

D. The Climax of Jewish Opposition (6:1-7:60)

The increasing resistance of the Jewish authorities didn't hinder the apostles' commitment and zeal in proclaiming Christ and His gospel of forgiveness and new life. The Father of the Lord Jesus – *their* heavenly Father – had demonstrated His invincible power over the opposition of men, and His angel had punctuated Jesus' previous commission to them to act as His witnesses (5:20). That final commission of worldwide testimony remained in force, but the Lord was providing His disciples with the spiritual resource for its accomplishment; they could speak with all confidence and boldness because the Spirit was bearing witness through them.

1. As the angel directed them, the apostles continued to proclaim "*the whole message of this life*" and the Spirit attended that witness with His enlivening power, so that multitudes in and around Jerusalem were coming to faith in the Lord Jesus. Christ was building His Church, but its enlargement brought with it increasing diversity within its ranks. The Church was still comprised of Jewish individuals, and to this point Luke conspicuously made no mention of Gentile believers. But this community of Jewish Christians wasn't homogeneous; among other distinctions, it had many members who were native to the land of Israel, but many others who were a part of the *Diaspora* – Jews who, for one reason or another, had come to Palestine from the surrounding nations.

The Assyrian and Babylonian captivities had scattered the sons of Israel among the nations, and though many Judahites had returned from exile following the Medo-Persian conquest of Babylon, many remained behind (ref. the book of Esther). For their part, the northern ten tribes enjoyed no formal restoration to the land of Israel (although many individuals from those tribes did return to Israel over the ensuing centuries); that restoration awaited the coming of David to reunite the remnant of all twelve tribes (cf. Hosea 1-3 with Isaiah 11:1-13, 49:1-7; Jeremiah 30-33; Ezekiel 37; etc.).

Though there was yet no true Gentile component to the Church (only Gentile proselytes), Luke's noting of the increasing diversity within it contributes to his overall purpose of documenting the fulfillment of all the Scripture in Christ.

- Central to the Old Testament portrait of the messianic kingdom of God is the revelation that it was to be a global, all-encompassing kingdom. Even as it would embrace the whole created order in a "new heavens and new earth," so it would consist of an innumerable multitude drawn from every tribe, tongue and nation. When the Servant had completed His redemptive work in Yahweh's name, Zion would need to enlarge her tent, lengthen her cords and strengthen her tent pegs in order to accommodate all her sons and daughters (Isaiah 49-54).
- The messianic Servant had now come, and at the heart of His message was the proclamation that the true sons of the kingdom are all those who "bear its fruit" – all those – Gentile as well as Jew – who, having believed in Him, bear His fragrance and declare His gospel in word and deed. Those who are Abraham's children *indeed* are those who share Abraham's faith and carry out the Abrahamic mission of mediating the knowledge of Yahweh to all the earth's families.

- So Jesus' parting commission – in light of His full and final triumph and impending enthronement – was to take His gospel to the world, making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the triune God (Matthew 28:18-20).

Luke identified the diversity within the early Church in terms of *Hebrews* and *Hellenists* (6:1). The former were native-born Israelites and Jews from other countries who were committed to Hebrew culture and customs (so Saul of Tarsus); the latter were Jews from outside Israel who were more influenced by Hellenism (that is, the customs, thought and culture of Greece as propagated by the expansion of Alexander's empire). Being Jews, these two groups shared common ethnicity and religious faith and practice (there were also Gentile proselytes within these groups, certainly among the Hellenists; ref. 2:5-10). At the same time, there were significant differences between them:

- The Hebraists spoke Aramaic as their native tongue, but also used Hebrew and the Hebrew Scriptures in their worship, while the Hellenists were more proficient in Greek and used the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament).
- The linguistic differences between the two groups weren't inconsequential, but the more important distinctions were *cultural*. Every human being is a product and reflection of his culture – at the national and community level as well as the family level. So the Jews of the Diaspora, having been raised outside of Israel, were a product of Hellenistic culture. Most were Jewish in their ethnicity (in part, if not wholly), and they grew up observing the Judaism of the synagogue, but they also were reared in the Greek cultural framework, perspectives and practices of their native Greco-Roman lands. The Hebraic Jews likewise had their own cultural distinctives associated with their Israelite heritage.

Jewish ethnicity and religion had united these Hebraic and Hellenistic Jews, but in a somewhat distant and tenuous way; now they shared the common bond of mutual faith and renewal in Christ and participation in His Spirit. They were bound together in a spiritual, supernatural and transcendent way, *and yet that bond didn't erase all personal and cultural distinctions*. The Church was a diverse community from the very outset, and it was becoming increasingly so as more and more people were embracing Jesus as the Messiah. And where diversity exists, there always looms the specter of prejudice and discrimination. Already in its brief history the Church had confronted internal and external threats, and another one was now arising within its ranks. Cultural diversity was threatening to split the Church into factions, thereby fracturing its unity, grieving the Spirit and undermining its witness in the world.

The early Church was marked by cultural and even linguistic differences, and those differences did tend toward certain challenges and difficulties. Nevertheless, Luke's repeated observation that the saints were united in one heart and mind was no rhetorical caricature, and their mutual concern expressed itself in their eagerness to provide for those in need among them. Even to the point of divesting themselves of land and other property, they were all contributing to the well-being of the community, bringing their gifts to the apostles to use as they saw fit (4:32ff).

The intention in this giving was that no believer should be in need, and a crucial component of that provision was the ministrations of daily rations to the Church's widows. In that day, women whose husbands had died and who had no children or other family members were left destitute. There were no government or social "safety nets"; without the Church's support, such women would perish. Of course, in instances where a widow had family members, they were expected to care for their loved ones so that the Church's resources could be allocated to "widows indeed" – Christian widows without any family whatsoever. Such women were added to the "widows list," but only if they were past marrying age and had lived disciplined and faithful lives (1 Timothy 5:3-16).

- a. This "widows list" that Paul referred to had its origin early in the Church's history, and it is the administration of the daily provision according to that list that Luke here referred to. Specifically, this ministry had become the occasion for the Church's diversity to become problematic. Somehow, the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food, and this was an increasing point of irritation among the rest of the Hellenists (6:1).
 - 1) It is important to note that Luke gave no indication that this oversight was in any way conscious or intentional. But neither did he explain how it came about; instead, he focused on the outcome of it: As the Hellenistic population watched their widows being passed over day after day, their frustration turned to resentment and murmuring.
 - 2) And though he doesn't state it directly, Luke's language seems to suggest that this growing resentment was fueled by the Hellenists' sense that they were being discriminated against. He used a term that indicates that they grumbled *among themselves* rather than going directly to the apostles; since the apostles were the ones ultimately overseeing the food distribution, it may have been that the Hellenists were suspecting them of discrimination. Luke provides no basis for such a conclusion, which shows that the diversity in the Church was already manifesting itself in an unwarranted and dangerous sense of "us" and "them."

The Hellenistic and Hebraic Jews had a long history of differences, only some of which were cultural; significant historical and theological concerns also separated the two groups. In particular, the Hebraic Jews tended to look down on their Hellenistic brethren as compromisers who had diluted their Jewish uniqueness and cultural separateness by adopting Gentile (Greco-Roman) cultural norms. To that practical compromise was added the problem of violation of the Law's demand of ethnic purity, since many of the Hellenistic Jews were descendents of Israelites whose lines had been rendered impure through intermarriage with Gentiles. The seriousness with which the Hebraic Jews viewed this violation is evident in the case of the Samaritans (who were themselves the product of Jew-Gentile intermixing following the Assyrian deportation and relocation): Ethnic Jews refused all contact with them, regarding them as unclean.

Now Hellenists and Hebraists had together come to faith in Christ and become part of a new community, the authentic unity of which was to be ordered and preserved by mutual *love*. In natural communities, unity is secured by the elimination (or prohibition) of differences; *in the heavenly community that is the Church, unity depends upon the recognition and celebration of differences.*

- Not the absence of distinction and diversity, but common-union in Christ and the binding principle of love define and administer the Church's unity.
- Indeed, the Church's authentic witness in the world *depends* upon its diversity. The only way the Church can show itself to be something other than another human organization is to have its organizing principle reside in something "other-worldly"; it must have a transcendent unity.

For the Church to be the Church – the Body of Christ and the dwelling of God in the Spirit – it must be diverse, populated by all sorts of people from every tribe, tongue, nation and culture. But old patterns and old habits die hard; thus it was very easy for the Hellenistic believers to conclude that they were experiencing the same sort of discrimination that they and their fathers had endured for centuries. *Left unaddressed, this growing perception and the schism it was causing would tear the Church apart, but God again intervened.* Luke doesn't say how the apostles became aware of the problem; the truth is, it really doesn't matter. What is important is that, having learned of it, they took immediate action.

- b. If the emerging schism between the Hellenists and Hebraists threatened the Church's unity and witness, so did the *distraction* it posed for the apostles. Up until that time, gifts had been brought directly to the apostles and Luke implies that they had personally assumed responsibility for distributing those resources. Now, through a challenging providence, the Lord was bearing witness that they needed to assign that work to others. Whether the inequities in the distribution process were the result of the apostles being stretched too thin, or individuals acting on their behalf were simply falling short in their duties (or perhaps even manifesting a degree of preference), the apostles had come to realize that formally designated men were needed to oversee this work. The alternative was the undermining of the Church's life and mission as the apostles were distracted from the work of preaching, teaching and intercession to which Christ had called them.
- c. It is noteworthy that the apostles didn't make the appointments themselves, but called upon the *Church* to select the men who would do the work of "serving tables" (6:2-4). This decision first reflects the apostles' recognition that the whole Body possesses the mind of Christ and the gifts and leading of His Spirit. The Church isn't an organization administered "from the top down," but a spiritual *organism* in which each member is equally vital to the effective operation and well-being of the whole. *The congregation of the saints, operating in the unity and synergy of the mind of Christ in them, was better qualified to identify and select men to serve the Church than were the twelve apostles acting alone.*

Secondly, this approach shows that the apostles understood the necessity of the whole congregation of believers acknowledging and having confidence in the men who serve them. Leadership in the Church is servanthood exercised in the context of mutual trust and submission. Christ's leaders don't *impose* their authority on His people, but *win* their confidence by their love, service, and example (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Obtaining effective leaders for this work of administering the Church's resources required that they be affirmed by the whole community as men "*of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.*"

This congregational attestation was all the more important in view of the problem at hand: The Hellenistic believers were suffering from a crisis of confidence in the Church's leadership and suspected that they were being marginalized, perhaps even by the apostles themselves. In order to resolve that crisis and restore confidence going forward, it was absolutely essential that the offended individuals be involved in selecting those who would be handling the Church's resources. The whole congregation participated in the selection process, appointing among the seven men several Hellenistic believers (evident by their Greek names), one of whom was a Gentile proselyte (6:5).

- d. Many Christians (and commentators) regard this passage as the New Testament's introduction of the office of the *diaconate*, and a couple of observations are helpful in assessing that conclusion, especially in the light of the overall context. First of all, the most common support for this view is Luke's use of diaconate language in this passage. He referred to the daily *ministration* (diakonia) of rations to the widows (6:1) and employed the same Greek root in its verbal form when speaking of serving tables (6:2). However, the force of this argument is negated by the fact that he used the same Greek root in referring to the apostles' work of *ministering* the word (6:4).

Second, the context (and Luke's language) highlights, not the diaconate, but the diversity of the Church and its gifts and the diverse arenas of service ("ministry") associated with those gifts. Some serve by the ministration of the word; others serve by administering the Church's resources. The Church's well-being and mission depend upon both the ministry of the word and the administration of its daily life; though this passage doesn't formally introduce the diaconate, it certainly points toward it as an essential leadership function within the Church.

This context also highlights the disastrous consequences of individual Christians failing to exercise their gifts, whether through ignorance, neglect or distraction. Each must serve according to his gifts and calling, but all must serve with the mind of Christ in the love and wisdom His Spirit supplies. The apostles were capable of administering the widows' list, but to do so was to function outside of their gifts and distract them from their calling. So also those gifted and called to "serve tables" must not seek to operate outside of their calling. The foot isn't a lesser member because it's not a hand; indeed, it cannot *be* a hand and the body suffers when it deviates from its design and function (1 Corinthians 12:12ff).

- e. Luke ended his treatment of this potentially disastrous situation by noting its fruitful outcome (6:7). The appointment of the seven servers clearly met a couple of important needs in the Church and resolved a growing conflict:
- 1) It freed up the apostles for the work to which they were called and also allowed the Church to see the importance of an “every member” ministry in which each believer serves the good of the Body with his gifts.
 - 2) It also provided for a conscientiously managed distribution of resources, which in turn acted to diffuse the growing schism among the saints. In that way God wisely and productively resolved another internal challenge to the Church’s life and witness.

Those things were enough for Luke to include this episode in his account, but the surrounding context shows that he had a greater purpose in mind: This particular problem and its resolution allowed for the man *Stephen* to come to the forefront and gain a public presence in the Church. In turn, that status facilitated the vitally important events to come – events that would prove to be a providential milestone in the life of the Church and its fulfillment of its calling of global witness.

Luke highlights Stephen’s centrality to the larger context by identifying him first among the seven and affording to him a unique description (6:5). It’s not that the other six men weren’t “*full of faith and of the Holy Spirit*”; those things are embodied within the selection criteria (ref. 6:3). Luke ascribed them specifically to Stephen to set the stage for what was to come (cf. 6:8). It was precisely as just such a man that Stephen would fulfill his own calling and purpose in Christ’s program: *In the full conviction of faith and the confident power and leading of the Holy Spirit, he would bear witness to Christ in a way and to an extent not previously seen in the Church’s brief history.*

To this point, Luke has highlighted only Peter’s public proclamation of the gospel. His narrative indicates that others of the apostles were also preaching publicly to the Jews (ref. 4:31, 5:27-32, 40-42), but only Peter’s sermons are recorded (2:14ff, 3:12ff, 4:5ff). Now, for the first time, someone else will take center stage in Luke’s account.

Stephen’s sermon is notable not merely for that reason, but more importantly because it represents the most extended and comprehensive treatment to date of Christ’s person and work as the fulfillment of all the Scriptures. In fact, as a rehearsal of salvation history it is rivaled in the book of Acts – indeed in the entire New Testament – only by Paul’s sermon in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch (13:14-41). But even that panoramic gospel presentation falls short of Stephen’s.

Stephen was a man *full of the Spirit*, and this enabled his insight and the power of his proclamation of Jesus from all the Scriptures. But he was also a man *full of faith*, equipped by God to gloriously fulfill his calling as Christ’s first martyr.