

## ACTS 6-9

**1)** The apostles choose an additional 7 leaders to be responsible for the practical and spiritual needs of the 'Hellenists' (Greek-speaking Jews) living in Jerusalem.

- Even though these 7 are supposed to be responsible for the practical needs of a growing body of believers, at least 2 among them (Stephen and Philip) also become compelling evangelists in their own right, bridging the communication gap between the local Aramaic language (among Hebrews) and the Greek language (universal language of the time).

**2)** Stephen (one of the 7) proclaims the gospel (good news) about Jesus very persuasively in one of the Greek-speaking synagogues in Jerusalem, so much so, that he is seen both as a threat and a blasphemer. He is taken outside and stoned to death. The leader of that synagogue and the one who gives official permission for the stoning, is Saul (or Paul in Greek).

- The accusations against Stephen and the contents of his sermon, reveal: 1) a questioning of the necessity of the temple and a prediction of its destruction. God is not bound by location or laws (7:48ff). Stephen also traces scriptural prophecies pointing to the Messiah (being 'raised') all the way back to Moses' teaching (7:37ff), and he accuses the leaders and the Jewish people as a whole of having been resistant to God's prophets and leaders all the way back to the patriarchs. He is undermining the foundations of the traditional Jewish faith and questioning the faithfulness of the people. No wonder he is a threat.

- As he is being stoned to death, he follows Jesus' dying witness according to Luke's crucifixion account by doing 2 things: 1) praying for the forgiveness of his killers, and 2) committing his spirit into God's eternal care (see Luke 23: 34,46).

**3)** That day a persecution begins against all Christians, and especially against non-citizens of Jerusalem (Greek-speaking Jews who were not necessarily permanent residents). Among them is another one of the 7 new appointees - Philip. He goes to Samaria and proclaims the gospel there. Having such a great response, Peter and John also go down to check out for themselves what is going on. Rather than reprimand Philip for operating outside of their authority or commission, Peter and John support what Philip has done and finish what he has begun by laying hands on the new believers. The Holy Spirit also comes upon them (the same Spirit that has been moving among believers in Jerusalem).

Philip then comes face to face with a Gentile proselyte (a non-Jew who has adopted the Jewish faith) and guides them (a eunuch is neither strictly male nor female) into the fold. He also baptizes them. This previews what will become manifest among the gentiles later on - namely, a receptive faith in the gospel of Jesus as the Christ (messiah). It also points to an ever-expanding inclusive movement of the Spirit well beyond anything the early church could have imagined.

The wind and flame of the Spirit is spreading. How will the church respond?

- Unlike Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, Simon the magician is given the chance to repent of his dishonest ways in being part of the believers' fellowship.

- Even though there is a lag of time between the Samaritans believing the gospel and receiving the Holy Spirit, (and this, because the apostles seem to have the authority to pass on the 'full' gospel), this does not continue to be the case as things progress in the church.

- The Ethiopian Eunuch is reading a passage from Isaiah very central to the early church's understanding of the uniqueness of Jesus' way as a 'suffering' messiah. It was the perfect springboard for Philip to teach them about Jesus as the one. As the Eunuch may have known suffering in their life and rejection for being who they are, they discover in Jesus a God who suffers with them and whose compassion resurrects new life. The sign of the Spirit in them is a heart-felt "rejoicing" in the Spirit after they are baptized. The apostles don't need to come and finish the job this time.

- Philip disappears from them the same way as Jesus disappeared from the two disciples on their way to Emmaus (in Luke's account of the resurrection appearances of Jesus (Luke 24)). Philip has now become the hands, feet, voice and heart of the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit just like Peter, John and the other apostles have.

**4)** Saul realizes that the disease of false religion has not been curbed with the stoning of Stephen, and so takes it upon himself to follow its trail beginning with rooting them out in Damascus (present day Syria just north of Israel). On the way, however, he has some kind of breakdown and some kind of encounter with the risen Christ. He is converted to 'the way' he has been trying to stamp out, and it takes time for believers to trust that he is not a spy among them. Paul will understand his vision of Christ as equally legitimate as any physical encounter with the risen Christ other apostles like Peter will claim.

**5)** As Paul's ministry is beginning, Peter's reaches new heights, especially in the kinds of healing he performs. He heals a paralytic and resuscitates a dead woman, emulating Jesus' ministry and representing his authority. Jesus is alive and active through the hands, feet, voice and heart of the apostles and the church in the power of the Holy Spirit. What about us here and now, you and me? Are we ready to embrace our new identity as and the hands, feet, voice and heart of Jesus within our sphere of relations, engagement and opportunity? Healing is not necessarily dramatic, but the steady, compassionate care we offer, the listening ear, the generous help, the hospitality of friendship and even the mundane day to day tasks done with a heart full of gratitude. This is all the Holy Spirit of Jesus alive and active through us, creating kingdom networks in anticipation of the fuller kingdom of God to come.

