



Acts 6

An OCF Bible Study

Acts 6

In a general sense, what do we see happening in the church (v. 1)? This is an example of spiritual warfare at its finest. Satan delights in attacking the church using internal tactics like bickering to divide the church and external tactics like persecution to discourage and divide. Those remain his primary tools to this day.

Two types of Jews made up the Jerusalem church. Some were native “Hebrews” who had lived primarily in Palestine, spoke Aramaic predominantly and used the Hebrew Scriptures. The others were “Hellenists” [or Grecian Jews] who originally lived outside Palestine (Jews of the Diaspora) but were now living in Palestine. Many of these Jews returned to Palestine to end their days in their ancestral homeland. They spoke Greek primarily, as well as the language of the area where they had lived.

The Hebrews and the Hellenists had their own separate synagogues in Jerusalem. But when they became Christians, they came together in one fellowship. As the church grew, some of the Christians believed that the church leaders were discriminating against the Hellenists unfairly.

The conflict between Hebrews and Hellenists was over what major doctrinal/theological issue? Food! The Greek widows were not getting their fair share of food.

This conflict appeared to be a small issue. But why was this conflict a big deal? It had the potential to be a divisive issue by setting up an environment of hostility—Greek Jews vs. Hebrew Jews. Splits are devastating in any church. This New Testament Church could not tolerate a split; they must have unity! The potential end result could have been two separate Christian churches. The care of widows and the needy was a priority in Judaism (Exodus 22:22; Deuteronomy 10:18). The Hebrew Jews provided for their own widows weekly—in their own synagogues—along with the poor.

Where do we see competing interests or potentially divisive issues in the church today?

How did the apostles respond to this new crisis? What was their proposed solution (vv. 2-4)? The twelve apostles wisely delegated responsibility for this ministry to other qualified men in the congregation, so that it would not distract them from their primary duties of prayer and the ministry of the word. “Serving tables” probably involved the organization and administration of ministry to the widows, rather than simply serving as waiters or dispensers.

They chose seven men. What did the seven have in common? They were all part of the Greek community.

What leadership principles do we see demonstrated here? The leaders took action; they didn’t bury their heads in the sand and hope the problem would go away. They gathered all the principals, explained their reasoning, identified qualifications, let the disciples choose the disciple ministry team (delegation). They got buy-in from the masses. They didn’t shoot the messenger. They didn’t punish the food handlers.

Hellenists appear to have been given responsibility for settling a Hellenist complaint (equal distribution of food). This was a wise approach—delegating authority to a group within the church that had the greatest vested interest knowing they would take ownership of the distribution problem.

The Twelve were able to differentiate between the urgent and the important. Widows clamoring for their attention qualified as an urgent matter. The ministry of the Word of God and the ministry of prayer were the major priorities of the leaders. When you compare the early church with today’s church, the missing element is most frequently the commitment to prayer.

What were the qualifications for waiting on tables (v. 3)? Men who were full of the Spirit and full of wisdom. These men needed to have good reputations, to be under the Spirit’s control and to be wise. Note that these are character traits, not special talents or abilities or aptitude for the job. No food management degree was required.

Why did they need spiritually mature men to take care of a food problem? This wasn’t a food problem—the food issue was merely a symptom of a bigger underlying problem. What kind of problem was it? It was a leadership problem. There was

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a leadership vacuum. There was confusion, nobody was in charge. When they put the right people in charge, the problem was solved.

Once they chose the men, what did they do next (v. 6)? They had the leaders lay hands on the chosen men and prayed over them. They realized the value and necessity of prayer.

What does the laying on of hands signify? Laying hands on someone symbolized the bestowal of a blessing, a commission for a new responsibility and/or the granting of authority.

What was the impact of their leadership (v. 7)? The Word of God spread. The early church had problems but it also had strong leaders who moved swiftly to ward off corruption and find solutions to internal conflicts.

Luke linked the spread of God's Word with church growth. This cause and effect relationship has continued throughout history. Many of the numerous priests in Jerusalem were also becoming Christians. One writer estimated that about 2,000 priests lived in Jerusalem at this time. The gospel did not win over only the "laity" in Israel. The Gospel invaded the religious hierarchy.

We are introduced to Stephen (v. 8). What do we know about Stephen? He was one of the seven chosen to wait on tables (6:3-5). He was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, full of grace and power, who did wonders and miracles.

Stephen ran into opposition. Who were the Freedmen (v. 9)? Grecian Jews who previously were Roman prisoners and who had later been granted their freedom. Stephen, also being a Grecian Jew, debated Christianity with them. The leading men in this congregation took issue with Stephen whom they had heard defend the Gospel. However, they were unable to defeat him in debate. Stephen seems to have been an unusually gifted defender of the faith as he was empowered by the Holy Spirit. Here we see a clear illustration of the second tactic of Satan—persecution from outside the church which discourages, even dissolves churches (vv. 8-15).

Failing to prove Stephen wrong by intellectual debate, what did they do next (v. 11)? Stephen's accusers deceitfully accused him of blasphemy—speaking against Moses and God. The Freedmen incited hostility and hatred among the Jewish people and the religious leaders. They had Stephen arrested and taken to face the Sanhedrin. This was their modus operandi -- they had done the same to Jesus, and the apostles.

Do you see a parallel between Stephen and Jesus? Like Jesus, Steven did great miracles, opposition arose, they could not debate with him, they charged him with blasphemy and false witnesses leveled false charges against him. Stephen appeared to be challenging the authority of the Pharisees, the Mosaic Law and a major teaching of the Sadducees, namely, the importance of the temple. He was evidently saying the same things Jesus had said.

What are the implications of v. 15? 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 God never forsakes His people. His face reflected the perfect peace and confidence of one who knows and trusts his God.

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