

Sermon Title: Infant Church Takes First Steps (Part 2)
Scripture Text: Acts 6:3-15 (Acts #14)

Speaker: Jim Harris
Date: 5-14-23

Now it is our joy to open God's Word. I invite you, please, to Acts Chapter 6.

And as we study this unique book, a one-of-a-kind book in the Word of God, we are studying the historical record of the greatest spiritual transition in history.

Jesus announced the arrival of "the New Covenant" that night before He went to the Cross (Lk. 22:20). And then on the Cross, remember, He triumphantly announced: "It is finished!" (Jn. 19:30). He had finished satisfying "the wrath of God" for all who would believe (Rom. 5:9; cf. Is. 53:5-8; Heb. 2:17; 10:14). At that moment, God ripped the "veil" over the entrance of "the Holy of Holies" (Heb. 9:3) "in two, from top to bottom" (Matt. 27:51), and that was to symbolize that the ministry of the Temple was complete at that time, and now "access" was *directly* into the presence of God (Eph. 2:18; 3:12; cf. Heb. 10:19-22). Well, from then on—until A.D. 70, when the Temple was destroyed—everything that happened in that Temple was a giant spiritual lame-duck session. The Old Covenant is *closed* (Heb. 8:13); the New Covenant is here (2 Cor. 3:6).

Well, that was a *transition*—it didn't just all happen at once. Jesus was buried (Matt. 27:58-60). Jesus "rose from the dead" (Mk. 9:9). "He appeared to more than five hundred" people after His resurrection (1 Cor. 15:6). He gave instructions to the Apostles (Acts 1:4). He "ascended to the Father" (Jn. 20:17; cf. Acts 1:9). And then, He sent the Holy Spirit, just as He had promised multiple times (Jn. 14:26; 15:26; 16:7), and the era of the New Covenant *burst* to life!

Acts is the record of approximately the first three decades of that new era. Through five chapters, we have seen about fifteen to twenty thousand people turn to Christ. They meet daily in the Temple, as often as they can. They meet in homes. They share all aspects of a joyous new life together. And remember, many of these people were not from Jerusalem; they had come to Jerusalem for the pilgrim Feast of Pentecost. And so, this is a *massive* thing that is going on with these *thousands* of people celebrating this new life in Christ (Rom. 6:4; 2 Cor. 5:17).

Well, the unbelieving leaders of the Jews are *furious*. We have already seen that they threw Peter and John in jail overnight; it didn't do any good. The Gospel spread even faster, as soon as they released them.

Then Satan concocted an attack on the Christians by manipulating a prominent husband and wife, who were generous donors, to lie about what they had done; and they were *stuck dead* in front of everyone! People were shocked, but they were also sobered to the holiness of God—and the Gospel kept spreading even more! (cf. Col. 1:5-6)

Then the Sanhedrin—the leaders of the Jews, primarily "the chief priests" (Acts 22:30)—they threw *all* the Apostles in jail, but the Apostles refused to back down. And following the famous advice of a rabbi named Gamaliel, they decided that, "Since they really haven't done anything illegal, we are going to let them go free again"—but they flogged them first. "Okay, well, we don't find any fault in you; we're just going to beat you almost to the edge of death, and then let you go." And the Gospel continued to spread!

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That brings us to Chapter 6, and that is when we see this new group begin to be organized by anything other than the direct oversight of the Apostles.

There were a "hundred and twenty" people in that first "upper room" (Acts 1:13, 15); and then the preaching of Peter after the Holy Spirit comes, and "three thousand" people believed (Acts 2:41)—that's a lot to cover for twelve guys! Well, now it's more like fifteen thousand, twenty thousand people.

And when we stuck our toes in this chapter last time, I began to make the case for you that this is the beginning of the development of "the Church" (Col. 1:24), "the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12)—this is the new thing (Eph. 3:4-6). So I made the case for you that you want to be a *member* of this—the case for church membership (cf. Acts 2:47; 5:14; Eph. 4:16; Heb. 10:24-25; 13:17).

Some people say church membership isn't in the Bible. Well, if you skip the whole Book of Acts, and everything from there on—no, it's not. There is no passage that says: "You must be a member of a local church"; but in Christ, "we are members of one another" (Eph. 4:25; cf. Rom. 12:10a; 14:19; Gal. 5:13; Eph. 5:19, 21; Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 5:11).

And look at what they did as this first group blossomed: They kept records; they counted people; they knew who was in and who was out; they knew people's marital status; they knew everyone's ethnicities and all the subtleties of that, because they had come from all over the Roman Empire; they knew the native languages of the people that were there. They *copiously* took care of one another, even to the point of some of the locals *selling property* to raise the money to take care of needs as they arose with those who were from out of town. That was *amazing*, in light of how many people there were there! They sought to *rigorously* care for the *most* needy, and that tended to focus on the widows; and that is what touched off the situation that is the focus of this chapter.

So, as I urged last time: We are seeing the pattern developing. It is *vital*ly important for *every* Christian to be as overtly attached to the local church as possible (Heb. 10:24-25). We call that concept "church membership." To shy away from being openly identified with a local church is to say, "I don't want to be known for the one thing that Jesus is doing on Earth—which is 'building' His 'Church' (Matt. 16:18)." We need to be committed visibly, vocally, outwardly, *obviously* as "in Christ" (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 1:3; 1 Pet. 5:14), and belonging to each other (cf. Ps. 16:3; 119:63; Prov. 18:1).

If you were to fast forward about 30 years from what we are studying right now, this group that we have met in Acts 1 through 5 that had been made up, at that time, completely of those who were Jews, it had grown and encompassed then not only those who were "in Jerusalem" but those who were in "Judea," the surrounding area; and then "Samaria" (Acts 1:8)—and the "Jews" hated "Samaritans" (Jn. 4:9); and then the Gentiles, and they had *nothing* to do with Gentiles (cf. Acts 11:3). But, by 30 years from now, it has grown like crazy; now it is more Gentiles than Jews. And once Gentiles became a part of the mix, God raised up a special additional "Apostle" to assemble teams to take the Gospel primarily to "Gentiles" (Rom. 11:13; cf. Rom. 1:5; Gal. 2:8; 1 Tim. 2:7), we are going to see about half or more of the Book of Acts devoted to that.

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Now, churches, in every place where the Gospel went, were led, not by Apostles—there were only twelve of them, until Paul came along and there was a thirteenth one; but there is no such thing as "Apostolic Succession" beyond that (cf. 1 Cor. 9:1; Rev. 21:14). That group died out, and all of those flocks of God's people around the world were led by "shepherds" of "the flock" (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-3). And the word "pastor" is simply the Latin word for "shepherd"—so, "pastors" are "shepherds of the flock"; and they were also known as "elders" (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; Jas. 5:14) or "overseers" (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:7). In every local church, there was always a plurality of the "elders" (Acts 20:17; Jas. 5:14). And as the Apostles died off, and the written New Testament was completed, the leadership of "the apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2:20)—which we are seeing in early Acts—was replaced by the leadership of "evangelists"—or, "missionaries"—and what Ephesians 4:11 calls "pastors and teachers."

So, the study of all this stuff—the development of how the Church, the Body of Christ—the capital "C" Church—is to be organized is the Doctrine of Ecclesiology; that's the fancy word for the Doctrine of the Church. Acts 6 is the first part of the progressive revelation of Ecclesiology.

Now, "progressive revelation" is an important concept; we say it applies to the whole Bible. If you had the Book of Genesis, and you *only* had the Book of Genesis, every single thing you had would be the Word of God, but it would not be the *whole* Word of God. The Bible progresses from incomplete to complete (cf. Rev. 22:18). Well, even *within* the Bible, we have the progressive revelation of the Church. It starts here with this first step of organization beyond the Apostles, and then it becomes more fully developed.

Not surprisingly, most of Ecclesiology was unveiled through the writings of Paul and Peter. Consider a couple of Scriptures that just touch on that. We will say more as we get into later chapters, when we have to cross-reference things that Paul wrote. But, Philippians Chapter 1, Verse 1—"Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons" (NASB-1995—and throughout, unless otherwise noted). Just in his introduction to that letter, in the address line, he says, "Oh, by the way: Under the 'overseers' and the 'deacons.'" Those are the two offices that will come to be the leaders of the church for all time. "Overseers" is one of three words that are used in the New Testament for the "shepherds" of the "flock" (Acts 20:28). The other two are "elders" (Titus 1:5) and "pastors" (Eph. 4:11). They were, and they are, the two groups of the leaders in the Church—elders and deacons, or overseers and deacons.

Once the fullness of the Doctrine of Ecclesiology was unfolded, *every* church had *its own* elders and deacons. First Timothy Chapter 3 and Titus Chapter 1 contain the lists of the biblical character qualities that are required to recognize who is an elder. And in First Timothy Chapter 3, there is an almost identical list for "deacons" (vss. 8-13). The main difference between those two offices is that the elders are where the buck stops, if you will; they are the "leaders" in soul care and in preaching and teaching. Hebrews 13:17 says we "will give an account" for the souls that are entrusted to us (cf. Acts 20:28). The deacons are primarily assisting the elders, and taking charge of hands-on ministries. Elders and deacons work closely together and as a team, but that's the distinction.

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And once we get Paul on the scene, you are going to see several more steps, even here in the Book of Acts, in the progressive unfolding of Ecclesiology. But today, the infant church takes baby steps.

Once the leadership of the Church was in the hands of the elders, it was Peter who showed us the seamless connection between the leadership of the Apostles and the leadership of the elders—the Apostles being only in the first generation of the Church. But Peter—even though he was an Apostle, even though he was the *mouthpiece* of the Apostles, at the beginning—he considered himself, as that transition unfolded, to be one of the elders.

Look what he wrote in First Peter 5:1-3: He says, "Therefore"—and now he is writing to several different churches in several different places that we are going to see mentioned here in the Book of Acts—"I exhort the elders among you, as your *fellow elder* and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you"—there's his command—"exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock." All three of the words for elders are used there: "elders," "exercising oversight," and "shepherd"—they are all different ways of describing the same office of elder, overseer, and shepherd.

We really missed Scott Basolo for a couple of weeks, but he was ministering in a place where you have pastors that have been saturated in the anti-First-Peter-5 methodology of quasi-pseudo-spiritual leadership, where they *do* do it "for sordid gain." That "Prosperity Gospel"—it works *great* for making prosperous preachers (Ezek. 22:25, 27; 34:2; 1 Tim. 6:5; 2 Pet. 2:3)—and it just sucks the life out of everybody else! This is *exactly* what we need to be doing: building churches in the way that Christ wants it done.

Now, today, let's take a look at this infant church in Jerusalem choosing its first deacons. We began last time and just kind of got our feet wet, and I wanted to make the point to you that this whole concept of organizing, and knowing who is in and who is out and what the lines of accountability are, begin to be developed very early here in the Book of Acts.

It starts with this: Number 1: A Need Arises. Chapter 6, Verse 1—"Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food." (NASB-1995—and throughout, unless otherwise noted)

The Greek-speaking contingent was concerned that "their widows" were not being treated the same as the Hebrew-speaking—or, Aramaic-speaking—widows. It was a legitimate need, and it was *prime* opportunity for *disaster*. "What? You're not taking care of *my* grandma like you take care of *your* grandma? Well, we are going to have to deal with this!" It was a legitimate thing. But this ministry was huge; it was growing rapidly, and every day they *were* taking care of the most needy—especially the widows. So, if you will, there were growing pains in this whole operation.

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Number 1: A Need Arises.
Number 2: Leaders Prioritize

Now, we said: It is a *very good thing* to feed hungry people. It's a *very good thing* for believers to share needs together. It's a *very good thing* to pay special attention to the needs of widows. But it is *not* possible to study and teach full-time, to be devoted daily to prayers, and to reason with people day in and day out about the Gospel "in the temple and from house to house (5:42), *and also* to handle the hard work of distributing and serving food.

So, they kept their priorities. Look at Verse 2—"So the twelve"—Apostles—"summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables." It is not *wrong* to "serve tables"; it's *right* to "serve tables"—but we have to prioritize who does what.

So, after the Need Arises and the Leader's Prioritize, the Leaders Propose A Plan. The plan proposed by the Twelve did not *minimize* the complaint—it took it seriously, and also kept their priorities in place.

So, Verses 3 and 4—They said: "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Nearly all commentators and Christian theologians believe that Acts Chapter 6, Verses 1 through 7, is the beginning of the office of "deacon" in the church. Now, those who don't agree with that say that, "Well, these men that were chosen to serve were never given the *title* "deacon." Well, that's an argument from silence. What they did was, they "deaked," okay? The word "deacon" means "servant" (Rom. 16:1). They were appointed to oversee "the daily serving" of things under the leadership of the Apostles. That's *exactly* the relationship between elders and deacons, as it is developed later in the New Testament.

I agree: This *is* the beginning of the concept of "deacons"; the *concept* is here: people chosen because of spiritual qualifications to serve under the leadership of the Apostles—later, the elders—to carry on certain ministries of the church. That is the pattern described, especially in the Pastoral Epistles: First and Second Timothy, and Titus. The ministry that needed the oversight is *exactly* the kind of thing that deacons are best suited for.

So there is a sequence of events here that outlines the process of choosing these three men, and there are practical applications here. Just listen to this process:

It began with people being saved. This whole thing start with: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...He was buried, and He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). By the way: It was "this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36)—"There's His tomb; it's empty! You have a problem! You are in opposition to God." You preach the Gospel.

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It begins with people being saved, and then continuing in fellowship with one another and learning "sound doctrine" (Titus 1:9; 2:1 cf. Acts 2:42). And then, as this whole group grows in their fellowship, Spirit-led ministry goes on—like taking care of widows.

There were *many* things happening, but the daily care of widows began to expose a weakness that needed to be addressed—so, a need arises: to make sure that the ministry is as effective as possible. The leaders acknowledge the need.

Now, it's not spelled out in the text exactly, but it is quite clear that there was open communication between the leaders—the Apostles—and the people involved in the ministries of the church; there was a very close fellowship.

And then, we saw the leaders maintain their priorities. Good leaders don't abandon what God calls them to do. There are *many* good works to be done, but that doesn't *everyone* should do *all* of them. And leaders, especially, have to prioritize, and they have to equip and utilize the gifts of other people.

So, the leaders proposed a solution. They figure out a way to not minimize what they do, but they harness the gifts that God has given to other people.

And here is another practical application you can make from that: Whenever *you* begin to do something in the church, whenever you see a need and you start to meet it, whenever you accept a responsibility and you start to do it, you should *immediately*, always and forever, be seeking out and *challenging* others to come and help you do it! That's how people learn to serve: by being asked to serve, by having someone *show them* how to serve; and they join you, and they help. That is discipleship; that's how disciples are made. That's exactly what Jesus did: He brought these guys together, He taught them, and He had them go to work.

Then, we have the congregation getting involved in this. They are asked to participate by recommending qualified people to take on the responsibility. Notice, they said, "select from among *you*" qualified men. That reflects the godly wisdom of leading by sound principles, rather than by making edicts. They said, "Okay, *you* see who is being faithful. *You* know the people around you. *You* recommend to *us* people whom we may put in charge."

And that's the next principle: The leaders *screen* the recommendations. Spiritual leadership is not a matter of a popularity contest or democratic rule; it is led by the most godly ones who take the oversight to take the initiative to find the people to train and equip to be servants and potential leaders (cf. Eph. 4:12).

And then you see the leaders seek agreement from the people to confirm those additional leaders; and they "select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task."

So that brings us to the next step in our text: New leaders are recognized and commissioned in public.

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So, People Are Put Forth for the job: Verse 5—"The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch."

Now, notice again the solid connection between the Apostles and the whole congregation: Wise, humble, godly leadership, coupled with willing submission and faithful service—that's the formula for a very healthy church.

What do we know about these first deacons? Well, we know that each of them had a "good reputation." That means that they were known by others, and they were highly regarded by all. And as we see this fleshed out further, when Paul writes down the qualifications for deacons, he says, "having a *good reputation* with those outside" (1 Tim. 3:7)—so, it's not *just* somebody who is nice to you at church, but it's also somebody who doesn't abuse employees and harass neighbors and make himself a jerk outside of church. So, "good reputation."

And each one was "full of the Spirit and of wisdom." Remember, the idea of being "full" of something means to be guided and controlled by it (Eph. 5:18). If you say someone is "full of jealousy" (Acts 5:17; 13:45)—well, jealousy is controlling what they do; "full of anger" (Est. 5:9)—anger is controlling what they do; "full of compassion" (Lk. 15:20, HCSB)—compassion is controlling what they do. Well, "full of the Spirit" means they are doing those things that would eventually be written down as "the fruit of the Spirit" that is manifest in their lives (Gal. 5:22-23).

They were also guided by "wisdom," which means they were knowledgeable about God's Word (Acts 18:24; Heb. 5:14), and their advice was known to be trustworthy because of the way they lived (1 Chr. 12:32).

What about the specific guys? Well, "Stephen" is the one here who is going to attract the most attention. He is going to play a key role in spreading the Gospel in Jerusalem.

Now here comes a spoiler alert: It was Stephen's "persecution" and martyrdom, which is about to happen, that is going to propel the church to spread out from Jerusalem (Acts 7:54-60; 8:1, 4). Remember, Jesus said, "I'm going to send My Holy Spirit, and you *will be* My witnesses in Jerusalem *and* Judea"—outside the walls of Jerusalem—"and Samaria and the remotest parts of the Earth" (cf. Acts 1:8). Well, Stephen getting persecuted was a catalyst; we will see that when we get a little bit further in Acts.

Then there's "Philip." Philip is the second most [well known] of them; he is going to be prominent for a little while, later in Acts. He is the one who is going to take the Gospel to the Samaritans—oh, and *that* was leaping a firebreak! "Jews" and "Samaritans" did not have *anything* to do with each other (Jn. 4:9). Do you remember what a *scandal* it was when Jesus said, "We are going to cut through Samaria on the way to Galilee"? *Jews don't do that!* (Lk. 9:51-53) Philip took the Gospel to the Samaritans (Acts 8:5).

And then, famously, he took the Gospel to a "eunuch" from Ethiopia (Acts 8:27). Wow! That's pretty unique.

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By the way, that's a good mission strategy: Go to your local campus, find the foreign students, witness to them, lead them to Christ, and send them back home. You're sending out missionaries that don't have to go through language school! That's exactly what happened with the Gospel going to Ethiopia.

And, interestingly, "four" of Philip's "daughters" were to become "prophetesses" (Acts 21:9). We will talk about that when we encounter it later.

We don't have any biblical information about the other five of these seven. There are some traditions which connect this guy "Prochorus" with the Apostle John. It is theorized he might have been John's amanuensis when John wrote the Gospel of John. Those same traditions say that Prochorus eventually became the bishop of Nicomedia; that's the capital city of the Roman province called "Bithynia" (Acts 16:7; 1 Pet. 1:1), and that he was eventually martyred in Antioch. I can't refute any of that, but I also can't prove any of that. It is certainly plausible.

The only other comment we have here among these other five is that "Nicolas" was "a proselyte." That means he wasn't born a Jew; he was a Gentile who converted to Judaism. And he came "from Antioch." Now, it's interesting: That may have been *especially* used by God when the Gospel went to the Gentiles, and Antioch became the first fully-Gentile church that sent out missionaries (Acts 13:2-3). They sent out Paul and Barnabas on their First Missionary Journey—and their Second, for that matter.

So the names don't matter a lot, but you are going to see quite a bit about Stephen, and you're going to see quite a bit about Philip—and trust me, the other five were nice guys, too.

So, A Need Arises; Leaders Prioritize; Leaders Propose A Plan; People Are Put Forth. And now: The Leaders Pray and Confirm. Verse 6—"And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them."

"Laying hands on" is identifying with somebody (e.g., 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22). We do it at ordination services. We do it, typically, when we send out people on short-term missions. You call them up, have the leaders pray for them, you put your hands on them in the sense of, "We are connected here," and it's like, "We are conferring upon you our blessing. We are praying for God's power for you for your ministry."

The fact that this was a wise step to take in the development of the new church and how it operates is evident from the next step: God Keeps Moving. Look at Verse 7—"The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem"—and then, here, listen to this—"and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith."

That phrase "continued to increase greatly" shows that even the very *best* efforts of the counters could not keep up with the exact number, but the intensity of the "caring for one another" *never waned* (1 Cor. 12:25). And then there is this *astounding*, God-glorifying thing: "a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith."

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Now remember, it has been "the chief priests" (Matt. 16:21; 20:18; 26:59; 27:20, 41; Acts 4:23; 5:24)—the chief mucky-mucks, the ones that controlled the Sanhedrin—they are the ones that have been systematically *persecuting* the Christians.

This is talking about the *everyday* "priests"—like John the Baptist's father, "Zacharias" (Lk. 1:5)—who lived all around the area, and they came and did stints of service in the Temple (Lk. 1:8), and they did the sacrifices, and they did the hard work. These were the regular, run-of-the-mill priests, if you will.

The average priests began to see the message of the Gospel—can you imagine how many people were witnessing to them?—and they were seeing the contrast between the Christians and this *spectacular* fellowship that was going on, versus what their leaders were *doing* to the people who were having this spectacular fellowship. So, "many" of them were "becoming obedient to the faith."

The text doesn't say it directly, but the fact that we are about to see this intense persecution break out against Stephen—it just might be related to this statement about "many of the priests...becoming obedient to the faith." That would not have pleased those guys in the Sanhedrin! I mean, what if *they* had to get *their* hands dirty, and actually make the sacrifices in the Temple? What if *they* had to work extra shifts because people were resigning their commission as priests?

So before we shift our focus to Stephen, I want you to again notice some spiritual principles for local church leadership that are illustrated in this text. And I want to say it because this is the *beginning*; this is the infant church taking baby steps. And we are going to see *many more steps* through the Book of Acts, and then you have the fullness of it in the rest of the New Testament.

And if you are careful and diligent, you would be able to see how every one of these things I'm about to tell you is put into practice, in one way or another, in the by-laws of Heritage Bible Church. Now, if you have not yet taken our "Heritage Bible Church Distinctives" Class, put a bookmark here, take the class next time it is offered, and you will see these things fleshed out in how we try to follow the biblical pattern.

Number 1: The autonomous government of the local church. Now, right away, I'm going to grant to you: it's a stretch to say that right here, because at this time, there was exactly one congregation of Christians in the world. But it *was* autonomous. You are going to see this develop, though, through the rest of the Book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament. Different churches in different places *cooperated* with one another, but the elders of each local church were the leaders of that local church's congregation. The submission was mutual, but the autonomy of the local church is a very clear New Testament principle.

And by the way, remember, I mentioned the guy "Prochorus" was believed to have gone on to be the "bishop" of a certain city in Bithynia? That idea of "bishops"—which is a translation of the word "overseers"—the idea of bishops with authority over *all* the churches in a region, not just a specific local church—that was not developed until well

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after the close of the New Testament. We will probably talk about it later, as we move through the Book of Acts. But that is *not* a biblical office of, like "regional bishop," or some denominations have "regional supervisors" or "superintendents" or things like that. It isn't necessarily an evil thing, but any hierarchy above the local church is extra-biblical. We'll leave it at that for now.

Notice this principle of maintaining spiritual priorities which are the best for all. The standard was set from the beginning: They feasted every day on "the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42, NKJV). It would have been a *disaster* if the Apostles had not held onto their priorities and passed them along to the elders who would lead the next generations of believers (2 Tim. 2:22; cf. 1 Tim. 4:6, 15-16).

We have this in Ephesians Chapter 2, Verses 19 through 22—"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints"—like being members of a local church—"and are of God's household"—like being part of a local church—"having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit." That is *all* built on the priorities of feasting on the "apostles' doctrine"—"the foundation of the apostles and prophets."

So notice also the principle of recognizing men who have developed within the local church. It was important and it was significant that the Apostles *asked* the whole congregation to recommend men in whom they saw leadership ability, in whom they saw patterns of faithfulness and wisdom and the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Then, there is dealing with needs and problems openly and in "unity" (Ps. 133:1; Eph. 4:3; 3:14; cf. Rom. 12:16; 15:5; 1 Cor. 1:10; Phil. 2:2). These principles kept that first complaint from causing a shipwreck! (cf. Gal. 5:15)

So, Acts Chapter 6: A Need Arises; Leaders Prioritize; Leaders Propose A Plan; People Are Put Forth; Leaders Pray And Confirm; God Keeps Moving; and then: Stephen Rises Up.

We are not told who long it took; we are not told *exactly* what happened; but it became obvious that the hand of God was on Stephen in such a way that he developed a ministry *like* that of the Twelve Apostles, and he began to manifest *gifts* of an Apostle—"the signs of a true apostle" that Second Corinthians 12:12 describes. Acts 6, Verse 8—"And Stephen, full"—that means "controlled by"—"full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people."

Well, of course, we know what happened when Peter and John did that. We know what happened later, when somebody else did that. Any demonstration of the power of God, and any powerful proclamation of the Gospel of the resurrected Jesus Christ, drew immediate opposition from the unbelieving and apostate Jewish leaders (Jn. 11:47-48; 12:9-10; Acts 4:16-17). So, Verse 9—"But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen."

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There are some details there that we really don't need to dive into too much, but it does seem that this looks like another one of those situations where people that didn't particularly have a lot to do with each other got together and shared the bond of their mutual hatred of Jesus and His Apostles and His people (e.g., Matt. 16:1; Mk. 3:6; 12:13). There was "the Synagogue of the Freedmen," another synagogue including "Cyrenians and Alexandrians," and another composed of people "from Cilicia and Asia."

So here's the deal: After the return from the Babylonian Captivity, people didn't have a temple yet, and they were scattered around; but in the Captivity, they had begun to meet in places called "synagogues"—from the Greek word *sunagōgē*, which means "a gathering together." A "synagogue" is "a gathering together." It required ten males—heads of households—to form a synagogue; that was the minimum size. And they met; it was the precursor to the local church, in the days of Judaism. So with the ones mentioned here, the cultural and linguistic differences between them make it very unlikely that these were all from one synagogue.

The other thing that is interesting is: When people would come to Jerusalem for the feasts like Passover and Pentecost, where a lot of people from out of town would come, they would gather from out of town—like, if we had an R.V. convention here, and we had a whole bunch of people from Wisconsin: they would probably park together. They would even meet in their "synagogue," if you will, in Jerusalem.

The "Freedmen" were descendants of Jewish slaves who had been captured by Pompey in 63 B.C. Go look up the history if you want to. They were taken to Rome. When they were granted their freedom, they formed a Jewish community in Rome.

"Cyrenians and Alexandrians" refers to people from two major cities in North Africa: Cyrene and Alexandria. By the way, "Cyrene" was the home of that man named "Simon" who helped carry Jesus' "cross" to the place of the crucifixion (Matt. 27:32).

"Cilicia" and "Asia" were Roman provinces in Asia Minor; that's the area of "the seven churches" to which the Book of Revelation is addressed (Rev. 1:4), in what we now call Turkey. And we know that since Paul's hometown of "Tarsus"—follow this now—Paul's hometown of "Tarsus" was located in the province of "Cilicia" (Acts 21:39; 22:3), therefore Paul likely attended that synagogue, with the group of people from there, in Jerusalem. And we are going to see later that Paul is going to be present at Stephen's trial and execution, so—talk about, maybe the Holy Spirit wrote this book—this is likely the first oblique reference to the Apostle Paul, other than the fact that we know that his rabbinical teacher was "Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3), who was the guy that gave the interesting advice back in Chapter 5.

Here's what happened: Verse 9—They "rose up and argued with Stephen." The word that is translated "argued" infers more of a debate; it probably started out friendly. After all, "Stephen" was "full of grace"—he was a nice guy; you could talk to him (cf. 2 Tim. 2:24-25). But if you are trying to refute a Spirit-filled spokesman of God, and you don't believe that he is telling you the truth when he says, "Jesus died and rose again," you are either going to repent, or the conversation is going to deteriorate.

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And deteriorate it did. Verse 10—"But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly induced men to say, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God.' And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes"—again, the Jewish leaders—"and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council." We've seen that before! Put them in the middle, Sanhedrin in a circle around them, and you interrogate them. "They put forward false witnesses who said, 'This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.' And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel." He wasn't flapped, even by the false accusations (cf. Lk. 21:15).

We are going to circle back to that when we enter Chapter 7, but get that scene in your mind: There stands Stephen, as calm as an angel, listening to false accusations solicited against him by sinister false teachers who want to cause a riot, and who are willing to commit murder to defend their spiritual turf (cf. Matt. 27:18; Jn. 11:48; 12:10).

What happens next? Come next Lord's Day. If you want the trailer for it, go ahead and read Chapter 7 on your own. Great chapter!

But let's take away from this what we can to today. Are *you* watching for needs? Every need is an opportunity for service. Are you serving? Are you, as you serve, recruiting others to serve with you? And will you stand tall when the enemies of Christ come after *you*? Because, by the way, "*you will be persecuted*" if you "*desire to live godly in Christ Jesus*" (2 Tim. 3:12). As the adage says: There are only four things that you are ever going to get in trouble for: whatever you say, whatever you don't say, whatever you do, and whatever you don't do. So "*make sure*" that those are for the Lord (1 Pet. 4:15-16); and if somebody wants to come after *you*, it's because they have a problem with your risen Lord (Ps. 69:9; Jn. 15:18; Col. 1:24).

Let's pray:

Father, what a privilege it is for us to look back through the telescope of history, and see Your infant Church take its first steps. Heritage Bible Church stands many steps further down the road, and we want this place to be where Your work is done—and where Your work is done in Your way, and by Your people. So have Your way with each of us. You know the needs of our hearts; You know the opportunities You would bring to us. Use them all, we pray, for Your glory, in Jesus' name. Amen.