

The Acts of the Apostles

LESSON 12

The Choosing of Appointed Servants (Acts 6:1-7)

Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution. 2 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. 3 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; 4 but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 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, 6 whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them. 7 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.

As the Early Church grew, it experienced common challenges associated with growth. The more people you have, the more challenges you have. Unfortunately, in most cases we do not take the challenges seriously until there is significant murmuring.

Many of the needs of the people were being neglected. This passage says that the Hellenists (Jews from the dispersion) were complaining against the Hebrews because their widows were neglected. They felt the neglect was an ethnic thing. The truth of the matter is that all the widows were being neglected.

God's heart has always been for His people to consider the poor (Deut. 15:7- 11). God has always encouraged His people to consider the widows and orphans (Jam. 1:27). As a result, the Early Church felt a sense of obligation to provide for these needs (I Tim. 5:3, 9, 10, 16).

The primary call of the leadership was being neglected. They were neglecting prayer. They were neglecting their preparation in the Word of God (I Tim. 4:15-16; II Tim. 4:2).

Prayer and the Word are two of the four keys of the Kingdom and not something that you want to neglect.

As the Early Church grew, it had to respond to the challenges of growth. This involved delegation of responsibilities. The only way to meet the demands of a growing work is to bring more people into the work. Bringing others into the work is not "using" people; it is training people and releasing people.

This involved prioritizing responsibilities. Those in leadership need to understand what is to be their primary focus. The general rule is that if someone else can do it, someone

else should be doing it.

When the disciples indicated that, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables” they were not being proud. Because they were not proud but had a servant spirit, they were in fact trying to do the work up to that point.

This involved the development of clear job descriptions. It is important to point out that these individuals were not placed over the administration or the budget of the local church, but they were placed over the ministry of the local church to the poor and needy. The oversight of the church always remained with the apostles and elders.

As the Early Church grew, other servant leaders needed to be added to the team. These leaders needed to be servant leaders who had the same qualities as the disciples of Jesus.

- They needed to be people of a good reputation.
- They needed to be people of wisdom in dealing with people.
- They needed to be people of faith.
- They needed to be people who were full of the Holy Spirit (not just good administrators).

“Even mundane duties must not be done by mundane men but by spiritual men.” --Guthrie

On a side note, it is interesting to note the names of the individuals whom the church leaders placed over this ministry. All the seven names listed are Hellenist names. It was the Hellenists who were complaining that their widows were neglected implying that the Hebrews were more concerned over their own widows. This appointment would diffuse any future concern over the same issue.

Two significant appointments who would become key players in the Book of Acts were Stephen and Philip.

As the Early Church responded to the challenges of growth, the results were evident. The needs of the widows were met, the congregation was in unity over the decision (that is, the murmuring ceased), the word of God spread, and there was a new release of harvest.

God will not put more people in our hands unless we take care of the ones He was already entrusted to us.

There was a higher level of preaching. Even the trained religious leaders of the day were taking notice and responding to the preaching of the “ignorant” fishermen. There is no short cut to revelation. For more teaching on the actual installation of these ministries refer to the course Local Church, Lesson 17.

The Ministry and Arrest of Stephen (Acts 6:8-15)

And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. 9 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen. 10 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. 11 Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." 12 And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. 13 They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; 14 for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us." 15 And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

All these charges against a man who looks like an angel. Stephen is an example of someone who understood the principle of advancement (Luke 16:10-12).

He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore, if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?

His first focus was on becoming an example believer (Refer to the qualifications that he met). His second focus was to be a servant wherever needed (Eccl. 9:10).

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.

His final focus was the ministry to which he was called. Stephen is an example of someone who functioned well at the place in which he found himself (I Tim. 3:13).

For those who have served well...obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

He was willing to go above and beyond his actual job description (excellence). He was willing to be led by the Holy Spirit and wisdom in all that he did. He was willing to step out in faith at the leading of the Lord (Acts 6:5, 8). He was willing to trust his promotion to the Lord (Ps. 75:6).

Stephen is an example of someone who was willing to give all for the sake of the cause of Christ (Acts 7:59-60). Stephen is an example of someone who fell to the ground and died but in doing so produced much fruit (John 12:24-26).

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and

dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honor.

We will refer to this later.

The Defense of Stephen (Acts 7:1-53)

Stephen had two main charges leveled against him (Acts 6:13). Charges were made against him related to statements he had made concerning the Law of Moses. He had evidently made statements that were interpreted by some as taking a light view of the Law of Moses, indicating that it was a temporary thing which was to be absorbed into and superseded by a spiritual and enduring order.

Whenever anyone made such implications against Moses, the Pharisees and the Sadducees got together to crush the movement (Acts 6:11, 13-14; John 9:28-29). Charges were made against him concerning statements he had made concerning temple worship.

He was evidently making statements about temple worship that seemed to others to take a light view of “this holy place.” He must have been insisting on the spirituality of true worship, the temporary nature of the Jewish law and the non-essential aspect of locality in worship.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were sensitive on this point also. Jesus had said, “One greater than the temple is here” (Mt. 12:5-6; John 2:18-21).

Stephen would use history to argue his case for him. At first glance Stephen’s speech seems to give no answer to the charges against him. A closer look indicates otherwise. Stephen was going to use history to do the work of arguing.

Stephen presented three main lines of argument from history.

There had been true worship before the temple was ever built. Abraham had a visitation from the God of glory even before circumcision and before they had the land (Acts 7:2-8). Moses had a visitation from God at the burning bush upon “holy” ground (Acts 7:31-36). The Children of Israel met with God in the Tabernacle in the wilderness (Acts 7:44-46). Solomon built a temple for God but acknowledged that it could not contain God (Acts 7:47-50).

From all this Stephen implied that locality was not the essence of worship, and that he was not to be found guilty of blasphemy for what he had said regarding the temple.

There had been a progressive revelation of truth throughout history. Stephen indicated that throughout their history God had moved progressively and that it should not seem strange that a better and greater thing was being introduced that would take the place of the old.

- Abraham’s call had progressed from Chaldee to Canaan (Acts 7:4-5).
- Moses moved from Egypt to Sinai and the tabernacle (Acts 7:37-44).
- The Israelites moved from the wilderness into the Promised Land under Joshua (Acts 7:44-46).

At the introduction of each of these things something greater was promised. With Abraham it was the promise of a permanent possession (Acts 7:5-6). With Moses it was the promise of a greater prophet (Acts 7:37).

Their history had been characterized by the fact that they always rejected God's true worship and God's true servants who had been sent to them. They had despised, resisted and even murdered those whom God had chosen and appointed to be their leaders. They had done this with the following:

- Joseph (Acts 7:9-13)
- Moses (Acts 7:25-28, 35, 38-39)
- True Worship (Acts 7:40-43)
- The Prophets (Acts 7:51-52)
- Christ (Acts 7:52-53)
- And now, Stephen (implied)

Now they were fully exposed. They were cut to the heart. They responded as predicted.

The Death of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60)

When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed at him with their teeth. 55 But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, 56 and said, "Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" 57 Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; 58 and they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 And they stoned Stephen as he was calling on God and saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

There are three important lessons that we can learn from the death of Stephen.

When we hold fast to the truth, we will provoke the antagonism of others. Holiness repels sin. Love repels selfishness. Sooner or later the followers of one will come into collision with the followers of the other. In the proportion that we manifest Christ's Spirit we shall provoke the enmity of those who crucified Him.

The glorified Redeemer takes great interest in the suffering of His followers. In the hour of Stephen's deepest extremity, Christ was there to give grace and support. The disciples may have abandoned Jesus, but He would not abandon a disciple. Jesus was seen standing. Standing speaks of two things. It speaks of dignity and respect. It also speaks of judgment and vindication.

Words which seem to be in vain are not always fruitless. Stephen's argument seems to have been lost. It did not save his own life. But Stephen became the grain of wheat that fell to the ground and died producing much fruit.

The life of Stephen has great significance in the history of the Early Church. Stephen appears to have been off to a great ministry of signs and wonders. Did his ministry die when he died? No! His mantle was passed to Saul, the one holding the mantles or coats of those who stoned Stephen (Acts 7:58).

Stephen's ministry had been to the non-Jewish community (Acts 6:9). Stephen had a ministry in signs and wonders (Acts 6:8). Stephen gave in seed form the message that Paul would later develop. Stephen's message became the foundation for ministry to the Gentiles and the entire book of Hebrews. Paul's doctrine came from those seeds. Paul used Stephen's quotation on God's dwelling (Acts 7:48; 17:24). Paul expanded Stephen's revelation on the circumcision of the heart (Acts 7:51; Rom. 2:29).

Paul seems to have begun where Stephen left off, with a revelation or vision of Jesus. Paul must have been the source of the information contained in this account for Luke to be able to write it.

It is doubtful that any other Christians were on the scene during the stoning of Stephen. The devout men that buried Stephen were most likely Jews who did not agree with such mob action. At this time Rome had suspended the right of the Jews to put anyone to death. This is why they had to go through the authorities to get rid of Jesus.

Paul's last words were like that of Stephen (II Tim. 4:16-18).

At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them. But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear. Also, I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen!

Stephen came to a peaceful end even though violence was all around him. And when he had said this, he fell asleep. Acts 7:60b. The death of saints is often presented as falling asleep (John 11:11-12; I Cor. 11:30; 15:51; I Th. 4:14; 5:10). This is not to suggest "soul-sleep" but rather the peaceful nature of the transition to the next world. The body, in a sense, sleeps while Stephen committed his spirit to the Lord (Acts 7:59). The body will be awakened at the last trump (Mt. 24:31; I Cor. 15:52; I Th. 4:16).