



What problems do you see for Church growth as we come out of Covid? Can you think of ways to resolve these problems?
Do we confine or limit God? In what ways?
Can you recite any words of Scripture? Would you commit to learning two Bible verse a week?

Last week, in Acts 5, we were reminded of the importance of honesty and integrity, the continued growth of the early church and the miraculous healings that occurred. There was also persecution of the apostles, their arrest, appearance before the Sanhedrin and resulting punishment. Yet they retained their fervour to preach and teach the good news of Jesus Christ. This week we have a lot of ground to cover as well, and our focus is on Stephen, an early Christian who had a tremendous testimony in the church, was a powerful preacher and witness, and was willing to die for his faith.

I thank God daily for the deacons of our church who are willing to give of themselves freely to ... servant tasks and ministries of mercy that become increasingly more pressing in our minds.²

R C Sproul

- The chapter begins with the first of two progress reports. We are told that the number of disciples was increasing – the early church was growing. We don't know the time span for this, but a reasonable period of time may have passed. Church growth is what we all want to see but we need to be realistic and expect to encounter problems of growth.
- Ch6 identifies problems within and without! At this time the Early Church was entirely Jewish in its composition. There were two groups of Jews within the fellowship. Grecian Jews – those born in lands other than Palestine. They spoke Greek and were more Greek than Hebrew in their outlook and perspectives. And Hebraic Jews – who spoke the Aramaic and/or Hebrew language(s) of Palestine. They preserved Jewish culture and customs.
- We encounter a dispute between these two groups at the beginning of our chapter (v1). The complaint is regarding the daily distribution of food to widows – a very necessary task as widows had no one to care or provide for them and, thus, they became the responsibility of the Church. At this early stage of Christianity, the Apostles appear to have been responsible for everything involved with the day-to-day running of the church.
- Verse 2 appears to be a very harsh statement from the Apostles: “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 ...”, but they are responding to the charge that was given to them in by the angel in (5:20). Tom Wright reminds us that “Only when a crisis emerges do we see what is really important.”¹
- The Apostles have to offer leadership and make a decision! Qualifications are established (v3). Further instructions for diaconal ministry are outlined in the Leadership MOT of 1 Timothy 3.
- The Apostles recognise the reality of spiritual and material ministries. Both are important but in order to be done well help is often needed!

¹ Tom Wright, Acts for Everyone: Part 1

² Acts: An Expository Commentary, p128

- Tom Wright's insight is that "The temptation for leaders in the movement, from the earliest day until now, has always been to breathe a sigh of relief at being spared the spiritually and mentally demanding task of preaching and teaching, of explaining Scripture, opening up its great narrative and its tiny details, applying it this way and that, enabling people to live within its story and make its energy their own. Running committees, though tricky at times, is not nearly so demanding."²
 - I give thanks to the Lord that we have a Rector who has a love of Bible Study and a gift of teaching and preaching, that he promotes team ministry, just like the early Church, and where everyone is encouraged to develop their gifts and be freed up at any time to be on the ground.
 - Stephen was chosen, along with six others, (6:5) on the basis of certain godly characteristics – full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (6:3). Jesus has promised the disciples the help of the Holy Spirit when they are brought before the authorities (Luke 12:11-12) and we see a fulfilment of that promise as the Spirit empowers Stephen for clear and bold proclamation. Note how all 7 deacons have Greek names. The original complaint had come from the Grecian Jews.
 - The term 'deacon' literally means servant or minister. We still have deacons in the Church today!
 - The seven were to do the rather menial job of overseeing the practical needs of the growing number of converts, particularly the widows among them, so that the apostles could give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the word (6:4).
 - V7 begins our second progress report in Ch6. The Word of God continues to spread, the number of disciples in Jerusalem increases and a large number of priests 'become obedient to the faith' – they respond to the Gospel.
 - We see a living church, a delegating church, a missional church, a wise church, a faithful church and a growing church in these opening seven verses. The problems within are wisely and quickly dealt with. But, before long, problems emerge from without.
 - V8 marks the beginning of a significant change of direction in Acts and what an incredible description we read (v8). Until now only the Apostles worked miracles in Acts. Now Stephen, and later Philip, will also do the same.
 - Stephen is opposed by Jews of Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia and Asia. These Jews worshipped at the Synagogue of the Freedmen and were, thus, former slaves. They are unable to debate with Stephen (v9) because of his wisdom and God's anointing (v10).
 - Stephen is accused falsely and is before the high priest, presumably Caiaphas (**7:1**). He is asked an opening question and what follows is the longest defence of Christianity in the New Testament.
 - Stephen is accused falsely and is before the high priest, presumably Caiaphas (7:1) and the council (v12). He is asked an opening question and what follows is the longest defence of Christianity in the New Testament. Stephen speaks with boldness and authenticity. God is clearly with him during this whole ordeal.
 - David Cook observes that "Stephen's opponents soon abandon argument when they realise that they can't out-date him, and they resort to underhand methods (v11)."³
 - The charges levied against Stephen were:
 - That he was speaking out against Moses and the Mosaic Law (v11, v13). He said that Jesus would change the customs of Moses (v14).
 - That he was speaking out against God by speaking against the temple (v11, v13). He said that Jesus would destroy the temple (v14).
- "The people of Jerusalem would have been easily stirred by such charges since their livelihood depended on the temple and the Law (v12)."⁴

² Tim Wright, Acts for Everyone: Part 1, p100

³ David Cook, *Teaching Acts*, p134

⁴ David Cook, *Teaching Acts*, p 134

- Stephen had to make an account of himself in the face of false charges. Such is the opposition to the Christian Way. But God was with Stephen.
- Look at (v15). What beautiful language! **“And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel”**.
- In brief, his historical overview can be subdivided into three main parts:
 - The Period of the Patriarchs **(v2-16)** – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.
 - The Period covering Moses, the Law, the Exodus and the Wilderness Wanderings **(v17-43)**.
 - The Period focusing on the place of the Tabernacle and Temple **(v44-50)**.
- Stephen has been charged with blasphemy against God and Moses. His speech is a recalling of familiar episodes, which are carefully selected to counter the charges, and are well organised. Overall, he makes a very strong case – but one that struck to the very hearts of his audience!
- Such people are in short supply and are also clearly absent among the members of the Sanhedrin in our passage.
- To sum up Stephen’s argument and challenge is that it is the Sanhedrin who have actually done wrong and not him! David Cook notes that **“The true God, Stephen asserts, is not static and localised, but is with his people. He makes them wise, is merciful and gives them success...Israel contains and localises God, making idols of his temple and tabernacle. If then God is everywhere, empowering and merciful, who are the blasphemers of Moses and God?”**⁵
- Stephen began his address by calling the Sanhedrin brothers. But in his closing statement he ends by using Gentile descriptors – stiff necked and uncircumcised! His premise is that the Israelites have ignored God, his prophets, and have made their greatest mistake in killing the Righteous One. At the heart of the Israelite problem is CHANGE – you either love it or fear it!
- Though seemingly the one on trial, Stephen declares that it is the Sanhedrin, as the representatives of Israel, who are on trial before God himself! This is a powerful reminder that unenlightened intellect is never a match for Spirit-empowered testimony. Rather than removing Stephen from the danger that such an audacious charge puts him in, the Spirit gives Stephen the courage to remain faithful to Christ even to death.
- In spite of the good Stephen did, there were those who feared the downfall of Judaism more than the miraculous workings of God, so they set about concocting false charges of blasphemy against this man of God. It wasn’t long before Stephen was dragged before the Jewish high court. Such was the power they wielded, the Sanhedrin usually struck terror into those brought before them.
- They were doggedly trying to keep control of the “rabble” that was causing havoc in synagogues across the land with their message of a risen Messiah. They saw in Stephen an opportunity to put a stop to that by making an example of him. Except that there was a problem they hadn’t reckoned on – as the members of the council looked at Stephen, they “saw that his face was like the face of an angel” (v15).
- This man was more than a dissenter. This man had the manifestation of God written on His face. His very presence in their religious court challenged their own spirituality. I wonder whether Stephen made these experts in the Law think about Moses, whose face shone when he left God’s presence to speak to the people (Exodus 34:29)?
- Furious the council refuse to listen to any more from Stephen. He is dragged outside the city and stoned to death. But as this is happening, Stephen, **“Full of the Holy Spirit he looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at God’s right hand”** (v55).
- In Stephen’s death we see parallels to Jesus. In his response to false accusations, Stephen kept his cool, remaining silent, and he only answered when he was directed to speak by the high priest.

⁵ David Cook, *Teaching Acts*, p134.

- There are other similarities with Jesus - Stephen was falsely accused, demonstrated love and concern for his accusers, and died an “underserved” death. His attitude toward his executioners was forgiving, and his Christ-likeness is most obvious when he prays as Jesus did at His crucifixion except that Stephen addresses Jesus, rather than the Father as God: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (7:59) – cf. Luke 23-46). He also prayed that God would forgive them for their sin of murder.
- Bible truths illustrated in Stephen’s Life include: the presence and comfort of the Holy Spirit in the trials of life (Acts:7:54-55); Hebrews 13:5-6); false accusations and persecution will come into our lives (Acts 6:11ff); God’s grace is sufficient when we walk with him (Acts 6:10; 1 Cor 1:27-31; 2 Cor 12:9).
- **Takeaway lessons for us from Stephen’s life include:**
 - The outstanding characteristic of Stephen was his commitment to the Lord and his willingness to do anything for him, including giving up his life.
 - This commitment is seen in the fact that he was a man who walked with God (he was “full of the Spirit and wisdom ... faith ... God’s grace and power”). He had a great testimony before others in the church and he witnessed to people both in life and in death.
 - He was, furthermore, a man of the Word. He really knew his Bible – the Old Testament. He must have spent hours studying the scrolls and the parchments.
- **The challenge** is that we are called to engage with this world and not retreat – regardless of circumstance or situation. And we should strive to be a person of the Word who knows Jesus Christ intimately and who is able to answer others with Scripture when they ask questions. This accentuates the importance of Bible Study, by memorising Scripture verses and by having a daily quiet time with God.
- God’s cause will always triumph in the end.