

The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Gloria Dei Lutheran Church

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The Holy Spirit Appoints Deacons; Stephen Arrested

1. The appointment of deacons ([6:1-7](#))
2. Stephen's witness and arrest ([6:8-15](#))

The Appointment of Deacons

There arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists. Up to this point in Acts, Satan's attacks on the church were all unsuccessful in stopping or slowing the spread of the Gospel, and the work of the church. So here Satan tries a "divide and conquer" approach by raising one group of Christians against another.

We know from chapter 5 that the idyllic good ole' days (of there ever were any) in the church were over. By this point they've had to deal with dishonesty and internal strife (Ananias and Saphira), and now we start to see disputes and potential divisions.

Such is the nature of Church Growth – humans are involved, after all! That the number of disciples continued to multiply indicates that God's kingdom-building work continued to be effective. Another good sign is that the church dealt with these problems well.

It is worth noting that that the early church was organized. They knew how many were saved; they met together at specific places at specific times. Money and goods were collected and distributed to those in need. Sin was confronted and dealt with. All these are marks of good organization.

Against the Hebrews by the Hellenists. "The Hebrews" were those Jews more inclined to embrace Jewish culture and were mostly from Judea. Hellenists were those more inclined to embrace Greek culture and were mostly from the Diaspora (in other words, from all over the Roman Empire).

Though it's probably an over-simplification, it appears that Hebrews regarded Hellenists as "compromisers" with Greek culture, and Hellenists regarded Hebrews as self-righteous traditionalists. Because of their different backgrounds,

there was probably a natural suspicion between the two groups, and Satan tried to take advantage of that history and suspicion.

The daily distribution. The early church took its responsibility to help support widows seriously because they often had no other support; but they also expected these widows to serve the church faithfully (1 Timothy 5:3-16).

There is the hint here of a growing division between the religious leaders and the early followers of Jesus. The care of widows and orphans was an important part of Jewish life, and normally the temple authorities organized the distribution to the needy. Yet it seems that the Christian widows were not cared for by the Jewish leaders. In a congregation of that size, it was inevitable that someone's (or some group's) needs would be overlooked, or not dealt with consistently when compared to others.

Perhaps the Hebrews were right in their hearts, and the Hellenists were right in their facts. Sounds like near-perfect conditions for a church-splitting conflict!

It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. The apostles explained that they should remain faithful to their central calling, which was prayer and to the ministry of the word. It would be a mistake for them to spend their time administrating the practical needs of the widows.

The contemporary comparison and resulting tension are obvious: A pastor should not have his time consumed in tasks that are essentially "serving tables", yet there is something wrong with a pastor who considers such work beneath him.

Seek out from among you.... The apostles pursued a solution with a lot of communication and input from the people. They even asked those – probably especially those who felt wronged – to suggest men of good character to do this work. This was a very effective way to solve the problem. They didn't throw the complainers out. They didn't divide into two congregations. They didn't shun the unhappy people. They didn't form a committee and discuss the problem to death.

Seven men. Possibly they chose seven so that one could manage the needs of the widows a different day of the week. A distributed load, instead of dumping on a single man.

Whom we may appoint over this business. The final decision rested with the apostles. They asked the congregation to nominate the men, but the decision really rested with the apostles.

This was a simple, practical service that the men were to be appointed to; yet they must be well qualified in a spiritual sense, especially because of the danger of division.

And the saying pleased the whole multitude. We can't say this was a good decision *only* because the people liked it. Instead, God confirmed the wisdom of the apostles through agreement among the people. The apostles were led of the Lord, not popular opinion. Yet, because they were all in basic agreement, they agreed on how the Lord was leading the apostles.

Stephen, Philip, Prochorus... These are all Greek names, indicating that they were probably Hellenists themselves. The people (and the apostles) showed great sensitivity to the offended Hellenists by appointing Hellenists to take care of the widows' distribution.

So once again, Satan's strategy failed to hinder the Gospel. He tried to divide the church, and it did not work. Satan's secondary strategy also failed. The apostles were not distracted from the primary ministry God had for them, to focus on the word of God and on prayer.

Stephen's witness and arrest

Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people. God did great "wonders and signs" through not only the apostles, but also through people like Stephen, one of the seven servants chosen to help the widows.

Disputing with Stephen. Stephen debated with Jews from the Synagogue of the Freedmen. Lead by the Holy Spirit, he showed greater wisdom than his opponents. There is no indication that Stephen – in and of himself – was smarter, better educated, or a better debater than these Jews. We should attribute his upper hand in the debate to the Holy Spirit.

They secretly induced men to say.... The opponents of Stephen could not win a fair fight, so they used lies and covert strategies to shape popular opinion against Stephen. Normally, Luke would not know what the opponents of Stephen

secretly induced men to say. Possibly he knew it because a man named Saul of Tarsus was among the opponents. Some of them were from Paul's home region of Cilicia. It's possible that Saul (who became known as the apostle Paul) told Luke about this incident.

Popular opinion can be all-too-easily shaped. The same crowds that praised Jesus (Luke 19:35-40) soon called for His crucifixion (Luke 23:18-23). The crowds that loved the apostles (Acts 2:47, 5:26) cry out against Stephen.

This is why we should never let popular opinion shape the vision or focus of the church, but instead let it rest wholly on God's Word!

Stephen had his words twisted, and false accusations were brought against him.

Some commentators state or imply that the thrust of Stephen's message – that Jesus supersedes the temple and its localized worship – was a doctrine that the apostles themselves shied away from proclaiming. I disagree. The demonstrated boldness of the apostles is undeniable proof that they withheld no truth from fear that it might be too controversial – or too dangerous.

His face as the face of an angel. Stephen's face did not have that mild, soft, angelic look that we see in so many paintings; nor was it a look of stern judgment and wrath. Instead, his face reflected the perfect peace and confidence of one that knows and trusts his God. His face had the same reflected glory that Moses had as he beheld God intimately.