

Session 7 – Questions

A. Review the Context

In the last session, we got a closer look into the inner dynamics of the first-century Church. We discovered a community marked by miracles, signs, wonders, unity, and generosity on one hand, and greed, selfishness, and deception on the other. This surprising contrast was personified in the figures of Barnabas and his spiritual opposites, Ananias and Sapphira. The account of this internal struggle is sandwiched between two stories of persecution from without. But the many challenges faced by the fledgling Church in this opening narrative serve only to highlight the triumph of the Gospel despite mounting odds against it. For clearly, something new was happening in Israel! The events of Acts 5 show that the Holy Spirit had broken out of the stony confines of the Jerusalem Temple and entered the living temple of the Body of Christ. His power and glory were evident through the apostles in an extraordinary way, everywhere that they went and spoke in His name. No wonder “more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women” (vs. 14)! And no wonder the Sadducees and others in the council were jealous. Only the wise advice of the Pharisee Gamaliel kept them from killing the apostles. In spite of continued warnings and even beatings, the apostles continued to spread the word of Christ with joy.

Review what has happened so far in the Acts of the Apostles.

- *How would you summarize the events so far? What new thing have you learned?*

B. Read the Story

Carefully read **Acts 6-7**. Place yourself in the overall story by finding the reading in the chart below. Ask yourself these questions as you read: *Who? What? When? Where? How? Why?*

As always, pray before you read.

The Church's Mission to the Jews	Acts 1:1-8:3	Witness in Jerusalem	Center: Jerusalem Main Apostle: Peter	2-year time frame
	Acts 8:4-12:25	Witness in Judea and Samaria	Center: Jerusalem Main Apostle: Peter	10-year time frame
The Church's Mission to the Gentiles	Acts 13:1-28:31	Witness to the ends of the earth	Center: Antioch Main Apostle: Paul	17-year time frame

C. Take a Deeper Look

Answering these questions will draw you into the heart of the story. If you don't understand something, make a note of it to bring up in the discussion.

Seven Chosen to Serve (Acts 6:1-6)

1. What did the apostles consider to be their most important priorities for the fledgling Church?

2. a. The seven men chosen in Acts 6 are generally considered to be the first deacons of the Church. What qualities were the apostles looking for in their selection of deacons?

- b. Read **1 Timothy 3:8-13**. What additional qualities did Paul add to the list in Acts 6, in light of the needs of the maturing Church? Why are these qualities so important?

Diakonia

This Greek word, translated “service,” marks the ministry of the seven men chosen in Acts 6. Their task was “to serve” (*diakonein*) the people of God. In addition to caring for the poor, they would prove to be some of the most powerful teachers and evangelists written about in the Acts of the Apostles.

Living Tradition marks Acts 6 as the beginning of the order of deacons (see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.26; 3:12; 4:15; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6:43). St. Paul will later offer qualifications for this important office (1 Timothy 3:8-11). At the Second Vatican Council, the permanent diaconate was re-established. There were three main reasons for this decision: (1) to enrich the Church with the functions of the diaconate, which otherwise could be exercised only with great difficulty in many regions; (2) to strengthen with the grace of diaconal ordination those who already exercised many of the functions of the diaconate; and (3) to provide sacred ministers to regions that have a shortage of clergy.

Today deacons work in parishes, schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and prisons; with youth ministries or wherever the Church may need them to serve. They deliver homilies, assist priests at Mass, conduct funeral services, baptize, and, in some dioceses, officiate at marriage ceremonies. Most dioceses have formation programs for men discerning a call to the permanent diaconate.

3. How did the community continue to grow, as recorded in verse 7?

- b. The rest of the story Stephen told, the story of Israel's history, shows the fulfillment of those promises. In the process of telling this story, what did Stephen make clear about the response of the people of Israel – and why?

7. The Jews had almost begun to idolize the Temple (Acts 7:48), believing it was the symbol and center of God's presence and protection. How did Stephen's retelling of Israel's history show the problem with that position?

8. What did Stephen say that moved his audience to violence?

The Stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60)

9. **Think about it:** Compare Stephen's last words to the last words of Jesus, which can be found in **Luke 23:34, 46**. What is the significance of this similarity?

10. **Living Tradition:** In light of *Catechism*, No. 2635, what does Stephen's prayer in Acts 7:60 teach us?

D. Application

These questions will help you apply one of the key themes of the lesson to your life. After meditating on them, respond to God with a brief written prayer if you choose.

- Would you be willing to confront someone about his/her sin if you knew in advance that it would cause serious personal loss on your part, maybe even death for you? Explain your answer.

- Stephen was clearly prepared to die. What can we learn from Stephen's final moments in order to prepare for our own death?

Dear Lord,

Session 7 – Responses

Acts 6-7 • The First Christian Martyr

ACTS
The Spread of the Kingdom

A. Review the Context

Discussion Leaders: Take a brief moment to review the context and what was learned last week. Place yourself in the overall story by finding the reading in the chart. If you like, ask what ideas people had in response to the question that was asked:

- *How would you summarize the events that have taken place so far in the book of Acts? What new thing have you learned?*

B. Read the Story

Discussion Leaders: If there is time, have someone read each passage before it is discussed.

C. Take a Deeper Look

Seven Chosen to Serve (Acts 6:1-6)

1. *What did the apostles consider to be their most important priorities in regards to the fledgling Church?*

The apostles felt keenly the need to focus on the spiritual needs of the community, which were prayer and the ministry of the word. But they also took the responsibility of making sure that the community's material needs were met. They did this by appointing leaders under them to serve the needs of a population that was being neglected: widows of the Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews) who had traveled to Jerusalem from other places.

2. a. *The seven men chosen in Acts 6 are generally considered to be the first deacons of the Church. What qualities were the apostles looking for in their selection of deacons?*

The apostles were looking for men of good reputation, who were filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom, to serve the material needs of the Church community.

- b. *Read 1 Timothy 3:8-13. What additional qualities did Paul add to the list in Acts 6, in light of the needs of the maturing Church? Why are these qualities so important?*

Paul emphasized particular attributes necessary for those who would be deacons. Candidates were to be dignified and hold fast to the mystery of faith with a clear conscience. They were not to be deceitful, addicted to wine, or greedy for dishonest gain. They should also be married only once and must manage their own children and households well. These qualities were so important that Paul said they should be tested first, so that only those who demonstrated good character might serve.

Why was this important? To begin with, as deacons they would be representing Christ and the apostles in positions of leadership. The community would be looking to them to be trustworthy and to act in a manner worthy of such a position. The Kingdom of God is a family and deacons share some of the responsibility for running the household. If a man or woman is not able to run his or her own household or demonstrate attributes like temperance and dignity, he or she will not be competent to lead in the larger affairs of God's household.

3. *How did the community continue to grow, as recorded in verse 7?*

Not only did many more lay disciples become Christians, “a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith” as well. The Sanhedrin may have opposed them, but the people and even priests were recognizing the authority of the Spirit at work in the apostles.

Stephen is Seized (Acts 6:7-15)

4. *Stephen, “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” (vs. 5), was one of the deacons appointed to care for the widows. The following passage reveals that even more importantly, he exhibited the same signs of the Spirit that the apostles did. As a result, he drew pointed criticism from groups of Jews from the diaspora who were gathered in Jerusalem and who took Stephen before the council.*

- a. *Of what did they accuse him?*

Unable to counter his claims, they set up false witnesses to accuse him of speaking against Moses (by saying that Jesus would change the customs and law passed down through Moses) and against the Temple (by claiming that Jesus would destroy the Temple).

- b. *What physical evidence was the council presented with in verse 15?*

The entire council “saw that his face was like the face of an angel.” In Daniel 3:92, a similar observation was made about the young men who were thrown into the fiery furnace. This should have been tangible evidence to the leaders that God was speaking through Stephen.

5. a. *Read also **Matthew 26:57-68**. Do you see any similarities to this passage in Acts 6?*

Luke’s description of Stephen’s arrest in Acts 6 echoes the events of Jesus’ betrayal and arrest. The arrest was premeditated and instigated with false accusations. Jesus was accused of saying he would destroy the Temple, and Stephen was accused of saying the same about Jesus. Both sets of accusers suspected the accused of setting out to change or destroy the Law. (Further similarities can be found in Acts 7.)

- b. *What is the significance of this comparison between Stephen and Jesus?*

Under the power of the Holy Spirit, Stephen went out to spread the word of God and do miracles among the people much like Christ did before him. He was one of the first members of Christ’s Body to carry on the work of Christ in the world – and he met a similar fate. Luke notes in Acts 6:10 that Stephen’s accusers “could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke.” Neither could Christ’s accusers withstand the Spirit behind his words. Impotent to stop the message, both groups fell back upon treachery and violence in an attempt to silence the messengers. Stephen is living out the life of his master, and will do so even unto death.

Stephen’s Sermon (Acts 7:1-53)

6. a. **Old Testament Connection:** *Stephen began his homily by reminding his hearers of the original promise made by God to Abraham in the Old Testament. What was that promise? (See also **Genesis 12:1-3**.)*

God promised Abraham three things: a land (“go...to the land that I will show you”); a kingdom (“I will make of you a great nation...and make your name great”—a “great name” being synonymous with royal dynasty); and worldwide blessing through him (“by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves.”)

- b. *The rest of the story Stephen told, the story of Israel's history, showed the fulfillment of those promises. In the process of telling this story, what did Stephen make clear about the response of the people of Israel – and why?*

Stephen pointed out Israel's persistent idolatry: both after they left Egypt (vs. 39 ff), when because of their sin with the golden calf they were given a system of sacrificial laws that was necessary to deal with their idolatry, and also later in their history when continued idolatry led to their exile to Babylon (vs. 43). By pointing these things out, Stephen would have reminded his accusers that the laws of the Temple they are so keen to preserve were never meant to supplant true worship of God from the heart.

7. *The Jews had almost begun to idolize the Temple (Acts 7:48), believing it was the symbol and center of God's presence and protection. How did Stephen's retelling of Israel's history show the problem with that position?*

Stephen's retelling of salvation history emphasized that God worked in the most dramatic and memorable ways before a stone was ever laid for a temple. He made a covenant with Abraham, blessed Joseph in a foreign land, chose Moses and gave His living words from Mt. Sinai – all without the Temple. Finally, Stephen used God's words to David (vv. 49-50) to chastise the people for their presumptuous over-reliance on the Temple, which was made by hands and worth nothing next to the "temple" of heaven and earth that God had created.

8. *What did Stephen say that moved his audience to violence?*

The final irony in Stephen's message is that the people he spoke to were as guilty as their forebears of refusing to obey God and worshiping him with their actions and through the Temple ritual while neglecting true worship from their hearts. The narrative thread of the story brings them up to Christ, showing him to be the true fulfillment of all that the Old pointed to – including the Temple and the Law.

By calling them "uncircumcised in heart and ears," Stephen accused them of following the letter of the law (physical circumcision) to the neglect of its spirit (circumcision of the heart) and hinted that they were no better than Gentiles. He told them that they always "oppose the Holy Spirit" and identified them with all their ancestors who persecuted and killed the prophets. In verse 53 Stephen delivers the final attack: Like their forefathers who received the law at Mt Sinai (tradition held that angels gave the law to Moses there) but did not obey it, they have failed to obey even to the point of betraying and murdering the promised Righteous One, Jesus Christ.

The Stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54-60)

9. ***Think about it:*** *Compare Stephen's last words to the last words of Jesus, which can be found in **Luke 23:34, 46**. What is the significance of this similarity?*

Stephen's last words can be found in verses 59-60: "And as they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'" This is a striking parallel to Jesus' final commending of his spirit to the Father and asking Him to forgive those who crucified him.

Recall that Luke introduced the Acts of the Apostles with "In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach..." (Acts 1:1). The implication is that what Jesus began to do and teach is carried on in the Church, through his disciples. With Stephen's last words, he spoke the words of his Lord and carried out Christ's mission to forgive and release. He was not just trying to be like Christ, he was allowing Jesus to work through him.

10. **Living Tradition:** In light of **Catechism, No. 2635**, what does Stephen's prayer in Acts 7:60 teach us?

Stephen is a model of godly intercession, participating in the work of Christ by turning his own will over to the divine will and interceding for those who have persecuted him. Most people are willing to intercede for those they care about. The intercession that Christ calls us to goes beyond that to include even our enemies.

As the *Catechism* points out, in the kind of intercession that participates in the intercession of Christ, one looks "not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others, even to the point of praying for those who do him harm." This is the way that Christ continues to work through his body.

D. Application

Discussion Leaders: If time allows, have group members share their responses to the following application questions:

- *Would you be willing to confront someone about his/her sin if you knew in advance that it would cause serious personal loss on your part, maybe even death for you? Explain your answer.*
- *Stephen was clearly prepared to die. What can be learned from Stephen's final moments in order to prepare for our own death?*

As a follow-up to this discussion, listen to or watch Jeff Cavins' talk on Session 7: Acts 6-7, "The First Christian Martyr."

Sample