



Have you ever wished God would use you, but felt like you had little to offer? Discover how God uses our simple & sacrificial obedience to further the gospel.

**BIG TRUTH: God uses our simple & sacrificial obedience.**

### **The Attempt to Divide & Conquer**

**Acts 6:1** (NET) <sup>1</sup> Now in those days, when the disciples were growing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Greek-speaking Jews against the native Hebraic Jews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

The fledgling Jewish followers of Jesus continued a Jewish practice of meeting needs.

- **Friday money**, Jewish people provided for resident needy with money for 14 meals.
- **Daily meals** were provided for nonresidents and transients.<sup>1</sup>

So too, the early church was using funds to help feed their needy **widows** - who would normally depend on their own families. If they had no family, most of these women would have no way to earn a consistent income. That's when the church provided for their needs.

But a problem now arose, a problem that - if not dealt with - could cause quite a division. The minority widows - **the Greek-speaking Jews** - were being **overlooked**.

Many Jews who had grown up in other nations were visiting & moving near Jerusalem. Although Jewish, many of them had grown up in Greek cultures speaking the Greek language, rather than in the Israeli culture speaking Aramaic. This was a hurdle to overcome: a communication problem led to a relationship problem.

If the church couldn't be stopped 1) through persecution by the unbelieving Jews, nor 2) infiltrated by the lies of Ananias & Sapphira, maybe they could be 3) racially & culturally divided.

### **Dealing with the Division**

**Acts 6:2-4** (NET) <sup>2</sup> So the twelve called the whole group of the disciples together and said, "It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to wait on tables. <sup>3</sup> But carefully select from among you, brothers, seven men who are well-attested, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may **put in charge of this necessary task**. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Up until this point, the apostles were having to **neglect the word of God** - that is - they had to stop sharing the message of Jesus in order to get meals to others. The apostles needed someone else to serve the physical food if they were going to serve the spiritual food.

<sup>1</sup> John B. Polhill, Acts, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 180.

The phrase **wait on tables** or serve tables use two significant terms:

- First, **wait on** or serve (*diakonein*) is from the Greek word that we get **deacon**, which has led many to think these were the first deacons. This, however, is presumptuous.
- Second, the term for **tables** was typically used as a metaphor providing a **meal** or **money**.<sup>2</sup> It is likely that these men did both, securing the funds to provide the food.

While this task might not have been the most important task, it was a **necessary task**, and the impact of this simple obedience would make a difference.

### Selecting 7; Spotlight on Stephen & Phillip

**Acts 6:5-6** (NET) <sup>5</sup> The proposal pleased the entire group, so they chose **Stephen**, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, with **Philip**, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a Gentile convert to Judaism from Antioch.<sup>6</sup> They stood these men before **the apostles**, who **prayed and placed their hands on them**.

While the flexibility of these men to serve might be foundational to later deacon ministry, you might be surprised to learn that these men likely were NOT the first deacons. Here's why:

- Of the seven, only Stephen and Philip appear elsewhere in Scripture, but they are never called deacons, but evangelists (Acts 21:8).
- While Acts later refers to elders (14:23; 20:17), there is no mention of deacons in the entire writing. That is strange, if the office of deacon began in Acts 6.
- Since all 7 men chosen had Greek names, they were likely Greek-speaking Jews themselves. Because of this it seems unlikely that a permanent order of deacons for the Jerusalem church would include no native Aramaic-speaking Jews.<sup>3</sup>

These 7 men provided leadership for the minority subculture of Greek-speaking Jews in the Jerusalem church.<sup>4</sup>

**The apostles prayed and placed their hands on them**. In this way the apostles identified and affirmed the ministry of these men the the church Elders, deacons, and all who served in the early church were ordained this way (cf. Acts 13:3; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim. 1:6).<sup>5</sup>

### God uses our simple & sacrificial obedience.

This simple act of serving food to Greek-speaking widows helped further the gospel work!

### The Impact of Simple Obedience

**Acts 6:7** (NET) <sup>7</sup> The word of God continued to spread, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.

A **large group of priests** lived in and around Jerusalem. Remember how John the Baptist's father served at the temple for a certain period of time (Luke 1:5)? Some say there were likely 2000 priests like Zechariah, even including other Pharisees (Acts 15:5).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Polhill, 180.

<sup>3</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., Acts, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 181.

<sup>4</sup> Craig S. Keener, Acts: An Exegetical Commentary & 2: Introduction and 1:1–14:28, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012–2013), 1287.

<sup>5</sup> MacArthur, 183.

<sup>6</sup> Keener, 1291.

## Stephen's Impact

**Acts 6:8-10** (NET) <sup>8</sup> Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. <sup>9</sup> But some men from the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, as well as some from Cilicia and the province of Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. <sup>10</sup> Yet **they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.**

**Freedmen** were Jews who had at one time been slaves in the Roman empire were now freed men (children of freedmen could carry the same title<sup>7</sup>). These Jews were Greek-speaking and **argued with Stephen**, but they could not resist his Spirit-laced wisdom. The first followers of Jesus were not left alone during these tough times (see Acts 4&5). Jesus had told the apostles,

**Luke 12:11-12** (NET) <sup>11</sup> But when they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you should make your defense or what you should say, <sup>12</sup> for **the Holy Spirit will teach you at that moment what you must say."**

This didn't mean they shouldn't or we shouldn't be prepared to respond, but it meant that they didn't have to worry if the Spirit would show up & speak through them...He WOULD.

## False Accusations

**Acts 6:11-15** (NET) <sup>11</sup> Then they secretly instigated some men to say, "We have heard this man speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God." <sup>12</sup> They incited the people, the elders, and the experts in the law; then they approached Stephen, seized him, and brought him before the council. <sup>13</sup> They brought forward false witnesses who said, "This man does not stop saying things against this holy place and the law. <sup>14</sup> For we have heard him saying that Jesus the Nazarene will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us." <sup>15</sup> All who were sitting in the council looked intently at Stephen and saw his face was like the face of an angel.

**Acts 7:1** (NET) <sup>1</sup> Then the high priest said, "Are these things true?"

These claims, were not true. Neither did Stephen speak against the temple and the law, other than to point out that Jesus was the fulfillment of them both! HE fulfilled the law perfectly. HE was the final sacrifice & the very Presence of God!

And as the face of Moses shone after being in God's presence (Exodus 34:29-35), Stephen's face demonstrated the presence of the Spirit, apparently shining **like the face of an angel**.

Synopsis of Acts 7:2-53:

🌟 **John Polhill** writes:

*The speech falls into five sections: (1) the promises to Abraham (vv. 2-8), (2) the deliverance through Joseph (vv. 9-16), (3) the deliverance through Moses (vv. 17-34), (4) the disobedience of Israel (vv. 35-50), and (5) the rejection of the Messiah (vv. 51-53).<sup>8</sup>*

**Read Acts 7:36-47** (not in notes nor on screen)

<sup>7</sup> Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 253.

<sup>8</sup> Polhill, 188.

## Stephen's Stand

**Acts 7:48–53** (NET) <sup>48</sup> Yet the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands, as the prophet says, <sup>49</sup> **‘Heaven is my throne, and earth is the footstool for my feet. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is my resting place?’** <sup>50</sup> **Did my hand not make all these things?** <sup>51</sup> “You stubborn people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are **always resisting the Holy Spirit**, like your ancestors did! <sup>52</sup> Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold long ago the coming of **the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become!** <sup>53</sup> You received the law by decrees given by angels, but you did not obey it.”

How is it these non-believing Jews didn't see what Stephen saw about Jesus? Stephen said they, like their ancestors, were **stubborn**, hard hearted, spiritually deaf people **who are always resisting the Holy Spirit**.

They had the SAME SCRIPTURE and yet came to 2 very different conclusions about Jesus.

## 1st Christian Martyr

**Acts 7:54–8:1a** (NET) <sup>54</sup> When they heard these things, they became furious and ground their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup> But Stephen, **full of the Holy Spirit**, looked intently toward heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup> “Look!” he said. “I see the heavens opened, and **the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!**” <sup>57</sup> But they covered their ears, shouting out with a loud voice, and rushed at him with one intent. <sup>58</sup> When they had driven him out of the city, they began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named **Saul**. <sup>59</sup> They continued to stone Stephen while he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” <sup>60</sup> Then he fell to his knees and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” When he had said this, he died.<sup>1</sup> And **Saul agreed completely with killing him...**

Where was God during Stephen's brutal murder? RIGHT THERE. In fact, there was a BIG piece of the puzzle that we will see later in Acts. We will truly see how

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This same **Saul** later transforms from a persecutor of Jesus to a disciple of Jesus. How many times did Saul remembered THIS DAY...the day that Stephen stood in the power of the Spirit?

How are you being USED by God to further the gospel? He might not ask you to sacrifice your life, but He will ask you to sacrifice your time. The way you serve might be SIMPLE, yet VITAL. **Your obedience will make a difference** because

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## FEET2FAITH

- Surrender your life to Jesus.
- Share Jesus with a friend.
- Serve with your local church