



Acts of the Apostles
A DEEP DIVE INTO THE BOOK OF ACTS.

WEEK 5

CLASS BY PASTOR GLYN NORMAN

Acts 6:1-6 The Hellenists and a Problem in the Early Church

- identity of the “Grecian Jews” - “Hellenized Jewish Christians’ or ‘Grecian Jewish believers’ – that is...Jews living in Jerusalem who had come from the Diaspora and were under some suspicion by reason of their place of birth, their speech, or both, of being more Grecian than Hebraic in their attitudes and outlook but who, since coming to Jerusalem had become Christians” (*Acts*, Longenecker, 329)
- widows overlooked. Judaism had a system for the distribution of food, as did the early Christian church, but the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked. This may be only one symptom of larger tensions between the groups.

v2-6

- spiritual and material concerns are linked – they always affect each other. No attempt to assign blame; they simply focused on solving the problem.
- chose men “full of the Spirit and wisdom” – seems an unusually high requirement for a food distribution ministry. The apostles made the proposal but the whole group decided.
- laying on of hands (cf. Moses commissioning of Joshua in Num 27:18-23) to delegate authority.
- all seven men have Greek names (best able to represent the Hellenistic Jewish Christians?)

A pattern for church life?

- the church took the combination of spiritual and material concerns seriously
- they adjusted their procedures and organization to meet the need
- they refused to assign blame but dealt with the problem, using their energies to solve the problem rather than in looking to blame somebody
- were willing to turn the solution over to others

v7

- a large number of priests become Christians (but see 4:1ff and 5:17ff).
 “there were as many as eight thousand ordinary priests and ten thousand Levites, divided into twenty-four weekly courses, serving at the Jerusalem Temple during the period of a year, whose social position was distinctly inferior to that of the high priestly families and whose piety (spirituality) in many cases could well have inclined them to an acceptance of the Christian message.” (*Acts*, Longenecker, 333)

Acts 6:8-8:3 The Martyrdom of Stephen

- date. These events probably took place between AD33 and AD37.
- v8 full of grace (*charis*) and power (*dynamis*)
- v9,10 What is Stephen doing preaching? Shouldn't he be tending to the tables? (see 6:3,4) It's not impossible that he could be doing both.
- we don't know the content of his preaching that so annoyed his Hellenistic compatriots, though Luke labels the charges as false (v13)

The charges:

Blasphemy against Moses and against God (6:11)

Speaking against the holy place (the temple) (6:13)

Speaking against the law (6:13)

- **Stephen's defense (7:2-53)** is going to address central Jewish issues – the land, the law and the temple. Again, as with Peter and John, it is less of a defense designed to get him off the hook, and more of a proclamation of Christianity. Key pillars of Jewish faith were centered on the land, law and temple, and Stephen is going to attempt to redefine their status.

Discussion Question: What are the central planks of the Christian faith? If Stephen were aiming to attack Christianity, what might he aim at that would be most threatening for his hearers?

a) On the land (7:2-36)

Stephen gives a resume of Israel's history (a common Jewish form) but he argues that God's significant activity has usually taken place outside of the confines of Palestine (cf. Jesus in Luke 4). Wherever God meets his people can be called 'holy ground' so worshipping the land is dangerous. God is not limited to a certain geography. If the land is the locus of God's blessing, then the people might be less open to seeing another 'vehicle' of God's blessing, namely Jesus. (Difference between OT tangible blessings and NT intangible?) He is basically saying, "Don't worship the land to the point where you can't see God's redemptive work elsewhere (i.e. Jesus)."

Discussion Question: Do you think Americans see this country as "God's country" and believe that America somehow has special status or favor with God (because it was founded on Christian principles? because God has placed America in a situation of leadership in the world?...) Why are we so quick to believe that God is on our side in a war? Don't other countries believe that their God is on their side? Who is to say we are right, or that God even takes sides?

v17-36 A Moses-rejection theme is introduced in vv.23-29 and 35, highlighted in vv.39-43 and then driven home in vv.51-53 The Moses-rejection theme paves the way for his "Jesus-rejection

theme.” But a main point, still on the issue of land, is that God has acted outside the land of Palestine of which Stephen’s hearers make so much:

1. God raised up Moses in *Egypt* (vv.17-22)
2. God provided for the rejected Moses in *Midian* (v29)
3. God commissioned Moses in the *desert near Mount Sinai* (vv.30-34) – the place God himself identified as ‘holy ground’, for wherever God meets with his people it is holy, even though it has no holiness or special value on its own
4. Moses acts in delivering his people in *Egypt, the Red Sea and in the desert*.

Stephen’s underlying message is “Maybe you need to venerate the land less, and look for what (who!) else God might be bringing blessing through.”

b) On the law (7:37-43)

• Stephen makes three points about Moses (whom they accused him of blaspheming – v11) and the law:

1. Moses himself spoke of God raising up “a prophet like me” from among his people and for his people – therefore, Israel should not limit God’s revelation purely to Moses precepts. There would also be a future prophet they should listen to (i.e. Jesus).
2. Moses was rejected even though he was God’s appointed redeemer, (just as Jesus, God’s appointed redeemer now has been rejected by most of the nation).
3. Even though the people had Moses and his law and the sacrificial system, they still fell into gross idolatry and opposed God. (vv.41-43) (Something more is needed?)

c) On the temple (7:44-50)

Stephen has refuted the charge of blasphemy against the law by reassessing Moses’ place in redemptive history and has accused his accusers, of both rejecting the one Moses predicted would come, and turning to idolatry in their refusing of Jesus. He will now address the charge of blasphemy against the temple. He will denounce the temple and the type of view which holds it as the pinnacle of revealed religion.

v44-47 Stephen emphasizes the role of the tabernacle which was the focus of Israel’s worship both in the desert and in the time of David. It was held in such high esteem that David wanted to build a permanent “tabernacle” i.e. a temple, but God refused to allow that to him, and instead Solomon built the temple. Stephen is attempting to show them that something greater than both the tabernacle and the temple is here.

v48-50 The climax of Stephen’s argument: “the Most High does not live in houses made by men”, citing Isa 66:1-2a. Although Judaism never officially taught that God resided in the temple, they spoke of his “Name” and his presence being there, and so the popular view was that he did actually live there. Stephen’s point is that even if God did reveal himself in the temple, he cannot be contained by it, and is free to reveal himself elsewhere. God cannot be kept in a box, or a temple, and is free to locate himself wherever he wishes (i.e. in the person of Jesus). Isa 66:2b is implied as what their appropriate response should be to what Stephen has just told them: “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.” Isa 66:2b

d) The indictment (7:51-53)

- contrast this speech with Peter's speech in the temple in Acts 3. Peter goes easy on the nation of Israel but Stephen rips into them, emphasizing Israel's history of sin, rebellion and rejection of God's purposes.
- his phrases are theologically loaded:
 - "stiff-necked" was God's own description of the Israelites when they rebelled against Moses and worshipped the golden calf (Ex 33:5; Deut 9:13)
 - "uncircumcised hearts and ears" – recalls God's judgment on the apostates (those who depart from the faith) among his people (Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4; 9:26)
- the emphasis is that God's judgment now rests upon you just as it did on your idolatrous and apostate ancestors
- v52 the persecution of prophets was a recurring theme in Israel's history (2 Chr 36:15-16; Neh 9:26; Jer 2:30). For the council that is listening to Stephen, all these are well-known lessons from the past. But he accuses them of having learned nothing from these lessons of the past, since an even worse crime has been committed in the present – the betrayal and murder of "the Righteous One."

The Stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54-8:1a)

Through his speech, Stephen is not renouncing the importance of the land, law or temple, Rather he is attempting to show that they are minor in significance with how God is now revealing himself through Jesus Christ:

"a radical recasting of Jewish life to make Jesus, rather than these traditionally holy things, the center of Jewish faith, worship and thought" (Filson, p.103 quoted by Longenecker, *Acts*, p.349)

- v55,56 again brings the charge of blasphemy to the front. Stephen claims to see the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God (see Mark 14:62). Sitting or standing – standing to welcome his martyr?
- v57,58 Note the progression of the trial scenes in seriousness.
 - The first ends in threats (4:17,21)
 - The second with flogging (5:40)
 - The third with stoning to death (7:58-60)

The Introduction of Saul (Acts 8:1b-3)

- persecution and the introduction of the next central figure in the Acts story.

Note: The majority of these notes were taken from R.Longenecker, *Acts, Expositors Bible Commentary, Vol 9.*