

Acts chapters 6 to 9 form a new section in the book.

"The first five chapters of Acts have seen the establishment of the church in Jerusalem and the beginnings of opposition to it because of its preaching of Jesus. In the next main section of Acts we see the missionary work of the church beginning to expand in various ways. First, we have the story of the increase in the church in Jerusalem and its spread among Greek-speaking Jews; this led to the martyrdom of Stephen (6:1–8:3). Secondly, we have the spread of the church to Samaria (8:4–25). Thirdly, there is the conversion of an Ethiopian (8:26–40). Fourthly, there is the conversion of Saul, who was to be the most significant Christian missionary to the Gentiles (9:1–30). The Jewish persecution of Christians comes to a peak in the death of Stephen, but at the same time this incident leads to the geographical spread of the church and hence to the beginnings of witness outside the strict limits of Judaism; the ground is being prepared for the critical question of the place of non-Jews within the church" (Marshall, 132,133).

***6:1 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.***

Chapter 6 begins with the criticism about the care of the widows within the church. Widows and orphans were of particular concern to the church for they had no means of financial support (1 Tim. 5:9–16; Ja. 1:27).

Two groups of people are introduced: the Hebrews and the Hellenists. The key term in these verses is the word Hellenist. From now on this group will begin to emerge as an important part of the church.

Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews; Hebrews were Jews who spoke a Semitic language (probably Aramaic, not Hebrew), but also knew some Greek since it was the lingua franca of the eastern Mediterranean world. By contrast, the Hellenists knew little or no Aramaic. The Hebrews would be the Jews who had been living in Israel, while the Hellenistic Jews were Jews that lived in other countries as a result of the diaspora. The linguistic and cultural differences that existed between the two groups created a division that the community recognized and swiftly attempted to remedy. Specifically, there was a complaint that the Hellenistic widows were given less attention and provision from the church.

This was a fairly serious accusation for it maligned the character of God. In Deuteronomy 10:17-18 it is said that God does not show partiality, but defends the cause of the widow. In the context of tithing, God instructs Israel to give to the widow "in order that the Lord God may bless you in all the work of your hands" (Deut. 24:29). In other words, the blessing of God was contingent in part upon the way people treated widows. Deuteronomy 27:19 says that the person who distorts the justice of the widow is cursed. In the NT, James said, "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world"(Ja. 1:27). In sum, neglecting the widows was no small matter.

**6:2 And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.**

**6:3 "But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.**

**6:4 "But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word."**

The apostles immediately prioritized their duties and delegated responsibility to others. The decision they made was based upon following their call from God, not because they viewed serving others as below their dignity. They could not and should not do everything in the church lest they neglect preaching and prayer. The suggested solution was that seven men be chosen to do the task; two qualifications were given; they should be spiritual men who were accepted by others.

"Although the verb 'serve' comes from the same root as the noun which is rendered into English as 'deacon', it is noteworthy that Luke does not refer to the seven as deacons; their task had no formal name" (Marshall, 131). This is probably *not* the origin of the office of the deacon. The title is never used of the group, nor is there any evidence that the men did all the things that deacons did (Bock, 262).

**6:5 And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.**

**6:6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.**

The apostles' proposal was put before the church and it gained immediate approval. The disciples did not fragment along ethnic lines or suggest that separate communities be formed.

It was the church, not the apostles, who chose the seven. In verse 5 their names are given; they are all Greek names. Since the problem involved Hellenists, Hellenists were given the responsibility to solve it.

After they were chosen, the apostles appointed them by praying for them and placing their hands on them. "The rite indicated conferring of authority, and the accompanying prayer was for the power of the Spirit to fill the recipients" (Deut. 34:9; Marshall, 135).

In sum, this unit shows the community using its own people to solve its own problems. The community hears the complaint, owns up to the problem, allows those closest to it to solve it, delegates the authority to get it done, and then goes to work. The issue is not denied or papered over but confronted directly as a community concern. As the church was growing, it was encountering natural growing pains. It was adapting to the needs the new situation produced. The needs of the community were being met, as God was already raising up others who were qualified to meet the new challenges. So unity was maintained, and the church did not lose sight of its mission to witness, as the bridge to what follows in Acts 6-8 shows. The church continued to affirm and show its multiethnic, multicultural character, one of the potentially powerful elements of its testimony to community. . . The scene also makes clear that to solve the

community's problems, ministry must extend beyond those who are called primarily to preach. The solution of the community showed that in the midst of growth, new problems sometimes require fresh structures to cope with them. The building up of community in unity need not lead to a neglect of evangelism. These are the churches to basic missions. In fact, edification and instruction should support evangelism and lead to it (Bock, 262,263).

***6:7 And the word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.***

Verse 7 summarizes the community's growth in Jerusalem with three imperfect tense verbs: the word of God "kept on spreading," the disciples were "increasing greatly," and many priests "were becoming obedient." The word of God was being preached, and that word was bearing fruit. The church was growing. The passive tense verb "were increasing greatly" probably points to God's divine work.

"And" at the beginning of the verse connects verse 7 to what had come before. It was the result of their commitment to the word of God and prayer that the word of God spread. It was the result of the appointment of the seven that there was an increased witness of the church's unity. The result of both was that God blessed the church even more and converts were added, including many priests.

***6:8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.***

The Greek-speaking Christians began to reach out to the Jews with the Gospel. Stephen's ministry included more than serving tables; he was also effective at preaching and healing, acts which paralleled the work of the apostles. He is described as a man full of grace and power, terminology used to draw a parallel between him and the apostles (4:33). Furthermore, he was said to be full of the Holy Spirit.

***6:9 But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen.***

***6:10 And yet they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.***

***6:11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."***

Stephen's preaching stirred opposition from a group of people in the synagogues called the Synagogue of the Freedmen. The Freedmen were those who had once been prisoners of Rome, and were later granted their freedom. In verse 13 Luke clearly states that the accusations against Stephen were false. And Stephen's speech in chapter 7 proves that to be true.

God gave Stephen the wisdom to refute the arguments that were brought against him so when Stephen's opponents could not get the best of him, they induced people to bring false charges against him saying that he was blaspheming against Moses and God.

**6:12 And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and dragged him away, and brought him before the Council.**

**6:13 And they put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place, and the Law;**

**6:14 for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us."**

**6:15 And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.**

This is the first time in Acts when the people rise up against Christians and not just challenge the Christian leadership. The outcry of the Greek-speaking Jews and the anger of some of the members of the Sanhedrin resulted in the arrest of Stephen to inquire about the allegations against him. He had been accused of attacking Moses and the temple. How the law is treated is a major concern in the book of Acts. Comment about the law appears in Acts 11 regarding the question of Gentile belief, then appears in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem Council, and again in Acts 21 with the visit of Paul to Jerusalem and James.

The charges brought against Stephen were that he blasphemed God, Moses (particularly the law of Moses), and the temple. There could hardly be more serious charges.

It's not hard to imagine what Stephen had said that so angered the Jews if He was speaking about Jesus. Jesus was accused of similar sins (Lk. 21:5; Mk. 14:58; 15:29; Jn. 2:19). Jesus had said, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." Of course, He was speaking of the temple of His body and was predicting that He would replace the temple as the meeting place between God and man. On the negative side, this meant that the old temple would become obsolete and the worship that took place there would no longer be necessary. On the positive side, it meant that there would be a new fellowship with God that centered in Christ. If this is what Stephen was referring to, it's easy to see how it could be misunderstood in a negative, superficial way that brought charges against him. Likewise, in Matthew 5:17, Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill." The implication was that some were surmising that He was trying to abolish the law. Just as the Jews misunderstood Jesus, they misunderstood Stephen. Stephen was pointing beyond the temple (the type) to the antitypes in Jesus Christ. He was speaking Christologically, telling the Jews to look beyond the OT images to the realities that the images pointed to. He was teaching that the OT had a messianic trajectory. Stephen was actually for the law and the temple when seen in light of their God-given nature and purposes, but all that the people could hear was blasphemy.

When the Sanhedrin looked at Stephen, his face appeared to be the face of an angel.

It is significant to notice the way Luke describes Stephen in Acts 6. In 6:8 he is said to be "full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people." This is picked up in Acts 7:36 where Moses is said to be the one "performing wonders and signs." Likewise, the fact that Stephen's face was "like the face of an angel" makes us again think of Moses when it was said of him in Exodus 34:29 "that the skin of his face shone" from having been in the presence of God. Stephen's wisdom and

the glow in his face were tokens from God that signified that His presence was upon him. The brightness of God's countenance was shining upon him. It is the divine vindication that Stephen was God's ambassador. However, just as the Jews opposed Moses, so their children opposed Stephen. In Acts 7:51 Stephen says, "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did."

In sum, this unit shows the continued escalation of opposition to Christians. Now people on the street oppose the message. Stephen is arrested, charged with blaspheming God as well as speaking against Moses, the law, and the temple. It is hard to imagine a more devastating set of Jewish charges against someone. The charges prepare us for Stephen's speech. In Acts, the issue for Luke is who contends for God's truth and gives responsible teaching to the nation. Stephen is portrayed as calm in the midst of the charges, composed, and looking like an angel. The arrest provides the setting for the longest speech in Acts, which surveys Israel's history of poor response to God's revelation and presents a fresh view of the temple. The speech carries forward the debate about religious faith and Israel's God (Bock, 274, 275).

The importance of this section that includes Stephen's message in Chapter 7 is that it identifies the public break of Christianity from Judaism. Christianity is no longer seen as a sect of Judaism, but as the expression of the fullness of the revelation of God centered in Jesus Christ.