

Acts 6

A. Growing pains (6:1-6)

Illus – growing pain in kids

1. The complaint

Acts 6:1 *"And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations."*

a. Church growth

Church growing shows effectiveness of the witness of the disciples and the church.

Church growth was also the cause of problems.

b. Against the Hebrews by the Hellenists:

The **Hebrews** were those Jews more inclined to embrace Jewish culture and were mostly from Judea.

The **Hellenists** were those Jews more inclined to embrace Greek culture and mostly were from the *Diaspora* (from all over the Roman Empire).

To oversimplify, **Hebrews** tended to regard **Hellenists** as unspiritual compromisers with Greek culture, **Hellenists** regarded **Hebrews** as holier-than-thou traditionalists. There was already a natural suspicion between the two groups.

- c. Existence of both synagogues and Temple in Jerusalem.

2. The resolution - Deacons

v2-4 *Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave*

the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

- a. **It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables:** The apostles explained that they should remain faithful to their central calling, which was prayer and to the ministry of the word. Does not reflect any superiority complex, but rather need for delegation of tasks for efficiency.

Serving tables: could mean serving food and also monetary matters.

- b. **Seek out from among you:** democratizing the process. Inviting more talents and people to the task and giving responsibilities.

Responsibility also inspires owning up the organization.

They didn't throw the complainers out. They didn't divide into two congregations. They didn't shun the unhappy people. They didn't form a committee and discuss the problem to death.

- c. **Of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom:** the task was for a church. not to be considered menial or insignificant.

Good reputation – good opinion among believers on their character

Full of the Holy Spirit – Holy Spirit upon not just the apostles but the whole church. these people's lives and character showed the working of the Holy Spirit.

Wisdom – maturity for the task given by God. In the Bible, wisdom comes only from God.

3. (5-6) The selection of deacons.

And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

Stephen... Philip, Prochorus: The seven men all had Greek names, indicating that they were probably Hellenists themselves. The people (and the apostles) showed great sensitivity to the offended Hellenists by appointing Hellenists to take care of the widows' distribution.

Laying on of hands – symbol of passing of authority, blessing, Holy Spirit.

Stephen, Philip – mentioned first by Luke as a precursor to their ministry in the following chapters.

4. good result

v7 - Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

- a. One of Luke's periodic statements summarizing the growth of the church and the spread of the gospel (2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14 and in further chapters too)
- b. Priests who came to the faith as opposed to the High Priest who persecuted them
Perhaps the teaching, witnessing, signs and wonders and especially ministry to widows showed them that this was now the religion God preferred.

Emphases

1. Duty of taking care of the disadvantaged was a duty of the church, not neglected for the sake of teaching and worship. 1 timothy 5 shows Paul's instruction on providing for widows.
2. Church was taking care of its own widows. That shows that church was becoming an independent organization with proper structure and functioning.
3. Laying on of hands
4. God calls the best for ministry.
5. Ready to innovate

Question for reflection

Can we see various groups in the church today? How does the Holy Spirit equip the pastor and the people to minister to the unique needs of each group?

What can we learn from the apostles about their style of resolving a conflict that could have broken their church?

B. Stephen's witness and arrest.

1. (8-10) Stephen's witness for God.

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.

a. Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people:

not just serving but teaching and witnessing ministry with signs and wonders. Does the work of apostles.

b. Disputing with Stephen:

He must have preached to Hellenistic Jews in the Synagogues whereas the apostles kept to the Temple courts. That is possibly how he was isolated from the rest of the apostles. The rest of the apostles continued teaching in Temple, unhindered by the threats of the Jewish council, and without violence because of the council of Gamaliel to leave them alone. Whereas Stephen preached to the Hellenistic Jews who were antagonized by his arguments.

It seems that this verse describes 3 synagogues: The Synagogue of the Freedmen, a second composed of Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and a third composed of those from Cilicia and Asia. Cultural and linguistic differences among the 3 groups make it unlikely that all attended the same synagogue.

“Synagogue”: These were meeting places which began in the intertestamental period where the dispersed Jews (usually Hellenists), who did not have temple access, could meet in their community to worship and read the Old Testament

Freedmen or “Libertines”: Descendants of Jewish slaves captured by Pompey (63 B.C., siege of Jerusalem), and taken to Rome. They were later freed and formed a Jewish community there.

“Cyrenians”: Men from Cyrene, a city in North Africa. Simon, the man conscripted to carry Jesus' cross, was a native of Cyrene (Luke 23:26).

“Alexandrians”: Alexandria, another major North African city, was located near the mouth of the Nile River.

“Cilicia and of Asia”: Roman provinces in Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Since Paul's hometown (Tarsus) was located in Cilicia, he probably attended this synagogue.

2. (11-14) The opposing Jews, defeated in debate, induce false accusations against Stephen.

Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon *him*, seized him, and brought *him* to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, “This man

does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.”

When words prove ineffective and arguments fail, desperate men turn to more desperate measures. They induced some who claimed that they heard Stephen, “speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God,” (Acts 6:11).

In OT, Ahab and Jezebel similarly accused Naboth of “cursing God and the king” because they wanted his property (see 1 Kings 21:1-16). So, this blasphemy law was often used as a tool by the corrupt and the powerful.

Illustration – blasphemy law in Pakistan, sedition law in India.

The enemies of the gospel had twisted Jesus’ words when they accused Him and so, too, did the enemies of the gospel who opposed Stephen.

verses 6:11-13: Stephen is falsely accused of blaspheming in three areas:

(1) “God” (verse 11);

(2) “Moses” or “the law” (verses 11, 13); and

(3) The temple (verse 13).

Stephen answers these charges in his sermon.

3. (15) Stephen’s countenance when accused.

The description is of a person who is close to God and reflects some of His glory as a result of being in his presence (Exodus 34:29ff).

The face of an angel also means that Stephen was at perfect peace. His face was not filled with fear or terror, because he knew his life was in God’s hands and that Jesus never forsakes His people.

Emphases

Parallels between the trials of Jesus and his disciples