Preparing to Teach Acts 6-7

To some scholars, it seems like there is such a break between Gamaliel’s advice to the council in Acts 5 and the beginning of Acts 6 that they think it is evidence that Luke had shifted gears to what was happening in Antioch as opposed to Jerusalem [Adolf von Harnack (1909) as quoted in Smith, T. C., “Acts” in Allen, Clifton J. (ed.), *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Volume 10: Acts-1 Corinthians* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 47]. Since I believe that Acts 6 is still about reaching Jerusalem and Judea while reaching on to Samaria and beyond in Acts 8, I don’t believe it is necessary to shift scenes (or sources) here.

In fact, since Acts 5:42 ends with the idea of the disciples continuing to preach Christ EVERY day, despite the warning of the council, it makes sense that you would have numerical growth in the house churches of Jerusalem in particular in THOSE DAYS (Acts 6:1). But it’s also ironic to note that it is when the church looks by human measures of success at its most successful that here comes the problems. Here It is that when the church is doing the most social ministry in its history (since no one today seems to be selling all they have and giving it to the church for social ministry) that controversy rears its head.

So, I shared this chart showing that whenever you have numerical growth, you inevitably have a commensurate increase in challenges, controversy, and problems. Churches, and especially pastors, seem to want numerical growth, but if they want numerical growth, they’d better be ready to make adjustments. More people means more opinions, concerns, needs, and demands.

We also need to make sure that we understand what is going on here. Because the controversy is over how money or goods are being distributed to widows, I’ve heard a few insensitive male pastors claim that the women caused the trouble. That’s chauvinistic and we don’t even know that it was the widows doing the murmuring. The issue isn’t gender; the issue is language. We know these are Greek-speaking Jews and not Greek proselytes because the Bible uses the term “Hellene” for Greek proselytes and “Hellenistic” for those who are Greek-speaking Jews [Du Veill, Carolus Maria, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: J. Haddon, 1851), p. 132; Lightfoot, John B., *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (London: J. F. Dove, 1823), p. 104.]. In fact, there is some contention that there weren’t actually any Gentile converts yet [Conzelmann, Hans, *Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible: Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987—original 1972), p. 42.]. We can also deduce that it doesn’t mean Greek proselytes because only one of the men chosen, Nicolas, is described as a proselyte (from Antioch). If they were all proselytes, why would Luke have singled out Nicolas? [Lightfoot, p. 105.]

Why would this have been controversial? It was because the Jews from Palestine (probably Aramaic-speaking rather than strictly Hebrew-speaking Jews) were suspicious of the Jews outside Palestine, associating them with those Samaritans and the like who had intermarried and compromised some of the matters of faith and ritual that the Palestinian Jews thought were important [Smith, p. 47.] So, the very act of speaking Greek instead of Aramaic/Hebrew was suspicious, much like modern church members might be suspicious of how outsiders dress, what books they’re reading, or what music they listen to. It was discrimination based on something external.

Now, any pastor or church leader who has felt like their ministry has been derailed by a controversy that isn’t overtly spiritual (building programs, church decorating, fellowship activities, musical tastes, etc.) can very much understand the reaction of the apostles. The disciples gathered the multitude of disciples together and told them that it was not “pleasing” [an old Greek adjective rarely used in the New Testament as per Robertson, A. T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Volume III: Acts* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1930), p. 73.] for them to leave the gospel behind in favor of serving tables. Rather than translate “pleasing” as “right” like KJV, ESV, J. B. Phillips, and CEB, it seems better to use the term “fit” as in the ASV or “appropriate.” In other words, it wasn’t the best use of their gifts to prioritize social ministry over preaching and teaching. They aren’t “…disparaging such work; they are taking decisive action so that this necessary social (and liturgical?) administration might be assured…” [Willimon, William H., *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Acts* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 59].

So, what could be done? It is interesting that the TWELVE called together the MULTITUDE to choose SEVEN leaders to assume this role. They didn’t draw lots like they did to replace Judas and the apostles didn’t appoint them. It was the whole church to that point involved [xxxxxxxxxxxxxx

As for the SEVEN, seven is an established number in Jewish tradition. I’ve shared before how gematria would take the divine 3 (God who caused, God who is, and God who always will be) and add the 4 that symbolizes creation (four cardinal directions, four living creatures around the throne in Ezekiel’s vision, and four rivers coming out of the Garden of Eden) to suggest God and creation in right relation. However, it may be even more significant that there were usually seven local officials of each Jewish community and seven members of a basic Jewish council [Conzelmann, p. 42; Marshall, I. Howard, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 126.]. It might even refer to the seven provinces outside Jerusalem with all Greek-speaking Jews: Cappadocians, Pontics, Asians, Phrygians, Pamphylians, Romans, and Cretans [Lightfoot, p. 106.], though it seems like Luke’s focus in this part of Acts is still, primarily, on the Jerusalem church.

They are also supposed to be men of “good report.” Their references needed to be checked. The church didn’t select the persons who were most popular or the new flavor of the month in terms of demonstrating devotion. The word translated “of good report” or “well-attested” comes from the same root as witness or martyr, an interesting choice considering what happens to Stephen. That means they were to be persons whose faith and uprightness is unquestionable [Du Veill, p. 133.] and of unimpeachable honesty [Gloag, Paton J. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1870), p. 206.]. So, it needed to be men with a good reputation, as well as apparent ability.

But there are lots of people with good reputations who might not be good leaders in the church. There are two other requirements: they are to be filled with the Holy Spirit and, consequently, filled with wisdom. The former is about spiritual inspiration; they are to have spiritual depth [Gloag, p. 106.]. The latter is practical application of the spiritual insights God has given them [Du Veill, p. 133.]

William H. Willimon may have been reading my mind when he summarized the lessons in this part of Chapter 6 with three principles. First, leadership in the church grows out of necessity [Willimon, p. 59.]. How we respond to challenges and problems determines our quality of leadership. Second, leadership is authorized by the congregation (the multitude) rather than from the hierarchy (professionals and denominational leaders [Marshall, p. 127; Willimon, p. 59.] Third, as the apostles adapted their ministry to prioritize the gospel and make room for specialized leaders in social ministry, so must modern church leaders adapt to new situations that require new leadership styles [Willimon, p. 59.]. The latter is particularly clear in verse 4 where the disciples pledge to focus their ministry on prayer and delivering God’s Word.

Interestingly, when we get to verse 5, we run into the same root that we translated as appropriate or fit in verse 2 when the disciples said that it wasn’t pleasing, appropriate, fit, or right for them to neglect preaching to take care of social ministry. So, when the multitude finds it pleasing to choose the seven, it means that it was appropriate, fitting, and right to do so [Robertson, p. 74.]. For me, the proof that this was of the Lord is the fact that of the seven names, all of them seem to be Greek-speaking Jews with Hellenistic names [Gloag, p. 208; Marshall, p. 127; Robertson, p. 74.], meaning that the privileged and established population went the second mile to be certain that they had redressed the problem.

We also see that these specialized leaders weren’t all about the status or title. Even though the root of what they were to do, serve tables, is the root from which we get our word “deacon,” it doesn’t necessarily mean that they were called “deacons” or that they were “deacons” as an appointed office [Marshall, p. 126; Smith, p. 49.]. We don’t even know anything about them except that Stephen was the first martyr, Philip was the evangelist who brought the Ethiopian eunuch to the Lord, and that Nicolas was a proselyte from Antioch (but probably not the founder of the cult of the Nicolaitans mentioned in Revelation [Gloag, pp. 207-208; Robertson, p. 74.].

The laying on of hands is used on many occasions in the Bible. We see it in the commissioning of Joshua and the successor of Moses (Numbers 27:15-23) [Gloag, p. 209; Marshall, p. 127.]. It was used in later Judaism in the ordaining of rabbis [Marshall, p. 127] and in the later church when: “The church presented men of great wisdom and piety to the apostles or their delegates, who were greatly endued with a spirit of discerning, to be ordained, who, after having tried them, prayed to God that he would bless them in the new office to which they were appointed, and endue them with such wisdom, as they might with great success manage the same.” [Du Veill, p. 134.] Personally, I prefer Robertson’s citation of an earlier interpreter that the laying on of hands “…was a symbol of the impartation of the gifts and graces which they needed to qualify them for the office. It was the nature of a prayer that God would bestow the necessary gifts, rather than a pledge that they were actually conferred.” [Robertson, p. 74.]

Verse 7 uses a very Lukan phrase to describe the result of this decision and the execution of it by appointing these seven men. As in 12:24 and 19:20, “the word of God increased” [Marshall, p. 127], implying that the apostles really had focused on the priority of preaching God’s Word [Du Veill, p. 134.], though Gloag cites a position that suggests that the Greek-speaking Jews were better able to communicate with the culture at large, so the gospel increased more because of the seven than because of the apostles [Gloag, p. 209.]. Regardless, it looks like Luke was communicating a causal connection between settling the internal dispute in the church and the church growing [Smith, p. 49]. That seems right to me, and there could be an element of truth in all three of these factors: apostolic dedication, overcoming cultural boundaries, and settling the internal dispute in the church.

Naturally, when more people are exposed to God’s Word, more people receive it. What is even more interesting is the phrase telling us that a great number of priests had become obedient to the faith. For years, scholars questioned this because of how hostile the priests were in other accounts. Yet, there was no manuscript evidence to remove this claim [Lightfoot, p. 109.]. Beza tried to emend the verse to say, “a great multitude and certain of the priests” but there wasn’t any manuscript support [Gloag, pp. 209-210.] and proved to be pure speculation. Just because something seems illogical doesn’t mean we can discount it. Indeed, even if many priests did convert to the Christian faith, there could still be considerable opposition. It’s estimated that there were 18,000 priests and Levites associated with the Jerusalem temple at this point.

Verse 8 further develops this causal connection by explaining that Stephen, one of the seven, was full of grace and power—working signs and wonders. The irony is that the seven not only wait on tables, but several of them end up preaching and performing miracles, as well. Remember, though, that the church had not only selected the seven but prayed and laid hands on them. So, it isn’t surprising that we see clear evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in his life.

But notice what happens when he does so. He gets opposition from verse 9 through the rest of the chapter. Some scholars think that the reason for this fresh opposition was because the church had heretofore focused on the temple and not the synagogues. Now, reaching out to Greek-speaking Jews, they would inevitably end up running afoul of authorities in the synagogues [Gloag, p. 210]. Depending on how you handle the groupings, you may have one [Bruce, F. F., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1974—original 1954), p. 104.] or up to 5 synagogues actively opposing Stephen at first, but notice that they stir up others [Smith, p. 49.] Interestingly, a Talmudic source suggests [though many historians are skeptical] that there were about 480 synagogues in Jerusalem alone at that time [Robertson, p. 75.].

The Libertines or Freedmen in some translations were likely freeborn Jews like Paul who were born as Roman citizens like Saul/Paul [Lightfoot, p. 109]. This has good evidence because Tacitus, the Roman historian, calls those freeborn Jews who were expelled from Rome under Tiberias*, libertini* (Latin for free ones) [Gloag, p. 236; Smith, p. 49.] F. F. Bruce seems to follow the scribes who tried to turn “Libertines” into Libyans so that you would have Libyans, Cyrenians, and Alexandrians (Egyptians) in a nice trio. [Bruce, p. 138]. I believe that these are Jews who were born of freed Roman slaves who became citizens. In our session, Dr. Wong asked a good question. Why would these freeborn Jews be opposed to what Stephen was preaching? Status and security! They would have had to prove themselves to the Jerusalem authorities as good Jews, so they certainly wouldn’t want any Stephen-come-lately spoiling their hard-earned reputations.

Cyrenians were Jews from the region of North Africa, as were the Alexandrinans. Cilicia, Pontus, and Asia are places in what is now Turkiye and so, these were Jews from that region. It seems very likely that Saul of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, would have been a member of this synagogue—explaining his active presence at Stephen’s execution [Bruce, p. 140, Gloag, p. 218..] Notice that, across the board, Stephen seems to have upset the foreign-born, Greek-speaking Jews who seem to have made it in the big city of Jerusalem.

Note that he is accused in verse 11 of blaspheming against Moses and God, but Luke tells us in v. 13 that the charges are definitely false [Marshall, p. 128.]. In fact, they bring back the old falsehood about Jesus destroying the temple in verse 14 [Robertson, p. 77.]. I would ask my students if they knew of anyone else in the Bible who had expected this type of kangaroo court. The answer, of course, is Jesus. I would also ask if they were aware of any servant of God who was treated with false accusations (and if they ever have been).

I would also ask them how Stephen reacted to such accusations. Hopefully, they will respond with verse 15. Rather than bringing hostility against hostility, his serene face reflected their false charges back on them. In the end, it didn’t save his life, but the memory of his face vindicated them. Rembrandt van Rijn captured this so well, though he was picturing the execution rather than the trial. You know Rembrandt has a tendency to put everything important in light and the lesser things in his paintings in shadow. I’ll demonstrate that with his painting of Stephen. But it brings us to the third and most important question of this lesson, what do YOU think you would do (or have done) when accused of something unjustly? “The idea of an angel-like face here is found frequently in Judaism.” [Conzelmann, p. 42.].

I note that because, as we segue to Chapter 7, notice that they get Stephen before the Sanhedrin and the leader of the council asks Stephen if the charges against him about predicting the destruction of the temple were true. Notice that they are not really concerned about the KINGDOM of God, but the institution that feeds, clothes, and gives status to them. And, remember that Luke categorically denied that the charges were true in the last chapter.

 In reality, Stephen doesn’t really mount a defense for himself as to try to broaden their understanding. “This speech is commonly called Stephen’s defense in the forensic sense of the term. Such a speech as this was by no means calculated to secure an acquittal before the Sanhedrin. It is rather a defense of pure Christianity as God’s appointed way of Worship; …” [Bruce, p. 141.]. He wants to show that, while God does set aside some spaces as holy, it doesn’t have to be one particular place [Bruce, p. 141; Du Veill, p. 137.]. I would particularly point out that rather than defend himself from false charges, he focused on what he knew of sacred history. And from personal experience, I would say that one can rarely, if ever, win from being accused of false charges. No matter how innocent, you are likely to be perceived as desperate or hiding something. It is even possible that the angelic, holy awareness shining from Stephen’s face caused the high priest to interrupt the false testimony and question Stephen directly [Gloag, p. 231.].

I do notice that Stephen begins quite respectfully, addressing both “brethren” and “fathers.” Even though he was a Greek-speaker, he recognized the common foundation between Jew and follower of Jesus. It seems like Stephen addressed the younger men as “brothers” and the older men as “fathers” [Du Veill, p. 138.]. And then, he touches base, not only with their traditions from the Scripture, but also with God of the temple. “God of Glory” is almost a direct echo of “King of Glory” in Psalm 24, an entrance liturgy to the temple. So, he is connecting himself with those who think he is against the temple with God’s glory which is believed to enter into the temple. [Note: He wouldn’t quote directly as “King” without falling into the trap of a debate about Jesus as the Messiah-King.]

Note that God deals with Abram in Mesopotamia. Despite beginning his defense with a quotation from the Septuagint of Genesis 12:1, Stephen seems to follow the Jewish tradition that Abram stayed with his father Terah till Terah died. If you do the math, you’ll find that Terah lived about 60 years after Abram left [Gloag, p. 233; Smith, p. 51]. I think Stephen didn’t want to lose the focus here. So, charging Abram with not being loyal to his aging father would have created a peripheral debate that would have taken away from his point. His point, of course, was that Abraham doesn’t end up with an inheritance in Canaan. “The opening words of Stephen’s defense imply that the people of God must be on the march, must pull up their tent-stakes as Abraham did, leaving national particularism and ancestral ritual, and go out where God may lead.” [Bruce, p. 143.]

Note that he skips Isaac and Jacob to go right to Joseph. And almost the first thing Stephen says is that the patriarchs sold Joseph into Egypt, but “God was with him” (v. 9). Notice that God’s guidance was with Joseph in EGYPT, not Jerusalem [Willimon, p. 62.]. Then, notice that he probably used Joseph for two reasons: 1) his great accomplishments were not in Canaan and 2) his sojourn in Egypt might echo a little bit of Jesus’ flight into Egypt during Herod’s persecution after His birth. [Du Veill, p. 149; Smith, p. 51.]

Some are concerned about the fact that Stephen says that Joseph saved 75 souls. If you see the Hebrew of Genesis 46:27, Exodus 1:5, and Deuteronomy 10:22, the descendants of Jacob equaled 66. Even the secular historian, Flavius Josephus, said that there were 66. BUT, as I noted before, Stephen didn’t want any distractions from his main argument. The people who had stirred things up were Greek speakers and would have used the Septuagint as their scripture. Well, guess what? The Septuagint says that there were 75 [Gloag, p. 238.]. The number of descendants wasn’t the point in Stephen’s main argument; it was how much God did through Joseph outside of the land of Promise.

Of course, the fact that Joseph reminded them that the patriarchs sold Joseph into slavery and the fact that Joseph had to instruct his brothers, the forefathers of the Jews, that they had sent him to Egypt for the wrong reason, but God had transformed it into something good.

 Now, why is Moses so important to Stephen’s argument? It’s because he has been accused of blaspheming Moses, of course. But notice what Stephen emphasizes. He emphasizes Moses’ training as an Egyptian. He wasn’t educated in the same traditions as these Jewish leaders but in Egyptian traditions. But then, when he makes his first effort at liberating the Jews (by killing the Egyptian taskmaster), he is immediately rejected by Jews who asked where his authority came from (v. 27) and who refused to obey him (v. 39). “So Stephen, by turning the community’s own Scripture back upon the community, has reminded his audience that the community once rebellious and idolatrous can easily be so again.” [Willimon, p. 62.] Indeed, the next emphasis even mentions Aaron’s complicity in the golden calf episode. Stephen is on trial by priests and Aaron was the first high priest of Israel. So, there is a slam here against the very priests themselves. Indeed, Moses never even makes it to the Promised Land, at least till the Mount of Transfiguration. So, once again, Stephen scores a point because Moses was not tied to the land of Promise.

Notice also that Stephen has been accused of blaspheming against the temple. But he uses his account of Moses and the tent in the wilderness in contrast to the temple where David gathered the materials and Solomon built it. But God tells them that He doesn’t live in a house made by human hands (v. 48). How can he blaspheme against the temple when God Himself warned them about worshipping the temple as opposed to the Lord.

“After quoting Isaiah 66:1-2, Stephen begins to sound a bit like Amos or Jeremiah, concluding his speech with a torrent of accusations against “You stiff-necked people” (7:51), whom he accuses of the murder of God’s righteous One.” [Willimon, p. 62.]

I think the slides make it clear about the purpose of stoning and the procedure, so I just want to make one more point by quoting another pastor on this passage. “Stephen’s speech reminds the church that one of the most significant aspects of our legacy from Israel is Israel’s ability to use its own Scripture as a means of self-criticism.” [Willimon, p. 63.] So, when you’re studying a text that is covering another passage in the Bible, pay attention to what is left out as well as what’s in there.