

Acts 6 – 7 – Deacons and Stephen’s Speech

THEME: The appointment of deacons; witness of Stephen, a deacon.

In this chapter we see the further result of the defection that was in the church. We first saw that defection in the case of Ananias and Sapphira. They were believers who were saved, but they could not remain in the early church with that lie in their lives.

Now the defection we see in this chapter led to the selection of deacons. The chapter continues with the account of one of those deacons, Stephen. He was framed, arrested, and tried.

THE APPOINTMENT OF DEACONS - Seven Chosen to Serve

Act 6:1 Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

If the devil cannot destroy by attacks from without, he will seek to overthrow by dissension within. This is illustrated in these verses.

In the early days of the church, it was customary to make daily disbursements to the poor widows of the church who had no other means of support. Some of the believers who had been Greek-speaking Jews complained because their widows were not receiving the same treatment as the widows of Hebrews (those from Jerusalem and Judea). – Believers Bible Commentary

We need to recognize that this took place early in the history of the church. They had attempted a form of communal living and, actually, it succeeded for a short while. Then carnality entered the church. We saw how Ananias and Sapphira misrepresented their situation. Now we find that there is a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews. This is not a clash between two races. This is not a demonstration of anti-Semitism. The word Grecians here means “Hellenists,” Greek-speaking Jews. They had a background of Greek culture while the Hebrews in Jerusalem closely followed the Mosaic Law. Naturally, a misunderstanding developed.

It has been estimated that the number in the church at this time may have been around twenty-five thousand. And we see that this early church was not perfect. We hear people say, “We need to get back to the early church. The early church was power-conscious, and we today are problem-conscious.” That is only a half-truth. The early church did have power, but the early church had problems also.

The high plane to which the Spirit had brought the church was interrupted by the intrusion of satanic division and confusion. The sharing of material substance, which first characterized the church, gave way to the selfishness of the old nature. Carnality had come in. The Grecians, who evidently were a minority group, felt neglected and demanded that their widows be given equal consideration with the Hebrews. This communal form of living wasn't working as well as they would have liked. This was brought to the attention of the apostles. - McGee

Act 6:2 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.

The apostles felt that they should not give up the study of the Word of God. They felt it was important for them to continue with that. If they gave up the study of the Word of God and served tables, that would be the undoing of them. They should spend their time in prayer and in the study of the Word of God.

It is important for every church to recognize that the minister should have time to study the Word of God and should have time for prayer. Unfortunately, the average church today is looking for a pastor who is an organizer and a promoter, a sort of vice-president to run the church, a manager of some sort. That is unfortunate. As a result the church is suffering

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today. When I was a pastor in downtown Los Angeles, I had to move my study to my home. I built a special room over the garage for my study. I found out that all I had in the church was an office, not a study. They didn't intend for me to study there. They didn't want me to study there. - McGee

Act 6:3-4 Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Although these men are not designated deacons in the Bible, it is not unreasonable to think of them as such. In the expression, serve tables, the word serve is the verb form of the noun from which we get the English word deacon, so their function literally was to “deacon” tables.

1. Of good reputation - Reputable
2. Full of the Holy Spirit – Spiritual
3. Full of wisdom - Practical

More detailed qualifications are given in 1Ti_3:8-13. – Believers Bible Commentary

The seven men were to be appointed because a crisis had arisen. The apostles felt it was important that they should not have the burden of this detail so that they could give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.

Now I want you to notice the qualifications of these seven men who are to assume the burden of handling the material substance of the church. I'm afraid this is something which is neglected in the average church today when the deacons are chosen. In fact, I've heard men say they didn't want to be appointed to the spiritual office of an elder but would like to be a deacon to handle the material things.

May I say to you, the office of deacon requires more spirituality and wisdom and prayer than any other office. Now notice the qualifications: These men had to be men of honest report. Their honesty was to be unquestionable. It is really a tragic thing for a church to have a deacon whose honesty is in question so that others—including the pastor—cannot trust him. Such a man should not be in the office of deacon. The second qualification was “full of the Holy Ghost.” They were not to be filled with wine but were to be “filled with the [Holy] Spirit” (Eph_5:18). Thirdly, they were to be men of wisdom. They were to be spiritual men who would be able to make an application of spiritual truth. That was very important. You see, the fact that they were handling material matters was apt to give them a lopsided view of things. So it is most important that deacons should be men who look at things from the spiritual point of view.

We shall see that Stephen was a man who met these qualifications. He had wisdom—“they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake” (v. Act_6:10). He had real conviction. Also he was “full of faith.” Not only did he have saving faith but also serving faith—witnessing faith. It wasn't the amount of his faith but the object of his faith that was important. We learn from this same verse that he was full of power. Such were the kind of men chosen as deacons. - McGee

Act 6:5-6 And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

I can't tell you anything more about the last five men. The first two, Stephen and Philip, will be mentioned again as we go along in the Book of Acts. They were outstanding men in the early church. Although they were to “serve tables,” the record of them is that they were spiritual men.

Now, friends, there is a great deal of hocus-pocus and abracadabra connected with this matter of laying on of hands. A great many people think that some spiritual power is connected to it. They think that putting on the hands

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communicates something to a person. Frankly, the only thing you can communicate to someone else by the laying on of hands is disease germs. You can pass them on, but you cannot pass on any kind of power.

What is the meaning of the laying on of hands? As we saw in Leviticus, when we were studying the Old Testament sacrifices, the sinner would put his hand on the head of the animal to be sacrificed, which signified that the animal to be offered was taking his place. The offering was identified with the sinner.

When the apostles put their hands on the heads of the deacons, it meant that now the deacons would be partners with them. They were together in this service. It designated that these men were set aside for this office, denoting their fellowship in the things of Christ and their position as representatives for the corporate body of believers.

Notice that this was a social service in which these men were engaged. The early church took care of its own. I think that should still be true today. The early church had a poverty program, and it included only the members of the church. The church today should also take care of its own. - McGee

Act 6:7 Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

It is still important in our day for the Word of God to be increasing. Certainly this is the purpose of my radio program. It is my sincere desire that the Word of God may be increased.

Don't miss the fact that many of the priests turned to the Lord. Some of them must have been serving in the temple when the veil was rent in two at the death of Christ. Many of them must have turned to Christ after that experience. - McGee

Stephen Is Seized

Act 6:8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

Apparently these deacons are one with the apostles in having the sign gifts. They have been brought into a unique position. Because Stephen is a strong witness to the gospel, he incurs the hatred of the Sadducees. False witnesses are brought before the council to accuse Stephen.

Act 6:9 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen.

Opposition to Stephen's powerful ministry arose from the synagogue. These were places where Jews gathered together on the Sabbath for instruction in the law. The synagogues were named according to the people who met there. The Freedmen were perhaps Jews who had been freed from slavery by the Romans. Cyrene was a city in Africa, some of whose Jews had apparently settled in Jerusalem. The Alexandrian Jews had come from the seaport of Egypt by that name. Cilicia was the southeastern province of Asia Minor, and Asia was a province of Asia Minor made up of three territories. Apparently communities of Jews from all of these places had synagogues in or near Jerusalem. – Believers Bible Commentary

Act 6:10-14 And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. They also set up false witnesses who said, "This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us."

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These zealous Jews proved no match for Stephen as they disputed with him. The words which he spoke and the power with which he spoke them were irresistible. In a desperate move to silence them, they secretly induced false witnesses to accuse Stephen of blasphemy against Moses and God. Soon he was standing before the Sanhedrin, charged with speaking against the temple and the law. They falsely quoted him as saying that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the whole system which Moses delivered to Israel. – Believers Bible Commentary

Act 6:15 *And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.*

The Sanhedrin heard the charges, but as they looked at Stephen, they saw not the face of a demon, but the face of an angel. They saw the mysterious beauty of a life that is fully surrendered to the Lord, determined to proclaim the Truth, and more concerned with what God thinks than with what men may say. They saw something of the glory of Christ reflected in the radiant face of His devoted follower. – Believers Bible Commentary

Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin, and false witnesses are brought in. The false witnesses tell a half-truth, of course. The Lord Jesus did say that they would destroy this temple and He would raise it up again, but He was speaking of the temple of His body. At His trial, the false witnesses misunderstood that and misrepresented it. So here, they misunderstand Stephen when he says that the temple in Jerusalem will be left desolate. Actually, it was desolate without Christ anyway. And they twist what he is saying about the customs of Moses. Of course men are not saved by the Law but by grace. But salvation in Moses' day was by grace even as it is today. Their accusation is based on only a partial truth.

They see something marvelous in the face of Stephen. This man came closer to being an angel than any man who has ever lived. – McGee

Act 7:1-2 *Then the high priest said, "Are these things so?" And he said, "Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran,*

They have made an accusation against him. He is questioned as to the truth of the charges. In his response he makes no attempt to clear himself. In fact, he doesn't even mention the charges they have made against him.

What a marvelous beginning. He calls them brethren. They are his brethren in the flesh. He calls the older men fathers. He is a younger man and shows them this respect. This young man is to become the first martyr in the church.

We sometimes hear it said that at the beginning Christianity was actually a youth movement. It is not altogether inaccurate to state that it was a youth movement. Two men who held as prominent a place as any were Stephen and Saul of Tarsus, whom we will meet soon. These two men had a great deal to do with the shaping of the course of the early church. Both of them were remarkable young men. Both of them were gifted and used by the Holy Spirit. Yet the only time these two young men ever met, they were enemies. The Cross divided Stephen and Saul of Tarsus just as truly as it divided the two thieves who were crucified with Jesus. Paul knew what he was saying in 1Co_1:18 : "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God." When Saul saw Stephen, he thought Stephen was very foolish.

This address of Stephen is a master stroke. He reviews the history of the nation beginning with Abraham. That is where the history of the nation Israel began. They did not go back any farther. You will find the same thing in the Gospel of Matthew. This book, written to the nation Israel, traces the genealogy of Jesus Christ back to Abraham. If you want to trace it all the way back to Adam, you must turn to the Gospel of Luke. Stephen starts with Abraham, a man of faith.

Even though he traces the resistance and rebellion against God by the nation, still there was always a believing remnant.

This is true today, too. In the organized church, in the visible church which you and I can see, there is a remnant of believers. Not every one in the visible church is a true believer. People may ask, "Do you think So-and-So is a Christian?"

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The answer is that even though he goes to church and is a church officer, he may not be a Christian. Just as in the nation Israel there was the believing remnant, so in the visible church there is the little remnant of true believers.

Abraham was a man of faith. He believed God, and he obeyed God. Faith always leads to obedience. Stephen starts his narrative with Abraham in Mesopotamia, down in the Tigris–Euphrates Valley. That was the place of Abraham's hometown. It was there that God called him.

Act 7:3-8 and said to him, 'GET OUT OF YOUR COUNTRY AND FROM YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME TO A LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.' Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell. And God gave him no inheritance in it, not even enough to set his foot on. But even when Abraham had no child, He promised to give it to him for a possession, and to his descendants after him. But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years. 'AND THE NATION TO WHOM THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I WILL JUDGE,' said God, 'AND AFTER THAT THEY SHALL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.' Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham begot Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac begot Jacob, and Jacob begot the twelve patriarchs.

7:1-8 This first section of the message takes us back to the beginning of the Hebrew nation. It is not exactly clear why Abraham's history is dealt with at such length, unless it is:

1. To show Stephen's familiarity with and love for the nation of Israel.
2. To lead up to the story of Joseph and Moses, both types of the rejection of Christ.
3. To show that Abraham worshiped God acceptably even though his worship was not confined to a specific locality. (Stephen had been accused of speaking against the temple—“this holy place.”)

The salient points in Abraham's biography are:

1. His call by God in Mesopotamia (vv. 2, 3).
2. His journey to Haran, then to Canaan (v. 4).
3. God's promise of the land to Abraham, though the patriarch himself was not given any of it—as was proved by his purchase of the cave of Machpelah as a burial place (v. 5). The fulfillment of that promise is still future (Heb_11:13-40).
4. God's prediction of Israel's bondage in Egypt and of eventual deliverance (vv. 6, 7). Both parts of this prediction were accomplished by men who had been rejected by the nation: Joseph (vv. 9-19); Moses (vv. 20-36). The four hundred years mentioned in verse 6 and in Gen_15:13 refer to the time when the Jewish people were afflicted in Egypt. The four hundred and thirty years cited in Exo_12:40 and Gal_3:17 cover the period from the arrival of Jacob and his family in Egypt to the Exodus and the giving of the law. The Israelites were not persecuted during their first thirty years in Egypt; in fact, they were treated quite royally.
5. The covenant of circumcision (v. 8a).
6. The birth of Isaac, then Jacob, then the twelve patriarchs (v. 8b). This, of course, brings the history up to Joseph, one of Jacob's twelve sons. – Believers Bible Commentary

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Act 7:9-14 *"And the patriarchs, becoming envious, sold Joseph into Egypt. But God was with him and delivered him out of all his troubles, and gave him favor and wisdom in the presence of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house. Now a famine and great trouble came over all the land of Egypt and Canaan, and our fathers found no sustenance. But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent out our fathers first. And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to the Pharaoh. Then Joseph sent and called his father Jacob and all his relatives to him, seventy-five people.*

Act 7:15-18 *So Jacob went down to Egypt; and he died, he and our fathers. And they were carried back to Shechem and laid in the tomb that Abraham bought for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. "But when the time of the promise drew near which God had sworn to Abraham, the people grew and multiplied in Egypt 10till another king arose who did not know Joseph.*

Of all the types of Christ in the OT, Joseph is one of the clearest and most precious, although he is never specifically stated to be. Surely the Jews of Stephen's day must have felt the sharp arrows of conviction as they heard Stephen review the steps of Joseph's career, then remembered what they had done to Jesus of Nazareth!

1. Joseph sold into Egypt by his brothers (v. 9).
2. The rejected one raised to power and glory in Egypt (v. 10).
3. Joseph's brothers driven to Egypt by famine, but failed to recognize their brother (vv. 11, 12).
4. The second time Joseph was made known to them. Then the rejected one became the savior of his family (vv. 13, 14). Note: There seems to be a contradiction between the seventy-five souls given in verse 14 and the seventy mentioned in Gen_46:27. Stephen followed the Greek translation of Gen_46:27 and Exo_1:5, which has seventy-five. The Hebrew text has seventy, indicating nothing more serious than a different way of numbering Jacob's family.
5. The death of the patriarchs, and their burial in the land of Canaan (vv. 15, 16). Another difficulty appears in this verse. Here it says that Abraham bought a burial place from Hamor. Gen_23:16-17 says that Abraham bought the cave of Machpelah in Hebron from the sons of Heth. Jacob bought land in Shechem from the children of Hamor (Gen_33:19). There are several possibilities: (1) Abraham may have bought land in Shechem as well as in Hebron. Later Jacob could have repurchased the plot in Shechem. (2) Stephen could have used Abraham's name for Abraham's descendant, Jacob. (3) Stephen may have condensed the purchases by Abraham and Jacob into one for brevity.
6. The growth of Jacob's family in Egypt and their slavery after Joseph's death (vv. 17-19). This, of course, prepares us for the next step in Stephen's argument—the treatment which Moses received at the hands of his people.