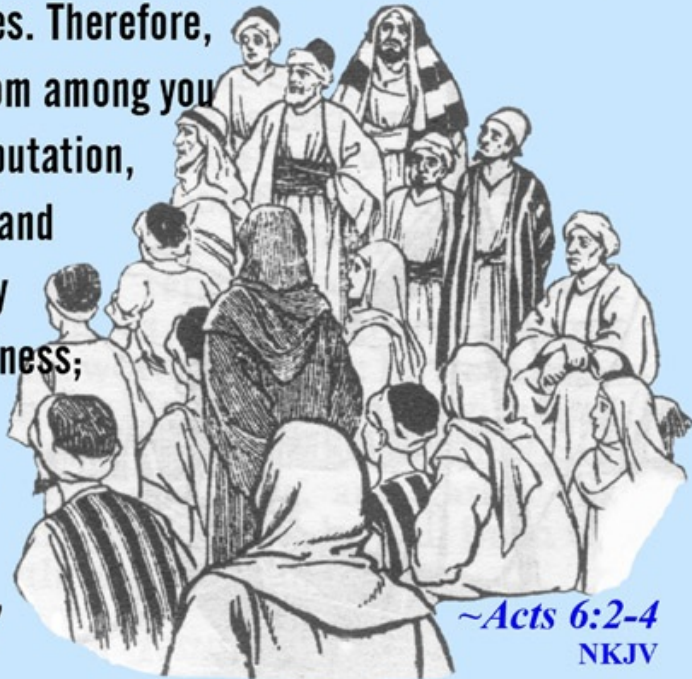


The Church: Organized and Empowered

A Study in Acts Chapter 6

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. 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.”



~Acts 6:2-4
NKJV

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Acts Chapter 6

We have been studying the establishment of the first Church on planet Earth, located in the city of Jerusalem. It was composed exclusively of Jewish believers: Israelites who had been born into the family of God, indwelt by the Spirit and baptized into the body of Christ. These Jews, including their spiritual leaders (the Apostles) did not fully comprehend the true identity of this unique work of God which He had launched on the day of Pentecost, namely the body and bride of Christ with all of its distinct characteristics. The book of Acts is a transitional book, and Church truth was little understood at first, but revealed more and more as time progressed. In this progressive revelation, God especially used the conversion of the Apostle Paul on the road to Damascus. God revealed the key elements of Church truth through Paul, including the nature, function and purpose of God's assembly on this Earth.

The manner in which God gradually unfolded these truths and made them known to His people is marvelous. God was in no hurry to pour upon immature people the whole counsel of God instantaneously. Even Saul of Tarsus had to learn these things gradually. He was thoroughly trained in Jewish tradition and in the Old Testament Scriptures under Gamaliel, who was a highly-esteemed teacher in first century Jerusalem (Acts 5:34). In spite of such high level training, Paul required three years in Arabia where he could be taught directly by God, and then many additional years back in his home city of Tarsus before God considered him to be qualified for ministry. Even after all this, he spent an additional year in Antioch, the great Gentile Church, before launching forth on his first missionary journey. The armed services may produce "90-day wonders," but when God deals with His people it involves a lifelong process of growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord, allowing the Word of God to cleanse us and to rectify our false thinking. May the Lord teach us the basics of Christian living as well as the character, distinctives, and goals of His marvelous Church program for this age.

Acts 6:1

As we come to Acts chapter 6, a crisis occurred in the church of Jerusalem. Up to this point, very little had gone wrong, with the exception of the sin of Ananias and Sapphira. God dealt with this situation quickly and severely, resulting in the fear of God being felt both within and without the Church. The administration of the Jerusalem church was in good hands. The Holy Spirit was in charge, and the Spirit worked through the twelve Apostles who were recognized as authoritative leaders. What local church today would not want twelve Spirit-filled Apostles to be in leadership?

"The number of disciples was multiplied." Perhaps five years have now passed since the day of Pentecost, though we cannot know this for sure. The number of believers was in the thousands. The last count Luke gave us was 5,000, just counting the men (Acts 4:4), and vast multitudes had been added since then (Acts 5:14). There may have been as many as 20,000 or more believers at this time. The Church was experiencing healthy growing pains. Jerusalem was quite a mega-church and its size created an administrative challenge. Numerical growth is wonderful but it brings with it some unique problems. In this case those Jews who spoke Greek believed that their widows were being neglected.

Who were these Grecians? Because of the Assyrian captivity and the Babylonian captivity there were Jews scattered throughout numerous countries. Because of Alexander the Great's conquests the entire empire spoke Greek, and this continued into the Roman period. Although Latin was the official government language, Greek was still the common language of commerce and culture and education. About 330 years before Christ our Lord was born, Alexander the Great, a Macedonian Greek-speaking general, came down to the Holy Land and was received and welcomed by the Jewish High Priest according to Josephus, the Jewish historian. In fact, Josephus tells us that Alexander was shown in the book of Daniel who he was and what he was to accomplish. The Greek general was so impressed by this information that he showed tremendous favor to the Jews, and he brought many Jews to Alexandria, the city in Egypt which was called by his name.

By the time of Christ there were over one million Jews in Alexandria. These Jews, of course, spoke Greek. Since they were not as familiar with the Hebrew language, they desired a Bible that they could more easily understand. It was in Alexandria that the Old Testament Scriptures were translated into Greek, the version now known as the Septuagint. No doubt some of these Alexandrian Jews came to Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, heard Peter's powerful message, and some of them were probably among the 3,000 who were saved on that day. At Pentecost, Jews came also from other Greek-speaking nations throughout the Roman Empire.

The Greek-speaking Jews were often looked down upon by the native Hebrew-speaking Jews of the Holy Land. These local Jews were able to read the Old Testament in their own language and they spoke Hebrew, or at least a form of Hebrew called Aramaic. So there was a division between these two groups of Jews based on their cultural distinctions. The Holy Land Jews felt that the foreign Jews had in some ways been contaminated by their Gentile environment and culture, and they considered themselves more of a pure Hebrew stock. They harbored a sad attitude of arrogance and pride.

In the Jerusalem church these distinctions became points of tension and friction because the Grecian Jewish Christians were marginalized and neglected, especially when it came to meeting the needs of their widows. The poverty of the Hebrew or Aramaic Christians was severe due to the fact that they were excommunicated and dispossessed of what they owned simply because of their identification with Jesus of Nazareth. This made them objects of hatred from unsaved Jews. To solve this dire situation, some of the Hebrew believers sold their homes and property and put the funds into a common pot which was administered by the Apostles to help meet the needs of the believers. The widows were especially vulnerable to evil people taking advantage of them.

The Lord Jesus had much to say about widows. For example, there is the parable of the widow who came to an unjust judge (Luke 18:1-8). This poor woman had been mistreated, and asked the judge that she be treated fairly. At first the judge pushed her off and ignored her request, but she persisted in troubling the judge and coming to him continually about the matter until he caved in and gave her what she asked. The point of the parable is not that our Heavenly Father is like that judge; quite the contrary. Our Lord was teaching by contrast: If an unworthy, sinful, uncompassionate, self-seeking judge will finally act because of persistence in requesting, *how much more* will our Heavenly Father respond to our prayers? It's a parable of contrast. The judge in the parable stands in contrast to our

Father in heaven.¹

Widows are not overlooked by our all-seeing Heavenly Father who takes special notice of those who are most vulnerable in human society. God gave special instructions for the care of widows and the churches were to support those widows who truly exhibited godly characteristics: “A widow is to be put on the list only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man, having a reputation for good works; and if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints’ feet, if she has assisted those in distress, and if she has devoted herself to every good work” (1 Tim. 5:9-10). James wrote that those who manifest true devotion to God will be careful to visit the widows in their affliction (James 1:27).²

The situation with the widows in Acts 6 could have been a very divisive matter. Already there were murmuring and complaints coming from the Hellenistic Jews. Such could have easily escalated into further suspicions, jealousies, rumors and accusations. Satan was looking for anything to disrupt the blessed unity and wonderful oneness of the early Church, seeking to cause division and schisms within.

Acts 6:2

The twelve Apostles were totally engaged in this crisis. These twelve were a unique group of men, specially chosen by the Lord. They had been witnesses of the full public ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ from His baptism to His resurrection (Acts 1:21-22). Matthias was selected and became the replacement for Judas (Acts 1:23-26). These twelve leaders called the whole congregation together and dealt with this problem in an amazing way. God certainly granted great wisdom to these men so that they could handle this church problem in the right way.

The verb used in the expression “serve tables” (*diakoneō*) means “to serve, to minister.” In its noun form (*diakonos*), it means “servant” and the plural is translated “deacons” in 1 Timothy 3:8. The office of deacon had its rudimentary beginning in Acts 6. Sadly, in some churches today deacons have become proud of their power and position and they may even flaunt their authority. This is so contrary to the early church where the office of deacon signified a man who was a humble servant of Christ, doing important administrative work or other types of service which would enable the spiritual leaders of the church to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of God’s Word.

¹See the excellent discussion of this parable in *Principles and Practice of Prayer* by Ivan French, BMH Books, 2016, pages 63-65.

²Dr. Whitcomb related his own personal experience in ministering to a widow who later became his beloved wife: “God definitely led me to invite a widow to become my wife. Norma and her husband had been missionaries in the Philippines for eleven years and had two wonderful boys. Their father, a brilliant man of God, was in our doctrinal program at Grace Seminary. One night he was out jogging and dropped dead of a heart attack. It was my duty as a member of the faculty to notify Norma and her family about what happened to her husband, tragic news which she received with amazing inner fortitude and grace. In the meantime my wife of seventeen years was dying of an incurable disease and the Lord took her home in 1970. After that God led our two tribes to merge into one, my four children uniting with Norma’s two children (ages 10,12,13,14,15,16). Three years later our family was privileged to have six teenagers at once!”

“Tables” as used here, refers to more than providing meals, but also involved the handling of money (compare Matthew 21:12, “tables of the money changers”). Money was received and had to be handled carefully and distributed wisely for the benefit of those in need, the widows being an especially needy group.

Acts 6:3

Seven men were to be selected. They were to be chosen by the Jerusalem believers, not by the Apostles. “The whole multitude” chose these seven men (v. 5). The entire congregation was involved in this selection process.³

Certain requirements and qualifications were set forth: 1) The ones chosen had to be men (males). The Greek word used applies only to males. God has ordained that men, not women, should be leaders in His assembly, even though believing men and women are equal possessors of all the riches in Christ (Gal. 3:27-28; Eph. 1:3). 2) The ones chosen had to be believers, selected from among the disciples (“among you,” v. 3). 3) The ones chosen had to be “of honest report,” having a good reputation and an excellent testimony for Christ; 4) The ones chosen had to be “full of the Holy Spirit,” spiritual men who were controlled by God the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18; Gal. 5:22-6:1).⁴ 5) The ones chosen had to be “full of wisdom.” This speaks of the ability to judge rightly and follow a sound course of action by way of knowledge and experience, the ability to apply God’s Word to life’s specific situations and problems. These men would need to handle money matters and the distribution to the poor in a wise and fair manner. 6) “Whom we may appoint over this business”—the ones chosen had to be able to do the job at hand (solve the problem of the widows).

These spiritual qualifications should be true of every believer, but were required for the men chosen for this important task.⁵

Acts 6:4

Charles Woodbridge exposes the strategy of Satan here in Acts 6: “Unable to corrupt the Church by inciting Ananias and Sapphira to deceit, he [Satan] determined to confuse the Church by persuading the Apostles to abandon their initial resolve and to direct their efforts into channels of service which

³In Acts 13 the whole congregation of Antioch was involved in the sending forth of Paul and Barnabas. In Acts 15:2 when Paul and Barnabas had a major dispute with Judaizers, it was the Antioch congregation which determined that Paul and Barnabas should go to Jerusalem to settle this question. In Acts 18:27 it was the congregation who wrote a letter in order to prepare the way for Apollos to minister. In 2 Corinthians 2:6 the punishment which was inflicted on this man was done by “many,” that is, the entire congregation, not just the pastor and church leaders.

⁴See the study *How to Be Filled With the Spirit* at <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/holyspir/hs10.pdf>

⁵See the paper, *Qualifications of Elders and Deacons* at <http://www.middletonbiblechurch.org/lochurch/qualific.pdf>

were important, but secondary.”⁶ Thankfully, this strategy failed.

The Apostles knew that their priority was to continue steadfastly in prayer and in the ministry of the Word. This verb, *proskartereō*, was also used in Acts 2:42 where the early Church continued steadfastly in the doctrine of the Apostles, in fellowship, in breaking of bread and in prayers. According to Vine, the verb means to be strong towards, to endure in or persevere in, to be continually steadfast with a person or thing. It is used of continuing steadfastly or strongly in prayer (Acts 1:14; Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2). It involves intense and persevering application to a thing, in this case to prayer and to the study and preaching of the Word.

If the Apostles had devoted themselves to solving the problem of the widows, then they would have neglected their primary ministry of prayer and ministering the Word of God, and the Church would have suffered. Prayer and the ministry of the Word was to be their full-time ministry. Every believer should give himself to prayer and to serious study of the Scriptures, but many are limited by long hours of work, family responsibilities, housekeeping responsibilities and other necessary daily duties. The pastor needs to spend time in prayer and in serious study of the Word which the average believer cannot do, and the pastor must not leave the Word of God in order to serve tables. That is, he must not leave what he has been called to do, in order to spend his time doing things which other believers are perfectly capable of doing.

The local church membership needs to make sure they are doing their job so that their pastor can do his job. If a pastor is required to perform snow removal, lawn care, run errands, purchase supplies, do carpentry repairs, clean the church building, then how is he going to have time to give himself to prayer and the Word of God? As much as possible, other believers need to help with these peripheral duties so that the pastor is free to spend time with God and immerse his mind in the Scriptures. If, for example, you see your pastor shoveling snow, grab that shovel and kindly say, “Pastor, I’ll be glad to do that. You need to get back to your office.” Visiting the sick and needy is an important part of pastoral ministry, and yet other healthy believers ought to be able to share in this load. It does not require four years of formal Bible training to be able to pray with someone in a hospital room and share from the Scriptures.

In most churches today the pastor bears the great bulk of the ministry load along with perhaps a few others. The great majority are content to sit in the pews, hear a nice message and perhaps come back on the following Sunday. The genius of New Testament Christianity was that the saints (the believers) were to be fully equipped and well-trained to go forth every day of the week and do the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:12). Instead of one man or a few people trying to bear the burden, God’s intent was to have a whole army of believers going forth trained and well-equipped to serve the Lord at work, at school, at home, in town, or in the local neighborhoods.

In so many churches the preacher is called “the minister,” and sadly this title itself reflects the wrong concept. The pastor is certainly a servant of Christ, but he is but one of many. His special assignment is to train and equip a whole group of believers to be faithful servants of Christ, who would be faithful heralds of the good news.

⁶Charles J. Woodbridge, *Standing on the Promises—Rich Truths From the Book of Acts*, p. 41.

If someone were to ask, “Who is the minister of this church?” an appropriate answer would be, “There are about 200 (depending on the size of the congregation) ministers in this church. Which one would you like to speak to?” God’s people need to understand that the Savior desires everyone of us to be His faithful servants.

On the other hand, the pastor has a very special ministry. He is able to devote himself continually to the ministry of prayer and the Word of God (Acts 6:4; 1 Tim. 4:15-16). The believers under his ministry ought to be good students of the Word also, but because they hold full-time jobs and are full-time homemakers, etc., the time they spend in the Word is limited by such constraints. The pastor has the time and needs to make the time for intensive study of the Word so that he might be able to equip the believers unto every good work. One of the great problems of our day is that Bible-believing pastors do not study the Word as they should, and part of the reason for this is that all during the week they are running around doing many of the things that well-fed and well-taught saints could and should be doing.

The Apostles rightly understood their priority to be prayer and the ministry of God’s Word. Solving the problem of the widows was important, and needed to be delegated to others in order that the Apostles not be distracted from their major God-given assignment. Indeed, careful study of the Scriptures was especially crucial in this transitional period of the book of Acts. The twelve Apostles did not fully understand what the Church was. At this time the four Gospels had not yet been written. The thirteen epistles of Paul had not been written, and in fact, Saul of Tarsus was an unsaved man at this point in history. Later, Paul would be God’s chosen instrument to reveal the mysteries and wonders of Church truth. God would slowly and gradually teach His Apostles that which they would need to know. Indeed, in Acts 10 Peter was still learning the basic truth that in this present age the gospel was to go to Gentiles. In Acts 15 (the Jerusalem Council), the Church was clarifying the basic truth of how a person is saved (by grace, not by circumcision and not by the works of the law).

Acts 6:5

Seven men were chosen for this task. They all had Greek names.⁷ The congregation wisely chose Greek-speaking believers. This was important since it was the Greek-speaking Jews who were complaining about the treatment of their widows. This leadership team, comprised of Hellenistic Jews, could never be accused of bias against the Greek-speaking Jews. It was a wise decision.

The first man listed was Stephen. His name and his life were summarized in Revelation 2:10—“Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a **crown** of life.” The noun “crown” [*stephanos*] refers to the victor’s crown. It was woven of oak, ivy, parsley, myrtle or olive, or in imitation of these in gold, and was given to athletic victors or military conquerors. Stephen was faithful unto death, as we learn in the following chapter.

Philip served as a deacon but was gifted as an evangelist (Acts 21:8; compare Eph. 4:11). His amazing preaching ministry is highlighted in Acts chapter 8. We know nothing about Prochorus,

⁷Having a Greek name did not absolutely prove that these men were Hellenistic Jews. There were Palestinian Jews who also had Greek names. An example of this is one of the twelve disciples named Philip (this Greek name means “friend of horses”).

Nicanor, Timon and Parmenas, except that their names indicate they were probably Hellenistic Jews. “Much of the work of God is carried on by unknown, unsung individuals who faithfully carry out the tasks entrusted to them, quite content to leave the limelight to others.”⁸ Nicolas was a proselyte, indicating that he was born as a Gentile but later embraced the Jewish faith. He was a full proselyte who converted to Judaism and submitted to all its requirements.⁹ Nicolas was from Syrian Antioch, the city where the gospel was soon to be taken and which would become the headquarters for Paul’s missionary efforts. Some believe, based on certain traditions, that Luke himself was from this city. As we travel through the book of Acts we are seeing a gradual transition from what began as exclusively Jewish believers to the later situation where the congregations would be dominated by Gentiles. Antioch would be the first major Gentile assembly.

Acts 6:6

The seven chosen men were brought before the Apostles, and after the Apostles had prayed, they laid their hands on them. In this way they were asking God’s blessing and setting them apart for their special service. The laying on of hands in this case did not impart to them the gift of the Spirit because they already had the Spirit and were Spirit-filled men (Acts 6:5). The Apostles, by this act, were identifying with them and showing that they were one with them in heart, purpose and ministry. This ordination by the laying on of hands was an act of setting these men apart for a special ministry and seeking the blessing of God upon them (compare Acts 13:3).

From this point on, we hear nothing more about this problem with the Grecian widows being slighted. We can only assume that under the leadership of these seven men, the problem was solved in a God-honoring way, and God was able to greatly bless the Jerusalem church as described in verse 7.

These proto-deacons provide a wonderful lesson for deacons in God’s churches today. The service deacons provide today is of utmost importance. They care for material things, for the physical needs of the buildings, for preparation of the communion services, for the handling of financial matters, etc. The purpose of their ministry is to carry the load and lessen the burden from those who are supremely responsible for handling the Word of God. They are to do all they can to keep the pastor and elders focused on their ministry of prayer and the Word of God. Nevertheless, deacons need to meet basic spiritual qualifications that are so important for anyone in leadership.

The ministry of these first deacons was not limited to the service of the widows. As we shall learn, Stephen gave a mighty presentation of the gospel to the Jewish ruling council (Acts 7), and Philip was used by God as an evangelist (Acts 8). What a blessing it is today when deacons are well-versed in the Bible as Stephen and Philip were, and able to share Christ with the unsaved.

Acts 6:7

Because the Church had acted to solve the problem of dissension and division in their midst, God’s

⁸John Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, p. 118.

⁹Some believe that this Nicolas was the founder of the Nicolaitans mentioned in Revelation 2:6,15, but there is little evidence to establish this apart from a similarity in names.

good hand was upon them, the Jerusalem assembly was blessed, and the number of the disciples was multiplied. In verse 1 we are told that the disciples multiplied; here in verse 7 we learn that they multiplied **greatly**. The Church kept on growing to the consternation of the Jewish religious leaders. Great persecution was just around the corner.

We are amazed to read that there was a large number of priests who were obedient to the faith. To be obedient to the faith was to obey the requirements of the gospel, namely to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16-30-31). Were not these priests enemies of the gospel? Within the nation of Israel there was a superstructure of administration led by the godless, wicked, apostate Sadducee priests who denied the resurrection of the dead and the existence of angels. They were liberal heretics, and even though they were a small minority and their views were at odds with the majority of the Jews, yet they held important positions in the Temple, and in the ruling body of the Jews (the Sanhedrin).

The fact that many priests believed may also imply that many Levites believed. The priests were a small subset of the Levite tribe, having descended from Aaron, a Levite. There may have been as many as 8,000 Jewish priests serving in the Temple at different times, and out of these “a great company” trusted Christ as Savior. These believing priests probably did not come from among the ruling priests, but from among the common rank and file of priests. We remember Zacharias, a priest and the father of John the Baptist, who had a tender heart toward the Lord (Luke chapter 1).

Why did many priests turn to Christ in faith? Obviously they were very impressed by the testimony of the early Christians, and many were present at Pentecost and at later occasions to hear the powerful preaching of the Apostles. We should also remember what some of the priests personally witnessed on the day that Christ died: “And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in two from the top to the bottom” (Matt. 27:51).

J. Oswald Chamber describes this remarkable event:

The Holy Place in the temple was divided from the Holiest of All by a great and beautiful veil. It was suspended by hooks from four pillars of gold. It measured sixty feet long by thirty feet wide, worked in seventy-two squares, and was reputed to be as thick as the palm of the hand. So heavy was it that the priests claimed it took three hundred men to handle it.

The purpose of the veil needed no explanation. It was not a gateway, but a barrier. It effectively excluded the ministering priests from entering the Holiest of All. Only once a year was it drawn aside to admit the High Priest--on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus chapter 16; and compare Hebrews 9:1-8). He entered the sacred Presence-chamber to sprinkle the mercy-seat with blood, making atonement for his own sins and those of his people.

For centuries the veil had hung gracefully in its place, but suddenly, at the very moment the Crucified uttered His loud, expiring cry, the ministering priests heard a tearing sound, and as if an unseen hand severed it by starting at the top, the veil fell apart before their awe-stricken gaze.

Who could express the solemnity of the moment when they found themselves gazing into the sanctuary where for centuries God had deigned to dwell, and into which none

had dared enter under pain of death. Tradition has it that the priests, unwilling to accept the implications of this divine act, sewed up the curtain and resumed their ritual, as though no world-shaking event had taken place.¹⁰

Yes, no human hand could have done this. Because of the death of Christ, God was able to remove the barrier that stood between sinful men and a holy God. In Old Testament times, only one man (the High Priest) could come before God's Presence; and this privilege he enjoyed only once a year (Heb. 9:7). Today God invites every believer to come boldly before Him! The way has been opened by a mighty act of God (Heb. 4:16; 10:19-20,22). How often do we take advantage of this free and open access (Eph. 2:18)?

Acts 6:8

Stephen is introduced in this chapter, first as a proto-deacon (v. 5), then as a Spirit-filled miracle worker (v. 8), and finally as a powerful proclaimer of the truth of God. He was so effective that he greatly angered the unbelieving Jews, resulting in a trial before the Sanhedrin (verses 9-15). All of this was a prelude to Stephen's remarkable message in Acts chapter 7.

Prior to this, it was the Apostles who performed great wonders and miracles. Now, Stephen, a non-Apostle, was doing the same. In the days of the early Church, God granted miracle-working power temporarily to special people such as Stephen, Philip (Acts 8:6-7), and Paul. Stephen's miracles probably included healing miracles and perhaps the casting out of demons. Luke calls attention to Stephen's great faith ("full of faith") and also his Spirit-filled empowerment ("power"). Christ had promised that His disciples would receive the Spirit and would be clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8), and this was certainly true with Stephen. A word which characterized the life of Stephen would be the word "fullness." He was full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:3), full of wisdom (Acts 6:3), full of faith (Acts 6:5), and full of power (Acts 6:8).

Acts 6:9

In the city of Jerusalem there was one Temple but a number of synagogues. One estimate based on the Talmud is that there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem, but this figure may be somewhat exaggerated. The tumult surrounding Stephen's teaching arose from the synagogue mentioned in this verse which seemed to be the worship place for Hellenistic Jews from several areas.¹¹ It was the synagogue of the Freedmen, and from this Greek term we get our word "liberty." These Jews or their ancestors were formerly in bondage to the Romans or in prison, but were now free. Some believe this is referring to captive Jews brought to Rome by Pompey in 63 B.C., who were later liberated and repatriated to Palestine. It is ironic that these "liberated Jews" so violently rejected the message of Stephen which would have brought them true liberation from sin (John 8:31-36).

¹⁰J. Oswald Chambers, *The Incomparable Christ*, pp. 216-217.

¹¹Was Luke was referring to one synagogue or several? It is probably best to understand the reference to one synagogue ("Synagogue of the Freedmen") made up of Hellenistic Jews from the various locations mentioned. See F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, page 133.

Four localities are mentioned as being the original homeland of these formerly enslaved Jews: 1) Cyrene was located in Northern Africa (the present-day country of Libya). The man who carried the cross for Christ was from this city (Mark 15:21). Jews from this city were present on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Also Lucius, a leader of the church at Antioch, was from Cyrene (Acts 13:1). 2) Alexandria, a large and key city in Egypt, named after Alexander the Great. Hellenistic Alexandria was best known for the Lighthouse of Alexandria (sometimes called the Pharos of Alexandria), one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Its great library was the largest in the ancient world. Alexandria was at one time the second most powerful city of the ancient Mediterranean region, second only to Rome. 3) Cilicia was a southeasterly province of Asia Minor along the Mediterranean Sea, with Tarsus, the birthplace of Paul, its capital. It is possible that when Paul was in Jerusalem, he worshiped at this synagogue. Some have even suggested that Paul may have debated Stephen in this synagogue, though we do not know this as a fact. Paul was certainly involved with the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58; 8:1). 4) Asia, or Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Some of the Hellenistic Jews who attended this synagogue were from areas in Asia Minor other than Cilicia. It was Grecian Jews from Asia who later gave Paul such horrendous problems, to the extent that they nearly killed him, as we shall see later in the book of Acts.

These Hellenistic Jews celebrated their freedom by having their own synagogue. They were very anxious to prove their orthodoxy and their loyalty to Israel by being fervently opposed to any supposed heresies, and the doctrine of the Christians seemed like such a threat. The same zeal inspired Saul of Tarsus and his violent campaign against those who believed in Christ.

Stephen, himself a Hellenistic Jew, frequented this synagogue and while there he entered into vibrant discussions and debates with these Jews. His discussions undoubtedly centered upon the Person and work of Jesus Christ, based on the Old Testament Scriptures. The key question was whether or not Christ was the promised Messiah. The fact that Stephen was extremely well-versed in the Old Testament is clearly demonstrated in the following chapter (Acts 7). Again, one can only wonder if Saul of Tarsus participated in these debates.

Acts 6:10

Armed with the Word of truth, and filled with the Spirit of God, Stephen powerfully pointed to the all-sufficient Saviour. The Spirit was helping him to speak with wisdom, and his words were so strong that they could not argue with him. When you cannot win an argument, the next option is to attack the person making the argument. This situation was similar to Bible-believing creationists today, such as Henry Morris and Duane Gish, who would debate evolutionists in major universities throughout the country. They masterminded all the arguments of the evolutionists, and could answer them on every point, backed up by the latest scientific documentation. This could be embarrassing as the outmatched evolutionist was being humiliated before hundreds of students in the auditorium of his local campus. So when the evolutionists failed to win the argument, they resorted to attacking the creationists as being ignorant and out of sync with the evolutionary mind-set of the overwhelming majority of the scientific establishment. These Hellenistic Jews were greatly outmatched by Stephen's proclamation of the truth, and they responded by attacking his person which eventually led to his unjust execution.

Acts 6:11

To "suborn" means to secretly induce someone to do something unlawful, to induce someone to

commit perjury (to lie under oath). Compare the “false witnesses” mentioned in verse 13. Bribery may have been involved as well. The false witnesses produced false charges, which included the charge of blasphemy against Moses and against God. Since Moses was Israel’s lawgiver, this false charge intended to make Stephen a blasphemous opponent of Hebrew law which was central to their entire religious system. Further charges given by false witnesses are mentioned in verse 13.

Stephen’s trial was not unlike the trial of the Lord Jesus when many false witnesses testified against the Son of God (Mark 14:55-59). The false witnesses at our Lord’s trial failed to get their stories straight between each other because their testimony did not agree (Mark 14:56,59). They contradicted each other! Stephen was not guilty, but those testifying falsely against him had blood on their hands, and were guilty of breaking the ninth commandment. They were guilty of breaking the very legal code which they had accused Stephen of rejecting!

“It was Calvary all over again. The nation, having officially rejected the Son of God, was now going to officially reject the Spirit of God with the same trumped-up charges, the same use of false witnesses, the same use of the mob, the same lawless murder of the victim.”¹²

Acts 6:12-13

The leaders of the synagogue of the Libertines stirred up the people against Stephen, including influential elders and scribes. Up to this point the Apostles and believers enjoyed favor among the common people, but this was beginning to change. These leaders seized and arrested Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin, the very same ruling council which had wrongly condemned Jesus to death and which later had commanded the Apostles not to preach the gospel. Their false charge against Stephen included blasphemy, with one new ingredient: blasphemy against the Temple (“this holy place”). This brought the total number of specific charges to three:

Stephen Charged With Blasphemy

1. Blasphemy against Moses (Acts 6:11) and the Law (Acts 6:13,14).
2. Blasphemy against God (Acts 6:11).
3. Blasphemy against God’s Temple (Acts 6:13, “this holy place”).

In Stephen’s message, given in Acts chapter 7, all three of these charges were skillfully answered with irresistible wisdom given by God. Similar to the charges leveled against Stephen, Paul also was later accused of attacking the law and the Temple (Acts 25:8).

Acts 6:14

Since these men were false witnesses, we must not take their charges seriously. Stephen, a devoted Jew who was well-versed in the Old Testament Scriptures, had nothing but the utmost respect for the Temple and for the law given by God to Moses. True gospel preaching does not make void or

¹²John Phillips, *Exploring Acts*, p. 121.

destroy the law; rather it establishes it (Rom. 3:31). The gospel never waters down God's righteous standards of holiness ("the law"), but instead it provides hope for guilty, law-breaking sinners by way of the substitutionary death of our Sin-bearer (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 3:18).

Early in His public ministry, the Lord made a statement recorded in John 2:19 which was frequently misunderstood by His enemies: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews thought He was speaking of Solomon's Temple which Herod had refurbished. But Jesus was referring to the temple of His body (John 2:21). The Lord Jesus was actually predicting His resurrection, which took place three days after the Jews and Romans destroyed His body by way of crucifixion. The Jews misunderstood this statement, claiming that Jesus promised to destroy the Jewish Temple, something which He never said. At the trial of Jesus, false witnesses asserted that Jesus claimed that He could destroy the Temple (Matt. 26:60-61). Those who mocked Him at the foot of the cross reviled Him with these same false statements: "You who destroy the Temple and build it in three days, save Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come down from the cross"(Matt. 27:40). This was the same fake news that Stephen's false witnesses repeated (Acts 6:14). It is another example of how God's Word is easily misinterpreted by those who do not have eyes to see, nor a heart to understand (2 Cor. 2:14).

Of course, the Christian gospel would have a radical impact upon the established religion practiced by the Jews. The Temple would be destroyed, not by the Lord Jesus, but by the Romans in 70 A.D. Prior to this destruction the writer to the Hebrews explained how the Old Testament sacrificial system, under priests descended from Aaron, found its wonderful fulfillment in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. What Christ accomplished brought in better things for the Jewish people:

1. Better Country (Hebrews 11:16)
2. Better Hope (Hebrews 7:19)
3. Better Promises (Hebrews 8:6)
4. Better Resurrection (Hebrews 11:35)
5. Better Sacrifices (Hebrews 9:23)
6. Better Substance (Hebrews 10:34)
7. Better Testament/Covenant (Hebrews 7:22, 8:6)
8. Better Things (Hebrews 6:9, 11:40, 12:24)

Acts 6:15

God did something very remarkable in the presence of Stephen's enemies. As the council gathered together, Stephen, the man charged with blasphemous crimes, was the center of attention. All eyes were fixed upon him, as each member of the Sanhedrin gazed at him intently. What they saw was unbelievable. God transformed this man's face so that it was not like the face of a man, but like the face of an angel.¹³ His enemies 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

¹³The Sadducees of the Sanhedrin did not even believe in angels, so it is ironic that God caused Stephen's face to glow like the face of an angel.

follower.”¹⁴

Certainly Stephen had a great amount of love and concern for his accusers, as we learn from Acts 7:60, when his dying words were “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge.” He had a remarkable love for his enemies, even for his killers. We are reminded of the Lord Jesus who prayed from the cross, “Father forgive them.” The Lord Jesus did not retaliate, and at His trials He stood with appropriate quietness when the accusations were not even worthy of a response. Isaiah described the event: “He openeth not His mouth: He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth” (Isaiah 53:7).

Historically, we remember that the face of Moses shone as he came down from Mt. Sinai, and he had to wear a veil (2 Cor. 3:13). It was as if God were saying, “This man is not against Moses; on the contrary, I was with Stephen and caused his face to glow even as the face of Moses once glowed.” On the Mount of Transfiguration, our Lord’s face did shine as the sun (Matt. 17:2). The Lord Jesus prepared His disciples for the persecution they would receive, and He promised to show them what to say when brought before their enemies: “for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist” (Luke 21:15). Stephen’s tranquil and trusting heart was reflected in his face. We have never seen the face of an angel and have no idea what that would look like, but the men in the Sanhedrin caught an unforgettable glimpse of something that could only be attributed to God. God did something special in that man’s heart and on that man’s face. How did Luke know about these things, including the transformation of Stephen’s face? He probably received this information from Saul of Tarsus.

¹⁴William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, p. 1602.