

The Spread of the Gospel (Acts 6)



Has it ever struck you that the entire Old Testament is Israel's history? That all of the Bible writers except one (Luke) are all Jews? That all of the twelve apostles were Jews? The first 20,000-30,000 members of the church were all Jews? And above all, their Messiah, Yeshua was born a Jew and still is a Jew? The church started within the cradle of Judaism which was an 'exclusive and localised Jewish religion'. The fact that the Christian faith is no longer primarily Jewish should shock us. It should amaze us that the Christian faith has become the 'most extensive and widespread faith in the world'. This would never have happened except that God intended it. Jesus said, *'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.'* (John 3:16)

How then did it all happen? It was Stephen, one of the first deacons in the Jerusalem church, who drove the wedge between Judaism and the Christian faith. It all began with a little grumbling in the early church, the Hellenists, the Greek-speaking Jews, complaining against the Hebrews, the Hebrew-speaking Jews (v1). It does not make grumbling right, but it served as the point from which the Christian faith began to separate from Judaism. Like launching a rocket into orbit, at a certain altitude, the rocket must separate from the booster.

A. The Rise of Internal Dissension (v1)

1. The Diaspora

i. All through their exilic history, the Jews were known for their business acumen away from the homeland. Starting with the Babylonian exile they spread out in all directions. These were known as 'diaspora,' i.e., the scattered Jews. They gradually forgot their language, Hebrew and Aramaic, and spoke Greek like everybody else. Greek was the lingua franca of the day, much like English today. These Jews were called 'Hellenists.' They frequently visited Israel and many of them returned to live in their homeland in their old age. They used the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called 'Septuagint (LXX)'. The Jews who spoke Hebrew were called 'Hebraic Jews' or Hebrews.

ii. When the Jews all came together to worship God in those days, they went to separate places to worship. There were two types of synagogues: Hellenist synagogues and Hebrew synagogues. (Talmud says there were 390 synagogues in Jerusalem, other rabbinic writings estimate 460-480.) What was the main cultural difference between the Hebraic Jews and Hellenistic Jews? The Hebraic Jews observed the law much more strictly. The Hellenistic Jews regarded the Hebraic Jews as narrow-minded snobs. Gradually the Hellenistic synagogues began receiving Gentiles in their synagogues who worshipped the God of Israel.

This created two worship services according to the language needs, the Hebrew-Aramaic service and the Greek service. It also created four groups of people in synagogues: (i) Hebrews - Jews who spoke Aramaic and Hebrew; (ii) Hellenists - Jews who spoke Greek as their first language; (iii) Proselytes –Gentiles who converted to Judaism by getting circumcised and offering sacrifices. *And they kept the law.* (iv) 'God fearers' or 'those who feared God' – Gentiles who didn't become 'Jews' by conversion, but still worshipped the God of Israel (c.f. 10:2).

iii. What was the composition of the Jerusalem church? In the first year or so, every convert to the Christian faith was a Jew. The first 8,000 converted men were all exclusively Jews. But once they began to grow to tens of thousands, different problems emerged. People began to form their own groups within the church with those who shared their language and culture - 'Hellenists' and 'Hebrews'. This became obvious at the fellowship meal tables.

2. The Bilingual Jerusalem Church

i. The Jerusalem church started with Jewish apostles from Galilee, and gradually developed into a bilingual church with two different languages and cultural groups who met under the same roof. Thank God for diversity. It is His idea. But the rich diversity came with its own challenges. The church distributed hot meals for the widows every day as there was no pension scheme in those days. (Ex 22:22; Deut 10:17-9). Naturally, the Greek speakers sat on one side, and the Hebrew speakers sat on the other side. And the Hellenist widows felt the Hebraic widows got more food than they, and the Hebraic widows were served first while the food was hot. This was an unacceptable preferential treatment based on racism!

- ii. The first church was full of love and had no trouble sharing generously. The problem was not sharing or lack, but distribution. Thank God the early church had ordinary folks just like us. Soon the Hellenist widows' complaint became a serious issue, and was brought before the twelve apostles. Consider the danger of 'the Chinese whisper!' This was the first real widespread internal trouble in the early church, and it also kick-started the eventual separation of the Christian faith from Judaism. Jesus said, *'And no one puts the new wine into old wineskins or else the new wine bursts the wineskins, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruins. But new wine must be put into new wineskins.'* (Mark 2:22)
- iii. Although Christianity started exclusively with the Hebrew-speaking Jews, it quickly spread to the non-Hebrew-speaking population outside of Judaism. And the apostles dealt with the problem quickly and wisely, so it did not cause the church to split.

B. The Apostle's Response – The FOUR Basic Principles (v2-7)

1. The Principle of Effectual Management: The greater the number of people, the more you need structure. Order is important for a growing church. But they did not blindly follow the organisational structure from their tradition, but employed the best structure to meet the church's needs as the needs arose.
2. The Principle of Shared Ministry: The church consists of multiple ministries, not one ministry. We might want a minister who has all the gifts - preaching, pastoral care, organisation, youth and children's ministry, etc. But we will never find someone with all the gifts. The apostles had the same 24 hours a day like everyone else. So, they decided not to spread themselves thin, but to focus on their two primary responsibilities – 'the prayer and the word' (v4). NOT because administration and serving were lower gifts but because it was the right priority for them. And they made the provision for other gifted men to rise and fill the needs of the church according to their gifts.

Every member is a minister, and every pastor is a member. 'Ministry' means 'serving' or 'waiting on tables,' (Gk. 'diaconeō') from which we get the word deacon. However, serving tables required administration skills beyond just waiting on tables. It was a leadership role. So, the congregation nominated seven chosen men from among them – which was a common tradition in the Jewish communities.

3. The Principle of Wise Selection: If you want to put seven men over these meal tables, what would be your criteria for their qualification? Men with a reputation for organisational skills? Their criteria was based on three qualities (v3), (a) *'men of good reputation'* – relational maturity; (b) *'full of the Holy Spirit'* – spiritual maturity; (c) *'wisdom'* – personal maturity. Common sense is not so common! Note that mature character beyond gifting was the major factor for positions of spiritual authority (C.f. 1 Tim 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9). How wise were the early church fathers! We hear no grumbling over the appointment of these seven men.
4. The Principle of Delegated Authority: The twelve apostles said, *'You find the good men and we will appoint them. You select them (deacons), and we will set them apart for the task with the laying on of hands.'* (v3, C.f. 8:17; 9:17; 13:3; 19:6). The appointment of elders and ministers follows a different process. Note these seven men of good reputation already had the wisdom and were filled with the Spirit. The apostles laid hands on them for greater release of the grace that was already upon them (e.g., Joshua's appointment C.f. Num 27:18-20 c.f. Deut 34:9)

When you look at the seven men, two interesting facts emerge (v5). (i) Not one had a distinctly Hebrew name - no Elijah, Elisha, Moses, Ezekiel, etc. All seven had Greek names. This was the wisdom of the apostles. If the Greek-speaking widows grumble against the Hebraic Jews, then give them Hellenistic deacons to serve them. Raising up indigenous leaders is the most effective way on the mission field. (ii) One of the seven was not even a Jew, but a proselyte! This was a significant move. Nicholas came from Antioch in Syria, a large gentile city with a major Jewish hub. Nicholas had decided to follow the God of Israel and became a proselyte. Now as a born-again believer, he was taking up a leadership position in the Jerusalem Church along with six other outstanding spirit-filled men. So, they set apart these seven 'deacons' (from the root word to 'serve') and the cause of the grumbling was quickly sorted out. And the church began to move forward and increase again.

The following verse is a progress report of the church (v7, c.f. 2:47; 9:31; 12:4; 16:6; 19:20; 28:31). The word of God spread and the number of 'disciples' were added to the church correspondingly. This is the first and second mention of 'disciples' in Acts, in 6:1,7 out of total 28 times. Disciples were those obedient to the faith.

C. The Rise of External Persecution (v7-15) - 3 Factors that Separated the Church from Judaism

The tension at the table fellowship led to the appointment of the seven Greek-speaking Hellenist deacons in the church. Then many priests started getting saved and became the disciples of Jesus (v7). Around 2,000 priests lived in Jerusalem at the time. What was a born-again priest to do? Should he resign from his work and stop performing animal sacrifices? It is tough enough when a pagan priest has to leave his occupation when he becomes a Christian. How about the Jewish priests? It was even more complicated to know what to do. And this escalated the tension between the church and the Jewish authorities, and Stephen's preaching brought great clarity on these difficult issues in Acts 7, which is the longest sermon in Acts.

Stephen's bold ministry to the Hellenistic Jews marks the beginning of the gospel witness going beyond the strict limits of Judaism, and penetrating the wider Greek-speaking world.

1. Stephen, a church leader for only 6 months or so, became the first man to achieve three things, He was :-
(i) the first believer to preach the gospel in a Jewish synagogue. This was a fresh breakthrough. The apostles preached in the temple and from house to house. Later Paul followed Stephen's pattern and preached in the synagogues in his missionary journeys; (ii) the first Christian apologist to hold a long and heated debate with the Hellenistic Jews on Christianity and Judaism; (iii) the first Christian martyr to shed his blood for the gospel.

Stephen's life closely parallels Jesus's life. Stephen understood that the Christian faith was never meant to stay within the Jewish religion, but it was meant to spread out to the whole world without any restraint of the Jewish custom, temple, and laws.

2. Stephen said two monumental statements, (i) *'Christ is the end of the temple.'* God does not dwell in the temple, so then the sacrifices and temple rituals are no longer required. (ii) *'You have all broken the law and now the only way forward to you is the Christ.'* *Christ is the end of the law.* Adherence to the law is not the way to God nor to heaven. What a relief it is that Christians are not under the sabbath law, dietary law, and sacrificial laws of the temple today. Stephen gave his life for these truths, but it had much wider implications for the gospel witness. (It doesn't mean we can live any way we want, but we are to live under the law of love and the law of liberty.) This debate became a sharp wedge between Judaism and Christianity. Stephen escalated what was mainly a 'political tension' in Jerusalem to a much deeper 'theological tension' on the one true religion. If what Stephen was saying is true, then Judaism has no longer any reason to exist. It was obsolete!
3. The Hellenistic Jews could not win the debate because Stephen spoke with wisdom and the Spirit (v10). So, they resorted instead to (i) false accusation, and (ii) the unlawful use of force. Interestingly, the attack came from the Hellenistic Jewish synagogues, not from the Hebraic synagogues (v9). 'Freedmen' were the Jewish prisoners taken by General Pompey to Rome as slaves, who were later released. These Jews had roots in North Africa (Cyrene, Alexandria) and Asia Minor (Cilicia, Asia). These Jews charged Stephen for 'speaking against Moses and God' because Stephen challenged their understanding of the temple and the law (v11). They brought Stephen before the same court where Jesus was tried (v12).
4. It was exactly what Paul preached after he was converted. It was as if Paul took on Stephen's mantle and vastly expanded it. Paul of Tarsus came from Cecilia, and considered himself a Hebraic Jew. He said, 'I was the devoted Jew but my righteousness from the law is complete rubbish. It is dung. All the good works you have done to save yourself are absolutely worthless. Salvation is purely by grace and through faith in Christ alone.' This is a very offensive statement to a religious mind. In the early days, the church did not see this clearly as the Christian faith was nursed in the cradle of Judaism. Eventually, they saw clearly. We cannot mix Christ with any other religion including Judaism.

For this message, Stephen paid the ultimate price. Stephen probably knew he would be murdered that day, and this was his last message on earth. The spirit of murder was all over his accusers' faces. But what did they see on Stephen's face? They saw the face of an angel (v15). Was Stephen's face glowing with glory like Moses? (C.f. Ex 34:29, 35) Was his face full of love like Jesus' face on Calvary's hill? It was probably the face of a man who already had his one foot in glory. Stephen said unequivocally that once you have Christ you don't need a religion, temple, sacrifice, law, etc. With that statement, Stephen signed his death warrant.