

Armagh Baptist Church
Sunday 16th August 2009 - 11:30am
Acts 6:1-15

Introduction

So far in our studies in the Acts of the Apostles we have seen:

- The Birth of the Church in Acts ch.2 and its progress and rapid growth since.
- The opposition and problems it faced from time to time.
- So far we have seen the believers being arrested, imprisoned, beaten, flogged, warned not to preach about Jesus, but no-one has yet been put to death for the sake of the Gospel.
- But now we are about to be introduced to the first Christian martyr Stephen. We meet him in ch.6 and he is dead by the end of ch.7.

1. What do we learn about the Church from this chapter?

'In those days the number of disciples was [still] increasing' (v.1)

In other words we can say that this church was still diligently fulfilling the Great Commission – they were making disciples right where they were in Jerusalem, the very thing that Jesus had commanded them to do. They were making disciples, as new people came to faith in Jesus Christ, and so the church was continuing to grow rapidly. They were experiencing remarkable church growth.

But you know, church growth brings its own problems with it!

As we can see from v.1 there were people from different backgrounds within the Church –

*'The **Grecian Jews** among them complained against the **Hebraic Jews** because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.'*

In other words there were already two cultures within this church in Jerusalem, perhaps even two language groups as well. There were those from a Greek background – Jews of the *diaspora* living around the Mediterranean basin, and there were also those from a Hebrew background – Palestinian Jews. So even though they were all from a Jewish background, the old differences within Judaism were now beginning to appear within the Christian Church! Had the Gospel just papered over the cracks, or had these people truly been united together in Christ in their new-found faith? That was the challenge.

That is the challenge for us here in Armagh as well. In fact wherever you have a church – anywhere in the world – this will be the on-going challenge.

Here in Ireland on this small island of approximately 6 million people, you don't need me to tell you that there are cultural differences. There are those from an Ulster Unionist tradition on this island and in the Armagh area, and there are those from an Irish Nationalist tradition on this island, living here in

the Armagh area. Culturally and politically there are different traditions and political aspirations in the hearts and minds of the people in this locality.

The challenge comes when people from each of those traditions come to faith in Christ, have their lives transformed by the power of the Gospel, and then get baptised and added as members to the same church. Do we just paper over the cracks of our past allegiances and hope that everything will be OK, or does the Holy Spirit really unite those old opposing view-points as one in Christ Jesus? That's the challenge for us here in Armagh, just as it was a challenge to the Church in Jerusalem as far as those from a Greek and those from a Hebraic background were concerned. They were all from a Jewish background, just as we are all from an Irish background (whether north or south) – but we have these differences nevertheless.

But then in my last church in Cavan we had some added challenges: Not only were there some from an Irish Catholic background in the church, and some from an Ulster Protestant background in the church, we even had English, Scots and Welsh added in for good measure as well. In fact more than that, 25% of our church were black Africans – mostly from Nigeria. Then we had some Afrikaners from South Africa – that was a challenge getting them to accept the blacks into the fellowship! And we had Eastern Europeans from Poland, and Asians from the Philippines and a few Americans as well!! You name it, we basically had them, in a group of 100 people just an hour or so down the road from here in Cavan!

How do you get all those people to get on with each other and to accept one another in the Lord, now that they are brothers and sisters by faith in Christ!? It's not easy, but we have to do it!

Let me tell you that someone from the church even came to me one night in Cavan and said, in the light of all these Nigerians coming into the church, what will we do if they club together and get one of their own men elected as a deacon?! Should we change the voting system, so that can't happen!? I was amazed! What is that, but bare naked racism! And yet that view was expressed within the Christian Church! I hope we won't have that attitude here in Armagh in the days that lie ahead!

You see this is what the church is all about! When we get to heaven we will be a great multitude that no-one can count, and we will come from every tribe, language, people-group and nation, and we will all stand before the throne and we will worship the Lamb who was slain for each one of us, in perfect unity, and we will do so for all eternity! So if we're going to do it up there, then we'd better get used to doing it down here!
No church is ever a homogeneous unit, and if it is, then it is not a true church!

A local church down here should be a scaled down version of the universal church worldwide, and of the church triumphant in heaven. So we shouldn't be afraid of differences within our ranks, we should celebrate the diversity that God has brought into our church and enjoy fellowship with one another in the Lord!

So the challenge that faced the NT Church in Jerusalem here in Acts ch.6, has been facing the Church down through the centuries ever since, and it will continue to face us no matter where in the world we are situated until the Lord comes again. So, get used to it! But the question is, how do we handle it?

Well how did the Apostles handle this particular situation in Acts ch.6?

- The Apostles led the Church to deal with the Problem (v.2)

Today it would be elders, who should do the same. Elders replaced Apostles. Elders must give leadership. They can't hide their heads in the sand and hope the problem will go away. They have to give the lead in dealing with such issues. So how did the apostles do it?

- They Gathered the whole church (all disciples) together (v.2)

This was a problem that was affecting everyone, because it was threatening to split the whole church in two. So all had to be involved in the resolution of the problem. In Baptist Churches to this day, we believe that every member has a part to play in the decision making process of the church. Elders must give leadership and guidance and propose the way ahead in tricky issues like this, but the whole membership has a part to play in the discussion and the implementation of the solutions. If you are not a member of this church, you will not be party to such discussions. I recognise that there are many of you here this morning who are not members of this church – you are what are usually known as adherents – and some of you have been coming to this church for many years and have never joined. I would ask you, if you are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, to consider getting baptised and coming into the membership of this church, to be part of the decision-making process of the life of this church. If so, I'd be glad to have a chat with you. Speak to me or any of the other elders about that.

- Then the Apostles expressed a very important Principle (v.2)

'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables.'

Now I don't know what you make of that statement? Do you agree with it? Do you accept it? That just as the apostles gave themselves to the ministry of the Word of God – the preaching and teaching of the Word of God to the believers in their discipleship ministry and to unbelievers in their Gospel ministry, do you accept that elders and pastors today should do the same thing? That our

primary role as elders is to safeguard, and to give ourselves to, the preaching and teaching ministry of the Word of God within and without this church? In fact, they state it again in v.4:

'We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.'

Those are the primary tasks of elders and pastors in the church – to give ourselves to prayer for the members and their families, and to pray for the adherents of this church, and to pray for the salvation of more people from this area as well. And also to make sure that we are involved in the study of God's Word to keep our own souls right, and to make sure we have messages ready for God's people on a Sunday (morning and evening) and on a Wednesday night, and for any number of other occasions when we handle God's Word within the context of the wider weekly ministry of the church in all its various departments. All of that takes time and energy, but it must be our top priority.

So what was the problem then? Well the problem was that this dispute between the Grecian Jews and the Hebraic Jews as to how their widows were being handled in terms of the daily distribution of food – this was threatening to distract them from their main priorities of ***preaching and prayer*** ministry.

So what was to be done then? Well the Apostles, having reiterated the primacy of ***preaching and prayer***, then proposed that some people be appointed to look after this more practical ministry of *'waiting on tables'* for those with this particular need in the church: (Elders propose, people chose!)

So what did they propose? (v.3-4)

'Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.'

Now some see this as the appointment of the first deacons by the early church in Jerusalem. It may well be that, but at this stage they are not called deacons. Later on in Philippians 1:1 for example Paul writes *'to all the saints (believers) in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers (elders) and deacons.'* In fact by the writing of 1Timothy the offices of elder and deacon have become very clearly the key offices of the Christian Church. It is there in 1Timothy ch.3 that Paul spells out the sort of people that should be allowed to fill such roles in the life of the church. We get a lot less detail here in Acts ch.6, but notice what is said about these first deacons (if that is what they were) in v.3:

'They should be men who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.'

Interesting: Wise, spiritual men to do practical work in the church!!

This role shouldn't just be given to anyone, but to those who have the confidence of the whole church behind them – those who are wise, and those who are known for being spiritual in their walk with God.

So what did the church make of this proposal? (v.5)

Well, we're told in v.5 that *'this proposal pleased the whole group'* – well over 5000 men alone by this stage (Acts 4:4). Probably over 20,000 people in total! So the church has responded favourably towards to the apostles' proposal. So they then chose seven men who were *'full of faith and the Holy Spirit'*: The first to be chosen was Stephen, who we'll hear more about in Acts ch.7. Also they chose Philip, who we'll hear more about in Acts ch.8. Then there was Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas from Antioch (who was actually not a Jew, but a Gentile convert to Judaism) – so fair play to them, they were already, from the start, getting beyond a purely Jewish 'deaconate' in the church! In fact all of them may have been Hellenists!

These 7 men, the church membership presented to the apostles, as *their* choice, and the Apostles then ratified their decision by laying their hands on them and setting them apart to this important practical task, and so they prayed for them as they took up their new roles (v.6).

And what was the result of all of this being well handled? (v.7)

'And so the word of God spread.

***The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly,
and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.'***

Do you see what has happened, the very thing that the apostles were so concerned about in the beginning has been safeguarded – the Word of God continues to spread unabated, new disciples were added to them all the time, and continued to grow in their new found faith rapidly – and more than that – a large number of Jewish Priests came to faith in the Lord Jesus and were added to their number as well! In other words through this division of responsibilities, a church split was avoided, and God continued to bless the on-going growth of the church.

If Armagh Baptist Church is to continue to grow and develop in the coming days, then we need to maintain this clear division in roles and responsibilities. The Elders need to be allowed to keep the spiritual work of prayer and the ministry of God's Word uppermost in their minds, and as the only full-time elder at the moment, as your pastor, I need to be given your support to go on giving my time and energy primarily to the preparation of messages for Sundays and Wednesday nights, and for the other discipleship work that I do in terms of visitation of both members and non-members of this church, i.e. ministering the Word and praying with people in their own homes. If you as a church free us up to get on with those tasks, then you will continue to see this church grow and prosper. But if we as elders continually get side-tracked onto side issues or things that other people within the church should be doing, then the spread of the Word of God will be curtailed in this area. So if from time to time, I learn to say 'no' to some more mundane or practical tasks, please

forgive me, but please understand I do so for the sake of the Gospel, and in order to keep the Word of God and prayer top priority. It's not that I'm lazy, or that practical work is beneath me (I assure you that it is not – e.g. what I did in Cavan) but it's because this principle is so clearly laid down in God's Word and therefore I must adhere to it, for the sake of the Gospel!

So we've learned a lot about the church in this chapter, but secondly...

2. What do we learn about Stephen from this chapter?

Dr Luke, the writer of the Acts of the Apostles, now focuses our attention on two of these deacons over the course of the next 2 or 3 chapters. He first of all tells us more about Stephen, and then he will tell us more about Philip.

Did becoming a deacon curtail Stephen and Philip?

Did it keep them hemmed in from doing other things or exercising their gifts?

Was there life after the diaconate? Of course there was!

We have already been told in v.5 that the church chose Stephen to be their first deacon, because he was *'a man who was full of faith and the Holy Spirit.'*

Again we're told in v.8 that he was *'a man full of God's grace and power.'*

And was able to do *'great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.'*

So what we can say about Stephen was that he was humble and willing to do menial tasks such as wait on tables, and yet his gifts and abilities went far beyond this, and he continued to exercise his gifts as opportunities arose.

It was amazing that God had given Stephen the ability to do great wonders and miraculous signs among the people – even though he wasn't an apostle. Was it because God had a special purpose for Stephen's life – to be the climax of the Gospel's witness to Israel, before it would be taken to the Samaritans in ch.8 and to the Gentiles in chs.10-11ff?

But notice something else about Stephen in vs.9-10. When more opposition arose, this time from the so-called Synagogue of Freedmen – Jews who had come from Cyrene and Alexandria (North Africa) as well as from Cilicia & Asia (modern day Turkey) – and they began to argue with Stephen in particular, they found that they could not stand up against his wisdom – or the Spirit by whom he spoke. Stephen was a man who knew what he believed and why he believed it. He could not only witness for the Lord Jesus, he could actually defend the Gospel before all-comers. No matter what they said against it, he had an answer for them. That's why he was fit to give his apology or defence of the Christian faith in ch.7 before being stoned to death for Christ! He was an amazing man. Deacons – do you know what you believe and why??

3. What similarities are there between Stephen and Jesus?

Stephen was certainly filled with the Spirit, but he was also Christ-like.

There are many things we could point out about how Stephen is like Jesus:

- His humility to serve (v.1-3) – cf Jesus in John ch.13
- He was full of grace (v.8) – cf Jesus in John 1:16,17.
- He did great wonders and signs among the people (v.8)
 - So did Jesus (Matt 11:2-5)
- He was opposed by the Jews (v.9) Synagogue of Freedmen
 - So was Jesus (John 8:31-41)
- They gathered up false witnesses against him (v.11)(v.13-15)
 - So with Jesus (Mark 14:55-59)(N.B. v.58)
- He was charged with the same false accusation as Jesus was!
- There is no record of him ever answering back (v.15)
 - Jesus: Mark 14:60-61 & 1 Peter 2:19-23

Stephen was about to be executed too (Acts 7:54-60) just like Jesus was.

But there is one thing we can say about Jesus' death, but not of Stephen's:

(1 Peter 2:24) *'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.'*

Jesus' death was an atoning death for our sins; Stephen's wasn't – his was a martyr's death. That makes all the difference. We identify and we sympathise with Stephen in that he was the first Christian to lose his life for standing up for the sake of the Gospel, but Stephen was just like us – a sinner saved by God's grace, who is now in heaven, not because of anything he had done – good or bad – but because of all that Christ had done for him on the cross. There Jesus bore his sins, in his own body on that tree, just as he did for us.

Conclusion

Stephen was the first Christian martyr. There have been many martyrs for Christ since. The early Anabaptists, our spiritual forefathers were sadly put to death by both sides of the religious divide – both the Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches of the day said, *'You want immersion, we'll give you immersion!'* and went on to drown many of our Baptist forefathers during the time of the reformation in Europe.

Jim Elliot, a young missionary in his twenties was killed by the Auca Indian tribe in Ecuador's rain-forest in 1951, along with his 3 missionary friends. But after his death their wives went back into that tribe and eventually saw that tribe won for Christ! In fact there have been more Christians martyred for their faith in the 20th Century, than in all the Centuries put together before that!

All of them were men & women *'full of faith and the Holy Spirit'*.

The question is are you – am I?

