

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Working Together for Christ

Acts 6:1–15

Our passage is Acts 6. And today we're going to discuss "Working Together for Christ," and what that looks like in the NT church. But before we turn to Acts, turn with me first to the book of Exodus. I want to set up our passage today by giving you a couple of OT parallels for what we see in Acts 6. The first passage is Exodus 18, where we see the power of *delegation*. And secondly we'll look at Exodus 35–36 where we see the power of *specialization*.

In Exodus 18, Moses's father-in-law, Jethro, shows up when Moses was leading the Israelites in the wilderness. And Jethro is appalled by Moses's leadership strategy. It says in verse 13, "The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, 'What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?'" (18:13–15).

Jethro continues in verse 17, "What you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you" (18:17).

Jethro goes on to suggest that Moses appoint judges over the people, so that he doesn't have to adjudicate every matter in the camp. It's a remarkable piece of advice, something that I'll just call common grace wisdom that Moses, a humble man, receives and implements (see Exod 18:18–27; Num 12:3). Moses delegates his authority, and it becomes a good thing for God's people.

That's the power of delegation. But let's also see the power of specialization. Turn with me to Exodus 35. In this chapter, Moses calls the people to bring their treasure before the Lord. It says in verse 4, "Moses said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, 'This is the thing that the Lord has commanded. Take from among you a contribution to the Lord. Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring the Lord's contribution: gold, silver, and bronze; blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen; goats' hair, tanned rams' skins, and goatskins; acacia wood, oil for the light, spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense, and onyx stones and stones for setting, for the ephod and for the breastpiece'" (35:4–9).¹

So the Israelites bring all these freewill offerings to the Lord. And Moses is tasked to use these items for the construction of the tabernacle. That mirrors what we see in Acts 2 and Acts 4, when the early church brought some of their possessions to the apostles to be used for the Lord's work.

But it's not just treasure that the people bring. There are also talents. Because look at Exodus 36:2–3: "And Moses called Bezalel and Oholiab and every craftsman in whose mind the Lord had put skill, everyone whose heart stirred him up to come to do the work. And they received from Moses all the contribution that the people of Israel had brought for doing the work on the sanctuary. They still kept bringing him freewill offerings every morning."

So the Israelites were giving generously to the work of the Lord. In fact, it says in the next few verses that Moses eventually had to tell them to stop bringing stuff, because they had too much (36:6–7). But there were also these two people, Bezalel and Oholiab, along with other craftsmen, who were specifically tasked and empowered by the Spirit to do the artistic work of the tabernacle. So both talent and treasure were mobilized for the work of the Lord.

Now we all know that the NT church is not the same as OT Israel. It doesn't replace Israel. But there are parallels in the way that God works among his people. And just like in the OT, the Lord divvies

¹ The Lord had initiated this earlier in Exodus 25. But that was interrupted by the golden calf incident in Exodus 32. Hence Exodus 35–40 is a recapitulation of Exodus 25–31.

up talents and treasures among his people in the church. And delegation and specialization are good within the church.² It's a way to leverage the collective strength of the church for more impact.

In our passage today, we're going to see both delegation and specialization in the church. And it's good. It accelerates Jesus's mission. In fact, write this down as a summary statement for the first part of Acts 6.

1) The power of **delegation** for advancing Christ's mission (6:1–7)

We're going to see a delegation of duties in Acts 6:1–7.³ And similar to what we see with Moses in Exodus 18, the impetus of the delegation was a crisis situation in the church.

Here's what I mean. Look at Acts 6:1.

¹ Now in these days⁴ when the disciples were increasing in number,⁵

Now that's good. The church is growing. As we've seen already, the church is growing so fast that the Sadducees are starting to get nervous. But their threats and their incarcerations and even their beatings aren't stemming the tide of the early church. At the end of Acts 5, Luke told us the apostles got flogged and threatened to stop preaching in that name. But Luke wants you to know at the very beginning of chapter 6 that this hasn't hindered the growth of the church one jot.

But there is a crisis brewing from inside of the church and not from the outside.⁶ Because as the disciples were increasing in number,

a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews⁷ because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.⁸

Okay, so with church growth comes church problems.⁹ We've already seen a threat to the church from the inside in Acts 5 with Ananias and Sapphira. Now we've got another internal problem with an internal conflict.¹⁰ **It's almost like Satan realizes that he can't stop the church with brute force. So he changes tactics. Instead of outside pressure attacking the church, he tries to get something going on the inside. If he can get some**

² Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 351–2 gives a wise warning in this regard, though: “While specialization is unavoidable, Christian ministries need to be careful not to focus in a one-sided manner either on only charitable relief work or only on preaching the gospel. While a single person may not be able to do both in a competent fashion—as, for example, the apostles—it is often possible, even necessary, to combine the two, certainly in a team context where Christians work together. Relief work without an explanation of the gospel is certainly a worthwhile venture, but not particularly Christian. And Christian ministries that only preach the gospel but ignore the practical needs of people are not particularly Christian either. Stephen served at tables, but he also explained the gospel.”

³ Sproul, *Acts*, 127 calls it “Division of Labor.”

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 178: “Luke generally was not concerned with giving precise chronological references, but from later data in Acts it may be concluded that this incident took place in the early to midthirties, perhaps five years or so after Pentecost.”

⁵ MacArthur, *Acts 1–11*, MNTC, 177: “The last figure given, 5,000 (4:4), apparently included only the men. To that figure must be added the women and youths and those who had joined the church since then (cf. 5:14). There must have been more than 20,000 in the Jerusalem church at this point.”

⁶ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 148: “While the first internal problem was with Ananias and Sapphira, the second internal problem was a conflict between two groups within the church.”

⁷ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 178–9: “We may assume that at this point the Christian community consisted exclusively of Jews. The only exceptions would be the ‘proselytes,’ like Nicolas (v. 5), who were Gentiles who had converted to Judaism. The Gentile mission as such had not yet begun. Yet even though it could be considered a purely Jewish Christian community, the Jerusalem church was not fully homogeneous, as this mention of the ‘Hellenists’ and Aramaic-speakers indicates.”

⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 179: “The Hellenist widows were being overlooked—certainly not deliberately neglected but inadvertently left out.”

⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 178: “The Jerusalem Christian community had witnessed considerable growth; and as is so often the case with rapid increase, administrative problems developed.”

¹⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 339: “The picture of the church in Jerusalem which Luke repeatedly paints (1:14; 2:42–47; 4:32–37; 5:12–16) is not utopian or idyllic—he does not downplay the difficulties that were caused by sinful members like Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11) or by the continued growth of the church which made a fair distribution of food more difficult. But Luke also describes the willingness of the apostles to admit that there were problems, to take responsibility, and to look for a workable and effective solution.”

internal fracturing in the church, then maybe he can slow down this movement.¹¹ If he can get a conflict to germinate in the church, maybe he can implode the church from the inside, instead of trying to blow it up from the outside.¹² Satan's been utilizing that strategy against the church for two thousand years... sometimes very effectively.¹³

And you might remember, the church was displaying incredible generosity in these days (see **Acts 2:45, 4:32–37**). People were selling their excess possessions and giving the proceeds to the church. And one of the big themes in **Acts** up to this point is the togetherness that the church displayed. They were together, together, together. They were one-minded. Their hearts were knit together.

Now all of a sudden, divisiveness is threatening the early church. There's a rift that's forming between two segments of the church's population. And this is a serious threat to the church. This could jeopardize all of the good things that are happening.

Now let me just point out a few cultural elements that will help us understand what's going on here. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews, and the Hebrews were Hebrew-speaking—or more precisely Aramaic-speaking—Jews.¹⁴ **D.L. Bock estimates in his commentary that roughly 10–20% of Jerusalem's population was Greek-speaking Jews or Hellenists.**¹⁵ And so even though they were all Jewish Christians at this time, the church had language differences, and ostensibly some cultural differences as well.¹⁶ Some of the Hellenistic Jews grew up outside of Jerusalem, so they had different customs, beliefs, practices, convictions, etc.¹⁷ And that created this conflict in the church. **Do conflicts ever happen in churches?**

I mentioned a few weeks ago that I went to Cameroon on a mission trip several years ago. Well, in the Cameroonian church that I helped plant, the church was made up of both English-speaking Cameroonians (i.e., Anglophones) and French-speaking Cameroonians (i.e., Francophones). And the church did everything it could to accommodate both groups. Every service, every prayer meeting, and every gathering was bilingual with a translator. And it was tedious to accommodate both languages all the time. But kudos to that church, they did it. They wanted all of their people to be accommodated.

¹¹ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 11, Kindle: “When Satan does not succeed in stopping the church with a frontal assault, he attacks from within. This usually happens subtly — an invitation not sent, a job unnoticed, a critical comment overheard, jealousy over something that really does not matter (like the size of a ham slice). When the murmuring begins, the devil smiles.”

¹² Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 11, Kindle: “The tiniest events sometimes cause great problems. Again and again a church has ward off a frontal attack only to be subverted from within. Acts 6 shows us Satan trying to disrupt the inward peace of the early church... Countless works for God have been destroyed in this way. God blesses a work, souls come to Christ, the church reaches its community, missionaries are sent out. Then someone complains that he or she is not appreciated or is being neglected. Perhaps this comes in the form of a critical glance, a name forgotten, a social gaffe, or some imagined offense. Bitter dissension ignites and spreads, and the whole work goes up in flames.”

¹³ RUDOLF GWALTHER: “[It] is to be observed that this grudge arose when the number of Christians increased, when they ought most to have acknowledged God's grace and to have embraced unity. But this is always seen where there is a multitude; there is also murmuring and confusion, because it is impossible in such diversity and desires of minds to satisfy all people's wishes....” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 73.

¹⁴ CHRYSOSTOM: “But by ‘Hellenists’ I suppose he means those who spoke Greek, for these, being Hebrew, spoke Greek.” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 70.

¹⁵ Bock, *Acts*, BECT, 258.

¹⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 329: “These terms describe a linguistic distinction, not ethnic differences—there were no non-Jewish believers in Jerusalem (or anywhere else) at this time. The ‘Hellenists’ were Greek-speaking Jews who had returned from the diaspora to live in Jerusalem, attending their own synagogues (6:9; 9:29)... While it can be assumed that many Jews both in Galilee and in Judea would understand and also speak Greek, it is not clear whether these ‘Hellenists’ spoke only Greek. If the latter was the case, there would have been meetings of believers conducted in Aramaic, and meetings conducted in Greek. Some if not all of the Twelve would have been able to teach in both groups. Numerous ossuaries found in Jerusalem attest to the fact that Greek was widely used among Jews living in Jerusalem in the first century BC and AD. It is impossible to know how many of the diaspora Jews who had returned to live in Jerusalem would have been able to speak both Greek and Aramaic. It is quite possible that many of them spoke Aramaic before they returned to Jerusalem, and surely many would have learned to speak Aramaic after they settled down to live in Jerusalem.”

¹⁷ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 11, Kindle: “Then came Pentecost, and thousands of Aramaic-speaking Jews plus hundreds of Hellenistic Jews became one in Christ. However, conversion (wonderful as it was) did not erase all their prejudices.”

Now I imagine something similar in Jerusalem in the early church. You had Greek-speaking Jews (Hellenists) mixed with Aramaic-speaking Jews. Surely everyone gravitated to their own group naturally.¹⁸ And this diversity spawned a conflict with the widows in the church because the Hellenists thought that their widows were being neglected in favor of the Hebrews.¹⁹

Now here's another thing you need to know about first century Jewish culture—taking care of widows was a big deal!²⁰ There were a number of Jews at this time that would move to Jerusalem from Egypt or Rome or Antioch or elsewhere, in order to die in their motherland.²¹ And since most men die earlier than women, widows were commonplace. **Even in our own day, widows outnumber widowers more than three to one! According to the 2020 Census, there were more than 11 million widows in the U.S. That's almost 9% of the adult female population. And there were roughly 3.5 million widowers, which is only 3% of the adult male population.**²²

So that's in our day. Imagine how much more that would have been the case with more wars and early death rates for men in the first century. And in the OT and the NT, God puts a premium on taking care of widows. Passages on caring for widows are legion in the Bible.²³ So this was a big deal! This was a big deal for the early church, and the oversight of these Greek-speaking widows was no small concern for the church leaders.²⁴

Okay, so now with that cultural info in mind let me re-read **verse 1**.

¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected²⁵ in the daily distribution.²⁶

¹⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 177: "Although an integral part of the Jerusalem Christian community, their common language and upbringing in the wider Hellenistic world probably gave them some sense of cohesiveness as a group and a predisposal toward a more worldwide witness."

¹⁹ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 11, Kindle: "The offense may have been more imagined than actual, but that made no difference to those who felt overlooked."

²⁰ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 149: "Under the Law of Moses, widows were under special protection (Deut. 14:29; 24:19; 26:12). Yet, under Pharisaic rule, they were often ignored (Mk. 12:38–40)."

²¹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 179: "Diaspora Jews often moved to Jerusalem in their twilight years to die in the holy city. When the men died, their widows were left far from their former home and family to care for them and were thus particularly in need of charity. Many of them may have been attracted to the Christian community precisely because of its concern for the material needs of its members."

²² Alexander Armstrong, FPA website, "Working with Widows More Effectively," March 2024:

<https://www.financialplanningassociation.org/learning/publications/journal/MAR24-working-widows-more-effectively>:

"According to the 2020 Census, there were 129,966,000 women in the United States. Of these, 11,271,000, or almost 9 percent, are widows. Looking at the statistics more closely, 87 percent of these widows were over the age of 65. In contrast, as you might guess, of the 122,182,000 men, only 3,487,000 were widowers, or almost 3 percent. In other words, widows outnumber widowers three to one!"

For more Census Bureau statistics, see the following website: <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive.html>

²³ Exod 22:22–24; Deut 10:17–19, 14:28–29, 15:7–11; 16:11; 24:17; 27:19; Ruth 1:1–4:22; Prov 15:25; Ps 68:4–5, 146:9; Jer 7:5–7; Isa 1:17; Ezek 22:7; Zech 7:9–10; Mal 3:5. See also Luke 20:47; 1 Tim 5:3–16; Jas 1:27.

²⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 337: "Churches and their leaders should be informed about members who are in financial need and who are needy in other areas (marital, emotional, health, work related). In large churches, the information flow can be a problem, and people who attend services can easily hide themselves; churches must find means of effective communication concerning special needs that people have."

²⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 330: "The imperfect tense of the verb translated as 'they were being neglected' (παρεθεροῦντο) indicates that this had been an ongoing problem for some time. This means that as food was distributed among poor believers, the Aramaic-speaking widows evidently received sufficient help, while the Greek-speaking widows did not receive sufficient attention. The widows appear in the narrative only as the 'object' of the neglect of others; they do not appear as independent actors, which suggests that male Greek-speaking Jewish Christians took up their cause and informed the Twelve about the problem."

²⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 180: "The Jews had a weekly dole for resident needy, called the *quppah*. It was given out every Friday and consisted of enough money for fourteen meals. There was also a daily distribution, known as the *tamhuy*... The Christian practice seems to have embraced elements of both Jewish systems. Like the *tamhuy* it was daily, and like the *quppah* it was for the resident membership."

Now the word “complaint” is a very unpleasant word in Greek (γογγυσμός [gongysmos]).²⁷ It’s an onomatopoeia. It sounds unpleasant. The LXX uses this word in the OT for “murmuring” or “grumbling.” That’s what the Israelites did in the wilderness when they grumbled against God and against Moses (e.g., **Exod 16:7–12; Num 17:5, 10**).

Now the complaints of these Hellenists are legitimate. There was some discrimination in the early church. There was some (inadvertent?) “racial-profiling.” But these Greek-speaking Jews went about it the wrong way. They should have taken up the matter with the church leaders, instead of fracturing the church with their “grumbling.” **Because this is exactly the kind of thing that can divide churches. Satan thrives on this kind of stuff.**

But watch this. Notice how the apostles respond.

² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right²⁸ that we should give up preaching the word of God²⁹ to serve³⁰ tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom,³¹ whom we will appoint to this duty.

Isn’t that great? Do you see the wisdom in their response? They didn’t respond with defensiveness or agitation. **“How dare you complain about the church!”** They didn’t sweep it under the rug, either. **“Ladies, ladies! This problem will take care of itself. Just let it go.”** Instead, they responded with swift, wise,

²⁷ See BDAG, γογγυσμός, 204: “utterance made in a low tone of voice (the context indicates whether the utterance is one of discontent or satisfaction), *behind-the-scenes talk*.” Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 226: “The word translated ‘complained’ (*gongysmos*) is an unpleasant word, used in the lxx for the murmuring of the Jews against Moses in the desert (Ex. 16:7; Num. 14:27).”

²⁸ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 259: “The word for ‘appropriate’ is often translated ‘right’ (RSV, ESV, NET, NIV), with the idea that it is not correct for the Twelve to serve tables rather than preach. The nuance of the term, however, is that it is not pleasing (to God; ‘desirable’ in NASB) for them to serve tables. It is a priority choice about observing the call of God versus a moral choice of right, wrong, and sin (BAGD 105; BDAG 130; John 8:29; Isa. 38:3 [to do what is good in God’s sight]; also Gen. 16:6; Lev. 10:19; Deut. 6:18; 12:8, 25; Tob. 3:6; Jdt. 12:14; esp. Exod. 18:17–23). They should do what God has called them to do, namely, teach and witness. They cannot and should not do everything in the church, but they should not neglect preaching... In the apostles’ view, this ability to prioritize activities and not be responsible to do everything reflects good leadership and stewardship.” Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 180: “The phrase ‘it would not be right’ really means ‘not pleasing in God’s eyes.’ Modern ministers sometimes misuse this statement as a biblical warrant for refusal to do the mundane administrative tasks in the church... In context this passage deals with the apostles and their unique role. They alone in all of Christian history were the witnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Their witness was unique, unrepeatable, and absolutely foundational for the Christian movement. Surely it was not fitting for anything to limit their bearing their witness.”

²⁹ MARTIN LUTHER: “In this passage you hear that we bishops—that is, preachers and pastors—are called not to watch over geese or cows but over the congregation God purchased with his own blood. We should feed them with the pure Word of God and be on guard lest wolves and sects burst in among the poor sheep. This is why he calls it a good work.” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 77.

³⁰ The Greek διακονέω is used here which is cognate to διάκονος. Paul used this term for a secondary office in the church underneath the elders. (1 Tim 3:8–13; see also Php 1:1; Ro 16:1; Eph 6:21). Acts 6:1–7 and these “seven” are properly seen as precursors to the office of deacon in the church. For more on deacons and their role in the church, see the following messages:

“Elders & Deacons,” 11-2-22: <https://www.vbvf.org/elders-deacons-1-peter-lesson-15>

“Elders and Deacons” (Part 2), 11-06-22: <https://www.vbvf.org/elders-deacons-1-peter-lesson-15>

“Deacons: An Important Role in the Church,” 08-06-23:

<https://www.vbvf.org/deacons-an-important-role-in-the-church-1-timothy-lesson-6>

Three helpful books are the topic are Alexander Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon: The Church’s Minister of Mercy* (Lewis & Roth, 1992), Matt Smethurst, *Deacons: How They Serve and Strengthen the Church* (Crossway, 2021), and Thabiti An, *Find Faithful Elders and Deacons* (Crossway, 2012).

Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 331: “The apostles state the problem in terms of a conflict between their commission to preach and teach the word of God (λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ) and the assignment regarding food distribution (διακονεῖν τραπέζαις; lit., “to serve tables”). Both tasks are important and represent official assignments (διακονία)—the commission of the Twelve to be witnesses of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, and exaltation (1:17, 25; διακονία), and the commission of believers to care for the needs of impoverished believers through a daily distribution (6:1, διακονία).”

³¹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 338: “Churches and their leaders need to be aware of the needs of believers in other regions and in other countries who may need our help. Sending clothes, or money, may alleviate the immediate needs in acute crisis situations. Chronic poverty needs different solutions where simply sending money can do more harm than good. Thus wisdom is needed, which is what the Twelve listed among the criteria for the selection of people who could serve as a member of the Seven.” CHRYSOSTOM: “For indeed great wisdom is needed in such ministries.” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 71.

compassionate action.³² **“We’ve got a problem. Okay, let’s deal with it. Let’s find a solution. Let’s get this problem resolved.”** That’s good leadership.³³

Now let’s look at their solution. There are a few important things to note here. **1) They delegated. Part of good leadership is delegation.³⁴ They don’t try to do everything themselves. They don’t micromanage. They don’t try to be heroes in every situation. They don’t try to be everyone’s “messiah” and meet every need themselves. Instead they empower other people to serve, and the church benefits from this.³⁵**

What’s amazing here is that this conflict actually produces something great. This conflict prompts a delegation of duties, so that even *more* people can have *more* roles ministering in the church. That’s fantastic! **When a church has 10% of its people doing 90% of the work, that’s not good. When a church has 10% of its people doing 90% of the work, who suffers? The church does.**

Notice a second thing from these verses: **2) The apostles prioritize the preaching of God’s Word. Here’s the thing. The church needs to have people that dedicate serious time and energy to feeding God’s people from God’s Word.³⁶ When pastors and elders get so bogged down with administrative responsibilities or even good things like benevolence, the church suffers.³⁷**

Here’s another way to look at it. When God’s Word is neglected, God isn’t happy! That’s not what God wants. God wants the best of both worlds. He wants spiritual leaders in the church feeding God’s people from God’s Word. And he wants God’s people stepping up and using their gifts to mutually bless one another. A church doesn’t have to choose one or the other. They can and should have both. This is such a wonderful, practical example for us from the Scriptures.

Notice what else the apostles say in verse 4.

⁴ *But we will devote ourselves to prayer³⁸ and to the ministry of the word.”*

Not just the ministry of the word, but also “prayer.” Prayer is one of those things that we can all do as believers. But church leaders need to major in this. It needs to be our bread-and-butter. You can delegate benevolence. You can delegate finances and facilities. You can delegate small group leadership. You can delegate ushering and connections and other leadership functions. But God help the pastor or elder who thinks that prayer is something that they can delegate out to other people.

³² Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 325: Ananias and Sapphira had injected false motives into the practice of sharing possessions with other believers (5:1–11); now as the church had grown in membership, the neglect of Greek-speaking widows among the believers threatens the harmony of the church (6:1–7). In both cases the apostles act decisively: Peter’s confrontation of the hypocritical and lying couple ends with their quick demise, while the apostles’ confrontation of the problem of the neglected widows results in a restructuring of the ministries of the church.

³³ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 228: “While we can take comfort in the fact that the early church also had problems of disunity, we are challenged by the way these problems were immediately dealt with (cf. also the deception of Ananias and Sapphira, 5:1–11).”

³⁴ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 11, Kindle: “By divinely-directed delegation, the apostles not only freed others to grow in their service to God, but they freed themselves for prayer, preparation, and powerful preaching! Thus the spiritual ministry of the Church was enhanced.”

³⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 326: “The Twelve are flexible and willing to introduce a new group of leaders with distinct responsibilities, keen to preserve the unity of the community and eager to preserve the priorities of their responsibility as leaders of God’s people, which are prayer and the ministry of the word.”

³⁶ CHRYSOSTOM: “‘Then,’ it says, ‘the twelve called the multitude of the disciples to them, and said, It is reasonable that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.’ Well said: for the needful must give precedence to the more needful. But see, how they take thought directly for these inferior matters and yet do not neglect the preaching.” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 70.

³⁷ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 11, Kindle comments on how the statement of the apostles could have been perceived: “No one wants others to think they see themselves as above common work. ‘You are not willing to wait on tables? Are you better than Jesus? He washed your feet, and you will not even set a plate before a hungry woman? Did not Jesus say, ‘The greatest among you will be your servant’ (Matthew 23:11)?’” Thankfully the young church didn’t respond this way.

³⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 332: “The reference to “prayer” may include the participation in the Jewish prayers in the temple (cf. 3:1). More likely it refers to the prayers in the gatherings of the believers (2:42), both in the temple and in private houses (2:46–47), and presumably prayers with and for sick believers.”

When it comes to prayer, elders, we can't phone that in.³⁹ We're not the only ones that pray; but we need to pray! We can't shirk that or excuse it away because we are too "busy" with other things. The apostles devoted themselves to prayer and the ministry of God's Word. And we must do that too, or the church will suffer.

Now we're not apostles here at VBVF. But I hope you realize that much of what is said here applies to us as elders. And as far as the ministry of the Word goes, I realize that more than any other elder here at church, the burden of ministering the Word of God to God's people falls on me. And I'm okay with that. I've given my life to the teaching of God's Word and the preaching of the gospel.

The Bible says, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching" (1 Tim 5:17). Paul told the young pastor, Timothy, "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead.... **preach the word**; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Tim 4:1-2).

I read those passages and my skin starts to tingle. My heart starts to race. That's on me. **That monkey is on my back.** That's God's expectation of me. **God will hold me responsible someday for my faithfulness as a minister of his Word, as a preacher of the gospel.**

And I don't tell you that, so that you would feel sorry for me. Don't feel sorry for me. This is my lot in life, and I wouldn't want it any other way. I tell you this so that you will pray for me. I tell you this so that you will value and prioritize the preaching of the Word. It's not the exclusive responsibility of the preaching pastor; but it's a primary responsibility.

And here's what I would encourage you to do as members of our church. Let's just call this a *quid pro quo*. Do this on behalf of me and the other elders here at VBVF. Use your gift to serve the church. Pull your own weight! We'll serve by leading and teaching in the church. You serve Christ in the church too. Edify others within the church with some tangible ways of "working for Christ."

Listen, hear me on this. It's unbiblical and it's ungodly for pastors, staff, elders, deacons, and a few others to do all of the work for Christ in the local church. Too many churches in our day operate that way. That's not the way it should be. We all have gifts to be utilized in the church body. So, serve in the church. Work for Christ in the local church!

I heard someone describe a football game this way. In football, there are 22 people on the field who *desperately need rest*, and there are 60,000 people in the stands who *desperately need exercise*. And for football that's okay. The players get paid millions of dollars to exhaust themselves on the field. But the church isn't meant to function that way. Some churches have 10% of the people doing all the work and *desperately needing rest*, while 90% of the people, who *desperately need to work*, are watching from the sidelines. Church wasn't designed that way. **And that does not please God.**

I couldn't say it better than the Apostle Peter, who says in 1 Peter 4:8-10, "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling [γογγυσμός]. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." Now back to the passage at hand. Notice how the disciples respond to the decision of the apostles to delegate responsibilities. Look at verse 5.

⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering,

These disciples respect the decision of their leaders. They see the wisdom of this solution.

³⁹ Speaking of spiritual leadership and prayer, Andrew Bonar made the following entries in his diary:

"I see that unless I keep up short prayer every day throughout the whole day, at intervals, I lose the spirit of prayer. Too much work without corresponding prayer.

Today setting myself to pray. The Lord forthwith seems to send a dew upon my soul.

Was enabled to spend part of Thursday in my church praying. Have had great help in study since then.

Passed six hours today in prayer and Scripture reading, confessing sin, and seeking blessing for myself and the parish" (quoted in Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 11, Kindle).

Here's the thing, church... I've said this before, but let me reiterate—conflict can be a good thing for a church.⁴⁰ Conflict is inevitable in all human relationships. We're all flawed, and we live in a fallen world. But conflict doesn't have to bring about negative results.

Too often people use conflict in the church as an excuse to bail instead of working through the conflict, trusting leaders, and getting to a place of resolution. But look what happens here. The church works through conflict and gets to a better place on the other side of the conflict. That's what *should* happen in our churches today!

Look again at **verse 5**.

⁵ *And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose⁴¹ [notice the names of these individuals... two of them will be important later in Acts] Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus,⁴² and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus,⁴³ a proselyte of Antioch.⁴⁴ ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands⁴⁵ on them.⁴⁶*

You might not know this, unless you have a study Bible or something like that, but the seven men who are chosen here all have Greek names. That's not an accident. Conceivably they are all Hellenists. And even one

⁴⁰ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 225: "Every group of Christians that tries to practice true community will sooner or later encounter problems in the very areas of their strength in community life. But this section provides answers too, for the early church faced the problem squarely as soon as it surfaced."

⁴¹ MARTIN LUTHER: "Now once the apostles found such people, who are honest, God-fearing and competent for such responsibility, they come before the congregation and are presented before the apostles. The apostles then pray and lay their hands on them. This is certainly a very important part. For we have experienced that human wisdom and ability are incapable of completing this task. It must receive God's blessing, and he must provide the growth; otherwise, it will certainly happen that the most capable will conduct themselves most incapably and cause the greatest trouble... That the dear apostles apply so much diligence in appointing this office—praying so devotedly and laying hands on the elected—all this is an indication that this management of the common church goods or the alms is no common task. Why else should they take so much care and devotion with selecting such people? Of course, it is true that the preaching office is far higher and more important, for through it God nourishes not merely the body with eating and drinking for this temporal life, but rather he nourishes the soul against sin and eternal death. However, after the preaching office there is no higher office in the church than this responsibility that we manage justly and honestly the church's goods, through which poor Christians who are unable to earn and win their nourishment themselves are sustained, so that they do not suffer poverty." Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 75.

⁴² Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 182: "Early tradition connects Procorus with the apostle John, maintaining that he was John's amanuensis in writing the Fourth Gospel, that he later became the bishop of Nicomedia in Bithynia, and that ultimately he was martyred in Antioch."

⁴³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 334: "Nicolaus (Νικόλαος) is described as a proselyte from Antioch, which means that he was a Gentile residing in Antioch, the Syrian capital and had converted to Judaism and then to faith in Jesus. He is the first (former) Gentile mentioned in Acts. The fact that he is specifically described as a proselyte suggests that the other six men were all born Jews. This Nicolaus has been regarded in early Christian tradition as the founder of the heretical "Nicolaitans" mentioned in Rev 2:6, 15 [Irenaeus]. Antioch will figure prominently in Luke's subsequent account."

⁴⁴ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 151: "[Nicolaus] is mentioned with this detail to point out a contrast: While the other deacons were all born Jews, this one was a Gentile convert to Judaism."

⁴⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 334: "The laying on of hands derives from the Old Testament gesture of laying on hands or hand leaning (לָּיִן יָדַיִם) which accompanies various procedures. Moses transferred his authority to Joshua through the laying on of both hands (Num 27:23; Deut 34:9)... [In the NT], the laying on of hands is mentioned in connection with such diverse situations as receiving the Spirit (8:17), healing from blindness (9:17), commissioning for itinerant missionary outreach (13:3), baptism (19:6), receiving a spiritual gift for ministry (1 Tim 4:14; cf. 2 Tim 1:6), restoring a person to the church (1 Tim 5:22; many see here a reference to the ordination of elders, cf. NRSV which translates 'ordain')."

⁴⁶ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 151–2: "Members of the Sanhedrin were also appointed to their office by the laying on of hands." JOHN CALVIN: "The laying on of hands was a solemn symbol of consecration under the law. The apostles now place their hands on the deacons for this purpose, that they may know that they are being dedicated to God. Because the ceremony was empty in itself, however, there is added at the same time a prayer, in which the faithful commend to God the ministers whom they are presenting to him. This is certainly ascribed to the apostles, for the whole of the people did not lay their hands on the deacons, but when the apostles said prayers on behalf of the church the others added theirs. We gather from this that the laying on of hands is a rite consistent with order and dignity, seeing that it was used by the apostles; not of course that it has any efficacy or virtue in itself, but its power and effect depend solely on the Spirit of God. That must be the general opinion about all ceremonies." Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 77.

of them, Nicolaus, is a Gentile-convert. So they appoint minorities, Hellenists, the offended party in the conflict, to oversee this ministry of benevolence to widows.⁴⁷

Remember they had all kinds of people selling their possessions and giving the proceeds to the church. So this was no small undertaking. There was a lot of money that these men were responsible for. And so this gesture by the Aramaic-speaking Jews, including the apostles, was quite magnanimous.

And watch this. Notice how God blesses their magnanimity in **verse 7**.⁴⁸

⁷ And the word of God continued to increase,

That makes sense, right? The apostles were able to focus on the Word, and so of course it increased. It allowed them to be specialists in this task, while others in the church picked up their other responsibilities.

and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem,

More disciples in Jerusalem! The church gets persecuted, and the result is *more disciples*. The church gets purified with Ananias and Sapphira, and the result is *more disciples*. The church works through this conflict, and the result is *more disciples*.

Everything Satan tries to throw at this church just backfires. And the church keeps growing. And notice this too... this is one of my favorite statements in the whole book of **Acts**. This is so good. Look at the end of **verse 7**.

and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

The priests! Not the high priests, Annas and Caiaphas. Those guys aren't interested in faith in Christ. But there were other priests in Jerusalem at this time. Josephus estimates something like 20,000 priests (that's probably an exaggeration).⁴⁹ And at first, they were adamantly opposed to Christ. They were the enemies of Christ, at one time. But now, the very enemies of the church get saved. Probably some of those same people who conspired to put Jesus to death just a few months before this, get saved and became part of the church. God does that kind of thing all the time.

I remember reading a biography of C.S. Lewis several years ago.⁵⁰ And I remember marveling at the fact that God took this Oxford Don, this intellectual giant who was an avowed Atheist, and turned him into one of the greatest apologists for Christianity in the history of the world. Who does that kind of stuff? God does that! And it's a marvel to behold. Some of the very people, who were responsible for crucifying Christ, are now coming into the church and getting saved. What an awesome God we serve!

Now does that mean that all enemies of Christ turn around and follow him? Does that mean that all persecutors of the church will stop persecuting and become promoters of the church? No. We've seen persecution of God's faithful already in the book of **Acts**. And it's going to get worse.

Write this down as a second point in our message today.

2) The reality of **opposition** when advancing Christ's mission (6:8-15)

Watch what happens with this man, Stephen, whom Luke says was "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (**6:5**). Luke tells us in **verse 8**,

⁴⁷ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 11, Kindle: "Though Hebraic Jews comprised the majority of the congregation, they chose Hellenistic Jews to administer the program!"

⁴⁸ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 228: "Luke is eager to show that this administrative change did not reduce the evangelistic fervor of the church. So he adds another of his reports of evangelistic effectiveness (v. 7). The book of Acts is like a long hymn interspersed with refrains like this, which report on the spread of the church. Luke wants us to catch the spirit of this consuming passion for evangelism."

⁴⁹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 336: "The 'priests' (ἱερεῖς) are members of the priestly families. Josephus notes that there were 20,000 priests, a figure that some accept as reflecting the situation at the end of the Second Temple period. Others estimate that there were perhaps 8,000 priests besides 10,000 Levites, while others reckon with 2,000 'ordinary Temple priests.' Most of the priests worked in a trade, except for two weeks every twelve months when they served in the temple."

⁵⁰ The two best biographies of C.S. Lewis that I have read are Alister McGrath's *C.S. Lewis—A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Tyndale, 2013) and Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C.S. Lewis* (Wheaton: HarperOne, 2006). I've also benefited from reading Lewis's 1955 autobiography *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (Wheaton: HarperOne: Reissue edition, 2017), but it is rather idiosyncratic for a biography.

⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders⁵¹ and signs among the people.

So Stephen was a man “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” And he’s described here also as “full of grace and power.” He was obviously a caring and compassionate person because he was chosen by the people to be one of the seven leaders distributing benevolence among the Hellenists. But he’s also a powerful leader. He’s also a powerful preacher and apologist for Christ, as we’ll see later. **So this guy, Stephen, was like the Michael Jordan of disciples in the early church.** He was a great man of God.⁵²

And even though he was assigned the role of serving tables, that doesn’t mean he couldn’t preach or get after it like some of the apostles did. He did that too! Because look at **verse 9**.

⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue⁵³ of the Freedmen (as it was called),⁵⁴ and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians,⁵⁵ and of those from Cilicia and Asia,⁵⁶ rose up and disputed⁵⁷ with Stephen.⁵⁸

So Stephen, this Hellenistic Jew, was out there preaching and doing wonderful things. And the other Hellenistic Jews from the synagogues were getting irritated with him. The term “Freedmen” is a reference to the Jewish slaves (or sons of slaves) that were freed, probably from Rome, and returned to Jerusalem.⁵⁹ They, like Stephen, were predominantly Greek-speaking.⁶⁰ So it makes sense that Stephen went to a synagogue where Greek was the primary language, just like the apostles went to the temple where Hebrew and Aramaic predominated.⁶¹

⁵¹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 184: “He was the first other than the apostles to be described as working miracles.”

⁵² Johann Eck fascinatingly associates his pro-Catholic side with the faithful Stephen against the “New Christians,” his term for the Reformers: “Notice, first of all, a pious Christian should not let himself be moved; even if he hears that the New Christians somehow, be it with booklets or sermons, oppose his own Christian preacher, he should not turn aside. The wicked stood against Saint Peter, Saint Paul, Saint Stephen, yes, even against Christ’s own preaching!” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 80.

⁵³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 344–5: “The Greek syntax is not sufficiently clear to allow a decision regarding the number of synagogues listed here. Luke could refer to one ‘Synagogue of Freedmen’ which was attended by diaspora Jews from different regions of the Mediterranean world. If the term ‘freedmen’ is taken to be explained by two clauses, we have two synagogues (one attended by Cyrenian and Alexandrian Jews, the other by Cilician and Asian Jews). If the freedmen, the Cyrenian Jews, and the Alexandrian Jews attend different synagogues, while the Jews from Cilicia and Asia gather in one synagogue, we have a total of four synagogues. If each group met in a different synagogue, we have a total of five synagogues. Certainty cannot be achieved. It should be noted that Paul speaks of ‘synagogues’ (plural) in Jerusalem (24:12).”

⁵⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 345: “The existence of a synagogue in Jerusalem has been confirmed by the discovery of the Theodotos inscription, which honors a certain ‘Theodotos, son of Vettenos, priest and *archisynagōgos*, son of an *archisynagōgos*, grandson of an *archisynagōgos*’ who built the synagogue ‘for reading the Law and teaching the commandments, and the guest chamber, the rooms, the water installations as an inn for those in need from foreign lands, which his fathers founded together with the elders and Simonides.’ Since Vettenos is a Latin name, this family seems to have returned from Rome to live in Jerusalem. It is thus possible, but not certain, that Theodotos was the president of the ‘synagogue of the freedmen’ mentioned by Luke.”

⁵⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 346: “Of perhaps 500,000 people living in Alexandria, it is estimated that as many as 100,000 were Jews. A certain Simon of Cyrene, who evidently lived in Jerusalem, is mentioned in connection with Jesus’ crucifixion (Luke 23:26 / Mark 15:21 / Matt 27:32); it is a plausible assumption that he and his family became members of the Christian community. Cyrenian Jews who had come to faith in Jesus were among the believers who brought the gospel to Antioch (11:20; 13:1). The Christian teacher Apollos came from Alexandria (18:24).”

⁵⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 184: “Paul himself was a Cilician Jew who had come to live in Jerusalem, and it was Asian Jews who later would accuse him of having violated the temple (Acts 21:27f.).”

⁵⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 346: “The active participle of the verb ‘debate’ (συζητοῦντες) indicates that these debates continued over a period of time, which suggests that these were (initially) not heated discussions but debates in which the pros and cons of the significance of Jesus for the Jewish people were considered.”

⁵⁸ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 344: “Taking food to believers would naturally involve him in conversations about any difficulties and problems the believers and their relatives and friends have, conversations in which mature believers inevitably explain and confirm the revelation of God in Jesus, the significance of Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and Savior, and the reality of the Holy Spirit as the transforming power of God bestowed by Jesus on those who believe in him.”

⁵⁹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 154.

⁶⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 185: “The Jews who came from the Diaspora were usually highly nationalistic Jews, having left their homes in the dispersion to migrate to the holy city, the temple city. They were highly zealous for both law and temple.”

⁶¹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 154: “According to Jewish sources, Jerusalem had up to 480 different synagogues in the Second Temple period. Some of these synagogues were built by Jewish people coming from various parts of the Diaspora.”

Now let me just show you on the map where these guys come from.



You can see 1) Jerusalem in the far bottom right corner of the map. 2) Rome is in the top left corner of the map. That's where the Freedmen come from. And 3) Cyrene and 4) Alexandria (Egypt) are at the bottom middle of that map. These are north African locations, where many Jews lived, and where the gospel spread quickly in the early church. You can see at the top of the map 5) Asia, which is not modern day Asia, but Roman Asia. And east of there is 6) Cilicia which is where Paul was from. The city of Tarsus is in Cilicia. There's a possibility that Paul was one of the men who argued with Stephen from the synagogue.

And so all these Hellenistic Jews had immigrated to their homeland in Jerusalem, and started their own Greek-speaking synagogue.⁶² And right now they are disputing their fellow Greek-speaking Jew, Stephen, who has converted to Christianity.⁶³

And look what happens. Look at **verse 10**.

¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which [Stephen] was speaking.⁶⁴

Stephen was blowing them out of the water with his Spirit-infused power and wisdom. **He went all “Michael Jordan” on them in the Spirit, and they couldn't defeat him.** In fact the next chapter, **Acts 7**, is nothing but Stephen dressing down the Jewish leaders with his wisdom and spiritual insight. He preaches his heart out and blows them away with his understanding of God's Word and insights into human behavior. And do you know what they do to him? We'll have to wait till next week to find out.

But you can guess what happens by what takes place here in **Acts 6**. Since these Hellenistic Jews are getting destroyed by Stephen, they try another tactic. **What do men do when they can't fight fair? They**

Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 345: “A synagogue (συναγωγή) was a meeting place for Jews to discuss community issues, share meals, adjudicate infractions of the law and of tradition, collect and distribute charitable funds for purposes of social welfare, provide elementary education, study Torah, and store the scrolls of the holy Scriptures and other material; it was also a place of residence for synagogue officials and a hostel for visiting Jews. Not all synagogues had all these functions, but synagogues did not exclusively focus on ‘worship services’ with prayers, readings from the Torah and from the Prophets, and sermons (which did take place in the synagogue); they also dealt with communal affairs. The leader of a synagogue was called ‘president of the synagogue’ (ἄρχισυνάγωγος), who was sometimes of priestly descent. The president of a synagogue was usually a wealthy person, a leading member of the community who looked after the ritual, administrative, and financial aspects of community life.”

⁶² Phillip Melancthon wrongly labels all seven men “proselytes.” Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 80.

⁶³ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 12, Kindle: “The Hellenistic Jews were not very popular in Jerusalem, so Stephen's Hellenistic synagogue had a vested interest in his not making waves.”

⁶⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 347: “As Stephen engaged these diaspora Jews in debate, he experienced the fulfillment of Jesus' promise in Luke 21:15 to give to his disciples ‘words (στόμα) and a wisdom (σοφία) that none of your adversaries will be able to resist (ἀντιστῆναι) or contradict.’ Stephen also experienced the answer to the prayers of the believers in Acts 4:29–30, who asked God for boldness in the proclamation of the word of God.”

cheat. They don't repent of their actions and come to Christ, because that would involve humility and repentance. Instead they slander him. They spread gossip and rumors about Stephen.

Look at **verse 11**.

¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words⁶⁵ against Moses and God."⁶⁶ ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes,⁶⁷ and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council,

So now they're in front of the Jewish Sanhedrin, not just the Greek-speaking Jews. These are the same Jewish leaders who condemned Christ. They just recently flogged Peter and the other apostles.⁶⁸

And look at **verse 13**.

¹³ and they [the Greek-speaking Jews] set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law,¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us."⁶⁹

Does any of this sound familiar to you? Do you remember something like this elsewhere? Do you remember what they did to Jesus when he was prosecuted by the Sanhedrin? **Matthew 26:59–61** says, "Now the chief priests and the whole Council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward and said, 'This man said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God, and to rebuild it in three days.'"

Jesus told his disciples, "you will be hated by all for my name's sake" (**Matt 10:22**). Jesus told his disciples, "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you" (**John 15:18**). Jesus said, "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you... all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me" (**John 15:20–21**).

Last week we saw the disciples rejoice because they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus. Now we see this godly saint, Stephen, suffering the exact same injustice that Jesus suffered as false witnesses are stacked against him. And indeed Christ's words are proven true, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you." **"If they hated me, they're going to hate you too."**⁷⁰

Now let me just clarify this accusation against Stephen (which was the same against Jesus). Jesus never said he would destroy the temple. At one point he prophesied its destruction (**Matt 24:2**), which came true in AD 70. At another point he said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (**John 2:19**). But John makes clear that Jesus was speaking metaphorically about his own body, not the Jewish temple (**John 2:21**).

⁶⁵ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 155: "They claimed that Stephen spoke words of blasphemy in two ways: First, he spoke against Moses, because he said that the Mosaic Law had come to an end; and second, he spoke against God, because the way they understood him, Stephen preached against Temple worship. However, by Jewish law, one is not guilty of blasphemy unless one has pronounced the name of God."

⁶⁶ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 347: "They start a whisper campaign in the synagogues of Jerusalem accusing Stephen of uttering words of blasphemy 'against Moses and against God.' Josephus says of the Essenes that 'after God they hold most in awe the name of their lawgiver, and any blasphemer of whom is punished with death' (J.W. 2.145)."

⁶⁷ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 156: "This time it was not the Sadducees, but the elders and the scribes, who were Pharisees. Hence, while the first and second persecutions of the church were brought about by the Sadducees, this third persecution was initiated by the Pharisees."

⁶⁸ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, chapter 12, Kindle: "The aroma of death permeates this entire passage. Young Stephen was already in the cemetery, if his enemies had their way."

⁶⁹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 156: "Stephen was probably saying that the Law had come to an end as a mandatory rule of life with the death of the Messiah and that Pharisaic or Rabbinic Judaism was superseded by the new faith. This would anger the Pharisees."

⁷⁰ JUSTUS JONAS: "Look, here again we are warned so that in tribulation we would learn to trust and believe that at that very moment the Lord is indeed present by our side. For here they see heavenly glory in the face of Stephen. His face is like the face of an angel, even as they drag him off to the council and condemn him as a blasphemer and a heretic. Truly the judgment of the world does not agree with the judgment of God." Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 82.

Jesus did initiate an end to temple sacrifices. That's what he taught. And that's what Stephen believed and was teaching as well. Why? Why would temple sacrifices end? Because Jesus became the atoning sacrifice!⁷¹ The blood of bulls and goats can't permanently take away sin. But Jesus's blood does.

So there is some truth in these accusations against Stephen. But what makes them false witnesses is that they are speaking half-truths. **The best lies are half-truths. The best liars mix truth and falsehood to deceive. That's as old as the Garden of Eden and Satan's lies there. But in God's eyes, half-truths are still lies. They are still false witnesses. That's why, like I said two weeks ago, it's so important for us to root out every hint of untruthfulness in our lives... any semblance of Ananias and Saphirra ... any semblance of these false witnesses who say, "O yeah, he said Jesus of Nazareth will destroy our temple and take away all our precious customs." That's a half-truth. That's a false witness. God abominates that stuff.**⁷²

So how does Stephen respond to this injustice? Look at **verse 15**.

¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.⁷³

In other words, there was godliness in him. There was a reflection of the divine in his countenance. This was a godly man, falsely accused, and the men in the council saw this.

Now just a point of clarification. **Please get out of your head any picture of some fat cherub, like Cupid, who goes around shooting lovers with his bow and arrows. That's a fabrication from the Renaissance.** That's not how the Bible portrays angels. The Bible isn't saying that Stephen had a child-like, cherubic countenance.

Angels in the Bible were God's messengers, and they reflected God's glory. They are usually accompanied by a bright, gleaming, otherworldly luminosity. And that's why people are scared to death when they show up. It's because they reflect God's glory. And that's what Stephen does here. **Just like Moses in the wilderness when he met with God and reflected God's glory, and he had a put a cloth over his face because he was glowing. In that same way, Stephen was luminous, like an angel.**

I think this is a statement of God's favor on Stephen. God loves this man. And God's glory was manifestly revealed in his countenance. But as we'll see next week, that means little or nothing to these religious leaders.

What happens with Stephen? Does he escape death and martyrdom like the apostles have escaped thus far?⁷⁴ We'll see next week.

But before we close out this passage, let's process this text applicationally. The title of today's message is "Working Together for Christ." And we see the power of delegation and specialization in the church. God leverages the gifts and the abilities of his saints to maximize Christ's mission in the church.

So what are some characteristics of a faithful Christian worker? What do we see in Stephen and these other disciples who answered the call for volunteerism? There are many things that I could list for you, but let me give you five.

Here are some descriptions of someone who is faithfully working for Christ. Write these down. Five characteristics of someone faithfully working for Christ:

What do we see in Stephen and these other disciples? First of all, they were,

1) Servant-hearted – Willing to meet a need

⁷¹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 348: "Believing in Jesus as the only one who saves from sins implies that the sins of Israel are no longer atoned for by animal sacrifices, and that purity and holiness are no longer established by rituals prescribed by the law, but, rather, on account of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and exaltation."

⁷² Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 349: "To give false testimony is prohibited in the Decalogue (Exod 20:16; Deut 19:16–18).¹⁶⁰⁹ Since the charges against Stephen probably did contain some truth (see on v. 11), these witnesses are 'false' because their testimony did not agree under cross-examination. Or, from Luke's perspective they are 'false witnesses' because they speak against God's spokesman."

⁷³ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 157: "It began to glow with the Shechinah glory."

⁷⁴ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 340: "The first interrogation by the Sanhedrin ended in a ban on speaking and a warning (4:17, 21); the second interrogation ended in a renewal of the ban on speaking, and flogging (5:40); this third interrogation by the Sanhedrin ends in Stephen being stoned to death (7:60). Thus the conflict is moving toward a climax: Stephen is killed and many believers are forced to flee and leave Jerusalem in a first major persecution of the Christians."

You can't anticipate every need in the church. For the record, I see these seven men as precursors to the office of deacon.⁷⁵ They helped free up the apostles to preach and teach, just like deacons free up elders in our church to teach and to lead.⁷⁶ But it would be a mistake to say, "O this passage is only about deacons." There are broader implications for us than just that.⁷⁷ These men saw a need, and they filled it. The church needed help, and they stepped up. When your number is called, are you willing to step and meet a need? Like minutemen in the American revolution, they were called upon in a moment of crisis and they answered that call.

Secondly, they were,

2) **Spirit-filled** – Demonstrating spiritual fruit

Notice the apostles said, "Pick out from among you... men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom (6:3). Stephen was a man who was "full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (6:5).⁷⁸ They were Spirit-filled. You might say, "Pastor Tony, I'm a Christian. Don't all Christians have the Holy Spirit." Yes, but this is different. These men were so controlled by the Holy Spirit and his presence was so full in their lives that the fruit of the Spirit was oozing out of them. People could sense it. Can that be said of you? Is the Spirit's presence in your life easily discernable by others? Does the fruit of the Spirit ooze out of you in faithful service to Christ?

Thirdly, they were,

3) **Reputable** – Exhibiting trustworthiness and growing character

These men were "of good repute" (6:3). They were capable and they were reputable. They had wisdom to get the job done. They were trustworthy men, and they had a proven track-record.

Some responsibilities require greater capability and reputability. Not just any Christian can be appointed as elder or pastor or deacon. There has to be capability and reputability (see 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5 for more on that). So if you're new to working for Christ, start small. Serve in a ministry where the need is great. Prove yourself. Jesus said, "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much" (Luke 16:10a).

Fourthly, they were,

4) **Tough-minded** – Displaying commitment and stick-to-itiveness

You know the truth is there's a little bit of trial and error whenever we serve the Lord. Sometimes you don't know what you're good at or what's the best way for you to serve Christ until you jump in and try to figure it out. But most people quit serving the church, not because they're not good at something, but because they lack perseverance through challenges.

⁷⁵ Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC, 226: "Though Luke does not use the word 'deacon' here to describe the Seven, this decision laid the foundation for the diaconal order, which, while taking different forms in the history of the church, has rendered great service in mediating Christ's love to needy people."

⁷⁶ JOHN CALVIN: "Luke is telling us here about the creation of deacons, dealing first with the occasion, second with the deliberation involved and finally with the rite used. Nevertheless he does say that this was the remedy adopted to silence the grumbling that had arisen among the disciples; as the common proverb says, 'Bad customs give rise to good laws.' But it could appear an extraordinary thing, since this is such an honorable and necessary office in the church, why it never entered the heads of the apostles from the beginning to appoint deacons on their own responsibility, and why the Spirit had not given them advice along these lines, when they now accept it as if under pressure. But in fact what did happen was a better way at that time and is more beneficial to us today as an example. If the apostles had spoken about the electing of deacons before any necessity demanded it, they would have found the people less disposed to it; they themselves would have given the appearance of avoiding irksome labor; many would not have been so generous in handing gifts over to others. It was therefore necessary for the faithful to be convinced by experience, learning that they could not do without deacons, and this really because of their own fault, so that they would be glad to choose them." Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 73.

⁷⁷ Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC, 228: "The Seven (cf. 21:8) are set apart for a ministry of 'serving tables', but they are not called 'deacons' and Luke's intention cannot simply have been to describe how the order of deacons originated (cf. 1 Tim. 3:8-13)."

⁷⁸ MARTIN LUTHER: "It is of great importance that in large principalities and cities, yes, even in each and every village, there be many Stephens, who assume such service with seriousness and manage justly churches' goods, who rather than concentrating on their own needs and desires minister to those who are truly in need, such as those who, first, serve the church in the ministry of the Word and on account of this ministry are unable to gather their own [physical] necessities." Quoted in Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts: New Testament*, RCS, 79.

We need more tough-mindedness in the church. We need people who can stand up to opposition like Stephen. And that tough-mindedness and stick-to-itiveness is going to look different in the twenty-first century than it did in Stephen's day. Stephen had to press on through persecution and arrest. We probably won't face that in our attempts to serve Christ.

What we face in the American church is distractions. We deal with busyness that crowds out our working for Christ. What we face in the American church is lack of commitment as people float endlessly from one church to another without ever plugging in and serving. What we face in America is insecurity and feelings of inadequacy. "I don't know what I'm good at. I don't know where to start. I don't know what my spiritual gifts are." Well, start somewhere.

What we face in America too is people who don't work for Christ in the church because they've got "church hurt" from their previous church experiences. And I get that. We're all dealing with church hurt. And maybe that's a reason to not commit to church or work for Christ in the church for a few months. Maybe six months. Maybe a year. But two years? Three years? Ten years? Now you're not dealing with legitimate church hurt that's preventing you from serving. You're dealing with unfaithfulness to Christ and his mission.

And finally they were,

5) **Collaborative** – Working in togetherness as part of a team

Verse 7 is key. The apostles delegate responsibilities and look what happens.

⁷And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

The church explodes with new growth. The Word of God increases. The number of disciples increases. And even staunch opponents of Jesus Christ and his church, the priests... some of those priests get saved! Christ's mission gets advanced all because some faithful servants, these seven men, step to the plate and meet a need in the church.

One of the things that you should note in the book of **Acts** is that things are typically done as a team. Peter was usually with John or the other apostles. Peter's going to disappear in a few chapters, because this book isn't ultimately about him or Paul or any of the apostles. This book is about Christ, the Holy Spirit, and Christ's church. And the church is a collaborative institution. God's people work together as a team.

And with wisdom and with humility, the apostles said in **Acts 6**, "**We can't do this anymore. We need help.**" And they mobilized men to help them. **Church is not a place to build your platform, to draw attention to yourself, or to arrogate powers to yourself. We function as a team. We function as a body. We work in unison and in collaboration for God's purposes.**⁷⁹

Let's review. What does a faithful servant of Christ Jesus look like? He or she is servant-minded, Spirit-filled, reputable, toughminded, and collaborative. **Let's pursue these things together church.**

Let me ask this question as we close: How can you be about the work of advancing Christ's mission? How can you serve Christ? You might say, "I can't preach, Pastor Tony. I don't have that gift." That's okay. Can you serve in another way? Can you teach kids in children's ministry? Can you serve as a deacon? Can you show hospitality both inside the church and inside your home? Can you actively serve in a ministry of mercy? Can you evangelize?

God is not calling *anyone* to do *everything* in the church. But God is calling *everyone* in the church to do *something*. Every member of Christ's church should be shouldering kingdom responsibilities in his church. **What can you do? What are you doing? Let's work together for Christ.**

⁷⁹ MacArthur, *Acts I–II*, MNTC, 176: "The church is neither a highly contrived corporation nor a loose commune, but an organism. It has an organic unity and an operative life principle, since all members are connected to its living Head, the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet just as living organisms require structure and organization to function, so does the church."

15.