

The Old-Time Evangelistic News

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Volume 10, Issue 12

May 2014

Stephen: The Man Who Was Faithful To the End (Part 1)

Acts 6-7

In Acts 6 and 7, we read about some events from the life of Stephen. In these verses, we will find the focus of our message. We will begin by reading a few verses at the end of both chapters. Acts 6:9-15 says, *“Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake. Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council. And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel.”*

We will cover some of the details of chapter 7 as we go through the message, but for now we turn to the resolution of the account in Acts 7:51-60. There we read, *“Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers: Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it. When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth. But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory*

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of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God. Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man’s feet, whose name was Saul. And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”

Before we get into the message, notice with me a few things by way of introduction. Stephen is brought into the Bible account because of the **Issue with the Widows**. There are six things that stand out in the first seven verses of Acts 6. The first is The Complaining. This is the only time that you find the early church doing any complaining. Most of the time, even in times of difficulty, they are happily serving God. But Acts 6:1 says, *“And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.”* (The Grecians are thought to be Greek-speaking Jews who had also taken up some of the customs and habits of the Greeks.) No details are given concerning what the “*ministration*” was, so we can only speculate as to what was going on, but the succeeding verses give us a fairly good idea. Because these were widows and could not provide for themselves, the church was taking care of them. Perhaps it was a distribution of food for them. Somehow in the process of taking care of these widows, the Grecian widows were forgotten about, or received second best. I do not think it was intentional because these believers truly cared for one another, but nevertheless, they were left out. To some degree, it became a “racial” issue because some felt the “true” Hebrews were leaving out those who had become like the Greeks. The problem would become bigger if it was not dealt with, so the apostles called a meeting to give their solution.

In verse 2, we find The Concern of the apostles. They make it plain that they are not minimizing the taking care of the widows, but they also let everyone know that it should not be their focus. Someone should help the widows, but not the apostles. They make it clear that their main concern should be the preaching of the Word of God. We need to remember that in our day as well. The pastor's main focus is the preaching of the Word of God. That is not to say that other things such as visiting the sick, etc., are not important, but they are secondary to the preaching of the Word. I have heard preachers talk about being so busy doing everything else that they have little time to focus on preaching. That is totally contrary to Scripture. The pastor should make it clear to his people, and the people need to understand, that the pastor cannot and should not be around for every little problem that may arrive in life. The modern day pastor cannot "*leave the word of God, and serve tables.*" Take that and apply it where you will, but the pastor's main concern is the Bible. Everything else is secondary. We will see a further explanation of this in verse 4.

The third idea that comes from the issue with the widows is The Command. Since the people have noticed the problem, they will help with the solution. They are told to find seven men who can handle the needs of the widows. It is very important to notice the qualifications given by the apostles for the men who are to fill this position. They are to be of "*honest report.*" Those two words come from the word that means witness. We would say today that the men should have a "good testimony." Everyone should see in their lives that they are living according to the Word of God.

The second qualification is that they be "*full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom.*" One could separate "wisdom" and make it a third qualification, but for simplicity's sake, we will leave them together. This second qualification forms the foundation for the first. The men will have an "*honest report*" if they are filled with the Holy Ghost. They are not mutually exclusive, but rather, the first is dependent

upon the second. Without going into too much detail, "*full of the Holy Ghost*" means to be under the complete control of the Holy Ghost. The believer is no longer living his life, but he is living how the Holy Ghost leads him. He cares no more for his desires, but he is readily submitted to the Holy Ghost's desires. He is completely and unreservedly yielded to the power of the Holy Ghost.

It is interesting that these characteristics are what the people are to look for. They are told, "*Look ye out.*" When one is full of the Holy Ghost, it will be obvious to others. You will not have to go around and tell everyone. In fact, if you have to tell it, you are not full of the Holy Ghost. You are full of pride. But if you truly are under the complete control of the Holy Ghost, other believers will know it. As we will see with Stephen, the world will know something is different about you. They may not appreciate and may even persecute you, but people will notice when one is filled with the Holy Ghost.

The apostles state The Continuation in verse 4. I doubt that anyone in the early church would wonder what the apostles were going to do with all of their free time, but that question is raised by some in churches today. They wonder, "What is the pastor doing all day long?" The answer should be readily apparent in the messages that he delivers at each service. Now to be honest, I have heard some messages, and I did wonder, "What was the preacher doing all week?" The message was not worth listening to. But no one should ever have to say that. The pastor should say what the apostles said in verse 4, "*But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.*" The apostles state what they will continue to do—preach the Word. Again, there are some secondary duties of the pastor—but they are secondary. He will need to visit the sick, do some counseling, and other things, but they are after he finishes the preparation of the messages for the whole body of believers. If there is not enough time to do all of those things and something must be left out, prayer and the ministry of the Word must take priority! We must follow the example of the apostles. Our churches would be far

better off if we did.

The Choices are listed in verse 5. The first one listed is Stephen, the subject of our message. The second one is Philip. He is mentioned two other times in Acts 8 and 21. The other men are never mentioned again, but their names are Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. It is interesting that even though these men are usually referred to as deacons, they are not called that in the passage. Forms of the word deacon are found in verses 1 and 2, but the word is used elsewhere in Scripture to refer to the duties of a preacher as well. Because Stephen and Philip both preached and because our modern day office of deacon is usually reserved for laymen (men not called to preach), some do not refer to this passage as the installation of the first deacons. Some call them assistant pastors. Regardless of what you want to call them, these men assisted the apostles in the duties of the church. The pastor may need help in some areas of the church. If so, then men such as these need to be sought out.

The final introductory thought is The Consequence. When the apostles focused on the Word and everyone worked together, people were saved and the murmuring stopped. The same thing will happen today, if we follow their example. Next month we will begin looking at the faithfulness of Stephen.