

# Acts 6 - Internal & External Conflict

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Acts of the Apostles

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## Verses:

### Acts 6

#### Seven Chosen to Serve

**6** Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. <sup>2</sup>And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. <sup>3</sup>Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. <sup>4</sup>But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." <sup>5</sup>And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup>These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

<sup>7</sup>And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

#### Stephen Is Seized

<sup>8</sup>And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. <sup>9</sup>Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. <sup>10</sup>But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. <sup>11</sup>Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." <sup>12</sup>And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, <sup>13</sup>and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, <sup>14</sup>for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."

<sup>15</sup> And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

### 1 Corinthians 12:11

All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

### Luke 21:15

for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict

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The early church started out pretty simple. You had the Apostles, who were closest to Jesus, along with some women along with Jesus' mother Mary and His brothers. **The hierarchy was pretty simple. Jesus of course was and will always be the head of the church, with the apostles holding a special position of teaching and leading this small band of 120 believers.**

And then one day, Pentecost to be exact, **there are now an additional 3,000 people added to the their little group**, but many of them returned to countries where they lived. But the church in Jerusalem continued to grow.

Then as we saw last week, Peter and James heal a lame man and 5,000 people in Jerusalem are added to their group. Remaining simple is getting harder and harder by the day. **But still what is this church is known for? Its unity and charity.**

**Maintaining unity gets more difficult as an organization grows, and the faster it grows the harder it becomes.** We saw a crack in the unity of the church with Ananias and Sapphira last week. **And now we will see a cultural crack that begins to show itself in this growing community.**

**Acts 6:11**

***1 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.***

The church was being pushed from the outside from the Jewish leaders and now there is conflict from within. A complaint is raised about a group in the community who are not being treated equally with others.

**The “Hellenist” were Greek-speaking Jews.** The church is mostly still made up of Jews, but some speak Hebrew and some speak Greek. The Hellenistic Jews are not getting the same portion as those who are native Jerusalem widows.

**For a group known for unity and generosity, this is a problem.**

**Acts 6:2-4**

***2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”***

The response of the apostles to this controversy is noteworthy. **The apostles were concerned about the Hellenistic widows, but they did**

**not want to get distracted from their primary ministry of sharing the Word of God and prayer.**

The apostles recognized that the **most critical aspects of any church are faithful teaching and preaching of God's Word, and the ministry of prayer.** Luke is again showing that **the church is sustained and built upon the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.**

It is only when a church **faithfully preaches and teaches Scripture,** and then **pleads with the Spirit of God in prayer to bless their efforts,** do we see true conversions and true Biblical growth.

The church was **created and is sustained by Word of God.** In fact, without the Word of God a church ceases to be a church. So **the priority of the apostles is valid and correct.** But they are **not indifferent to the need of the Hellenist.**

They suggest that the people choose seven men from amongst themselves to be put in charge of this ministry.

## **Acts 6**

***5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. 7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. 8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.***

Some scholars refer to these seven men as the first deacons, though they are not specifically called this in Acts. But there can be no doubt that they do the work of a deacon. In 1 Timothy 3 we see the definition of a deacon and these seven men fit that description. **The word diakonos, which is where we get the word deacon, means “servant.”** **Diacons are members of the church who serve the physical and administrative needs of the church.**

There are some key lessons that we can learn from the deacons and their role in the life of the church.

- **Diacons play a key role in freeing up the pastors and teachers from administrative concerns so that they can focus on the ministry of prayer and the word.** The apostles appointed deacons to make sure the congregation had their physical needs met, while they could focus on the spiritual needs of the church.
- ***Diacons function as the chief servants in the church. Their responsibility is not to just do the work, but also to activate the congregation to serve each other.*** They serve as examples of what a servant in the church should look like.
- **Diacons are a gift to the church and help maintain the unity amongst the believers.** Divisions had arisen in the church and disunity was beginning to spread and these 7 men as deacons were the answer to the problem of disunity. Their service and care for the needs of others maintained the church's integrity and unity.
- For those not serving as apostles or deacons there are also some important lessons to be learned here
  - **Every Christian should value a rightly ordered church. Biblical order preserves church unity.**

- Every church member should value the time that church leaders and pastors dedicate to the word and prayer. Members should expect nothing less and in fact should encourage the pastors to spend time investing in word and prayer.
- Verse 7 shows how God blesses churches that care about church order and unity, and the centrality of Scripture.

*And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*

- As deacons serve the church, and pastors and teachers focused on prayer and the preaching of the Word, God added to the church and brought sinners into His kingdom. Amazingly, even some of the priests, the very ones who had been hostile to the Gospel, were being saved.

Luke then focuses on one of the deacons, Stephen, a man who was full of grace and power. **We have seen the Holy Spirit working through the apostles to do signs and wonders, and here now we see the Holy Spirit working through a deacon.**

**We must always remember that the Holy Spirit chooses to use whomever He wishes.**

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 12:11 when he is speaking about spiritual gifts

*All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.*

**The Holy Spirit does what He will with whom He will, no matter what our opinion may be.** Don't sell people short because the Holy Spirit can do amazing things through the unlikely.

***9 Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. 10 But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. 11 Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, 13 and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." 15 And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.***

**Opposition is always waiting in the wings.** Jesus promised that we would have trouble in this world, and He was right. **We should not be surprised that the early church was being attacked left and right.** And we should not be surprised when we come under attack.

We see five groups that join together to attack Stephen because of the wonders and signs he was doing.

**The first are the "synagogue of the Freedmen."** Most likely these were Jews who had been freed from slavery, either in Cyrene or some other Gentile territory.

**Then we have Cyrenians, who were from northern Africa or modern day Libya**

Next we have the **Alexandrians from northern Egypt.**

**The fourth group are from Cilicia, which is an inland area in the southern part of modern day Turkey.**

**The third group are from what is termed Asia. This is not referring to India, China, or Japan, but northern Turkey.**

These groups join together to confront Stephen. But their attempt at discrediting Stephen falls flat on its face. **Luke says that they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen was speaking.**

This is a fulfillment of Luke 21:15

***for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict***

This did nothing to stop their attempt to intimidate Stephen. So they decide to get back at Stephen by spreading lies about him.

We can see this happening today. One side will twist the words of the other in an attempt to get the upper hand. Believe me, both sides do it. It is fake news and many times an outright lie.

It even happens in the church today. I was watching a documentary on the prosperity gospel and as I am sitting there the verses they are using to justify their beliefs are coming to my mind and the correct interpretation based on solid Bible study are coming to my mind. **If we don't get what we want, we can twist peoples words, or the very words of Scripture, to achieve our goals and justify our actions.**

But this group takes it one step further. They stir-up the people against Stephen. It is now a mob. **This mob believes that Stephen has spoken blasphemous offences against the temple and against the Law of Moses.**

We do not have the time today to examine Stephen's response to these accusation, we will do that next week, but I think there are some important things to consider about the opposition that Stephen encountered and the trumped-up charges that were brought against him.

**First, we must remember that true godliness many times will spark fierce opposition from the world.**

Stephen is known for his godliness and virtue. **The more we walk in the footsteps of Jesus, the more we will find that we will encounter the same hostility and persecution that Jesus himself encountered.**

**Second, like Stephen we must be patient with unbelievers and those who oppose us, even when they twist and pervert the message we are preaching.** One of the greatest people in our day who personified this was Ravi Zacharius, who just passed away recently. When we are sharing the message of the Gospel we must keep in mind that it is not about the question or statement the other person is making, it is about the person. **We should never try to win an argument, but we should always strive to win the person.**

**Stephen was probably teaching that Jesus was the fulfillment of the message of the Old Testament.** This is what we saw the apostles teaching. Jesus fulfills the Sinai covenant and Himself is the true temple. **Stephen is not saying that the temple and the law should be abandoned, but that both pointed towards Jesus as the Messiah.**

But Stephens opponents claimed he was saying that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the law. In patience, **Stephen endured these false accusations, as we will see next week, and continued to preach even in the face of opposition.**

Chapter 6 ends in a very perplexing way. The council is looking at Stephen and they notice his face is like the face of an angel. Our initial thought is that it shined and was like a baby cherub. But that is not what Luke means.

We have this preconceived idea that angels are sweet, “cherubic” creatures, but their purpose is to bring a message from God. **They inspire awe and fear.** Every time someone in the Bible has an encounter with an angel they fall to the ground in fear and awe.

Angels minister the word of God. **When Luke says that Stephen had the face of an angel, he means that Stephen was a true messenger of God. Stephen was determined to speak God’s word fearlessly, faithfully, and forcefully, no matter what the consequence.**

## **Takeaways**

- **Whenever you get a group together and they begin to do life together you are going to have conflict. The key is to handle it wisely and biblically.**
- **As leaders we may not be able to do everything that needs to be done, but we need to care about everyone involved in our ministry.**
- **The church should be well organized and structured in such a way that ministry occurs in the best way possible. No one person can do all the work, whether that is an elder or a deacon. We were all created by Christ for doing good works.**

- **Opposition will always arise, but we must be patient and understanding to those raising the opposition. Many times it is not the person bringing the message that they have an issue with, it is the message.**
- **When sharing God's Word we must do it fearlessly, faithfully, and forcefully to the end.**

Let's pray

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### **For further study:**

Why is every member of our church important?

In what ways are you dependent on other members of your church? In what ways are others dependent on you?

How have we taken up the charge to serve our church and our community? What can we do now to meet a need in our church?

Do you have difficulty being bold in speaking about your faith? Why or why not?

If we struggle with being bold, what does it show about our priorities?

Do you think hostility to Christian beliefs and values is increasing in our society? Why? What forms is such hostility taking? How should we respond?

What factors sometimes prevent you from seizing opportunities to express your beliefs and values? What can you do this week to seize the opportunities in your life?