

TUTORIAL
2.14

God guides the Church as they face challenges and persecution

This tutorial looks at the work of Apostles, elders, and deacons, and Stephen's sermon and death. We see how God guides His Church and its leaders as they face persecution from outside, sin from within, and as they learn to delegate roles and responsibilities according to His plan.

The portions of Scripture referred to in this tutorial are: ***Acts chapters 5, 6 and 7.***

Last time

We followed the account of God healing a crippled man through Peter and John. When a crowd gathered there in the Temple area to see what had happened, Peter challenged them strongly to recognize that Jesus, who they'd crucified, was the Messiah. The two former fishermen were arrested by the Supreme Council and the next morning they were warned not to speak in Jesus' name again. Peter and John replied that they would have to obey God and keep telling people about what they'd been eyewitnesses to. More people in Jerusalem believed in Jesus through these events and were added to the Church, which continued to strengthen and thrive.

Sin from inside and persecution from outside

In the Acts account, Luke next records two incidents that provide more insights into what God was doing at this point in history...how He was relating to the newly formed group that is Christ's *Body* or *Ecclesia* on earth (Acts Chapter 5). In the first, Luke describes how God deals decisively with a couple, attached to the Jerusalem church, who act deceptively and try to make themselves appear more generous than they actually are.

Although the results of sin among those claiming to be God's people today is rarely so dramatic and obvious as it was for the fledgling Church, the account tells us a lot about the view God takes of anything that dishonors His name or corrupts His Son's Body on earth.

The second incident again sees Peter and, this time, more of the Apostles, imprisoned overnight by the Jewish authorities. The next morning, despite the

apparently intact jail security, the officials are shocked to hear that the leaders of Jesus' followers are out in the Temple area preaching. After being threatened and flogged, the Apostles are released - delighted, Luke records, to have had the privilege of suffering for the sake of their Master. None of these events discourage them from obeying Jesus' command to bring new followers - disciples - to Him. The text says that every day the Apostles were teaching whoever would listen, in open public forums and in individual homes. Without reaching for definite conclusions, it's worth noting in passing here that there's no mention of them trying to attract seekers to the meetings of the *Ecclesia* - from what we're told, the evangelism and teaching of anyone who's interested takes place outside the church gatherings.

Potential divisions emerge in the Church

What Luke records next is also highly instructive and relevant to us as members of Jesus' Body today...particularly as we try to obey His command to be witnesses and disciple-makers for Him in our local communities and out to the nations of the earth (Acts 6:1). Interestingly, we see that the group of early believers in Jerusalem is not as culturally or even linguistically homogenous as we might suppose. Certainly they share a history of Jewish ethnicity and religion, but there are significant differences among them. On the whole, the Hebrew or Aramaic speaking majority is from a conservative Jewish background. The Greek speakers are generally more liberal, having been influenced by *Hellenization*: the Greek and, more recently, Roman cultural dominance in the Mediterranean 'world'.

These differences now represent potential fault lines along which the first divisions can occur in the so far unified *Ecclesia*...something that, sadly, has happened countless times since, for one reason or another, down through history. The text says there are "rumblings of discontent" in the Church. On the surface, the issue does not seem all that significant - the Greeks claim that their widows are not being cared for as well as the Hebrew women. But even relatively minor disputes can grow into serious problems if they're not handled right.

What will happen? Jesus had said that one of the distinctives of His people would be their love for one another. The Body, by definition, is meant to be *unified*. This is one of the reasons the Holy Spirit came - to join His New Covenant people together as *one*.

A new practical leadership role is instituted

So how will the Spirit respond to this issue? God's interaction with His people has always involved Him describing how things work within the reality He has created: the Author explaining the Narrative. His truth does not remain isolated in some mystical, spiritual realm...it works itself out in real life, it solves problems and provides practical frameworks within which we can fulfill His

intentions. And, consistent with the pattern we've seen in God's dealings with humans from the beginning, He looks for opportunities to delegate real responsibility. This is entirely His choice as Creator...His *Sovereign* right. He graciously works with His faithful followers in genuine collaboration, rather than pushing them aside to deal with things Himself. This gets right down into the fundamental reasons for Him creating an image-bearing race in the first place.

Now these characteristics of God are playing themselves out in this new Chapter of His Narrative - the Group of Jesus Christ's blood bought people. Luke describes how the Apostles, led by the Spirit, act decisively with a practical solution that serves God's purposes for the Church (Acts 6:2-7). The Apostles have been gifted by the Spirit and placed within the Ecclesia specifically to serve it in certain ways. Their primary role is to feed the Body with spiritual sustenance...to share the Truth, God's Narrative, with authority and clarity so that it leads God's children into genuine worship, produces change in their values and behaviour as needed, and equips them to contribute to His purposes. As leaders, they don't feel they have to micro-manage every aspect of the church's life. They are glad to follow God's pattern and what Jesus modelled for them by delegating responsibility to others.

They decide that seven men should be chosen to take leadership in the practical areas of the Church's function like the distribution of food. This will keep the Apostles free to focus on seeking God's guidance for themselves and for those in their care. But consistent with what they've seen from the Father and Son, these responsibilities will not just be handed out to anyone, nor will they be given on the basis of favouritism or social obligation. Whoever takes on these roles should clearly be submitting their lives to the Spirit's guidance and demonstrating wisdom in their dealings with others.

The Apostles don't act unilaterally or dictatorially, but instead put their plan before the group. The idea is supported and, significantly, it is the church body that chooses men among them who they feel are suitable...no doubt those who were already demonstrating an enthusiasm to serve, along with organizational skills. The names of the seven men chosen (Acts 6:5) suggests they were *Hellenists* - those with Greek cultural and language backgrounds - but this isn't certain because Palestinian Jews often had Greek names as well. In front of the group these men are recognized by the Apostles as those who'll take the lead in areas of *service* - a concept linked back to the practical roles of priests under the Old Covenant as they *served* God's people. In Greek, the term used is *diakonia* - "service" and *diakonos* "servant" - which of course has come into English as *deacon*. And so a pattern was established with God's guidance at the outset...two distinct but related ways to lead and serve the Church; as *Elders* - which the Apostles filled for the Jerusalem church - or as *Deacons*.

Stephen shows the pattern of the Jews' disbelief

What is described next in the Acts account (Acts 6:8-7:60) will have incredibly far-reaching results for the young Church, and for how it takes the next steps given to it by the Master. The Narrative focuses on one of the newly appointed servant leaders or *deacons* in the Jerusalem church.

Stephen is someone who is obviously experiencing God's grace himself and is able to help others see it as well. Along with it, the Spirit has given him a prominent role in demonstrating God's involvement in this new movement in Jerusalem...performing, as the text says, "amazing miracles and signs among the people". Trouble occurs when some antagonistic Hellenistic Jews realise they've come off second best in a theological debate with Stephen...what they don't know, of course, is that he has the advantage of the wisdom that comes from his constant companion, God's Spirit (Acts 6:8-14).

In a move very reminiscent of what happened to Jesus, these Jews persuade some others to accuse Stephen of blasphemy. The charges sound strikingly similar to what his Master was wrongly accused of. Selective fragments of the message are repeated, out of context of God's One Narrative...twisted and misapplied, they are made to sound heretical. The enemies of Jesus and His followers finally have what they've been waiting for...grounds on which to attack the movement that threatens their hold on the people. Stephen is arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin - the Supreme Council. The false charges are laid. How does he plead? Will he admit or deny the accusations?

With his face glowing, Stephen launches into a summary of the history of Abraham's descendants and their relationship with God (Acts 6:15-7:50). The conclusions he draws from this synopsis of the Old Covenant Narrative are anything but diplomatic. He clearly has no intention of ingratiating himself or avoiding any harsh treatment (Acts 7:51-53). They are stubborn he says, deaf and disobedient to the truth...resisting the efforts of God's Spirit to enlighten them, just like their ancestors so often did. They are no more God's people than the heathen Gentile people groups. They've persecuted and killed God's prophets, even killing the Messiah Himself.

Stephen is killed by the Jews

The Jewish leaders' supporters are beside themselves with rage...they hiss and jeer. But Stephen is no longer concerned with them. He's absorbed by something infinitely more compelling and wonderful (Acts 7:54-60). God's Spirit is allowing him to see beyond the boundaries of this limited world of the senses...to where God exists in all His glory. And look, there's His beloved Master, Jesus, standing next to His Father...in a place where He's fully honored and acclaimed.

Why can't the crowd see what is so real to him? Surely they see the Father and the Son there!

But no, there's no one so blind as those who won't see, or as deaf as those who refuse to hear.

They cover their ears and shout to drown out what they're convinced is blasphemy. They want to make him stop...to revenge his accusations that have found their mark and cut so deep. They surge forward, grab him, drag him down the narrow streets, more and more people tailing along to see what is happening...then out one of the gates to an open waste area. He must be killed by ritual stoning. The heretic is to die outside the city walls, rejected by his people, just like his Master before him. The ringleaders get organized. "Come on everyone, collect stones." "Here, young Saul, look after our cloaks, we need our arms free for this." The brutal execution starts. First one, then another, then more and more stones find their mark.

Stephen, now on his knees, looks up. "Lord Jesus, I'm coming. You're ready for me, aren't you?"

Don't blame them for this." Then, mercifully, he's gone...the first of many in the Church who'll give their lives for the sake of Jesus and His great Purpose of rescuing a lost and rebellious race.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. In a church made up of members from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, what do you believe are some of the
 - a) biggest challenges for those in leadership,
 - b) potential advantages for that church as a whole, in contrast to a more culturally homogenous situation?
2. Think about examples of how God appointed and equipped different ones to lead His people in the earlier part of the Narrative. Can you identify any common threads that are coming out now in the emerging picture of leadership in the early Church?
3. It seems safe to assume that Stephen said the things he did to the Jewish leaders knowing they would react violently...even that he might be killed. How then would you

explain his actions? Do you think he was illogical or reckless at all? Please explain. Can you apply your perspective about Stephen's choices to your own situation today?