

## 12. Ministering to Grecian Widows and Stephen Accused: Acts 6

The kindness shown by one another to the needy Christians is a recurring theme of Acts. From the very beginning in Acts 2:44-45, those with financial means shared with those less fortunate: “44 All the believers were together and had everything in common. 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.” This practice of sharing re-occurs in Acts 4:34-35:

34 There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

As generous as these early Christians were, contentions in the church focused on misunderstandings and hard feelings about these benevolent acts of the church. In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira thought they could keep money for themselves that they had committed to God for benevolent purposes.

Chapter 6 is about a dispute in the church over accusations of neglect of the Grecian widows. As the chapter develops, the narrative will also pick up the story of Stephen—one of those servants selected to tend to the problem of the Grecian widows. Stephen was also an evangelist, whose activities occupy Luke’s narrative through chapter 7.

### ***The Grecian Jews Complain***

Acts 6:1

*1 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.*

The Grecian Jews were the focal point of a complaint against the Hebraic Jews. The term Grecian Jews refers to Jews who were Hellenized from the time of Alexander the Great and used Greek as the language of their common discourse. The term also referred to Jews who had Greek ancestry. The passages cited in the introduction make clear that the church was providing for destitute saints, including widows. The church, time and time again, provided aid to distressed saints. The *Book of Acts* provides examples of help going to Jerusalem and Judea from Antioch, Macedonia, Greece, and Achaia. Such benevolence to destitute Christians is categorically commanded in passages like Gal 6:9-10:

9 Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. 10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

James 1:27 reiterates the Christian obligation to help those in *distress*: “27 Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.”

The New Testament makes clear that the first line of attack against the distress of poverty is the family and not the church. Paul explained the obligation of family when talking about which widows the church should support in 1 Tim 5:44

But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God.

The burden of unmarried relatives, including widows, falls first to the family, an obligation that extends beyond the immediate family to all relatives, according to 1 Tim 5:8: “8 If anyone

does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” There are simply occasions when the church is not to be burdened. Paul wrote in 1 Tim 5:16:

16 If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need.

1 Tim 5:9-10 teaches that widows, who are permanently enrolled for care by the church, must meet certain qualifications:

9 No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, 10 and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.

The Grecian widows of this passage may have been widows with qualification, or they may have been destitute and distressed by these times of general famine. A message in the early chapters of Acts is that the 21<sup>st</sup> century church should always see to the needs of less fortunate members.

Acts 6:2-4

*2 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, 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 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."*

The difficulty that this problem posed for the apostles was how could they attend to the teaching of the word of God and wait on tables. The appropriate focus for the apostles was attention to prayer and to the teaching of the word. The parallel problem in our day is that elders should not neglect the teaching of the word. Peter taught what the proper work of elders was in 1 Peter 5:2: “2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers.” According to Paul in 1 Tim 5:17, this spiritual tending and feeding of the church is accomplished by teaching, “17 The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.” Elders, just as the apostles, are not to get bogged down in the physical aspects of maintaining the work of the church.

In this case, the church was to choose men to wait on the widows. The men were to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.

### **Seven Men Selected to Oversee the Daily Distribution of Food**

Acts 6:5-6

*5 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. 6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.*

The problem was one of ethnic and cultural differences, not unlike those that rise in the church today, since the widows were Grecian. In this context, those selected had Greek names. Today the church must move aggressively to resolve real or imagined problems of discrimination, making sure that minority groups are represented in the leadership of the church. Luke's narrative will focus next on the work of Stephen and Philip, prominent evangelists in Judea and Samaria.

Acts 6:7

*7 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.*

As the word of God spread and as the number of disciples increased rapidly, a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. The reaction of these priests may be compared to the reaction some of the Jewish leaders had to Christ and his message. John reported in John 12:42-43:

42 Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not confess their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue; 43 for they loved praise from men more than praise from God.

Perhaps the contention and subsequent bitter events of the next two chapters followed the inroads made by the gospel among the leaders of the Jews. The focal point of this contention becomes Stephen.

### **Stephen, One of the Seven Accused**

Acts 6:8-10

*8 Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. 9 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. These men began to argue with Stephen, 10 but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke.*

Stephen was a man of extraordinary virtues: he was full of God's grace and power; he did his work among the people; he had wisdom; and he spoke by the Spirit. That he spoke by the Spirit elevates his discourse, in the next chapter of Acts, to scripture, inspired by God. Peter defines such scripture 2 Peter 1:20-21:

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. 21 For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The power of Stephen's teaching was such that they could not stand up against it. As Paul described it in 2 Tim 3:16, such teaching is powerful and all-sufficient: "16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness."

Stephen's opposition seems to have come from the Grecian Jews, of which he was one. The opponents were of Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and Asia.

Acts 6:11

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

Since they could not stand up against Stephen's wisdom and Spirit inspired word, they turned to deceit. *In secret* implies that they were conniving against Stephen; and, of course, Stephen would never speak against Moses and God. It is this great deceit that leads to the coming events.

### **Stephen Seized and Brought before the Sanhedrin**

Acts 6:12-14

*12 So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. 13 They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never*

*stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. 14 For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us."*

This group of the elders and teachers of the law and the Sanhedrin are the same people who wrongly accused Christ and turned him over to Pilot in Luke 22:66: "66 At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them." This is the very same group who had accused Peter and John in Acts 4:5-7:

5 The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. 6 Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest's family. 7 They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: "By what power or what name did you do this?"

This group plus the Sanhedrin tried the apostles when they were jailed in Acts 5:21-22: "When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin – the full assembly of the elders of Israel – and sent to the jail for the apostles."

The accusers provided false witnesses violating the commandments given to Moses in Deut 5:20: 20 "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." As this study moves through chapter 7, we find that the Sanhedrin also violated their law of commandments. Deut 19:18-19 teaches, "18 The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against his brother, 19 then do to him as he intended to do to his brother."

The charge itself is worth careful attention, since the entirety of Stephen's defense is really a defense of Christ's teaching about the Mosaic Law. These accusers alleged that Stephen speaks against the holy place and the law, that Jesus would destroy this place, and that Jesus would change the customs handed down. These false accusers were evil, indeed, but just as evil were the Sanhedrin who listened to their lies, according to Prov 21:28:

28 A false witness will perish,  
and whoever listens to him will be destroyed forever.

Acts 6:15

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

The figure of speech, *like the face of an angel*, shows what should have frightened the Sanhedrin into accepting the teaching of Stephen. In Matt 28:2-4, the appearance of an angel is like lightning:

2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. 3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. 4 The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

Terrifying also was the appearance of the angel to announce the birth of the Christ in Luke 2:9-10:

9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

The Spirit of God bore witness that Stephen spoke His word; the Sanhedrin had every reason to believe him.