophets so also the leadership here are doing exactly the same thing.

Needless to say this message enrages (rips the heart) of the council and those listening. Their response is to rush upon Stephen who is dragged out of the city where he is stoned with prayers of forgiveness on his lips and visions of heaven in his mind. He dies pleading for the forgiveness of those who are stoning him and it is in this context that the character Saul is introduced as one who condones and supports the actions of these people.

# Main Points

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1. Conflict within the church arises and is resolved by the Apostles over the daily distribution of food to widows.

2. The conflict between the church and religious leaders grows.

3. Stephen and the seven are appointed to “wait tables” but certainly they do much more than this as Stephen in these chapters performs signs and wonders and argues with members of a Hellenistic synagogue.

4. Conflict with the religious authorities grows and ultimately results in the death of Stephen.

5. Stephen proclaims the “good news” in both word and deed.

6. We are introduced to Saul and his complicity in the persecution of Christians.

# Questions

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1. Why do you think the church seeks to care for the widows?
2. What do you think we as a church today can learn from the way this early conflict in the church is handled?
3. Why do you think Luke does not mention how the seven wait on tables?
4. Why do you think those who belonged to the Synagogue of the Freedmen secretly instigated false witnesses against Stephen?
5. What do you make of Luke's statement that Stephen's face "was like the face of an angel?"
6. Why do you think Stephen does not answer the question directly that the High Priest asks 7:1?
7. How do you think the people of Israel were stiff-necked and uncircumcised of heart and ears?

How are we today as a church different or the same?

8. Why do you think Stephen discloses his vision to his attackers?
9. Do you think Stephen should have prayed for the forgiveness of his attackers? Why or why not?