

Acts 6 – Conflict, Grace and Power

Chapter 6 of Acts brings us to the end of the first stage of Luke's account of the spread of the gospel and the start of the second stage. Verse 7 is the first of five summary statements that Luke uses in Acts before the story takes off in a new direction (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; and 19:20). This chapter is, therefore, a pivotal chapter in Luke's account of the growth and expansion of the church.

There follows a long quote from the excellent book “How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth”, which explains the background to the first seven verses of the chapter far better than I can.

Luke's “interest in 1:1-6:7 is to give us a picture both of the life of the primitive community and of its expansion *within Jerusalem*. This narrative 6:1-7, includes both of these features. But it also hints of the first tension within the community itself, a tension based on traditional lines within Judaism between Jerusalem (or Aramaic-speaking) Jews and the Diaspora (Greek-speaking) Jews. In the church this tension was overcome by an official recognition of the leadership that had begun to emerge among the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians.

We have put the last sentence in that particular way because at this point one must also do some outside work on the historical context. By a little digging (articles in Bible dictionaries on “deacons” and “Hellenists,” commentaries and background books like Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969], you can discover the following important facts:

1. The Hellenists were almost certainly Greek-speaking Jews, that is Jews from the Diaspora (descendants of the Old Testament exiles) who had returned to live in Jerusalem.
2. Many such Hellenists returned to Jerusalem in their later years to die and be buried by Mount Zion. Since they were not native to Jerusalem, when they died, their widows had no regular means of sustenance.
3. These widows were cared for by daily subsidies—care that caused a considerable economic strain in Jerusalem.
4. It is clear from 6:9 that the Hellenists had their own Greek-speaking synagogue of which both Stephen and Saul, who was from Tarsus (located in Greek-speaking Cilicia, v.9), were members.
5. The evidence of Acts 6 is that the early church had made considerable inroads into this synagogue—note the mention of “their widows” (v.1), the fact that all seven chosen to handle this matter have Greek names, and the fact that the intense opposition to the church comes from the Diaspora synagogue.
6. Finally, the seven men are never called deacons. They are simply “the Seven” (21:8), who, to be sure, are to oversee the daily food subsidies for the Greek-speaking widows but who are also clearly ministers of the Word (Stephen, Philip).

This knowledge of content will especially help to make sense of what follows. For in 6:8-8:1 Luke focuses on one of the Seven as the key figure in the first expansion outside Jerusalem. He explicitly tells us that Stephen's martyrdom has this result (8:1-4). You should notice also from this latter passage how important this Greek-speaking community of Christians in Jerusalem is to God's plan. They are forced to leave Jerusalem because

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3. What were they to look for in the men who were to serve? Why do you think these qualities were required in this situation? (Acts 6:3-5, 8)

4. In verse 7 Luke says “the word of God spread” why do you think he uses this expression? (cf 12:24 and 19:20)

5. Describe Stephen in your own words from what Luke tells us in this chapter. What evidence is there that he had God's approval? (Acts 6:3,5,8,10 and 15)

6. Why do you think Stephen had opposition from the Greek-speaking synagogue? (Acts 6:9-11)

7. What tactics did the opposition use to bring Stephen down and why do you think they charged him with speaking against the temple and the law? (Acts 6:11-12)

8. What do you think is the significance of Stephen's appearance in the eyes of the Sanhedrin, “the face of an angel”? (Acts 6:15 cf Exodus 34:29-35)

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Commit

- We have seen the devil use three tactics to try and overthrow the church; by force in chapter 4, by internal corruption in chapter 5 and by distraction from the main task in chapter 6. Which is he using in our church? How can we foil his plans?

- “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.” Is there a principle for us to apply to the life of our church in these words? If so what is it and what do we need to do to apply this principle? What gifts has God given me to serve the church community?

- “Stephen was going around Greek-speaking synagoguesand the people he was speaking towere defending a worldview, a way of looking at things that coloured their whole life. And they saw the proclamation of Jesus as a threat to that whole way of thinking and living.”² To what extent is our proclamation of Jesus a threat to the worldview of the people we speak to? What do you think are the areas of conflict with their worldview?