

Church struggles and Stephen the Martyr | Acts

6-8:4 | 1/31/16

- Internal struggles in the early church | Acts 6:1-7
 - **Read Acts 6:1-7**
 - It isn't anything new that in a church, regardless of the size or how close knit they are that there WILL be conflict.
 - We would think that even among Christians who love one another in brotherly love would never have arguments or disagreements with one another.
 - This is obviously not the case with the modern day church and even this early church also had its share of internal conflict.
 - The neglect of the widows of the Hellenistic Jews
 - While these Christians referenced here are all Jews there are some differences.
 - The Hebraic or Hebrew Jews were those who were local residents of Palestine that spoke Aramaic and Greek.
 - The Hellenistic Jews were those that were outsiders and had come from various outside nations. They would have only spoken Greek and would have adopted the Greek customs.
 - The Hellenistic Jews voiced concerns that their widows were being overlooked and not being cared for like the widows of the Hebraic Jews.
 - The concern was over a combination of food and financial matters.
 - Some translations list "waiting tables", "financial matters", "distribution" or "serving of food".
 - The Greek word for table (trapezais) has meanings that reference both food and moneychangers.
 - Because of the sharing of the Christians they were able to help those who could not provide for themselves, but there seemed to be a certain group who was being overlooked.
 - This is certainly possible since the Hebraic Jews sometimes cast doubt or looked differently upon the Jews who were outsiders.
 - This issue needed to be resolved in a godly way otherwise the conflict in the church would grow.
 - Internal conflict is certainly not something that they wanted, the church was growing and working together doing God's work, the last thing they would want is internal conflict.
 - In fact, this has the ingredients that could cause a church split, even in this early church.
 - The Hellenistic Jews could go their way and the Hebraic their own.
 - Modern church's today split for all sorts of reasons.
 - The apostles chose 7 men who were full of the Spirit to handle the distributions of the church.
 - The apostles wisely determined that they could not do all of the work that God desired for the church themselves.
 - They likely realized that this was a real concern and they they perhaps had neglected it because they had too much on their plate.
 - They knew that their primary responsibility was to prayer and preaching the Gospel

- Their specific calling that God wanted them for was not handling the distribution of the offerings to the church.
 - It became obvious that they needed to appoint other disciples to handle this specific function of the church.
 - The apostles appointed 7 Greek Christians to hand the distribution.
 - In apparent acknowledgement of the neglect for the Hellenistic widows they chose 7 Greek Christians who were full of the Spirit to take on a newly founded church position.
 - The apostles commissioned them through the laying of hands.
 - To officially commission these men to the service of the church they laid hands upon them and prayed.
 - The apostles and disciple's desires for God to use them to serve His church and His people.
 - This is why today we do the same for pastoral staff.
- This act of appointing these men to serve set the foundations for later church roles such as deacons and elders.
 - While these men were not deacons (as that would come later) it did set the beginning foundations for having various roles within the church.
 - We see this quite clearly today, that it would be impossible to think that only the pastor of the church should serve all job functions.
 - When anyone is spread to thin then their primary calling will suffer.
- The church grew significantly after the calling of the 7 and the separation of duties.
 - Luke gives us another summary of the growth of the church, that the preaching had flourished.
 - This likely increased since some of the burden of the apostles had been lifted.
 - Numerous more people became believers and disciples of Jesus, even a large number of Jewish priests.
 - **Do you think that if all the members of NewSite found God's calling and acted upon it, that the universal church would see significant growth?**
 - **Is it possible that God intentionally spreads His work throughout the church so that more can be reached?**
- Christians must listen for the work that God has called us to do within the church.
 - In our modern day church there are numerous roles that the Christian can serve.
 - God has given us each a gift that we can use to further His kingdom, we need to be sure that we are not squandering this gift and put it to use to serve Him.
- Stephen the first Christian Martyr | Acts 6:8-7:60
 - **Read Acts 6:8-15**
 - Stephen like the apostles was filled with power from the Holy Spirit and he too was boldly preaching the Word of God.
 - In fact, God showed signs and wonders through him like the apostles.
 - The unbelieving Jews attempted to dispute Stephen's teachings.
 - Stephen like the apostles was preaching and teaching that Jesus was the Messiah, he showed how the Old Testament Scriptures foretold of His coming.
 - This of course angered them just like it did the Jewish leaders and they attempted to debate him.
 - **However, Stephen was full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit. They could not out debate God!**
 - The Jews brought forth false witnesses and accusations against him.

- The unbelieving Jews could not silence Stephen because he was speaking as the Holy Spirit guided him.
 - So they used the same tactics they did with Jesus and brought forth false witnesses to bring to the council so that they could bring charges of blasphemy upon him.
 - This was punishable by death.
 - They stirred up the people and drug him to the Sanhedrin along with the false witnesses.
- So what were the false witnesses saying?
 - First they falsely stated that Jesus was going to destroy the temple.
 - They took the words of Jesus from John 2:19-21 to mean the physical temple, when in fact Jesus was referring to Himself and the resurrection.
 - Their biggest problem that they had with the teachings of Stephen was that he spoke of Jesus bringing “change”
 - By far this was the what infuriated them the most.
 - They could not understand and would not believe that God was going to bring change to their customs that Moses had instituted.
 - They ignored the Scriptures where it clearly foretold of the coming Messiah and that there would be change.
 - They were so focused on themselves and their “religion” that they missed the God that they say they worship, who came before them as Jesus Christ.
 - They thought they were worshiping God, but instead they crucified Him.
 - **Why do you think this was so hard for them to see?**
- Stephen’s face after hearing the accusations looked like the face of an angel.
 - While what he looked like exactly we do not know, but God put His approval upon His servant.
 - Stephen who was innocent and obeying Christ was being persecuted for doing what was right. **And God approved of Him.**
- Stephen’s sermon
 - Stephen did not give a defense for the accusations against him, instead he gave a long and detailed sermon giving the history of God’s workings among the Israelites.
 - If we examine his sermon we see that he used it to point out several faults against the Jewish leaders.
 - They didn’t understand the truth of their own spiritual foundations.
 - He spoke of how Abraham’s relationship with God was required faith and obedience.
 - That it required Abraham obeying God and having faith to step and do as God had called him.
 - That God’s plan and promises to Abraham were fulfilled.
 - The relationship between Abraham and God was clearly one of faith and obedience that was quite different from the works based relationship they had established.
 - **They clearly didn’t grasp the faith based relationship with God instead of the one of works and perfect obedience to the law.**
 - They rejected those whom God had called to them to be a deliverer.
 - They Israelites had previously rejected both Joseph and Moses.
 - 7:9-10
 - 7:35-36

- Even though God had called them to save his people they rejected them both initially.
- It took time for them to come around to realize who they truly were.
- This would apply also to Jesus.
 - Jesus was first rejected but everyone will see Christ again and cannot refute who He is.
 - These Jewish leaders were also being like their ancestors and were rejecting Jesus.
- They were breaking the laws of God just as their ancestors had done.
 - Their ancestors had broken the laws of God on several occasions.
 - Acts 7:41
 - As high and mighty as the Jewish leaders might think they are they too had been breaking the laws of God.
- **Is it possible for Christians today to get caught up in our “religion” to a point that we miss the teachings of Scripture of what God truly wants from us?**
- Stephen accuses the Jewish leaders of resisting God just like their ancestors. | Acts 7:51-53
 - **Read Acts 7:51-53**
 - Stephen now rightly accuses the Jewish leaders of disobeying God just like their ancestors had previously done.
 - God sent Jesus Christ and they rejected Him.
 - They rejected God’s message with their hearts and ears.
 - Even though the message of Christ and His truth was given to them they rejected it both in their hearts and their ears.
 - They resisted the Holy Spirit and were disobedient.
 - They ignored the teachings of the Scriptures.
 - Stephens final remarks gave the greatest accusations against the Jewish leaders.
 - That they persecuted those that were bringing the message of Christ.
 - That they had killed the Righteous One who is Jesus Christ and are betrayers and murderers.
 - They have disobeyed the law that they so strive to keep.
 - This was likely the one that infuriated them the most. They took great pride in the fact that they were more obedient to the law than any of the other Jews.
- The stoning of Stephen | Acts 7:54-60
 - **Read Acts 7:54-60**
 - The Jewish leaders expressed their hatred for the accusations of truth that Stephen laid against them.
 - Stephen was quite right in his observations of the sins of the Jewish leaders, but they were so blind to their own sins.
 - They expressed hatred for him and everything he stood for.
 - But Stephen even in the face of their hatred was filled with the Holy Spirit and saw the glory of God.
 - While it is a normal human reaction for us to get mad in a situation like Stephen, this is not what he did.
 - If we were in a court room that was biased and was ignoring the clear facts and accusing you of something you did not do anger would be the natural response.
 - But Stephen maintained his composure and was filled with the Holy Spirit, he was completely at peace with the truth he had just proclaimed.

- He was so filled with the Spirit that God showed him His glory and He saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God.
 - God's sign of approval and comfort for Stephen
 - I see this as a sign of approval and comfort from God.
 - God knew what was going to happen next to him, God knew he was going to die.
 - So God revealed His glory to Stephen which would have given him great comfort to bear what was coming next.
 - He was soon gathered and taken outside of the city and he was stoned.
 - Stephen became the first Christian martyr.
 - But even at death Stephen's actions remind us of Jesus's last words.
 - He knew his time was now and he asked Jesus to take his spirit and to not charge his executioners with sin.
- Saul and the persecution of Christians | Acts 8:1-4
 - **Read Acts 8:1-4**
 - The entrance of Saul | Acts 7:58
 - Scripture here gives us the first mention of Saul who later became the apostle Paul.
 - His hatred for the followers of Jesus was seen very clearly as Saul was in the crowd of those who were stoning Stephen.
 - He also would have likely have been in the Synagogue and heard Stephens sermon as that was the city in which he lived.
 - Saul despised the Christians and sought to tear God's church down.
 - Saul before he became Paul was one of the biggest persecutors of the church.
 - He did everything he could to persecute them through his vote to have them killed.
 - There were two significant events that took place at this time.
 - There was widespread persecution against the Christians and God's church.
 - Now not only were they against the apostles who were preaching in the synagogues but they were going house to house and imprisoning those who where Christians and worshiped Jesus Christ.
 - But God used this persecution to spread Christianity
 - Because of it Christianity began to spread outside of Jerusalem.
 - At this time the Christians and apostles were still concentrated in Jerusalem.
 - But because of the persecution they dispersed (except for the apostles) and began spreading the word of God into other areas.
 - Acts 8:4
 - While Satan tried to destroy them, God used their evil to evangelize the rest of the world.