



Stephen and the First Deacons

Acts 6

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**This original sermon was not written by A.I.*

We're going through most of the book of Acts in our series, "Church Afire!" and I'm skipping to chapter 6. Before we get there, I want to bring you up to speed on the rest of chapter five. The Apostles continued working miracles, gaining a large following and adding to the church. The first church met regularly in Solomon's Colonnade, which was a large, covered area in the temple. The high priests and religious leaders were very jealous of this, so they threw the apostles in jail.

During the night, an angel opened the prison doors and told the Apostles to go back to the temple courts in the morning and tell of the new life in Christ. That's what they did. When the high priest and religious leaders saw that they were mysteriously let out of jail, they brought the Apostles back and told them to stop teaching the name of Jesus.

In response, the Apostles repeated something they said earlier, "we must obey God rather than men," and they preached the resurrection of Jesus to them. The religious leaders were about to have them killed, but a Pharisee named Gamaliel reminded them of previous men claiming to be the messiah, who gained large followings for a short time, only to come to nothing. And he said something quite prophetic that should encourage us today... he said, "let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourself fighting against God." So, they let them go.

A quick note Gamaliel's thought. Well, Mr. Gamaliel, here we are, two thousand years later. Christianity is the world's largest religion with over 2.5 billion people and growing. Despite all the doomsayers, Christianity cannot be stopped because God cannot be stopped. One thing that we need to rest in is that people who fight against Christianity are not actually fighting against us or the church, they're fighting against God. When you fight against God, you cannot win.

Let's open to Acts 6. This story turns toward the church. This is the beginning of the deacon ministry. Now, the deacon ministry began with a conflict in the church between the Hellenistic Jews, and the Hebraic Jews. The Hellenistic Jews were Greek speaking Jews that had come back to Jerusalem from all around the Greek world at that time. The Hebraic Jews were Hebrew speaking Jews that were native to the land. Generally, the Hebraic Jews viewed the Hellenistic Jews as second class citizens. This stereotype crept in and gravely threatened the community of the first church. Chapter 6 also introduces the deacon, Stephen. He was selected to wait on tables, but he performed miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit. Take note of that!

Let's read Acts chapter 6. (NIV)

Scripture: Acts 6

6 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. 2 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. 3 Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.

We will turn this responsibility over to them 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

7 So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

8 Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. 10 But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

11 Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.”

12 So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. 13 They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

15 All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

The New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ac 6:1–15.

This is the word of God for the people of God.

Let's pray.

I read a story about a church split in Dallas where both sides filed lawsuits to keep the church property. The judge deferred the decision to the denomination’s authorities, who then set up an internal court to hear both sides. The denominational court awarded the property to one side, and the other side left to plant its own church in the area. Well, in the course of the hearing, it was found that the conflict started when an elder was served a smaller piece of ham than the child next to him. Of course, this made it out to the newspapers, and the Lord's church was mocked by many because of it.¹ You wouldn't expect a church, especially an elder in the church, to mimic the selfishness of the world. It's tragic when the world outside hears about that kind of selfishness and they mock the Lord's church because of it.

The First Conflict In The Church

The first conflict in the early church arose between the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebraic Jews. The Hellenistic Jews felt that the Hebraic Jews were being favored in the daily distribution of food. Now, this was more than just an uneven distribution of food- this was worldly selfishness interfering with the community of the church. Favoritism crept in, and the issue at heart was the perceived inference that the Hellenistic Jews were inferior to the Hebraic Jews in the church.

¹ Hughes, R. Kent. *Acts: The Church Afire*. Preaching the Word. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996.

This was a cultural deficiency that had crept into the church— one side considering another side to be inferior. The potential to discredit Christ’s mission for the church was real. Jesus said, “they will know you are Christians by your love for one another” (Jn. 13:35). The early church was set up to be counterculture in these situations. Christians were forging a new path forward in life: a path based on sacrificial love, surrender, humility, grace, and preferring one another over your own interests. They saw Jesus wash the feet of his disciples as the pure example of humility and surrender.

Further, Jesus said, “if someone takes your coat, give them your shirt” (Lk. 6:29b). The Hellenistic Jews wanted to keep their fair share of shirts and coats, so to speak. So, both sides were not being very Christian at all. Inequity and ignorance had crept in. In fact, the church was becoming just like the world, and its credibility was threatened because of it.

The Apostles’ Solution

The solution that the apostles proposed was ingenious. Instead of stepping in and taking care of the problem themselves, they selected seven men from among the congregation. The apostles said, “it would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.”

So, first of all, they recognized that this was a spiritual issue in the church that needed dealt with through deeper prayer and greater ministry of the Word, not through their own practical action. And second, they saw that these kinds of problems were best practically dealt with through the congregation itself. Through reputable men from the congregation who were known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.

I love this way of dealing with conflict in the church because it takes away authoritarianism. It keeps reliance on God through increased prayer and more focused ministry of the Word by the pastoral leadership. They are freed up to address the spiritual issues at the root of the problem. And it places wise and spirit-filled people directly from the congregation in charge of creating and implementing practical solutions.

My friends, if the pastor is busy trying to fix every problem in the church, the spiritual leadership of the church will suffer because the pastor will have less time or no time to adequately pray and prepare for the ministry of the Word. Further, this can lead to authoritarianism because the pastor has the final say. That kind of power easily invades the human heart. Pastors are not immune to the sin of seeking power.

On the contrary, when problems or conflict arise, the church is best served by the pastor stepping back to seek God in prayer and to focus on teaching the Word of God. While the pastor is working on spiritual discipleship, the deacons work on bringing practical solutions in service to the congregation. So, the conflict is approached from two sides, spiritual and practical.

My friends, we need to see that this conflict was the birth of the deacon ministry in the church. Deacons began as a solution to a conflict. It was a conflict that threatened to take over and lessen the ministry of the word of God and prayer in the church. Think about that for a second. The deacon ministry was born out of conflict in the church that threatened spiritual discipleship. And the first deacons were chosen specifically because they were reputable; they had wisdom and the Holy Spirit. This enabled them to work out practical solutions amid conflict.

At the same time, the pastoral leadership was further enabled by the deacons to devote themselves to prayer for the church and to the ministry of the word of God. As such, they were tasked with the spiritual leadership of the church through seeking the Lord and faithfully ministering the Word amid conflict. I can guarantee that the congregation got a lot of teaching from the elders about humility, sacrificial love, surrender, and preferring others over oneself.

What I love about this is that their teaching was not just teaching without examples of practical application. The deacons were commissioned by the Lord for practical service amid conflict. So, spiritual teaching about conflict by the Apostles came in tandem with the deacons serving the church in practical ways to solve the conflict.

My prayer is that our church can find this kind of balance in how we deal with the problems that arise. And I have to tell you; it is not easy for me to step back and devote more prayer and more ministry of the Word in place of wanting to get my hands into every problem. I think this is a very good word for me, for us, and this church.

This passage helps us understand the ministry of the deacons. I said this before, but the deacons are like the boots on the ground, and the elders and pastors are like the support from the air. The support from the air is prayer, the ministry of the word, and spiritual discipleship. The boots on the ground are practical solutions from wise spirit-filled deacons who unselfishly serve the church and help to solve practical problems. Amen?

Stephen the Deacon

Now let's turn our attention to Stephen, one of the appointed deacons. If you are a deacon, or are thinking about becoming a deacon, you should love this story. Alright, not because Stephen's service was short-lived. He was stoned to death before he even got started. You should love this story because Stephen, as an appointed deacon selected to serve tables, was just as spiritually powerful and amply anointed as the apostles.

Verse 8 says Stephen was a man full of God's grace and power; he performed great wonders and signs among the people. He was a miracle worker just like the apostles. He had the same measure of the Holy Spirit's power as the pastoral leadership of the church. He had such wisdom in preaching that even the Jewish teachers of the law could not stand up against him. Yet he was a deacon selected to serve the church by doing practical service, such as setting up and breaking down tables, serving food, and keeping the peace between the Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews. I would call him a super Christian!

Hal the Maintenance Supervisor

Stephen reminds me of one of my supervisors way back in my first job at a church. Before I got into full-time ministry as a missionary, I had the privilege of working in maintenance. On the maintenance crew, my supervisor was a dear man named Hal Lawler. He tragically passed away from asbestos exposure recently.

I loved Hal so much. He was not a deacon in the traditional sense, but in the spirit, he was a deacon. He faithfully served the church in every practical sense. In maintenance, making repairs, building things, replacing wax rings in the toilets, stripping the wax from the bathroom floors

and re-waxing— we painted the church walls side-by-side. He did it all, and I learned a lot from him. The greatest thing about Hal was the spiritual maturity that he had. He was spiritually wise, full of integrity, and a great teacher of the Word in his own right.

I remember distinctly one time, we were in the church van heading to an offsite storage unit, and we came upon a couple of women walking down the sidewalk. Now, I had just come out of a job working at an auto dealership alongside mechanics. And if you know that atmosphere, mechanics and auto shops are not the most holy places. I was used to seeing a worldly kind of reaction to women from the older men that I worked with. I'll never forget this, as we were passing these women by, Hal flung his head in the other direction. He refused to ogle at them. He completely looked the other way. His actions spoke of his integrity and spiritual maturity. He wanted to give a great example to this young kid sitting in the passenger seat watching and learning from him.

For Hal, practical service for the church was not about non-spiritual tasks. He merged his integrity and responsibility for discipleship to his practical work for the church. He was always clear in teaching me through his actions that just because you clean toilets doesn't mean that you fudge on being a true disciple of Christ.

Practical Service Doesn't Exempt Spiritual Service

Stephen was that type of man. He was tasked with non-spiritual tasks as a deacon, but he took his spirituality seriously. He took his faith seriously. As a result, the Lord used him powerfully in performing miracles, healing people, and preaching the Word with wisdom.

My friends maybe some of you here, whether you're a deacon or not, feel that you are called only to practical work. Maybe you feel most comfortable only serving the church in practical ways, but you don't see how you would take up any form of discipling someone. Or maybe you feel that about your occupation outside the church right now. You might feel called to support the church in material or practical ways, but you don't feel a call to disciple people. You don't feel God has called you to be a spiritual leader.

Well, I think the story about Stephen is meant to give us an example. Stephen teaches us that the calling of practical work does not mean you cannot be called to pastoral kinds of ministries. It does not mean that you cannot be a powerful, Spirit-filled teacher of the word of God, or someone who can bring healing and wholeness to brokenness. It does not mean that you cannot be anointed by the Holy Spirit with the power to do great and mighty works for the Lord.

I want to encourage all to be like Stephen. Be like Hal. You might not be called to pastoral leadership in a church, but the Lord can fill you with the power of his Spirit and wisdom to be just as spiritually influential as any anointed pastor. I especially want the deacons of our church to hear this message. You are called to practical service, but the Holy Spirit can work through you just as strong as he can work through any pastor. Amen.

Three Key Takeaways

In closing, here are three key points from this sermon:

What God begins, opposition cannot stop.

From Acts 5, the apostles are imprisoned, threatened, and opposed—but God keeps opening doors. Gamaliel’s words prove true: if a work is from God, it cannot be overthrown. Two thousand years later, the unstoppable growth of the church testifies that people who fight against the church are ultimately fighting against God—and God always wins.

Conflict in the church must be handled spiritually and practically.

Acts 6 shows that conflict is inevitable when the church grows, but how it is handled determines whether the church’s witness is strengthened or damaged. The apostles respond wisely: they devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word, while Spirit-filled, reputable believers address the practical need. This balance guards against favoritism, authoritarianism, and spiritual neglect—and allows the Word of God to continue spreading.

There is no such thing as “non-spiritual” service in God’s church.

Stephen proves that practical service and spiritual power are not opposites. Though chosen to serve tables, he was full of the Holy Spirit, wisdom, grace, and power. God uses deacons—and all faithful servants—not just to meet practical needs, but to advance His kingdom through bold witness, integrity, and Spirit-filled influence. Every believer, regardless of role, is called to deep discipleship and spiritual impact.

Let’s pray.

<p style="text-align: center;">Study Questions <i>Read Acts 6</i></p>
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Observation Questions (*What does the text say?*)

1. What was the primary conflict between the Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews?
2. How did the apostles decide to address the issue of food distribution?
3. Who was chosen as one of the first deacons, and what was he known for?
4. What opposition did Stephen face after being appointed as a deacon?

Interpretation Questions (*What does the text mean?*)

1. Why did the apostles prioritize the ministry of the Word over other tasks?
2. What does the selection of the deacons reveal about the early church's values?
3. How does Stephen's story illustrate the power of the Holy Spirit?
4. Even though the Apostles focused on the ministry of the Word, what does Stephen's preaching the Word inform about the Deacon ministry?

Application Questions (*How should we respond?*)

1. How can we apply the apostles' solution to modern church conflicts?
2. In what ways can spiritual and practical services complement each other today?
3. How can Stephen's example inspire us in our roles within the church?
4. What steps can we take to ensure all church members feel valued and included?