
2. Two Powerful Witnesses

Acts 7 & 6

Outline for today

Today we are going to look at two parts of this long passage – and we are going to look at them in reverse.

- We are going to discuss **first** a summary of Stephens sermon (or more accurately- his defense). How did he present the Gospel, and How did he present Jesus to the chief priests and the council?
- After this I want to spend some time looking at the division amongst the disciples that led to the appointment of these seven men to minister to the widows. The unity of the disciples was the most important thing to protect, and I can't get past how this was handled and the focus and direction that is provided here – I believe – is relevant for us today.

The Witness of Christ (Chapter 7)

The Old Testament – a picture

My original intention was to talk with you solely about the message that Stephen gave, the associations that he made between the Old Testament prophecies and pictures (shadows) and the New Testament fulfillments.

Many people believe that Jesus started the Christian faith, and created his own religion. This is severely incorrect. Jesus tells us himself that he came to fulfill the Old Testament and to complete the religion of the Jews.

The Jews that persecuted the apostles and the early church believed this – that Jesus was distorting Judaism and His doctrines were starting a new religion or form of Judaism. They did not see Jesus as the fulfillment of the Old Testament, but a threat to it. It is a difficult position to take, that Jesus was an enemy of the Old Testament and the teachings of the prophets when he quoted from them so many times in his ministry.

Matthew 5:17-18

¹⁷ “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸ For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

Jesus did not come to do-away with the laws and the prophecies of the Old Testament, but to fulfill them. The Old Testament laws and sacrifices were the foundation of the gift of salvation that Jesus gives. Remember on the road to Emmaus and in the room with the disciples Jesus showed them all of the things in the Scriptures concerning himself? The Scripture was the Old Testament.

Luke 24:27

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.

And again in verse 45 - Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,

In the Old Testament we have pictures of the fulfillment in the New Testament – that’s it.

Hebrews 10 tells us that the Old Testament sacrificial code is a picture of the things to come in Jesus

Hebrews 10: 1-4

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. ² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? ³ But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴ For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Crist Jesus came to do what the sacrifices in the Temple could not. The sacrifices in the temple were daily prophecies of Christ!

Hebrews 10:10-18

And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ^[a] had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴ For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

¹⁵ And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying,

¹⁶ “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,”

¹⁷ then he adds,

“I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.”

¹⁸ Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Stephen is stoned because he shows the Jewish elite that Jesus was the purpose – the fulfillment of all of their traditions and sacrifices. The Old Testament was all about Jesus.

Stephen shows this by recounting the familiar stories of Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses, and his conclusion – that they killed both the prophets and the fulfillment of the prophecies - got him stoned.

I love his sarcastic question in the middle of his conclusion – which prophet did you not persecute?

Acts 7:51-53

⁵¹ “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

It’s a testament to the power and the purpose of God that Stephen was stoned for his message to the council and Peter was met with 5000 men who accepted Jesus from his message. Peter’s message was more aggressive and admonishing and Stephen’s was more logical and pragmatic. This is a great reminder that God is the one who affects the outcome of His Word’s message, not cleverly crafted words by men.

The Witness of Unity (Chapter 6)

The Followers of the Way - Divided

Format of the group

What we have here is a growing early group of disciples. We often refer to this as the early church, but that is really incorrect. It is really a gathering of believers – many believers – not organized in any particular fashion except they are:

- all filled with the Spirit
- devoted to the apostles witnessing (outbound) and fellowship
- eating and praying
- and shared everything they had.

(from Acts 2:42-47)

⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe^[a] came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 4 reiterates this format for the formation of the Followers of the Way

Acts 4:32-35

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

OK – let's now dig into the passage that is laid out for us.

[Read Acts 6:1-7]

In Acts 6 we learn that there is beginning a division in this group and the Apostles deal with it swiftly, and decidedly.

Acts 6:1

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists^[a] arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

The Hellenists are the Greek speaking members of the group. They were evidently present in good numbers among the new disciples. These were probably not gentiles, but Jews that spoke the Greek language. Remember that the Jews had been taken away to Babylon 700 years ago and their heritage became intertwined with many of the surrounding countries from then on. Many of the Jews of that time evidently spoke Greek.

There was a complaint amongst the disciples that the widows of the Hellenists were not getting their fair share in the food that was being served. This was dealt with by the apostles in a clear, swift and unique way. I want to take a look at this today because it shows us a clear example of the importance of unity and action amongst Christians.

Defense of unity

The apostles hear this complaint and called together all of the disciples. They dealt with the issue because their unity was at stake. They did not let it simmer, or fester – they called everybody together and reviewed the options.

- Doesn't it strike you as unusual how quickly and finally this issue was resolved?
- Does this sound like the resolution of a disagreement amongst believers today?
- **The Apostles knew that the most important visible sign of believers in Christ was to be their unity.**

Jesus prays for His disciples (and for us) in John 17 that we might be one – and by this unity that people might know that we are His disciples. In fact, in this final prayer of Jesus for his disciples (and those that follow) he prays for their unity and that they might have joy in this unity (vs. 13)

John 17:14-23

I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask that you take them out of the world, **but that you keep them from the evil one.**^[a] ¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them^[b] in the truth; your word is truth. ¹⁸ As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. ¹⁹ And for their sake I consecrate myself,^[c] that they also may be sanctified^[d] in truth.

²⁰ “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word,²¹ **that they may all be one,** just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that **the world may believe that you have sent me.** ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, **that they may be one** even as we are one,²³ I in them and you in me, that **they may become perfectly one,** so that **the world may know that you sent me** and loved them even as you loved me.

Also back in vs. 11 the same request – unity.

And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

Don't like something, fix it yourself

The Apostles recognized the threat to unity and immediately took steps to fix the issue. They recognized their role and limits and empowered the Hellenists to fix the issue.

They determined that their job was to continue to evangelize, not to devote themselves to the growing body of believers (**Remember this is not a church but a growing evangelistic movement**) The disciples weren't even called Christians for 5 more chapters, and then in Antioch, not in Jerusalem.

They certainly couldn't be called anything like what we have as a church.

Acts 11:26

and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.

However, they recognized the need to attend to the growing group of believers, and they instituted the first vestige of leadership in the church - the 7 men that are appointed in verse 5.

I would contend that these 7 men were more like pastors appointed to watch over the new flock than deacons. **That these 7 men were charged with the administration of the care of the new disciples.**

A few interesting things about these men. They were from among the Hellenists. **The apostle's solution to the division was to empower the Hellenists to correct the problem themselves.** They did not jump in and appoint a committee, but they told the people who felt that they had an issue to get involved and be part of the solution.

Acts 6:2-4

² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, ^[b] pick out **from among you** seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

They did place guidelines on the selection of the 7 men. They didn't care if they were good table waiters, or if they were particularly gifted in a certain manner, they said to pick men who were:

- Of Good repute – reputation – Our deeds build evidence of our changed lives
- Filled with the Spirit of wisdom – He promises to empower us to accomplish all that is needed to do His work.

What do we learn from This?

- Jesus is the fulfillment of all of the Scriptures.
- Unity should be the single greatest attribute in the body of Christ. Unity is the means by which the world will identify true believers.
- We should be involved in solutions and the building up of the body. All of us have abilities.
- Perhaps the area that most unsettles us in the body of Christ is the exact area that we are being prodded to get involved.