

# Acts

## Acts 6:1 to 8:1 - Jesus' ministry demonstrated in two ways

In **Acts 6** and **7** Luke tells the story of **Stephen**. It begins in **Acts 6:1** with a complaint from the “Grecian Jews” that “their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.” This had become a problem due to the huge influx of new disciples (verse 1), which included both Greek and Aramaic-speaking widows in need of daily meals being served to them in what sounds like a large communal dining area, because it involved the apostles “waiting on tables,” **verse 2**.

But waiting on tables was now taking up so much of the apostles' time that they felt they were “neglecting the ministry of the word of God.” So they “gathered all the disciples together” to select “seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” to take over the management of feeding all these people, and making sure no one was being favoured or neglected.

It's another great insight into how the the Holy Spirit operates in the church to make it a wonderful witness to Jesus being alive and continuing his ministry. But it's **ministry in two ways**: On the one hand, it's a **ministry of “miraculous signs and wonders”** (Acts 5:12), because the Spirit's been doing some pretty dramatic things so far, like the healing of the man crippled from birth, Peter and John taking on the entire religious establishment and refusing to buckle to their demands, the building shaking in response to the church's prayer in Acts 4, the death of Ananias and Sapphira for being fakes in Acts 5, and then freeing the apostles from a locked and guarded jail cell without anyone noticing.

But along with that show of power is a **ministry of love and caring** that's witness to the heart and mind of Jesus too. He shows he's intimately aware of our basic, physical day-to-day needs as well, as we saw back in Acts 4:34-35 in the willingness of the richer believers to sell land, homes and other possessions to make sure all the physical needs in the church were taken care of. And we see that same Spirit-inspired caring again here, in the gathering of “all the disciples together,” **Acts 6:2**, to find a solution to a group of Greek widows who feel they're being neglected.

The Holy Spirit had also provided gifted people best suited to meeting these needs, like Stephen.

Stephen was such an obvious choice too, because he was “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom,” As the church grew, then, so did the awareness that **the Holy Spirit had gifted people in readiness for the church’s needs**. Some were gifted teachers, like the apostles, but even the apostles admitted there were other gifts needed that they didn’t have. The church desperately needed people with good organizational skills, and those who knew how to deal wisely with upsets among people.

The church also needed leaders who were willing to “turn responsibility” over to the gifted (verse 3) and give them free and full rein to get on with their jobs without looking over their shoulders. This too freed up the apostles “to prayer and the ministry of the word,” **verse 4**. And they would stick to that, rather than trying to wear eight different hats they weren’t suited for - a great lesson for church leadership today, and especially for stressed out pastors.

Such sharing of duties, and fitting the obviously gifted to the needs they were best suited for, “pleased the whole group,” **verse 5**. It made consensus easy too, when all were consulted and given a voice, and all agreed. “How lovely it is when brothers and sisters get along,” as Psalm 133:1 says. Well, here it was happening. It was also God and humans working together as originally intended in Genesis, as the Holy Spirit directly communicated solutions and wisdom, and the church leadership sought the Spirit’s clear, wise and loving help with potentially divisive problems.

Such were the obvious signs of God at work in the church, with leaders tuned to God’s word, praying for accuracy and understanding, and gifted members all recognized and accepted as the right people for the other needs. So the church came up with seven gifted people, the apostles “prayed and laid hands on them,” **verses 5-6**, and in **verse 7** “the word of God spread, the numbers of disciples increased rapidly,” including “a large number of priests.”

But it’s Stephen that the Holy Spirit now focuses on, a remarkable man “full of God’s grace and power,” **verse 8**, who wasn’t an apostle, but he too was doing “great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.” It seems a bit odd, then, that the Holy Spirit would allow this gifted man - that the church had just chosen **because** of his gifts too - to be falsely accused by “members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen” in **verse 9**, and then stoned to death by the Jewish religious establishment in verses 58-60. One has to ask, “What good and useful purpose was there in that?” Obviously there was, but what?

Luke gives us a clue in **Acts 8:1**, that “Saul was there, giving approval to Stephen’s death” - the same “Saul” who would become Paul the apostle.

Stephen, then, was the set up for Paul, because it would take someone as brilliant and gifted as Stephen to shake up the likes of Saul, who even as a “young man” (Act 7:58) was headed for great things because of his “zealous and faultless legalistic righteousness” (Philippians 3:6). In knowledge and dedication to the Jewish (Moses’) law there were few equals to Saul.

Imagine what it was like, then, for this proud, accomplished, highly educated Jewish ladder climber from the wealthy city of Tarsus, capital of Cilicia, to be among those from Cilicia in Acts 6:9 who “argued with Stephen, BUT,” verse 10, “they could not stand up against Stephen’s wisdom or the Spirit by which he spoke.” Stephen, therefore, would never be far from Saul’s mind, and like anyone defeated in argument Saul would seek to silence him, which is exactly what happened to Stephen. He was accused of “speaking words of blasphemy against Moses and against God,” verse 11, and “against the holy place and the law,” verse 13, because Stephen (supposedly) had said Jesus would destroy the temple and “change the customs Moses handed down to us” in verse 14, all of which, if true, were hugely chargeable offences.

No wonder all eyes “looked intently” at Stephen in verse 15, and even more so because “his face was like the face of an angel.” But even that clear sign of God’s approval and backing did not deter or even phase the court. But the court does give Stephen a chance to defend himself, so he takes it.

His defence is shattering, because in answer to their most treasonous charge that preaching Jesus was “against Moses” and everything Moses taught (verses 11 and 14), Stephen quotes a verse by Moses “who told the Israelites” in Deuteronomy 18:15 that “God will send you a prophet like me from your own people,” Acts 7:37. So Moses and his teachings weren’t the last word on everything. God had another prophet coming to speak through, which those claiming Moses was the ‘be all and end all’ of their religion should have known.

And in answer to the charge against him that he was against the temple and he was saying Jesus would destroy it, Stephen again quotes verses they should have known, this time from Isaiah 66:1-2, that summarized say, “the Most High does not live in houses made by man,” Acts 7:48. Well, the temple was a man-made building, so it didn’t matter if it was destroyed, did it?

So we know Stephen has a foolproof defence against both serious charges, but in his defence he includes a foolproof charge against his accusers too, and again based on Scripture. So it pays to know scripture, because this is no child’s play we’re involved in as Christians. There are people out there who’d like to rid the world of Christianity, and with powerful arguments in support of it.

Stephen answers fire with fire. In **verses 2-16** he takes his accusers back to a time in Scripture **before** Moses and temples - to Abraham, who left everything he held dear in his own country, and to Joseph who was sold as a slave - "BUT God was with him," **verse 9**, just as God was with Abraham (verse 5), and again with Israel in **verses 17-19** when it looked like they'd be wiped out, and again with Moses in **verses 20-32**, who for the first 80 years of his life was a dismal failure. God had a plan, in other words, and though it looked really strange at times (like Stephen himself being killed), one only has to look back and see how one thing led to another and see God's power behind it all.

And Stephen is saying all this, because instead of his accusers accepting the obvious evidence of God's power in their history they were "just like their fathers," stubbornly "resisting the Holy Spirit," to the point they even "killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One....and murdered him," **verses 51-52**. So what right did they have accusing Stephen of "speaking words of blasphemy" against Moses, when they'd killed the very person Moses had predicted, that Stephen was preaching about **but they weren't** (verse 53)?

It was now their turn to answer Stephen's charge against them, but what answer could they give when the scriptures they claimed to live by condemned them? And when they heard Stephen then say, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God," they were so enraged they dragged Stephen out to stone him to death (verses 54-58), with a note by Luke in **verse 58** that the witnesses who'd accused Stephen falsely had been set up by Saul.

So it may have looked as though they'd won against Stephen, but look what it led to - Saul the instigator of this entire charade becoming the apostle Paul. No matter how Christianity is battered and crushed, then, God's plan through history is never thwarted, and in Paul's ministry it would soon grow mightily.

Bit by bit in the book of Acts, then, we're seeing how the Holy Spirit gives visible witness to Jesus in the church, from such **vivid and contrasting angles**, like the care of the entire church for the physical needs of some upset widows, followed by Stephen outwitting the best of the Jewish religious establishment.

So who knows what he's got in mind for the church today, and for us as individual believers too, where it may seem at times that nothing is happening in our lives to make us visible witnesses to Jesus, or that we're in a time when the church is hardly a good witness either. But look back in our history, as Stephen did, and what do we see? We see Christians **fulfilling both parts of Jesus' ministry** - taking care of the needy in the church so that none are neglected, and the likes of Luther who, like Stephen, exposed the sorry state of the church resulting in revolutionary change.