

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

An Exposition

by

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CHAPTER SIX

This chapter has two parts.

- In the first part (verses 1-7) we find the record of the murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, and how this difficulty was overcome.
- In the second part (verses 8-15) Stephen, one of the seven chosen, is in the foreground.

This part properly belongs to the chapter which follows, in which Stephen's great address before the council and his glorious martyrdom is revealed.

I. The Murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews.

"But in those days, when the number of disciples multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians (Hellenists) against the Hebrews, because their widows were overlooked in the daily ministrations. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples, and said, It is not right that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of good report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may establish over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: whom they set before the apostles: and when they have prayed, they laid their hands on them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith" (Verses 1-7).

Another failure is brought before us.

The enemy acts again. From without and from within Satan pressed upon that which was of GOD. While the Lord JESUS CHRIST and the Holy Spirit acted in Grace and power, the enemy came in to disturb. It is still so. Whenever there is a door opened there are also many adversaries (I Corinthians 16:9).

The flesh manifested itself in murmuring.

The assembly took care of the poor; widows being specially helpless, were the objects of daily ministrations. The Jews themselves in connection with the synagogue had special funds for them. They must have also formed a recognized group in the early church (I Timothy 5:9, 10). The ministration is the distribution mentioned in Chapter 4:35, and as the multitude was very great, including, perhaps, hundreds of widows, this work was quite a task.

Murmurings arose and these were born of jealousy, the result of unbelief.

It is the first indication of weakness and failure. This reminds us of the murmurings of Israel as recorded in the book of Exodus. The same old thing, the changeless flesh, shows itself among the saved and united company of believers, indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The murmurings were on the side of the Grecians. Their complaint was against the Hebrews that the Grecian widows were being overlooked.

The Grecians were not, as some teach, Gentiles, but they were Greek-speaking Jews, born in countries outside of Palestine, and therefore called Hellenists, or Grecians. Between these two classes, the native and foreign-born Jews, there existed considerable jealousy. This rivalry was introduced in the assembly. The Hebrew distributors were accused of overlooking the Grecians.

But the murmuring was arrested at once. A divine Person was present, the One perfect in wisdom, the Holy Spirit. As He was ungrieved in their midst, He at once meets the need of the assembly. The murmuring could not advance nor do its pernicious work in dividing the people.

Later the Holy Spirit especially warns against murmuring. "**Let all things be done without murmurings and disputings**" (Philippians 2).

Murmurings belong to the works of the flesh and will lead to the things mentioned in Galatians 5: "**hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings.**"

Alas! how sad is the condition of Christian churches at the present time in this respect. If believers walk in humility, in self-judgment, esteeming the other higher than themselves, and are controlled by the mind which was in CHRIST JESUS, all those things would not be. Any murmuring, if it arises through the weakness of the flesh, would at once be cut short by the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit of GOD, who had, as reported in the previous chapter, acted in judgment by removing the two transgressors, now acts in divine grace.

The twelve called the assembly together.

As the murmuring of Israel in the wilderness was mostly directed against Moses and Aaron, their divinely-appointed leaders, so the murmuring here was in a certain measure against the Apostles, at whose feet was laid the price of what had been sold.

There is no word of rebuke from the side of the Apostles. Neither do we read of any arguments they used. They act as guided by the Holy Spirit.

Their great calling and gift was the ministry of the Word; they had been obliged to serve tables more or less. They discerned at once that the Lord had not called them to this double service.

Here is another evidence of the existence of the church. The Holy Spirit who had united them at the day of Pentecost into one body, now begins to point out the order in that body. All of this, concerning the different gifts to the members of the body, is not revealed here, but is found in the doctrinal Epistles of the Apostle to the Gentiles, to whom the ministry of the church was committed.

Seven men, the Holy Spirit directs through the Apostles, are to be selected from among the assembly.

Three conditions are mentioned.

- They must be men of good report,
- They must be esteemed by all on account of their character,
- They must be full of the Spirit, and possess wisdom.

The Apostles themselves declared: "**we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word.**"

The Holy Spirit thus separated the gifts called to minister in spiritual things, from the ministry of temporal matters. What confusion there exists in this respect at the present time in the professing church, needs hardly to be pointed out.

In this word of the Apostles, there is an important statement concerning prayer and the ministry of the Word.

It is not the ministry of the Word, teaching and preaching, first, but they put prayer into the first place. There can be no effectual ministry, no effectual preaching of the Gospel and Bible teaching unless it is preceded by prayer. Prayer is the expression of dependence upon GOD. Ministry of the Word must be in utter dependence on the Lord and therefore prayer is the right preparation for it.

Then the multitude, that is the entire assembly, chose the seven men, while the Apostles sanctioned their choice.

Stephen is mentioned first, and described as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. Then follow the names of the others, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas. The latter was a proselyte, that is, one who had adopted Judaism. by circumcision; he was from Antioch. There is absolutely no historical proof that this Nicolas formed later a special sect and that he taught wicked doctrines. His name can in no wise be connected with the Nicolaitanes in Revelation 2:6 and 15.

While we know little of these men and the service they rendered, with the exception of Stephen and Philip, it is an interesting fact that their names are all Greek. In this the grace of GOD is beautifully exhibited. The Grecians were the murmurers, and no doubt they were fewer in number than the Hebrews. A modern day church meeting would have proposed to elect a committee composed of equal numbers of the two parties. But not so here.

Grace and wisdom from above are manifested in this action. The entire seven were chosen from those who had complained. This was the blessed rebuke of Grace. The weakness and failure is made an occasion to bring out such graciousness. Into the hands of those who had murmured is given the distribution of the funds. This silenced the murmurings at once.

The seven were then set before the Apostles and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.

This is the first time we find the laying on of hands in the Book of Acts. As this "**laying on of hands**" is so much misunderstood, and has been made an act by which authority, power and blessing is claimed to be conferred, we must say a brief word on it.

It is always proper in reading and interpreting the Word of GOD, to see if not elsewhere in the Bible the terms or things to be interpreted are used, so that through them the right meaning can be ascertained.

The laying on of hands is first mentioned in the Book of Leviticus.

In the opening chapters of that book we read how the offerer was to lay his hand upon the head of the offering. Thus we read of the Peace offering: "**He shall lay his hand upon the head of his offering**" (Leviticus 3:2).

This meant the identification of the Israelite with the offering itself. And this is the only meaning of the laying on of hands from the side of the Apostles. They identified themselves and the assembly with them in their work for which they had been chosen. It was a very simple and appropriate act to show their fellowship with them. All else which has been made of the laying on of hands is an invention. There is no Scripture for the present day usage in Christendom, that a man in order to preach the Gospel or teach the Word of GOD must be "ordained." We shall return to this when we reach other parts of this book.

The Word of GOD increased. The Holy Spirit gave it power, and after this victory when the enemy attempted to disturb the assembly by the murmuring, He unfolded great energy. The number of disciples increased greatly and especially is it mentioned that a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith. The latter was apparently a new thing. No priests were mentioned before. May not the rent veil have had something to do with this great company of priests believing in the Lord JESUS CHRIST? They had found the new and living way into the Holiest by the blood of JESUS.

The office of the seven, we may add, was only of a short duration, for soon persecution of the worst type set in and the disciples were scattered.

II. Stephen, his ministry and arrest.

"And Stephen, full of grace and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people. Then there arose certain of the synagogue, which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of them of Cilicia and of Asia, disputing with Stephen. And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake. Then they suborned men, which said, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God. And they stirred up the people, and the elders, and the scribes, and came upon him, and caught him, and brought him to the council. And set up false witnesses, which said, This man ceaseth not to speak blasphemous words against this holy place, and the law: for we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us. And all that sat in the council, looking stedfastly on him, saw his face as it had been the face of an angel" (Verses 8-15).

With Stephen we reach an important stage in this book.

The testimony, as given to Israel, is now soon to be closed and Stephen is the instrument chosen to deliver the most striking testimony to the representatives of the nation.

Of the history of this remarkable man we know but little. As already seen, his name indicates that he was a Hellenist; Stephen means "*crown*." And he is indeed to have a great crown in the day when the Lord will take the award seat and His saints will appear before Him.

We learned before that he was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. He is, so to speak, the link between Peter and Paul; most significantly, at the close of Stephen's great witness and after his vision of the Glory of GOD and JESUS standing on the right hand of GOD, there is mentioned a young man named Saul, "**and Saul consented unto his death.**"

Here in the sixth chapter we read that Stephen was "**full of grace and power,**" the effect of faith, and filled with the Spirit. He is the first disciple mentioned who is not an apostle, who did great wonders and miracles among the people.

Then we see those of the synagogues of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, disputing with him. These were also Hellenists, Jews brought up in foreign countries, and of much learning.

There were many synagogues at that time in Jerusalem, and as it is the custom still among the orthodox Jews, the synagogues were called by the names of the places from which its adherents came. This synagogue then was composed of Libertines, that is, Jews from Rome, * for they were known by that name, Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria.

* It is wrong to call these "Libertines" free thinkers. Jews had been taken to Rome as slaves. Their descendants who had been liberated were called Libertines, that is freedmen. They were known as such in Jerusalem and hence the name "**synagogue of the Libertines.**"

To this synagogue Stephen may have belonged, and if this was the case, his presence with them is easily explained.

The fullness of Grace in his heart reached out after them. These Jews disputed with Stephen and he with them; but also those of Cilicia and Asia are mentioned.

May not this young man, Saul of Tarsus, the Pharisee of the Pharisees, hailing from Cilicia, been among these disputers? It is more than likely. All their great learning was of no avail in the presence of such a powerful witness. The Holy Spirit bore witness and they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit in which he spoke.

They would not accept the testimony of this gracious and powerful witness and therefore only another way was left to them. They are filled with satanic hatred against him, and as the chief priests did with the Lord, did these here suborn men who accused Stephen of blasphemy. The charge is "**blasphemy against Moses, and against God.**"

They succeeded in their satanic work by stirring up the people, the elders and the scribes. Stephen is arrested and brought before the council. There the charge is repeated. Three things are mentioned by them. He ceaseth not to speak words against this holy place; against the law and that he should have said: "**This Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us.**"

And then they looked upon him and behold his face was like the face of an angel.

All eyes were attracted to this wonderful sight. Steadfastly they looked upon a face of Glory; a face reflecting heaven's light, heaven's Glory; a face reflecting the Glory of Him into whose presence he soon would be called. And may not that young man named Saul also have been there and seen that face? And that dark countenance of that young Pharisee of Tarsus was soon to behold that same Glory-light and then tell the world of the Gospel of the Glory and that "**we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory unto glory.**"

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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