

## Acts 6.1-15

### Recap:

#### God's problem:

The man who claimed to be his Son, the Christ, had been hung on a tree, i.e. defeated by human powers, apparently cursed by God, his followers scattered.

1. How could the shame and defeat be turned into victory – Jesus' status confirmed?
  2. How could his followers be regathered?
  3. How could Jesus' mission - the kingdom of God on earth – be fulfilled?
- i.e. How would Jesus not go down as just another failed would-be Messiah, his followers perishing or scattered

#### God's answer (his "plan and undertaking")

1. *Raise and exalt Jesus. Resurrection of Jesus and appearances to Apostles and more than 500 disciples (see 5.30-31)*
2. *Pour out the HS upon the Apostles. Regathering them and empowering them to preach + perform signs and wonders will give credibility to their witness to Jesus' resurrection and his continuing lordship as they preach and work miracles "in his name"*  
= Fulfilment of Jesus' promise to the twelve in John 14.11-14
3. *Establish an Apostolic HS community in Jerusalem by pouring out the HS on all who repent and are baptized, to live as model community – testimony to Jesus' kingdom/reign on earth.*

The "beginning" of the mission (see Luke 24.47):

- In Jerusalem, beginning in temple and spreading to homes
- Apostolic: centred on the apostles, with Peter (and John) clearly pre-eminent, both in terms of preaching and signs and wonders (only ones performing signs and wonders up to end of ch 5)
- Purpose: to establish church, founded on apostolic witness to Jesus and preaching, attested by signs and wonders

## **Ch 6 marks the beginning of the next phase:**

### **vv.1-7**

#### **Success of phase 1 brought 3 challenges:**

1. Practical – to care equally for everyone
2. Pastoral – to restore unity
3. Leadership – to guard apostolic ministry while releasing others to minister

#### **1. Practical**

Continued growth presents organisational and leadership challenges – unavoidable in all church fellowships!

Hand notes that in the Roman world poverty/the poor were treated unsympathetically and tended to be spoken of in derogatory terms, the poor being regarded as dishonest or lazy, or at least having failed to build sound social networks. Witherington summarises him:

The modern notion of charity goes back to Judeo-Christian concepts of giving without thought of return, of being “gracious”, concepts that are just the opposite of Greek and Roman notions of “giving and receiving,” in which a gift sets off a chain of reciprocity and in general one only gives to achieve personal honour or gain and only to those one thinks can in some way reciprocate (at least with votes or vocal support, if not monetarily).

Wall: The prophets make clear that the treatment of its poor and powerless effectively gauges Israel’s relationship with God (Mal 3.5; Zech 7.10) and heralds repentant Israel’s new covenant with God (Isa 47.8).

“There was a long tradition of care of the poor within the synagogue, and Christians continued this practice” (Willimon) based on Exod 22.22ff.; Deut 10.18

Because girls often married quite young, and to older men, widows common. Being diaspora Jews, those widowed may well have lacked other relatives/family networks in Jerusalem who would otherwise support them

## 2. Pastoral

First record of internal friction

– *goggysmos* ‘grumbling’ (“complaint expressed in murmuring” [BAGD]) – as in Exod 16.7; Num 14.27; 1 Cor 10.10.

Clements: “Those complaints, as every Jew knew, led to a whole generation being condemned to die in the desert outside the Promised Land. Would it be the same story all over again?”

- Hellenists v’s Hebrews, i.e. linguistic/cultural division
- Bias/favouritism?

Assume there was a common fund to support the poorer members of the community (see 4.32-35).

Funds were “laid at the apostles’ feet”, i.e. they had the responsibility of distribution, and – even though the grumbling is said to be against “the Hebrews” generally, it is they who are ultimately responsible.

*Is this a case politicising/attributing wrong motives to a situation which was merely a practical/administrative one? Instead of grumbling, the Hellenists could have simply raised it as an unintentional oversight/issue of fairness needing to be addressed.*

Hellenist = Greek speaking Jews originally from the diaspora (2.5; 9.29. v’s Aramaic speaking Jews). They had their own Gk-speaking synagogue/s, as attested in v.9.

With language goes culture, therefore it is likely that Greek speakers who had come to Christ and Aramaic speakers met in different homes and according to (some extent) different cultural practices – though still as observant Jews.

Wall: The reader should presume that the Hellenists and Hebrews “were of one heart and soul” (4.32)

The oversight was probably a result of administrative failure rather than discrimination. But because the failure affects one group and not the other, the potential for misinterpretation and offence is huge.

Clements: The way the church responds to social needs, and the way it handles internal problems, and the way it cares for vulnerable groups within its membership – such things are observed by outsiders and either enhance the credibility of the preached message or contradict it.

### 3. Leadership

“The twelve”(only time called this in Acts) take the lead. They recognise the problem as twofold:

1. The task is too big for them, they are not managing it and need to delegate
2. If they are to give it the time required, then it will be at the expense of the task they are particularly charged with, and which they cannot delegate: their witness to the risen and glorified Christ – “the delivering of the faith once and for all...” (Jude)

The “full number of the disciples is summoned” – presumably not all 5,000+ believers, but those in some leadership role. Possibly just those who are Hellenists, given that the Seven are said to be chosen from amongst them.

Reminiscent of God telling Moses to appoint the 70 elders (Num 11.16-30) and the appointment of Joshua, and placing his Spirit on them. Cf Exod 31.3; 35.31

All the names are Greek, suggesting all Hellenists, though not definitive as two of the twelve – Andrew and Philip, had Greek names. But Stephen and Philip seem to be Hellenists.

Witherington: The solution the apostles arrive at here is a rather novel one for antiquity.... (Keener) has called it the first example of affirmative action – “Those with political power generally repressed complaining minorities; here the apostles hand the whole system over to the offended minority.”

Not a case of one ministry being more important than another (the second Great Commandment cannot be set aside for the Great Commission). Not a matter of relative importance, but of what each is called to, of particular roles.

Witherington: Both ministries are seen as forms of public religious service – and are called *diakonia*

The disciples, not the apostles, are to choose seven men to serve at tables, but the apostles lay down their qualifications:

1. Of good repute
2. Full of the Spirit
3. and of wisdom

Criteria = character, reputation and fullness of the Spirit, not special talents or abilities.

Serving tables may be a practical task, but it requires wisdom and the HS.

Dunn deduces that:

- a) these seven may have been leaders of seven Gk speaking house churches, hence the choice of seven to be set apart. I.e. there were seven house churches which had Hellenist widows, and each needed someone to ensure they got their share of the distribution
- b) they were also seen, therefore, as the leaders of the Hellenist believers (in a similar way to which the twelve were of the Hebrew believers), which would account for why they are referred to as 'the seven' in Acts 21.8, and also for the fact that they became leaders in evangelism (as seen in case of Stephen and Philip)

They are set before the apostles, who pray and lay hands on them. But note that leadership is a gift bestowed from above – from God (Eph 4.8-11; 1 Tim 4.14)

### **The result:**

1. "the word of God continued to spread"  
(as in parable of sower, Lk 8.4ff) – as the apostles were released to focus on preaching and prayer
2. "the number of the disciples multiplied", including "a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith."  
c.8000 (Dunn) – c.18000 (Haechen) priests in Jerusalem at the time and those who converted may be presumed to have been of the lower ranks. Not linked to HP family or Sadducees.  
Cf. Don Corban's ordination sermon: preach the Gospel and love your people

### **vv.8-15**

Stephen doing "great signs and wonders", and "full of grace and power".

First mention of anyone other than an apostle doing so.

= accredited by God, as affirmed again in v.15 by his holy visage.

He is God's spokesman, transmitting the message delivered to him by the apostles, in the power of the HS.

- a man of evident spiritual authority, wisdom, power and maturity.
- Also preaching (the message he'd received from the apostles) and disputing, in the power of the Holy Spirit and his wisdom (v.10).  
Clearly beyond his brief as a server at tables!

Luke tells us that those who disputed with Stephen were not the religious authorities this time but ordinary people.

Opposition probably from only one synagogue - of the Freedmen, which included descendants of freed slaves (taken into captivity by the Romans in 61BC following Pompey's conquest of Jerusalem) and diaspora Jews from various regions including from Cilicia (where Saul came from) who also worshipped at that synagogue.

Dunn notes that the reason many diaspora Jews would have come to live in Jerusalem would have been because of their desire to reside near the Temple, and to be buried near it (as still today).

⇒ Stephen's preaching against the temple as the locus of God's presence (v's Spirit of Jesus) not surprisingly caused upset.

They "could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking". Fulfilment of Luke 12.12 and 21.15 "... for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict."

Having failed in open debate, they resort to dirty tactics – bribing false accusers and stirring up opposition.

Opposition mirrors that at Jesus' trial:

- secretly instigated men who claimed he had said blasphemous words against Moses (not illegal!) and God NB. same charges will be levelled against Paul (21.20-21,28; 24.7; 25.8)
- stirred up the people, elders and scribes and brought Stephen before the Council
- set up false witnesses (breaking 9<sup>th</sup> commandment – Exod 20.16) "he never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law... Jesus will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us" (cf. Jn 2.19). Cf. Jesus' own trial Mark 14.57-59. Temple and Law = the 2 things Jews prized most.

Dunn: an "over-the-top reaction of someone whose most cherished conviction had been called in question". Their concern is centred on the imp. of the Temple, which Stephen has clearly undermined by pointing them to Jesus. The reference to Moses and the law probably relates to the laws around temple worship, sacrifice etc.

Emphasis on Stephen's godliness: "And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel." i.e. someone close to God, in his very presence, who reflects something of God's glory (Witherington)

Is this Saul's report??

Not just saying Stephen looked saintly, but a deliberate comparison with Moses, who he is being accused of maligning. When Moses received the Law and came down the mountain the second time his face shone brightly (Exod 34.29ff.) God's anointing is on Stephen as clearly as it was on Moses.

### **Conclusions:**

This second phase still in Jerusalem, but:

- Prioritisation and delegation of some tasks/ministry roles
- Distinction remains between "the twelve" (apostles) and other disciples, but a new group set apart – "the seven".
- Signs and wonders performed by the HS through those the Apostles have laid hands on
- Preaching remains the priority of the apostles, but no longer is preaching or signs and wonders their exclusive domain – the spreading flame
- Consultative leadership/decision-making, with the apostles leaving it to the full number of disciples to choose the seven who will serve, but retaining the authority to set numbers, credentials (v. 3) and commission for ministry (v.6)
- There is no one set pattern of government or leadership in the church. The structures arose out of the needs and context.

Dunn: Here is evidence that, "There was never a time when the church did not know the tensions which come from diversity of culture and viewpoint and defects in organisation!"

- As Gospel spreads and church grows, so does persecution.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions**

1. Why do humans so often take offence, grumble and even attribute wrong motives to others rather than assuming a problem is driven simply by circumstances or external factors which can easily be addressed if talked about openly and honestly?

2. How good are we at looking out for the most needy or vulnerable in our fellowship? Who are they (not individual names, but by type of need)? Is there more we could be doing? To what extent do we empower them to provide solutions to their own needs?
3. What are our expectations of our clergy? Which ministries should they prioritise in our church, and which should be delegated to others?
4. How might these priorities change as a church grows?
5. Stephen clearly had a very powerful anointing to preach and perform signs and wonders. Why do you think this was? What was his strategic role in the early church?
6. Do we expect God to anoint people in this way today? If so - every Christian, or every leader, or just certain ones? What is your observation of what has happened over the history of the church?