

Murmuring and Second Confrontation with the Sanhedrin

V 1 Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.

“Complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists.” Although Rome was the ruling power in those days, in the eastern section it was still very much a Greek (or “Hellenic”) world in language and culture. In previous centuries, Assyrian and Babylonian conquerors had scattered Jewish people throughout the Mediterranean world. But many had returned to Israel, and some had joined the Early Church, a number of whom were likely recent arrivals for the Passover/Pentecost pilgrimage.

These “Greek Jews”, as they were called, had absorbed some aspects of the worldly Greek culture of that day and so were suspect by the “Hebrews”, the native Jewish population, who felt intimidated by the more cosmopolitan outlook of these foreign Jews; there existed also a language barrier between Greek and Aramaic speakers. Whatever the case was, a major issue had developed, and the Greek Jews were complaining that some of their needy widows were being neglected.

V 2 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.

“Tables.” Refers to tables used both for monetary matters and for food preparation and serving.

V 3-4 “Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business;

“but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

“We will give ourselves continually to prayer, and. . . the Word.” Good example of delegation and sticking to priorities. The Apostles had firsthand knowledge of Jesus and the Resurrection and needed to abide in their calling of ministering along spiritual lines.

Then came the third crisis of the Church: murmuring (Chap.6) Another kind of attack. The Devil found out in the first attack, the outside attack of persecution, he couldn't lick'm, so he tried two inside attacks. One was hypocrisy and the next one was murmuring! - Complaining, griping, belly-aching! You mean that's an attack of the Devil?

The best thing to do is get it out in the open and deal with it, and they did. They called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and they said, 3rd verse, "Look ye out" - you take care of it! Indigenuity!

The indigenous church is what? - self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating! . . . The Twelve were Apostles or elders, the leaders, and their major responsibility was spiritual, to be overseers of the spiritual welfare of the Church. That was their major job - teaching and prayer.

So they picked some men, good businessmen, who evidently knew how to handle business affairs, to take care of the material affairs of the church! They were called deacons. The difference between elders and deacons is: The elders are the spiritual leaders of the Church, deacons the material leaders.

(from lecture by [David Berg](#) - 14 May, 1967)

V 5-6 And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.

These seven men (with Greek names) spoke Greek, which helped to restore better communication. Stephen and Philip (not the same Philip who was one of the 12 disciples) became powerful witnesses. Prochorus is thought to have become John the Apostle's scribe when he wrote his Gospel. Nicholas was a Gentile convert to Judaism.

"They laid hands on them." For those who had been chosen for a task, this practice officially committed and authorized them to carry out their new ministry.

Some of these guys they picked for deacons turned out to be

pretty good elders in the long run! They turned out to have such power and such blessing that the Lord turned them into evangelists - like Philip and Stephen! They were handling the food distribution, the cooking and waiting on tables! So there's hope for you, if you follow the Lord in even the least of these!

They laid hands on them, prayed for them, and committed unto them this material, economic work of the church - and it was a big job! There were thousands of people now who had joined the Church! - Not the building, they'd joined the group, they'd joined the Team. They all had to be fed. They had to organise the cooking, the distribution of the food and everything. Big job, right? It takes a real administrator!

Stephen and Philip had spiritual talent and ability, and they ministered spiritually as well. Stephen preaches his famous sermon in the 7th chapter - the most marvellous short history of Israel you'd find in the whole Bible, outside of one of the Psalms! - Wonderful 7th chapter! . . .

(from lecture by [David Berg](#) - 14 May, 1967)

V 7 Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.

"Priests were obedient to the faith." The lower ranks of the priesthood numbered in the thousands, many of whom were poor (and humble). The conversion of *"a great many of the priests"* attested to how much the news and testimony of Christ's resurrection had succeeded in winning the city of Jerusalem.

V 8 And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people.

"Full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs." As we saw in chapter 5 in the exploits of Peter and the Apostles (5:12-16), again the Keys of the Kingdom are at work. This access to Heavenly Power, which Jesus had extended to His 12 disciples (in Matthew 16:19), was empowering this new disciple, Stephen, to brandish the same mighty power of God.

9-10 Then there arose some from what is called the Synagogue of the Freedmen (Cyrenians, Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia), disputing with Stephen.

And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.

Synagogue of the Freedmen. These were former Jewish slaves who had gained their freedom. They were Greek speakers like Stephen and were composed of at least two groups: one from north Africa (“Cyrenians, Alexandrians”), and the other from Asia Minor (“from Cilicia and Asia”); the apostle Paul, who persecuted the Early Church before his conversion, came from Tarsus in Cilicia and may have been a member of that group. Alexandria was the center of learning in the ancient world and the place where the Old Testament had been translated into Greek; so likely, the Jews from that area were well educated and knowledgeable in the Scriptures.

During inter-Testament times, some 460 synagogues had sprung up in Jerusalem, some of which were built by foreign-born Jews to give themselves a place to worship and read the Old Testament. (Apparently, they were not allowed access to the temple’s inner court because of their foreign birth, especially the more Hellenistic Jews who had adopted the Greek language and customs.) Because of their more cosmopolitan outlook, these Jews often felt superior to the Jews of Palestine. They thought they knew it all. . . until they met their match in Stephen and found “*they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.*” They stood in awe of the power of God manifested in the words of His messenger.

Those early days of proclaiming the Gospel shook the established Jewish order to its foundations. Many listeners, with a healthy respect for the Almighty, fell to their knees in praise of the true God; others, like this “*Synagogue of the Freedmen*”, trembled in fear as they listened, but not wanting to repent or turn from the old way, fought against the power of God.

Will such dramatic demonstrations of God’s power happen during the closing days of man’s history? There is evidence in the Bible that, yes, we can expect to see similar kinds of miraculous manifestations. (Daniel

11:32, Revelation 11:3-13) For they will be needed to push back the tide of secular materialism and fierce opposition to Truth that are about to flood the world of mankind prior to the Second Coming.

V 11-13 Then they secretly induced men to say, “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.”

And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council.

They also set up false witnesses who said, “This man does not cease to speak blasphemous words against this holy place and the law;

“They secretly induced men. . . stirred up the people, the elders. . . set up false witnesses.” Unable to silence Stephen by their words and reasoning, the Jews resorted to underhandedness and deceit.

“Blasphemous words.” Blasphemy was a serious crime punishable by death.

V 14 “for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us.”

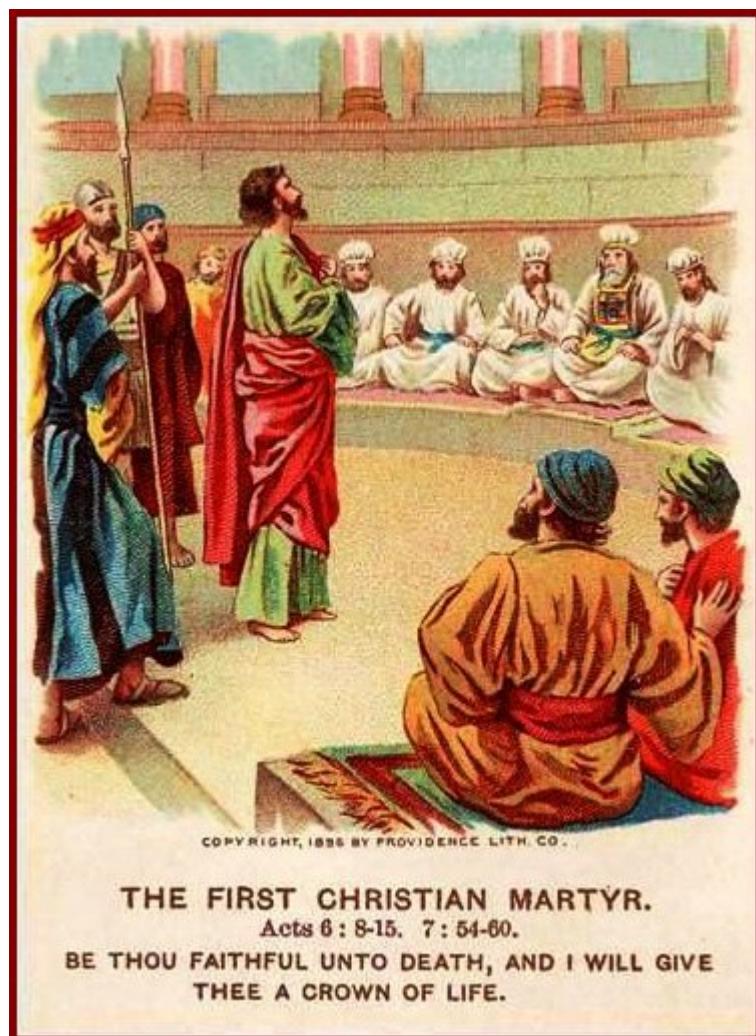
“Destroy this place.” It’s hard to say whether this accusation was based on Jesus’ prediction about the temple’s and Jerusalem’s destruction (Matthew 24:2, Luke 19:43-44, 21:20) or on the prediction of His execution and resurrection. (John 2:19-21) In either case it was a false charge.

In the first case, it was to be the Romans, not Jesus, who would destroy Jerusalem and the temple. And in the second case, Jesus was referring to the “temple” of His own body being destroyed, not the Jerusalem temple; Jesus’ statement about the “temple” drew attention to the idea that the Holy Spirit would dwell in the temple of our bodies, not just in stone temples - a relatively simple concept that Stephen’s accusers were, nevertheless, unable to grasp.

“Change the customs which Moses delivered to us”- That’s exactly what they were supposed to do according to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Actually, it wasn’t so much a question of changing the customs of Moses, but more one of just leaving them behind. They had served their purpose in times past, but now it was time to adopt the new Way - the “*grace and*

truth" of Jesus Christ. (John 1:17)

Had they been willing to accept Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah, their concern about the old laws would have faded away. They would have been empowered to step into the new Age of Grace that God was ushering into the world of mankind.



V15 And all who sat in the council, looking steadfastly at him, saw his face as the face of an angel.

"His face as. . . of an angel." The Sanhedrin Jews, whose minds could not be persuaded by reasoning and debate, at least could see - if they wanted to see it - the light of God on Stephen's countenance, bearing witness to the truth of what he was saying.

The Book of Acts lays out for us the exciting account of the exploits of the early apostles. Much of their activity centered around their confrontation with those who would not accept the new way of faith but preferred to preserve the status quo. God loves change, and He is a moving God! The following quotes will shed some light on how the Lord viewed the need for change back then and how it applies to us in modern times:

When the Lord gave the Mosaic Law, that was His law for His people for more than a thousand years. People could die for small infractions of the law. Israel was judged and conquered, or prospered, depending on their obedience to the law. There were many ceremonies and rituals required—and at the time, they were anything but token. The Lord used people's adherence to those very strict rules and rituals to gauge their obedience, and they were blessed or cursed accordingly.

When Jesus came, the gospel of love that He preached made all those rules and sacrifices – which the Jews had lived by and adhered to for so many years – outdated. The rules and traditions of the Mosaic Law weren't needed anymore. All that people had to do was believe in Him, accept Him as the Son of God, and be willing to live by His Law of Love (Mat.22:37-40). He was the way to salvation, by grace through faith. All the rest was dead tradition. Not many people followed initially, but grace was the way of the future, and we still live by it today.

Another example was blood sacrifice. That was the way for Jews to seek forgiveness and to be absolved from their sins (Lev.17:11). They had to sacrifice a lamb – and there were many regulations regarding what kind of lamb, the age of the lamb, that it was the best of their flock, without blemish, etc. – and through that sacrifice, they were cleansed and forgiven. When Jesus died for us, He was the Lamb of God, sacrificed for the forgiveness of the sins of all humanity. He shed His blood for us, and no further blood sacrifice was needed.

Another example is that the Early Church considered Gentiles unclean, because that's what God had told them in the Old

Testament. The apostles wouldn't even witness to them at first. It took a direct revelation from God to change Peter's mind on that, and Paul had to continually reinforce the point. Even then, many of the Christian Jews were reluctant to change. Many did not accept Gentiles in their homes or consider them worthy of the Gospel. . .

The Lord isn't concerned about preserving the past or the way He showed us to do it before, if it's no longer His will for today. And if He isn't concerned about it, we shouldn't be either! He is interested in keeping us alive and fresh and relevant to today, so He's going to continue to help us adjust, change course, and even reverse course when necessary, in order to get the job done.

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(Jesus speaking:) I want you to be successful in the mission I have given you. That's what interests Me. The past is past. It suited the needs at the time very well, but today's needs are very different. The world is different, the needs of the lost are different, and if you hold on to the way things were or the vestiges of the past, you will miss the mark for today! - Not to mention the future. Today and tomorrow are what count, not yesterday or yesteryear

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(Jesus speaking:) When I say that old things are passed away and all things are become new, you have to believe that I have the power and authority to do just that. When I walked the Earth two thousand years ago, My announcements of change were big news to people in that day. When I told them that I had the power to forgive sins, it was a real departure from what they'd been taught - something they didn't think was possible - and that's why so much of what I did seemed wrong to them.

When My Father and I. . . reveal new plans to you, We. . . have the power and authority to do so as the Creators of the universe. . .

I am a God of love and righteousness and My ways are higher than your ways, but I also. . . give instructions to My people as may be needed at the time. When I. . . introduce new factors, you can't measure the old by the new. You can't ask, "Well, if this is how it is now, then what about back then?" If the past had to be perfectly

synchronized with the future, there would be no way to progress. . .

It was My will for Christians to organize themselves and to submit themselves to the elders and leaders of the church, as I taught in the gospels. Yet centuries later, as that had developed into a church that was decadent and corrupt, obedience to the religious system of the day was no longer My will, and the newness of the Reformation was required to sweep away what was old. My will for that day was different. I was calling My children to resist and rebel against the religious system of their day.

If you look back and compare the past with the present, you could wonder how My instructions of yesterday and My instructions of today were both within My will - especially when they're so different. But instead of trying to figure it all out, I ask you to trust Me. I ask you to remember that while My purposes are often far beyond your comprehension, and My means may seem strange to mortal men, My love and justice and mercy and plan are infinite and will never be defeated. - And that includes My understanding of you and My care for you as an individual.

Just as I have the power to forgive sins, I have the power to change what I ask of you. I change My instructions frequently in order to give you what you need at the time, and to help you be what you need to be at the time. . . What I have given even five or ten years ago is in many cases different from what is needed now. As needs change, so do My instructions to you. . .

Though My ways may be past your comprehension, I do all things well. Though many things may change, My love and My great desire for all to know Me has never changed and will never change. This is. . . why I often call you to change. . . to better accomplish My purpose. (End of message.)

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(Continue to ACTS, chapter 7)