

...seven men of good repute full of the Spirit and of wisdom...



Parnenas Nicolas Philip Stephen Timon Nicanor Procorus

Acts 6

Seven are Chosen to Serve and The Arrest of Stephen



Last week...



LOOKING
BACK...

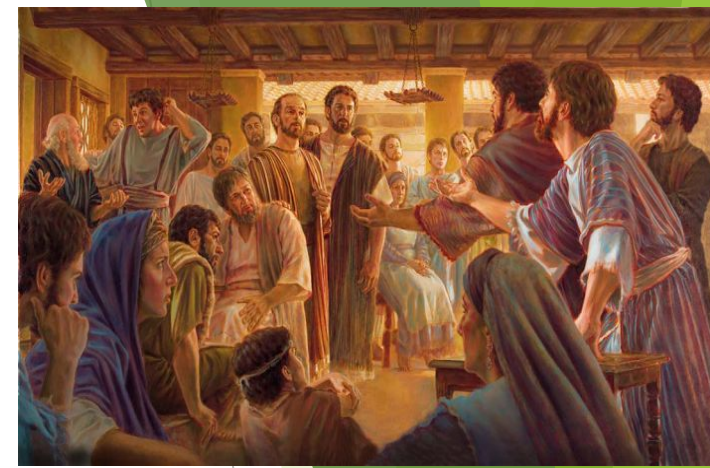
Ananias and Sapphira drop dead suddenly after lying to the Spirit-filled Apostles about a charitable gift to the community.

The Apostles continue to preach the Word and the message of the life death and resurrection of Jesus. They are arrested again.

A wise man named Gamaliel addresses the Sanhedrin and advises that they should leave these men alone. If their activity is of human origin it will “destroy itself. But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them; you may even find yourselves fighting against God.”

The Apostles were flogged but then released.

The community grows, But not without some growing pains!



- ▶ **Acts 6:1** At that time, as the number of disciples continued to grow, the **Hellenists** complained against the **Hebrews** because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.
- ▶ No community is perfect. We see that both the growing numbers of members in the community as well as differences in **socio-economic status, culture, and language** causes problems. The problems are both practical and prejudicial in nature.

A Transitioning Church

Earlier accounts of the Jerusalem Jewish-Christians show a community of “**one in heart and mind.**”

Then we saw persecution from the authorities.

Here we see difficulties and frustrations *from within* the community.

These new problems threaten the unity within the church community.

What does “church” mean?

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew term (*qahal*) meant simply 'assembly' and could be used in a variety of ways, referring for example to an assembling of prophets (1 Sam. 19:20), soldiers (Num. 22:4), or the people of God (Deut. 9:10). The use of the term in the Old Testament in referring to the ***people of God*** is important for understanding the term 'church' in the New Testament.

The Greek term for ***church*** was used more than one hundred times in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (The Septuagint), and was in common use in the time of Jesus.

“Church” in the first century

- ▶ “Church” is the English translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*.
- ▶ The Greek term which basically means '*called out*' was commonly used to indicate an *assembly of citizens*.
- ▶ When the early Christians understood themselves as constituting a “church”, they perceived themselves as **called out by God, in Jesus Christ, for a special purpose** and that their status was a privileged one in Jesus Christ.

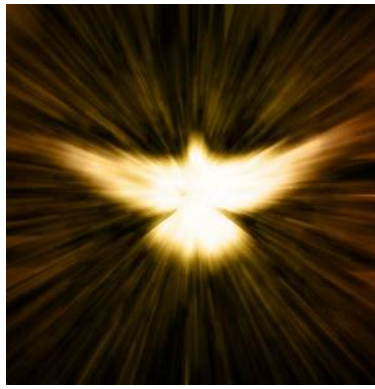
Church in the early days of Christianity

- ▶ Acts is describing the origins of our faith and “Church”.
- ▶ In these early chapters the Apostles and their disciples understand themselves to be Jews.
- ▶ They are Jews who believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, and Son of Man. They believe that Jesus will return. They believe in the Resurrection. They meet daily in the Temple and celebrate the Jewish Holy Days and Feast Days.
- ▶ The Church is the community that gathers together to break bread, give thanks, pray, worship and study at the feet of the Apostles. *Not* in a dedicated building, but in the homes of other Jewish-Christians (at this time in history).

Difficulties between Hellenists and Hebrews?

- ▶ The entire **New Testament** was written in koine Greek language. This was the international language of the first century world.
- ▶ **Hellenism** is a term used for the widespread use of Greek language and influence on the world after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC.
- ▶ Greek continued to be spoken after the Roman conquest and gradually became the primary language of the Eastern, later Byzantine, Empire.
- ▶ So, there was tension between the Aramaic and Hebrew speaking members of the Church and those who spoke mostly Greek.

Acts 6:2-5



So the Twelve called together the community of the disciples and said, “It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to **serve at table**.”

³ Brothers, select from among you **seven reputable men**, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task, ⁴ whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” ⁵ **The proposal was acceptable to the whole community!**

More likely this involves an administrative type of service to the poor, managing the money etc.

Why 7 men? 7 men were used as judges to administer justice in each city.

Success! Unity is restored and the poorest of society will be cared for.

The Solution to the problem..

- ▶ With unity of the church at risk, no doubt the Holy Spirit supplied wisdom and good judgment to Peter.
- ▶ What were the requirements for these first deacons?
 - ▶ They had to be reputable- of good character and trusted
 - ▶ They needed to be wise and “filled with the Spirit”.
 - ▶ Stephen was “full of faith” as well.
 - ▶ They were prayed over, ordained and blessed, by “laying on of hands” by the Apostles.




Who were these men chosen to be the first deacons?

- ▶ All 7 have Greek names!
- ▶ **Stephen**- full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and wise, his name means wreath of laurel or crown. (a victor)
- ▶ **Philip** - in Acts 21 we see he is called an “evangelist”. He is the father of 4 unmarried daughters who all are able to prophesy.
- ▶ **Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolaus**, a proselyte of Antioch. Little is known of these men. They may or may not have been Hebrews with Greek names. Nicolaus is a proselyte, or new convert to Judaism.

The community continues to grow!

Acts 6:7

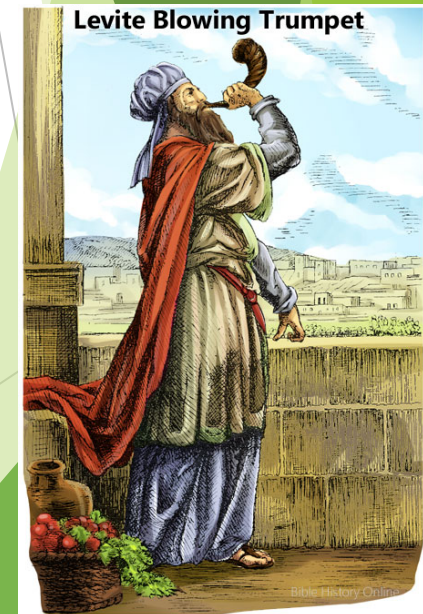
- ▶ The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly; even a large group of priests were becoming obedient to the faith.
- ▶ Priests became obedient to the faith?
- ▶ These would have been members of priestly families, or Levites. Some of these may have been serving in the Temple!



This is another miracle!

Priests and Levites in the first century

- ▶ Priests occupied an important and mostly well-regarded position in ancient Jewish society: they were trained not only in religious matters but also in Jewish law, literature, and tradition. In order to become a priest, one had to be the son of a priest and be pure in mind and body.
- ▶ Levites were similar to priests in that they were a hereditary order and they worked in the temple. Levites were not regarded as highly as priests for most of the Second Temple period (539 B.C.E.-70 C.E.); they are often described as a lower-level priesthood.



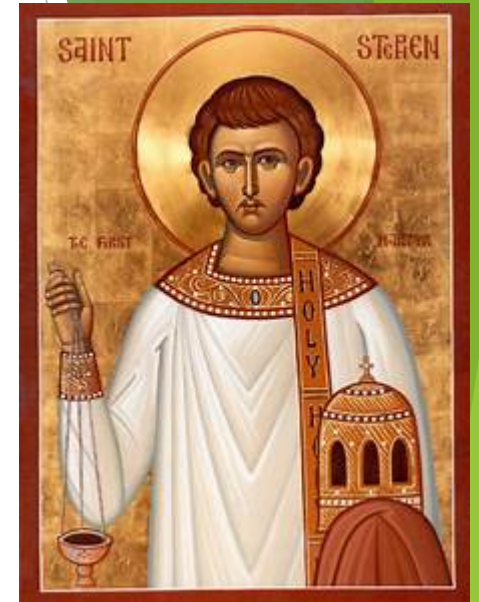
Acts 6: 8-10

- ▶ Now Stephen, filled with grace and power, was working ***great wonders and signs*** among the people. ⁹ Certain members of the so-called Synagogue of Freedmen, Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and people from Cilicia and Asia, came forward and debated with Stephen, ¹⁰ but they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit with which he spoke.



Stephen

- ▶ Stephen is never depicted as *waiting on tables*. He seems to be engaged in ministry of the word and in healing/miracles.
- ▶ Here he is debating with Jews in Jerusalem but clearly is a master at apologetics. He defends the Christian beliefs.
- ▶ For his efforts, he is summoned before the same religious leaders who had imprisoned Peter and John and had ordered them to be flogged.



Who are these people debating with Stephen?


- ▶ These men from the “Synagogue of Freedmen” were originally Jews from Italy. They had settled in Jerusalem and they had their own synagogue. Some are from Pompeii, and are **emancipated slaves or descendants** from slaves.
- ▶ Cyrenians and Alexandrians are from Northern Africa.
- ▶ Cilicia is in SE Turkey, or Asia Minor. Asia is the Eastern most province of the Roman Empire..
- ▶ None of them could win a debate against Stephen when it came to faith and Christian beliefs.

Acts 6:11-14

- ▶ ¹¹ Then they instigated some men to say, “We have heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God.” ¹² They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes, accosted him, seized him, and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³ They presented false witnesses who testified, “This man never stops saying things against [this] holy place and the law. ¹⁴ For we have heard him claim that this Jesus the Nazorean will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us.”

What are the accusations against Stephen?

- ▶ 1. Uttering blasphemous words against Moses and against God.
- ▶ **Blasphemy** against the Lord is punishable by death. It means cursing His name or insulting or showing contempt or lack of reverence for God. Blasphemy against Moses does not have the same weight. It might fall under the law against cursing a ruler of your people. (Ex 22:27)
- ▶ 2. “Jesus the Nazorean will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us.”



For the death penalty, one must say the name of God in the curse.

His accusers

- ▶ Not only the Hellenists, but false witnesses and members of the Sanhedrin testify against Stephen.
- ▶ ¹⁵ All those who sat in the Sanhedrin looked intently at him and saw that his face was *like the face of an angel*.
- ▶ St. John Chrysostom commented on this verse saying: “It was grace... I think God clothed him in this splendor because perhaps he had something to say, and in order that his very appearance would strike terror into them. For it is possible, very possible, for figures full of heavenly grace to be attractive to friendly eyes and terrifying to the eyes of enemies.”

Acts 7:1

- ▶ ¹ Then the high priest asked, “Is this so?”



Next week
Stephen's
response to the
Sanhedrin and his
fate.

Summary

- ▶ The Church, in Acts 6, is still a community of Jewish Christians. They attend high holy days at the Temple. They are meeting in the Temple Portico to hear the Apostles Teach. They share their gifts with the community to support the poor, widows, aliens, and orphans among them. They meet in homes to break bread for the Eucharist.
- ▶ Their numbers have grown so large that 12 Apostles can not do all there is to do to spread the Word of Jesus and also manage efficiently the charitable gifts. Seven deacons have been ordained to carry on some of these tasks.
- ▶ Stephen and Philip are among these 7 men.
- ▶ Stephen is later accused of blasphemy against both Moses and God.
- ▶ At the end of chapter 6, he stands before the High Priest²¹.

Let us pray

Dear Father, We thank you for your love. We thank you for the blessing of church, of being one body, and the joy of unity. Please be with us all as we go out from this place. Root the clarity of your Word and the beauty of your message deep in our hearts.

Lord, come and keep the rhythm of worship and prayer alive in our minds, And the prayers of our brothers and sisters safe in our hearts. Amen.