



# 'Acts' - Extra Teaching Points #8

## Acts 6:1 – 7:16 (NASB)

Pages 96-110 in '*Acts For Everyone*' (Part 1) by N. T. Wright

### Acts 6:1-7 (NASB95)

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because **their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.**<sup>2</sup> So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task.<sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."<sup>5</sup> The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.<sup>6</sup> And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.<sup>7</sup> The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

### Q: What is the crisis Luke describes here really about?

- The early disciples viewed themselves as one family, accepting responsibility for caring for each other as a family. However, their family grew faster than they were prepared for, so they were unprepared to care for all members impartially.
- "The problem came to a head over the treatment of widows. This shows that already in the early church the question of 'living as a single family' had clear negative, as well as positive, implications: normally, widows would be taken care of among their own blood-relations, but those family ties appear to have been cut when people joined the new movement. As in some parts of the world to this day, baptism meant saying goodbye to an existing family, as well as being welcomed into a new one. And the new one, therefore, had to take on the obligations of the old. That, by the way, is why we find regulations being drawn up about such things in 1Timothy 5:3-16." P. 98

### Q: What did the apostles think their priority should be?

- "In the present case, the apostles were quite clear what they should *not* do. They shouldn't at once rush to do the work themselves. Like Moses in Exodus 18, faced with an administrative crisis – and that may, indeed, be a parallel not entirely absent from Luke's mind – they must *delegate*." P. 99
  - "The heart of the apostles' reasoning in all this was the priority of the word of God and prayer. Only when a crisis emerges do we see what is really important. We noted earlier that 'the apostles' teaching' was top of the list of the defining marks of the church (Acts 2:42), and that the apostles, faced with persecution, were instructed by the angel to 'go and speak the words of this Life' (Acts 5:20)."  
P. 99-100
  - "The fact that they mention prayer in the same breath in verse 4 is highly significant. Of course, all Christians are called to pray, to make time for it, to soak everything that they do in it. But the apostles cite it as a reason why they can't get involved in the organization of the daily distribution to those in need. That implies, not that those who do the distribution can do without prayer, **but that the apostles must give themselves to far, far more prayer. Here, along with the challenge to a ministry of teaching and preaching, is a quiet but explosive hint to all leaders in today's and tomorrow's church.**" P. 100-101

### Q: Why do Church leaders tend to "put out fires" themselves, rather than delegate?

- "The temptation for leaders in the movement, from the earliest days until now, has always been to heave a sigh of relief at being spared the spiritually and mentally demanding task of **preaching and teaching, of explaining scripture, opening up its great narrative and its tiny details, applying it in this way and that, enabling people to live within its story, and make its energy their own.** Running committees, though tricky at times, is not nearly so demanding. Sometimes people even dismiss the ministry of biblical teaching as a kind of optional extra for those who like that kind of thing. But the early apostolic testimony stands solidly: the task of an apostle is the word of God and prayer." P. 100

## **Q: The apostles aren't here today, so who's work is it to preach and teach?**

- "This whole way of talking about God's word is a gentle reminder that however much work anyone puts into the task of expounding the scripture, into teaching the message of Jesus which stands on the shoulders of biblical witness, into explaining and applying the whole thing, **it is still God's work, not the preacher's or teacher's.** Making 'the word of God', as it were, a kind of autonomous agent is, if you like, a way of keeping the apostles in their place. They are not 'growing the church'; **God is growing the church, and using their ministry of teaching and preaching as the primary way of doing so.**" P. 100

## **Acts 6:8-15**

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.<sup>9</sup> **But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen**, including both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, **rose up and argued with Stephen.**<sup>10</sup> But they were unable to cope with the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.<sup>11</sup> Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God."<sup>12</sup> And **they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes**, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council.<sup>13</sup> They put forward false witnesses who said, "**This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law;**<sup>14</sup> **for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us.**"<sup>15</sup> And fixing their gaze on him, all who were sitting in the Council saw his face like the face of an angel.

## **Q: Why would some from the "Synagogue of the Freedmen" be so upset with what Stephen was preaching?**

- "But Stephen was going around Greek-speaking synagogues within the Jerusalem area, and the people he was speaking to weren't trying to defend a position of power, since they didn't have any. **They were defending a worldview, a way of looking at things which coloured their whole life.** And they saw the proclamation of Jesus as a threat to that whole way of thinking and living." P. 105

## **Q: Was there any truth in their accusations against Stephen?**

- No doubt, but they distorted his message to stir up opposition, rather than engage in honest debate; which is not an uncommon reaction from religious people today when they have their long held understandings and traditions challenged.
- "..., people today find real debate about actual topics difficult, and much prefer the parody of debate which consists of giving a dog a bad name and then beating him for it, and lashing out, too, at anyone who associates with the dog you happen to be beating at the time. There is far too much of that in the church, and the only answer is more listening, more actual thinking, and more careful and humble speaking." P. 103

## **Acts 7:1-16**

The high priest said, "Are these things so?"<sup>2</sup> And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,<sup>3</sup> and said to him, 'LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.'<sup>4</sup> Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living.<sup>5</sup> But He gave him no inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, and yet, even when he had no child, He promised that HE WOULD GIVE IT TO HIM AS A POSSESSION, AND TO HIS DESCENDANTS AFTER HIM.<sup>6</sup> But God spoke to this effect, that his DESCENDANTS WOULD BE ALIENS IN A FOREIGN LAND, AND THAT THEY WOULD BE ENSLAVED AND MISTREATED FOR FOUR HUNDRED YEARS.<sup>7</sup> "AND WHATEVER NATION TO WHICH THEY WILL BE IN BONDAGE I MYSELF WILL JUDGE," said God, 'AND AFTER THAT THEY WILL COME OUT AND SERVE ME IN THIS PLACE.'<sup>8</sup> And He gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs.<sup>9</sup> The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. Yet God was with him,<sup>10</sup> and rescued him from all his afflictions, and granted him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he made him governor over Egypt and all his household.<sup>11</sup> Now a famine came over all Egypt and Canaan, and great affliction with it, and our fathers could find no food.<sup>12</sup> But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our fathers there the first time.

<sup>13</sup> “On the second visit Joseph made himself known to his brothers, and Joseph’s family was disclosed to Pharaoh. <sup>14</sup> Then Joseph sent word and invited Jacob his father and all his relatives to come to him, seventy-five persons in all. <sup>15</sup> And Jacob went down to Egypt and there he and our fathers died. <sup>16</sup> From there they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

**Q: Why did Stephen address the charges against him by retelling the story of Israel, rather than dealing with the charges head on?**

- First, it seems he was more interested in defending the truth of his message than defending himself.
- Second, in order to defend the truth, he needed to establish the “big picture” that came from scripture.
- “What you need, he says, is to rework your run-up. Tell the story again from the very beginning and get it right this time. Pace out your whole journey, from Abraham onward, so that you arrive at the present moment at exactly the right speed and from exactly the right angle. Then, and only then, will you understand who Jesus is, and what I and my friends, who believe in him, have and haven’t been saying.” P. 108

**Q: What was so different about the way Stephen saw Israel and the way they saw themselves?**

- The Jews saw themselves as God’s special people... chosen to receive God’s blessings because they were in a special relationship with God.
- Stephen saw Israel as God’s plan for bringing His mercy to the rest of the world.
- “It is with Abraham that Genesis begins the story of how the world is to be set right. The story of the people of Israel, in other words, does not come as a separate, free-standing entity, but as a way of saying: this is how the creator God is acting to deal with the problem of human sin, social catastrophe, and cosmic disaster as set out in Genesis 3 – 11. The whole history of the people of Israel is to be understood under this rubric.” P. 109

**Q: From Stephen, what can we learn about communicating the truth of the Bible?**

- “One of the great arts of Christian theology is to know how to tell the story: the story of the climax of the Old Testament and the foundation of all that was to come (not, in other words, a random collection of useful preaching material with some extraordinary and ‘saving’ events tacked on the end), and the story of the church from the first days until now. Sometimes we, too, have to take a long walk back and have another run at things to make sure we get everything in the proper rhythm, and draw out the lessons we need for our own day. **Sometimes a story is the only way of telling the truth.**” P. 110
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## Follow Up Assignment

**Q: Do you really embrace other Christians as your family the way the disciples in Acts did?**

- If yes, explain how.
- If no, what can you do to change that?

**Q: Have you ever had what you said about following Jesus misrepresented to turn people against you? If yes, explain.**

- If not, is it because you try not to challenge people’s worldview?
- Have you ever misrepresented what someone else has said about following Jesus in order to keep people from listening to them?

**Q: Do you, or someone you know, see the Church the way the Jews saw Israel—as the people God is blessing, rather than the people God is using to bless the world?**

- If so, what needs to be done so the Church can be seen the way God sees it?