

# Acts The Gospel on the Move

## Study 7

### The First Christian Martyr Stephen

#### Acts 6-7

#### A. Managing Internal Conflict

##### **Acts 6:1-7 (NIV)**

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. 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. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

1. a) **Discussion Question. Look at Acts 6:1-7 and see if you can learn a few lessons about the management of church conflict from this case.**

The local church is supposed to minister in deed as well as in word. Verse 1 speaks of the "daily distribution". In Greek, the verse literally says, "the daily Diakonia". The word "diakonia" means "practical service", and it is the word from which we derive our word "deacon". "Diakonia" was a Greek word that meant to "wait on tables" and to feed people. We see that the early church did not only have a ministry of the Word (v.2), but a ministry of service, feeding people who were hungry. We see a conflict developed over the neglect of this and the leaders immediately took action and did not let things fester to take sides or discriminate against the Greek-speaking widows. The leaders delegate! The apostles see that they cannot "do it all".

We have to remember that these are the apostles of Jesus — uniquely empowered and gifted. But they have to decide what to concentrate on (v.4). In the church, we cannot expect the key leaders to do it all. We must determine our calling and concentrate on it. In a vital church, the whole Body of Christ is involved in ministry.

The church selects its leaders, not on the basis of popularity, but on the basis of spiritual maturity. These seven men were "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" (v.3). The people elected the men (v.5) but the apostles ordained them (v.6). This means that in a vital church, there is a "balance" between the will of the congregation and the screening of the officers of the church.

The vital church has both the problems and the wisdom to handle "diversity". The reason for the problem was that two ethnic groups inside the church were not getting along (v.1). The Greek speakers felt that they were being discriminated against. Instead of telling them to be quiet, the apostles knew that the situation took more attention and care than they could provide, and so they created a board (some would say that it was the first board of "deacons") to work for reconciliation between culturally diverse people. Scholars notice that all of the leaders' names were Greek. Thus the apostles were "sensitive" to the need for Greek-speakers to rise up in leadership if all the ethnic groups were to feel well served. So today, if we are sharing the faith well, our churches will become culturally diverse. If minorities within the church feel they are being overlooked, we should not ask them to "be quiet", but should listen to them. The most important is to encourage members of different groups to rise up into leadership.

## B. Stephen Seized

### **Acts 6:8-15 (NIV)**

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke.

Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."

So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."

All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

- 2. Reflection question. Other than the face of an angel, what do you think Stephen has that you don't have? Or do you think you have all the qualities Stephen has? Can we ask God for these qualities?**

### C. Stephen's Defence

#### **Acts 7:1-53 (NIV)**

Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?"

To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Harran. 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'

"So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Harran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living. He gave him no inheritance here, not even enough ground to set his foot on. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child. God spoke to him in this way: 'For four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,' God said, 'and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.' Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.

"Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the goodwill of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So Pharaoh made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

“Then a famine struck all Egypt and Canaan, bringing great suffering, and our ancestors could not find food. When Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers on their first visit. On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was, and Pharaoh learned about Joseph’s family. After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all. Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our ancestors died. Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money.

“As the time drew near for God to fulfill his promise to Abraham, the number of our people in Egypt had greatly increased. Then ‘a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.’ He dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our ancestors by forcing them to throw out their newborn babies so that they would die.

“At that time Moses was born, and he was no ordinary child. For three months he was cared for by his family. When he was placed outside, Pharaoh’s daughter took him and brought him up as her own son. Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action.

“When Moses was forty years old, he decided to visit his own people, the Israelites. He saw one of them being mistreated by an Egyptian, so he went to his defense and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not. The next day Moses came upon two Israelites who were fighting. He tried to reconcile them by saying, ‘Men, you are brothers; why do you want to hurt each other?’

“But the man who was mistreating the other pushed Moses aside and said, ‘Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian yesterday?’ When Moses heard this, he fled to Midian, where he settled as a foreigner and had two sons.

“After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to get a closer look, he heard the Lord say: ‘I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ Moses trembled with fear and did not dare to look.

“Then the Lord said to him, ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I

have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free. Now come, I will send you back to Egypt.'

"This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?' He was sent to be their ruler and deliverer by God himself, through the angel who appeared to him in the bush. He led them out of Egypt and performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the wilderness.

"This is the Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your own people.' He was in the assembly in the wilderness, with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our ancestors; and he received living words to pass on to us.

"But our ancestors refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron, 'Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him!' That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and reveled in what their own hands had made. But God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets:

"Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings  
forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?  
You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek  
and the star of your god Rephan,  
the idols you made to worship.  
Therefore I will send you into exile'[j] beyond Babylon.

"Our ancestors had the tabernacle of the covenant law with them in the wilderness. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. After receiving the tabernacle, our ancestors under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for him.

"However, the Most High does not live in houses made by human hands. As the prophet says:

"Heaven is my throne,  
and the earth is my footstool.

What kind of house will you build for me?  
says the Lord.

Or where will my resting place be?  
Has not my hand made all these things?’

“You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him— you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.”

**3. a) Comprehension Question. According to the video lecture slide, what were the two main points of Stephen’s speech/defense against the accusation with regard to the temple and the law?**

1. We do not need a temple to experience God

2. How can they condemn Stephen for denigrating the law when history has shown Israel has rejected the very law they are defending

**b) Fill in the Blanks. Fill in Stephen’s defense in regard to the temple.**

Stephen’s Implication	
The Charge	The Defense
Acts 6:13-14 (NIV) They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”	To announce the suppression or destruction of the temple was not to commit blasphemy or sacrilege against God, because God was independent of any temple”

**c) Comprehension Question. According to the video lecture slide, what were the counter-indictments that Stephen put on those who accused him?**

It's not Stephen who has rejected the Law, it is the nation of Israel repeatedly from the beginning with Moses down to all the prophets, they:

- Resisted God

- Killed the prophets

- Killed Jesus the greatest prophet
- Have the law but never keep it

#### D. Stephen Martyred

##### **Acts 7:54-60 (NIV)**

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

#### **4. a) Comprehension Question. According to the video lecture slide, what was the significance of Stephen seeing Jesus standing at the right hand of God?**

- He has already paid there is no double payment
- There is no more condemnation for those in Christ Jesus
- Whilst the earthly courtroom was condemning him, the only true courtroom that really mattered, Jesus was commending him
- Help of the Holy Spirit

#### **b) Discussion Question. Philippians 1:21 says "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." Do you find it easier to die for Jesus or live for Jesus? What does living for Jesus look like?**

##### **Takeaway**

In Acts 6-7, we see that internal conflicts in the church among the different language-speaking groups are resolved through appointing deacons, making the ministry more effective. We also see that one of the deacons Stephen was accused and faced external persecution for defending the gospel, he died as a martyr which resulted in the scattering of believers throughout Judea and Samaria, also making the ministry more effective.

## Case Study

### Case 1 – Food Distribution

Christ Baptist Church is made up of a bi-lingual congregation. There are English-educated Chinese and Mandarin-educated Chinese in the church. The two groups have different opinions about how the church should operate and how worship should run.

The Chinese-ed believers are rule followers and tend to see the English-ed people as not following the rules and instructions given in church. They think they are too arrogant as they don't follow the rules.

The English-ed people think the Chinese-ed believers are too rigid in their ways and suggestions and follow hierarchy too much and that they should be more flexible. They think the Chinese-ed are arrogant because they think they are superior because they obey human-made rules better.

1. a) Discussion question. What is the root cause of this disagreement?
  
- b) Discussion question. How can such an issue be solved in love?
  
- c) Reflection question. On a scale of 0-10, how good do you think you are to be able to see things from the perspective of someone who disagrees with you?
  
- d) Reflection question. Would you pray for someone who disagrees with you?
  
- e) Reflection question. Would you pray for yourself to see if there are any hidden flaws in the way you are thinking or factors you are missing in the way you think so God can change how you see the situation?
  
- e) Reflection question. Share other common issues of disagreements that you have faced or are currently facing and end in praying for each other over those items.