

Series: "Stephen: The Man With a Face Like an Angel"

Main Idea: In Acts 6:1-7 the Spirit of God introduces us to an unsung hero named Stephen. The account involves three scenes.

- I. God used a church problem to raise up Stephen (1).
 - A. There was growth.
 - B. There was grumbling.
- II. God used Stephen to help solve the church problem (2-6).
 - A. Step #1: Establish priorities (2).
 1. It's important to meet material needs.
 2. It's more important to meet eternal needs.
 - B. Step #2: Establish a plan of action (3-4).
 1. Let the church members serve (3).
 2. Let the church leaders give spiritual direction (4).
 - C. Step #3: Put it into practice (5-6).
 1. The church chose qualified men (5).
 2. The leaders commissioned them for service (6).
- III. God used Stephen and a church working together to advance His mission (7).
 - A. The Word kept spreading.
 - B. The disciples kept multiplying.
 - C. The hard cases came, too.

Take Inventory: We learn from Stephen something important about problems.

1. We must see God in them.
2. We must seek God in them.
3. We must serve God through them.

Scripture Reading: Philippians 3:17-21

We need heroes.

That's what this series is all about. We need models, examples, people to emulate.

I believe there is a Scriptural basis for looking for heroes. We just read one in Philippians 3:17. "Join with others in following my example, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you."

Follow my example. Take note of those who live according to our pattern.

This morning, we're going to begin to look at the man whom the Lord used to give the pattern to Paul. His name is Stephen.

Without Stephen, there would be no Paul. Paul's tenacity in life. Paul's courage. Paul's zeal for making Christ known no matter what the cost. And Paul's theology, too. Paul's rooting the gospel in the Old Testament. Paul's new covenant theology.

As the presence of a mighty oak goes back to an almost unnoticed acorn, so for the mighty apostle Paul. It all goes back to a barely known man named Stephen.

All we know about Stephen we find in Acts chapters 6, 7, & the start of 8. That's it. He lived apparently a very short life. In fact, he followed Christ apparently for a very short time, perhaps months, no more than a couple of years.

And yet what God did through this man turned the world upside down. No, not in his lifetime, but after it. Soon after it. Within three decades, the gospel of Christ saturated the Roman Empire. And Stephen was the God-ordained launching pad that propelled it out of Jerusalem.

Peter says we are to walk in the footsteps of Jesus (1 Peter 2:21). But, of course, we're not the first to seek to walk in those footsteps. Paul said, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ (1 Cor 11:1)."

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the expositional series in Acts at WBC in 2001.

So as we investigate where others who have followed Christ put their feet on the ground, and then put our feet on top of those prints they left behind, we will in turn follow Christ.

That, again, is what this series is all about. I want to help us follow Christ.

I've entitled it, "*Stephen: The Man With a Face Like an Angel.*" I've chosen that title because that's what Stephen's enemies said about him in Acts 6:15, that when they looked at him, "they saw that his face was like the face of an angel."

This was no ordinary man. And yet he was. He wasn't an apostle. There's no indication that he spent any time with Jesus personally. He was just an ordinary follower of Messiah Jesus.

Yet not ordinary, for his peers selected him to launch a new ministry. Which he did, and so much more.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's turn to the Word of God and meet our unsung hero. In Acts 6:1-7 the Spirit of God introduces us to Stephen. Though this text barely mentions Stephen, and couple of details about him, I want to start there. For what it does say is so very helpful.

At the beginning of Acts 6, the church had a problem. A this-could-split-the-church-down-the-middle problem. And that's precisely when we meet Stephen.

Let me give you the main points of today's text at the outset. There are three.

I. God used a church problem to raise up Stephen (1).

II. God used Stephen to help solve the church problem (2-6).

III. God used Stephen and a church working together to advance His mission (7).

Of course, His mission is what the book of Acts is all about. After finishing His redemptive work, Jesus gave His followers this assignment in Acts 1:8, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

When you read the opening chapters of Acts, that's what happened. The church did receive power when the Lord sent His Spirit in chapter 2. And they did become His witnesses. In chapters 3-5, they filled Jerusalem with the message of God's salvation through Christ. Three thousand believed it in chapter 2. The number grew to 5,000 in chapter 4. Countless others were added in chapter 5.

So things are going great in the church. It's vibrant. It's fulfilling its mission. But it's also, simply put, *still in Jerusalem.*

So the mission isn't completed yet, is it? "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem *and.*" Don't miss the *and.* What's the Lord of the harvest going to do to reach the *and*?

He's going to launch into the ministry a catalyst named Stephen. And how will He do it? He's going to use, of all things, a church problem.

I. God used a church problem to raise up Stephen (1).

The account begins, "In those days." What days? Again, in the early days of the history of the church. Those were days of rapid growth. The last figure Luke gave us was in Acts 4:4, which indicated the church in Jerusalem had swelled to 5,000 men. By the time we reach Acts 6, there must have been more than 20,000 in the church counting the women and youth that had joined.

That's quite a difference from the 120 that first met in the upper room! And talk about growing pains! I know the wonderful administrative challenges of pastoring a church our size. I can't fathom the logistical concerns the explosive growth created for the First Church.

In a congregation of any size, but especially one experiencing growth, it's inevitable that somebody's needs get overlooked. And that's what happened in Acts 6.

Verse 1—“In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.”

So here’s the context for our introduction to Stephen. Dr. Luke, the author of Acts, mentions a twofold problem in the First Church.

A. There was growth. The number of disciples “was increasing,” according to the text. The KJV uses the word “multiplied.” Several times throughout the first five chapters of Acts Luke said people “were added” to the church (such as 2:41). The church had grown by addition. Now it’s growing by *multiplication*!

You might be wondering, “Why do you call growth a *problem*? It’s not a problem, is it?” No, it’s not. Living organisms are supposed to grow, not remain the same. Jesus said He would build His church (Matt 16:18). Ephesians 4:16 says, “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, *grows* and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

So yes, growth is good. It must not be our god, but it’s good. Henry Ward Beecher called success “a last-year’s nest from which the birds have flown.” We mustn’t live in the past by clinging to yesterday’s successes. We’re in trouble when we start coasting.

However, know this about growth. When a church grows, it reaches new people. And the people it reaches aren’t always *like me*. Have you noticed that? In fact, sometimes the people we reach are very different from us. And that’s the way God intended. Such was the case in Jerusalem.

Here’s where the second problem entered. First, there was growth. Then...

B. There was grumbling. Luke says, “The Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.”

Luke mentions two groups of people that comprised the First Church. There were Hebraic Jews and Grecian Jews. We need some background if we’re to appreciate the severity of the challenge that confronted the early church.

The Hebraic Jews (called the “Hebrews” in the KJV) were Hebrew (or Aramaic) speaking Jews. They had grown up and lived in Israel. They maintained exclusive separation from the Gentile world—and often looked down upon Jews who failed to maintain this separation. In terms of background, the apostles were Hebraic Jews.

Then there were Grecian Jews (called the “Grecians” in the KJV), also known as the Hellenists. They, too, were Jews, but unlike the native Hebrews they spoke Greek, rather than Aramaic or Hebrew. They lived outside of Israel, and had absorbed some of the Greek culture. Instead of using the Hebrew Bible, they used the Greek translation known as the Septuagint.

In Acts 2 many Grecian Jews came from all over the world to Jerusalem for Pentecost. And some of them got saved that day. So did many Hebraic Jews. Both types became Christians. Both types became part of the church. And no doubt, both brought their baggage with them. We all do.

Apparently, many of the Grecian Jews who converted to Christ at Pentecost chose to remain in Jerusalem rather than returning home. They wanted to learn more about Jesus.

So think of the differences that existed in the First Church in Jerusalem. For starters, they spoke different languages. They used different Bible translations. They wore different clothing styles. They came from different cultural backgrounds. And these differences were minor compared to the ones the now *Jewish* church would confront in a few years once they began to reach *Gentiles*—which happened in Acts 10.

Let this sink in. The first church reached people that prior to Christ had huge differences. They talked differently. They dressed differently. They enjoyed different kinds of entertainment. They didn't even agree on the same Bible version.

Can people from such diverse backgrounds experience unity? The answer is not only that they can, but *must*, and here's how.

Listen to Colossians 3:11, "Here [that is, in Christ, in the church] there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all."

When God saves people, He makes them *new* in Christ. In the new man, race doesn't divide us (Jew/Gentile). Ceremonial acts don't divide us (circumcision/uncircumcision). Culture doesn't divide us (barbarian, Scythian). And social status doesn't divide us (slave/free). In God's sight, if we are in Christ, we are *one*.

If that's true, we need to act like it. Is unity in the church natural? No. In Christ we have unity, but Ephesians 4:3 says we need to "make every effort to *keep* the unity of the Spirit." Threats to the church's unity will come in all shapes and sizes.

In the book of Acts, Satan tried to stop the church first through persecution (Acts 4)—but that only made it grow faster. Then he tried to snag the church by filling Ananias' heart with deceit (Acts 5:3)—but God eliminated that problem. And so Satan tried a third tactic. He created *dissension*. He knows a divided church is no threat to his kingdom.

There was grumbling. The Greek term for "complained" is *gongusmos*. The word can mean "displeasure expressed in murmuring" (the KJV actually translates it as "murmuring"). Sometimes it's translated "secret talk," or "whispering." There were actually two issues that contributed to this complaint, one obvious and one not-so-obvious.

1. *The surface problem concerned distribution of food.* The Grecian Jews said the Hebrew Jews were "discriminating against" their widows (as the *New Living Translation* puts it). According to the accusation, their widows weren't getting the same treatment as the Hebraic widows were in the food distribution.

William Barclay explains the background, "In the synagogue there was a routine custom. Two collectors went round the market and the private houses every Friday morning and made a collection for the needy partly in money and partly in goods. Later in the day this was distributed. Those who were temporarily in need received enough to enable them to carry on; and those who were permanently unable to support themselves received enough for fourteen meals, that is, enough for two meals a day for the ensuing week."²

Apparently, the church followed this custom. And apparently, the Grecian Jews felt they were being slighted. Was the mistreatment real or perceived? And if real, was it intentional or not? We're not told. All we're told is that there was a problem, actually a *surface* problem which concerned the distribution of food.

In reality, there was a more serious problem.

2. *The underlying problem was division in the fellowship.* There were two groups in the church. And there was tension. This issue could easily have split the church. And maybe that would be best, anyway. You can't expect people with such different backgrounds to get along. That's unrealistic.

WRONG! WRONG! WRONG! God's way is so much better as we'll see.

² William Barclay, *Acts*, p. 51.

There's an Ozark story about a hound sitting in a country store and howling as hounds do. In comes a stranger who says to the storekeeper, "What's the matter with the dog?" "He's sitting on a cocklebur." "Why doesn't he get off?" "He'd rather holler."³

Quite honestly, it's a lot easier to holler than solve problems in godly ways. The Lord loves to help His people solve problems. When that happens, He gets glory, His people experience joy, and the world sees the beauty of Christ. That's what happened in Acts 6.

And how did the Lord do it? Enter our man.

II. God used Stephen to help solve the church problem (2-6).

Notice where the problem-solving started in verse 2, "So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together (2a)." Don't miss who took the initiative. *The Twelve* did, the apostles. You don't solve problems by running, or by dividing. You solve them by pulling together.

By the way, you'll notice no mention of divine revelation this time as there was in the situation with Ananias and Sapphira. Here we see the apostles working together to make an administrative decision.

It's worth noting what the apostles *didn't* do. It's what often happens in churches in our day. They didn't throw the complainers out. The result would have been disastrous to the Lord's plan. The Grecian Jews would have gone down the street a few blocks and stuck a sign in the ground, "Second Church of Jerusalem."

That reminds me of the following story. A ship at sea happened to discover a man who'd been stranded on an island. The man was all alone on this deserted island, and had been there for some time. The captain of the ship went onto the island to greet the man. He noticed the island was empty except for three buildings.

"Where'd the three buildings come from?" the captain asked. The man replied, "I built them."

"What's the first building?" he inquired. "It's my home," came the reply.

"Well, what's the second building?" the captain responded. "That's my church," the man responded.

"What about the third building?" he asked. And the man said, "That's where I used to go to church."

The members of the First Church could have parted company. They could have said, "Since we're different, let's separate." Or at least they might have started two benevolent funds, one for the Hebrews, and the other for the Hellenists. But no. They refused to ignore the root problem, choosing rather to face it head on.

Since we all have problems, we can learn from their example. They followed three steps.

A. Step #1: Establish priorities (2). "So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables."

I believe it was Lee Iacocca who said, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." There were two ministries calling for the attention of the apostles. There was the ministry of the Word, and there was the ministry of benevolence. Both were valid ministries, but they couldn't do both.

It's certainly not because they felt they were too good to work, shall we say, in the soup kitchen. But they knew something many tend to forget. It's not just sin that can distract us from doing God's will. Good things can distract us, too, if we let them.

³ *Bits and Pieces*, May, 1990, p. 20.

Is it good to spend time with your family? Sure. But is God pleased when we consistently miss Sunday worship when there's a family event?

Is it good to work hard in school, or on our job? Yes. But what about spending so much time that we fail to carve out daily quiet time with God?

The apostles established a twofold priority grid. In essence they said...

1. *It's important to meet material needs.* This is a valid concern. But...

2. *It's more important to meet eternal needs.* It wouldn't be right to neglect the ministry of the Word to wait on tables. The word translated "tables" (*trapeza*) is related to the Greek word for "bank." It can refer to money matters as well as an eating table.

Is collecting and counting money valid church ministry? How about visiting widows and making sure they've got food? Should churches do such ministries? The answer is, *sure*.

But the apostles said, "It wouldn't be right for us to do them, at least not continually." It's worth noting that the present tense verb indicates continual action. The apostles weren't saying they would never serve tables, but rather do it regularly and continually.

Why wouldn't that be right? Because the apostles knew the Lord chose them to be His witnesses. To them He delegated the ministry of the Word.

A church that abandons the centrality of the ministry of the Word and prayer for humanitarian efforts will soon fail to be a true church. Lest we doubt that, consider a lesson from history. In the early 1900's Liberal theologians invaded seminaries and churches in America, promoting their social gospel. The churches that drifted into the lie began to die.

Is it important to meet material needs? Yes. But it's more important to meet eternal needs. What good is it to fill a person's belly and fail to save his soul from hell? It's true that Christ fed the hungry. Christ healed the sick. Christ met physical needs. But while He didn't ignore physical needs, He made it clear man's greatest need is spiritual.

"What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" Jesus asked. That's why He went to the cross, to save *sinner*s from their *sins*. That's our biggest need. So that's why He died, and then conquered the grave, to save us and reconcile us to God.

So when it comes to solving problems, the first step is vital. We need to establish priorities.

B. Step #2: Establish a plan of action (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."

D. L. Moody used to say that it was better to put ten men to work than to try to do the work of ten men. Once the apostles clarified their priorities, they devised a practical plan to address the problem, a twofold proposal. Again, we can learn much from this.

1. *Let the church members serve (3).* Notice that the apostles delegated this matter to the church. The apostles lead, but they're not dictators. So they devised a basic plan to address the benevolence problem, and then told the *brothers* to find qualified people to implement it.

Why did they propose choosing *seven* men? Apparently, the number coincided with the Jewish practice of setting up boards of seven men for particular duties.⁴ A plurality of perspectives working on a common task.

But not just any men would do. They had to meet qualifications. They had to be "men," first of all. Certainly, women filled an important role in the ministry of the New

⁴ I. H. Marshall, *Acts*, p. 126.

Testament church. Ladies such as Dorcas, Lydia, Priscilla, and Phoebe were greatly used by God. But they did not lead the church, a role God designed for qualified men (1 Cor 11:3).

Next, these men had to be “full of the Spirit.” They certainly couldn’t have a personal agenda or, shall we say, axe to grind. And they couldn’t be self-sufficient, self-seeking men. No, they had to be men who lived in full submission to the Holy Spirit and His Christ-exalting agenda.

In addition, they needed to be men “full of wisdom.” They weren’t to search merely for men with the most administrative savvy, or Bible knowledge for that matter, but for men who knew how to *apply* Bible truth to an administrative challenge. That’s wisdom. It takes tact and common sense to work with people in God-honoring ways.

Church growth specialists suggest that to be a healthy church at least 60 percent of the people should be involved in some type of church work. I don’t know about that figure, but I do know the apostles refused to rob people of the joy of ministry. Here was phase one of their proposal. Find seven men who meet these qualifications, and we’ll delegate the benevolent ministry to them. In other words, let the church members serve. Here’s the second phase...

2. *Let the church leaders give spiritual direction (4).* “We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

According to a *Christianity Today* survey, the average pastor today spends only three minutes a day in prayer. Maybe that’s because it’s so easy for pastors to see themselves as *shopkeepers* rather than *shepherds*.

I must be at every meeting. I must participate in every ministry. I must contribute to every decision.

I sat under a pastor one time who did virtually everything in the church. He led the singing, gave the announcements, offered the Sunday morning prayer, did ministry in music at times, as well as preached the sermon. He was a godly man, that’s not in question. But his view of pastoral ministry differed from the apostles.

It’s easy for leaders to think, “If you want something done right, do it yourself.” I’m impressed that the apostles didn’t buy into that notion.

Here’s a key principle. *Push ministries down.* Get the people the Lord wants in place, people filled with the Holy Spirit and biblical wisdom, then unleash them. That’s the church leader’s job according to Ephesians 4:12ff., to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. Equip the church members to do the ministries of the church.

There’s the plan. But a plan is just a plan until this happens.

C. Step #3: Put it into practice (5-6). And now we meet our man. Verses 5-6, “This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.”

Here’s what happened.

1. *The church chose qualified men (5).* Notice that *the church* did the choosing. The apostles gave direction, but then the people did the work, including looking for, and finding potential candidates, then interviewing them, and finally bringing them to the apostles. They brought *seven* men as instructed, seven qualified men.

And whose first? Stephen. “The proposal pleased the whole group,” says verse 5. “They chose Stephen.”

This speaks so highly of this man. I mentioned earlier that by this time there were thousands and thousands of people in the First Church, perhaps 20,000 or so. So there

were a lot of potential men to screen. Only seven would be selected. And here's the man who topped the list.

Stephen. He has a Greek name. A Jew with a Greek name who has become a follower of Jesus. And why was Stephen chosen? What sets him apart and makes him particularly suited for the ministry assignment at hand? Two things mentioned in verse 5.

One, he's "a man full of faith," and two, he's "a man full of the Holy Spirit."

Full of faith. Saving faith? Yes. As the result of God's gracious working in his heart, he has put his faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is a saved man. But that's not what this means. To be full of faith means this man lives by faith. His Lord is real to him. He doesn't make decisions the way the world does, the way he used to before the Lord saved him. He seeks the Lord, trusts the Lord, walks with the Lord, seeks to please the Lord in all he does.

Will that be important for his assignment? It sure will be. When you're dealing with people, and money, and material goods, and cultural differences, you must be firmly convinced who you are seeking to please. And this man was.

Furthermore, he was *full of the Holy Spirit*. If I said someone is full of rage, I mean he's under the control of his rage. You can see it in his expression, hear it in the tone of his voice. Stephen was under the control of the Person Jesus sent to indwell His followers, God the Spirit.

This man lived a dependent life. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you," said Jesus in Acts 1:8. Stephen depended on that power. He was not a self-made man, but a Holy Spirit-made, Holy Spirit-dependent man.

That trait is going to show up first, in the way he cared for widows. But that's just the beginning. In time, this man will become a miracle worker (6:8), a phenomenal preacher (6:10), and ultimately, a man who courageously gives his life proclaiming the gospel (ch 7), the church's first martyr.

So the church chose this man, and six others, and presented them to the apostles. Then...

2. *The leaders commissioned them for service (6)*. The apostles prayed and laid hands on these men. Not only did this indicate the seven men would be accountable to the apostles, but it also unleashed them for ministry.

What's interesting is that, not just Stephen, but all seven men had Greek names. That probably indicates they were Grecian Jews, that is, Greek speaking Jews.

Remember, the Greek-speaking Jews were the ones who were complaining about their widows. And even though there were probably more Hebraic Jews in the Jerusalem church than Grecian Jews, the church decided to elect Grecian Jews to head up this ministry.

That's impressive, isn't it? As James Boice observes, "They might have said, 'There should be a few Greeks on this board to represent the Greek point of view. But we are the majority. At least four of the seven, maybe five of the seven, should speak Aramaic.' But they did not operate that way. Either they deliberately picked the Greek-speaking leaders, or else they just picked out the seven best men."⁵

It's a beautiful thing when church members humble themselves before the Spirit. The result? First, God used a church problem to raise up Stephen (1). Second, God used Stephen to help solve the church problem (2-6). Third...

III. God used Stephen and a church working together to advance His mission (7).

⁵ James Boice, *Acts*, p. 114.

“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.” We see three evidences of God’s blessing here...

A. The Word kept spreading. That wouldn’t have happened if they’d refused to deal with their problem. But they did. And God blessed.

B. The disciples kept multiplying. In fact, they “increased rapidly.” Growth led to growing pains. But once the church worked through the problems, they experienced more growth. And eventually more challenges would come, but God’s grace would be sufficient for them all. A third evidence of God’s blessing...

C. The hard cases came, too. Not just *some* priests, but a *large number* of priests became obedient to the faith.

By the way, there’s an excellent way to describe a true Christian. It’s not just a person who’s made an intellectual decision. It’s a person who’s experienced the life change that results from faith in Christ. He or she becomes *obedient to the faith*.

It’s been estimated that there were 8,000 Jewish priests involved in the temple ministry in Jerusalem. Luke says “a large number” of them converted to Christ.

Think of the implications. To become a Christian these men put their jobs on the line. What did the priests do? They performed sacrifices and other duties associated with the Levitical sacrificial system.

But when a person becomes a Christian, he is saying, “I believe the sacrifice of Christ alone is sufficient to save.” Do you see the tension? These priests said, no matter what it costs, we will obey Jesus.

Yes, when God saves someone, He makes them new, including the hard cases.

So there’s the introduction to Stephen. God used a church problem to raise up Stephen, then used Stephen to help solve the church problem. And then, He used Stephen and a now unified church working together to advance His mission of reaching lost people in the world.

The Lord willing, we’re going to learn a lot more about this man in the weeks ahead. Simply put, the church needs men and women like Stephen today, people full of the Holy Spirit, and faith, and wisdom. Let’s talk about one particular area.

Take Inventory: We learn from Stephen something important about problems.

Based on what we’ve just seen in Acts 6, we need to do three things with problems.

1. *We must see God in them.* God is at work. He is sovereign. God used a problem to launch Stephen into the ministry. What was a problem to the church became an opportunity for Stephen to serve and exalt his Savior.

Do you do that with problems, first, *see God in them*?

2. *We must seek God in them.* He has the answers. And He will give us what we need, as we *seek* Him. He may give us a Stephen. He may turn us into a Stephen.

3. *We must serve God through them.* There’s no need to run from our problems, not when we have a God like our God. So let’s seek Him, then seek Him, then serve Him right where we are. As Stephen did.