



## Organization and persecution

### **Acts 6**

We believe, of course, that the book of *Acts* is the infallible Word of God, as are all the other books of the Bible. We therefore receive it as much more than beautiful literature. However, we must not lose sight of the beauty of the Word of God. The book of *Acts* is a work of art. The historian, Luke, gives us the needed information concerning the beginnings of the New Testament church and of its early development.

#### **The church in transition**

Chapter six is a transition chapter in the book of *Acts*. This does not mean that it does not have rich content of its own, but that it is a bridge to further development of the early church. Slowly the church comes to better organization. The gospel is first preached to the Jews in Jerusalem, but the Gospel must go out to the whole world. God so leads the history of that period that the leaders of the church will fulfill the mandate He has given to them.

#### **The first deacon**

In the first seven verses of this chapter we hear of the addition of an office in the early church. This is the *office* of deacon. It is true that some today who do not believe that this is the institution of the diaconal office but that it was only the appointment of an *ad hoc* committee. These believe that this office (of deacon) was introduced some time later in the history of the church. I do not believe that this opinion rests on a solid foundation. The work which was given these men to do is work which has always been associated with the office of deacon. Our form for the installation of elders and deacons also mentions the fact that this distinct office had its beginning here.

#### **A problem of growth**

According to the review which the author has given us in the previous chapters, the church was doing very well. There was unbelievable growth. There was a spirit in the church which ought to be the envy of every future age. The church was strong. Its leaders were men of valor. Great things can be expected of this church. Now it is precisely at this particular *time* "*when the number of the disciples was multiplying*" that difficulties arose, not from without, but within the church. Complaints come from the Grecian Jews because their widows were not receiving adequate care. Just a word of explanation: these Grecian Jews were people who had lived outside of Palestine most of their lives. Many of them returned to Jerusalem late in life. As a result, there were many widows among them. Because they had lived most of their lives outside of Palestine, their language was Greek rather than Hebrew or Aramaic. They read their Bibles in Greek. Because of these differences, the division between the Jews of Palestine, and these Greeks who had spent most of their lives outside of the Holy land is easily understood. But, both groups were now believers in Christ!

#### **A money matter**

What the "ministration" mentioned in the complaints included is difficult to say. Some believe that it refers to the love feasts of which Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians. Whatever else was involved, it is clear that it included material aid. For a time the believers "*had all things common.*" This spontaneous sharing did not long produce sufficient care for all the needy. Is it not strange that the

first real difficulty rising out of the life of the church is a money matter? Yet, that is the case, and later history has shown that handling money often occasions problems in the church.

This is not a minor matter. The Apostles are fully aware of the seriousness of the problem and evidently recognize that these complaints are well-founded. They call the whole church together. This matter must be dealt with at once, lest it fester. Although the apostles had received and distributed the offerings of those who had sold property for the benefit of the believers (4:35, 37; 5:2), they want to delegate this work to others lest the most important task, i.e., prayer and the proclamation of the Word be neglected. Important as the work of benevolence is, it must not be placed on the same level as the ministration to the spiritual needs of the congregation.

### **Appointment to office**

The church is enjoined to appoint seven men to do this work which has now come to their attention. Why seven? Who knows? Apparently this number was able to do the work! These men must be *"of good report,"* they must be *"full of the Spirit and of wisdom."* These qualifications will be necessary for this work. That which the Sanhedrin and the people of the Jews could not accomplish, i.e., the destruction of the church, is now threatened from within. Let God's Spirit and uncommon wisdom reign here. The church agrees at once and they chose seven men. Although seven are named, we are further informed only about the first two. Stephen was a man *"full of faith and of the Holy Spirit."* No doubt the others were too, but in the case of Stephen it is stressed. Philip is also named. The last one named is a proselyte of Antioch. Interesting! He is a mission convert! These seven men are set before the Apostles; the whole congregation prays; and the Apostles lay their hands upon them. A new office has been created in the church. The organization is broadened and becomes more structured.

### **Healthy church growth**

Before going on to the next section, Luke emphasizes that the *"word of God increased,"* i.e., more and more people heard it and were made aware of it. In Jerusalem the number of disciples increased exceedingly. The complaints of the Grecians has not hurt the growth of the church. The matter was dealt with in time. Peace again reigns. *"And a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith."* This is a new element. Nothing has been heard of this before. These were not the "chief" priests, but the common priests who took care of the worship in the Synagogues. But, what a breakthrough! Those who were in the employ of the priests who had condemned Christ and made life difficult for the Apostles were now openly confessing their faith in Jesus Christ. Nothing can stop the onward march of the gospel. According to Daniel, and according to Jesus, it would fill the entire earth. It is coming to pass!

At first glance the verses 8 to 15 seem to have very little to do with the first part of this chapter except for the fact that the name of Stephen plays the dominant role. He is one of the seven who has been appointed by the church as a deacon. These men were to be *"of good report; full of the Spirit; and full of wisdom."* Such men were chosen. Now it is said of this Stephen that he was full of grace and power and that he did great signs and wonders among the people. The Apostles were not to be burdened with the waiting on tables, so that they could give themselves to prayer and the proclamation of the Word. The inspired writer does not say that these Apostles were the only ones who preached the word. These deacons did too. Not only did Stephen and Philip speak the Word, they were also given the power to perform great wonders.

### **New opposition**

The wonders and signs performed by this good man are now opposed by men of the Hellenist (Greek) synagogues. (Christian widows from that background had been helped by those appointed according to the first part of this chapter). But, though they dispute with him, they are not able to win, nor are they able to hold their own against the wisdom and Spirit by which he spoke. He puts them to silence. This was the promise Jesus had given the disciples before His ascension that the Spirit would give them words to speak. This has now become reality.

If there is no possibility of winning in debate, the people of that age did not hesitate to use different methods. They will obtain false witnesses to testify against the object of their hatred. This they have done with our Lord, this they also do with Stephen. He is accused of speaking blasphemous words against Moses and against God. This stirs up the people — naturally. He is brought before the council where these accusations are repeated and it is also stated that he has spoken against the holy place, the temple, and against the law! Such deeds cannot be condoned. They have heard him say that Jesus will destroy the temple and that this same Jesus will change the customs Moses taught them.

In a way this accusation may well be true. Jesus has foretold the destruction of the temple (Matthew 24). As for the customs and manner of life Moses had taught them, has Stephen perhaps emphasized the temporary character of these customs? They have served their purpose in the past and they fall away when the fulfillment of prophecy comes. Such words can easily be misunderstood. Besides, these were false witnesses which were testifying against him. Similar charges are hurled against the Christ at the time of His trial. He blasphemed! He said, *"Tear this temple down and in three days I will rebuild it."*

The witnesses have given their version of his teaching. Now the attention is focused on the defendant. How will he reply? What will be his defense? Before they hear this, they encounter something very strange in this man. His face has become *"like the face of an angel!"* What does this mean? Who of them knows what an angel's face looks like? It is clear to all immediately. He has their full attention. Even before he speaks, the Lord makes them realize they are not dealing with something common. His defense will be the more forceful.

Henry Vander Kam

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### **Questions for discussion:**

1. Is it often true in the history of the church that dangers arise out of seemingly small things?
2. Why were there no deacons before? Does the need determine office?
3. Are their qualifications those which we must still seek for office?
4. Do you think the addition of a company of priests is significant?
5. Is Stephen leaving the deacon's office when he preaches?
6. Why can't the world defeat the church in debate? Or can it?
7. Was it right to teach the people not to obey Moses' laws?