

Acts 6

In a general sense, what do we see happening in the church (v. 1)? Conflict, disagreement, friction. The first church dispute. In this chapter we see two of Satan's favorite methods of attacking the church that he has employed throughout history: internal dissension (squabbling among members) to divide the church (vv. 1-7) and external persecution to discourage and disperse the church (vv. 8-15). He still uses those tools today.

Two types of Jews made up the Jerusalem church. Some were native "Hebrews" who had lived primarily in Palestine, spoke Aramaic predominantly and used the Hebrew Scriptures. The others were "Hellenists" who originally lived outside Palestine (Jews of the Diaspora) but were now living in Palestine. They spoke Greek primarily, as well as the language of the area where they had lived. Frequently tensions arose between these two groups, which carried over into the new church.

The Hebrews and the Hellenists originally had their own synagogues in Jerusalem. But when they became Christians, they came together in one fellowship. As the church grew, some of the Christians believed that the church leaders were discriminating against the Hellenists unfairly.¹ It was a little like mixing oil and water.

The conflict between Hebrews and Hellenists was over what major doctrinal/ theological issue? Food! The Greek widows were not getting their fair share of food.

This conflict appears to be a small issue. But why is this conflict a big deal? It had the potential to be a divisive issue by setting up an environment of hostility – Greek Jews vs. Hebrew Jews. The potential end result could be two separate Christian churches. Splits are devastating in any church. This New Testament Church could not tolerate a split; they must have unity!

Satan's objective is to dissolve this new church. Distraction is a primary tactic of the evil one....reorient their focus....plant seeds of discord. If he can distract the leaders, the church will be weakened. Get a fire going in the corner and everyone rushes to put it out.

Where do we see competing interests or potentially divisive issues in the church today?

This was clearly a leadership crisis. How did the 12 apostles respond? What was their proposed solution (vv. 2-4)? After gathering all the disciples together, they explained the dilemma and wisely delegated responsibility for this ministry to other qualified men in the congregation so it would not distract them from their primary duties. Waiting on tables probably involved the organization and administration of ministry to the widows rather than simply serving as waiters or dispensers.²

They chose seven men (v. 5). What did the Seven have in common? They were all part of the Greek community.

What leadership principles do we see demonstrated here? The leaders took action; they didn't bury their heads in the sand and hope the problem would go away. They gathered all the principals, explained their reasoning, identified qualifications, let the disciples choose the disciple ministry team (delegation). They got buy-in from the masses. They didn't shoot the messenger. They didn't punish the food handlers.

Hellenists appear to have been given responsibility for settling a Hellenist complaint (equal distribution of food), a wise approach. The apostles delegated the responsibility for fixing the problem to the offended minority – knowing they would take ownership. They had the greatest vested interest and they would solve the distribution problem.

The Twelve were able to differentiate between the urgent and the important. Widows clamoring for their attention qualified as an urgent matter. The ministry of the Word of God and prayer were the major priorities of the leaders. When you compare the early church with today's church, the missing element is most frequently the commitment to prayer.

What were the qualifications for waiting on tables (v. 3)? Men who were full of the Spirit and full of wisdom. These men needed to have good reputations, to be under the Spirit's control and to be wise. Note that these are character traits, not special talents or abilities or aptitude for the job. No food management degree was required.

Why did they need spiritually mature men to take care of a food problem? This wasn't a food problem – the food issue was merely a symptom of a bigger underlying problem. **What kind of problem was it?** A leadership problem....there was a leadership vacuum....confusion....nobody was in charge. Put the right people in charge...problem solved.

Once they chose the men, what did they do next (v. 6)? Had the leaders lay hands on them and prayed over them. Again, they realized the value and necessity of prayer. **What does the laying on of hands signify?** Laying hands on someone symbolized the bestowal of a blessing, a commission for a new responsibility and/or the granting of authority.

What was the impact of their leadership (v. 7)? The Word of God spread. The early church had problems but it also had strong leaders who moved swiftly to ward off corruption and find solutions to internal conflicts. Note that the ministry at this time is confined to Jerusalem. That will soon change.

Luke linked the spread of God's Word with church growth. This cause and effect relationship has continued throughout history. Many of the numerous priests in Jerusalem were also becoming Christians. One writer estimated that about 2,000 priests lived in Jerusalem at this time. The gospel did not win over only the "laity" in Israel.³ The Gospel invaded the religious hierarchy.

Next, we are introduced to Stephen (v. 8). **What do we know about Stephen?** One of the Seven chosen to wait on tables (6:3-5), he was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, full of grace and power, who did wonders and miracles. He was a good debater. The first person outside of the Twelve to do miracles.

Stephen ran into opposition. **Who were the Freedmen (v. 9)?** Grecian Jews who previously were Roman prisoners and who had later been granted their freedom. Stephen, also having been a Grecian Jew, debated Christianity with them. The leading men in this congregation took issue with Stephen whom they had heard defend the gospel. However, they were unable to defeat him in debate. Stephen seems to have been an unusually gifted defender of the faith. Here we see a clear illustration of the second tactic of Satan – external persecution to discourage and disperse the church (vv. 8-15).

Failing to prove Stephen wrong by intellectual debate, what do they do next (v. 11)? Stephen's accusers falsely accused him of blasphemy – speaking against Moses and God. They framed him. The Freedmen stirred up the Jewish people, the Jewish elders and the teachers of the law against Stephen. Soldiers then arrested him and brought him before the Sanhedrin as they had done to Jesus, Peter, John, and the other apostles.

How do you explain the charges of v. 14? By saying that Jesus would destroy this place, Stephen was quoting Jesus (John 2:19) when he talked about destroying the temple. And Jesus did change the customs of Moses. He introduced the New Covenant making obsolete the Old (Mosaic) Covenant (Hebrews 8:13).

Do you see a parallel between Stephen and Jesus? Like Jesus, Steven did great miracles, opposition arose, they could not debate with him, they charged him with blasphemy and false witnesses leveled false charges against him.

What are the implications of v. 15? How is Stephen handling this? Stephen was at perfect peace. His face was not filled with fear or terror, because he knew his life was in God's hands and that God never forsakes His people. His face reflected the perfect peace and confidence of one who knows and trusts his God irrespective of the circumstances.

¹ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Acts, 2017 Edition (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>) p. 108

² Ibid. p. 109

³ Ibid. p. 111