

OUR *Guide* FOR USE IN *the Protestant Reformed Sunday School*

Lesson 64

The First Deacons

The Scripture Lesson *Acts 6*

In the early Christian church there were, of course, some poor people. As the church grew larger, and there were more and more poor people to take care of, the apostles were having a harder and harder time keeping up with it all.

Somehow, in the daily giving of food, some of the poor widows were missed. When the apostles heard about this, they decided that something would have to be done to share the work of taking care of the church. No longer could the apostles be in charge of everything. So they called the congregation together and told them that they should choose seven good men, men who were blessed by God with much wisdom, and set them over the task of caring for the poor. Then the apostles would have more time for preaching and teaching.

What the apostles had decided was to start the practice of having *deacons* in the church. Ever since that time, the church has always had men to take care of the collecting of money and the using of the money to run the church and to take care of the poor. God used the complaint of the neglected widows to bring about this good office in the church.

Of the seven deacons chosen by the church at

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that time, two became very well known. One of them was Stephen. God gave this man the power to do great miracles in Jesus' name. And God gave him also much wisdom, so that he could teach others about the things of Christ's kingdom. Now, the devil hates it when the Spirit of Christ is seen in a man. Satan therefore stirred up enemies for Stephen. These enemies were unbelieving Jews. They came to Stephen and tried to argue with him. But they found that they were no match for Stephen. He knew the Bible so well, and he understood so well how to use the Word of God to prove his teachings, that they were not able to answer him.

This made them angry. They decided therefore to try something else. First they persuaded some men to tell lies about Stephen. These liars would testify that they heard Stephen say things that were blasphemous against God, against Moses and the law, and against the temple. Blasphemy was such a serious charge that one who was guilty of it would be put to death. That way, the Jews thought, they would be rid of Stephen for good.

So Stephen was arrested and brought to trial before the wicked Sanhedrin. The false witnesses were there. The enemy seemed very strong — against one lone Christian. But then the Sanhedrin looked at Stephen and saw his face

shining “as it had been the face of an angel.” What could that mean? They were all ready to listen now to what Stephen would say.

The First Martyr

Acts 7:1 - 8:8

The false witnesses told the Sanhedrin that Stephen was a blasphemer, that he had said that Jesus would destroy the temple and change the customs given by God through Moses. That was a very serious charge, for if one was guilty of blasphemy he must be put to death. So after the witnesses had given their testimony, the high priest asked of Stephen, “Are these things so?”

Then Stephen began to talk about what the Bible said of the law of Moses and of the temple. He showed them that the temple and all of the ceremonies of the law pointed to the coming Messiah. Neither the temple nor the ceremonies, therefore, were meant by God to last forever, in the way that the Jews wanted them to. They were to come to an end when the Christ came. Stephen also showed them, from the history of Israel, that their fathers had *always* persecuted the prophets. They disobeyed Moses, and they killed the prophets who spoke of the coming of Christ. It is not at all surprising, Stephen meant to say, that you, who follow in your fathers’ footsteps, have killed the Christ Himself.

The Sanhedrin was furious. But they did not know how to answer Stephen, so they just sat there and gnashed their teeth at him. Stephen then looked up, and he saw right into heaven. He saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus Himself, standing there in His glorified human body, with all power given to Him by God. He said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God.”

The Sanhedrin could not stand that. For *they* were the ones who had killed Jesus. If Jesus were now really standing at God’s right hand, He could take vengeance on all His enemies. The wicked Sanhedrists wanted to shut the very thought of that out of their minds. So they began to yell loudly, to put their hands over their ears, so they would not have to hear another word from Stephen.

Then they rushed upon him and dragged him out of the city in order to stone him to death.

Once they were out of the city, the witnesses took off their long, loose outer robes so that they could throw stones more easily. They placed these robes at the feet of one of the men who were in charge of the stoning. This happened to a young man by the name of Saul, who is here a fierce enemy of the church of Christ. He will watch Stephen die ... and be glad.

Stephen, however, had just seen Jesus Himself, ready in heaven to receive him into glory. He is not afraid of what men may do to him. “Lord Jesus,” he said, “receive my spirit.” Then, praying that God would not hold any of His people responsible for this terrible sin, Stephen died, the first martyr of the New Testament church, the first one to die for the sake of Jesus.

Perhaps some of us will someday have to do the same. What a comfort it is to know what Stephen saw when he looked up to heaven. Christ stands at the right hand of God. He directs all things, even persecution, to be for our good. And when we die, He will receive us into the glories of His everlasting heavenly kingdom.

A great persecution followed the death of Stephen. Many saints were forced to flee for their lives from Jerusalem. In that way, many others came to hear and believe the gospel of Christ. The enemies of Christ intended to *destroy* His church; but instead they only caused the church to grow all the more rapidly. How clear it is that *Christ* rules in heaven!

MEMORY WORK

Group A

Acts 6:2 “Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.”

Group B

Acts 7:55 “But he, being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God.”

ACTIVITIES

This paper has been prepared in the hope that it will be used by students of all ages. The activities are designed so that the oldest will be challenged, and the youngest will find some of it within reach. Parents should encourage their children to attempt only what they can handle without frustration. For some that will be much, for others little.

DO YOU AGREE?

If you do, write Yes; if you do not, write No.

- ___ 1. As the Christian church began to grow in Jerusalem, some of the poor complained that they were being neglected in the daily ministrations.
- ___ 2. Realizing that they could no longer do all the work in so large a church, the apostles advised that seven men be chosen to make the care of the poor their special business.
- ___ 3. The appointment of these seven men was the beginning of the office of elder in the church.
- ___ 4. Stephen, one of the seven, did great wonders and miracles among the people.
- ___ 5. The enemies of the church hated Stephen for this evidence of the great power of the Spirit of Christ, and they tried first to defeat him by arguing against his teachings.
- ___ 6. When that failed, they brought him to the Sanhedrin and accused him of doing miracles in the name of Jesus.
- ___ 7. When the members of the Sanhedrin looked at Stephen, they saw his face shine like the face of an angel.
- ___ 8. Because they were so awed by this evidence of God's favor on Stephen, his enemies did not dare to continue his trial.
- ___ 9. Stephen showed them how the temple and the Old Testament ceremonies all pointed to the Messiah, whom they had crucified.
- ___ 10. As soon as they heard that, the Sanhedrin ordered the Roman soldiers to take him out of the city to be stoned.
- ___ 11. One of those who threw stones at Stephen was a young man by the name of Saul.

- ___ 12. The result of the persecution that followed the death of Stephen was that the Christian church became smaller and smaller.

QUESTIONS FOR YOUNGER READERS

1. Who took care of the poor people in the very early Christian church? Why did these men soon find it impossible to do this work alone?
2. The apostles advised the people how the problem should be solved. Can you tell what their solution was? What do we call men in the church today who care for the poor?
3. Stephen's enemies decided to get false witnesses to say that Stephen had spoken blasphemous words against the temple. Do you know what Stephen had probably *really* said about the temple? Why did not the unbelieving Jews like to hear that?
4. What did the Sanhedrin see when Stephen stood before them?
5. The Sanhedrin gave Stephen opportunity to defend himself. What two things did Stephen show them from Old Testament history?
6. Why did the Sanhedrin begin to shout and to cover their ears when Stephen told them that he saw heaven opened, and Jesus standing at God's right hand?
7. What part did Saul have in the stoning of Stephen?
8. What comfort is the story of Stephen to us?
9. After Stephen's death there was a great persecution of the church in Jerusalem. How did that persecution *help* the church?

COMPLETING SENTENCES

1. Though the apostles had been beaten by the leaders of the Jews, and though they were commanded not to _____ in the name of _____, they nevertheless obeyed their Lord's command, and _____ not to teach and preach Jesus Christ (Acts 5:40-42).

2. As a result of that preaching, the number of the disciples _____ in Jerusalem _____, and even a great company of the _____ were obedient to the _____ (Acts 6:7).

3. Soon the congregation of believers in Jerusalem must have numbered about 20,000. From the beginning, the apostles had taken care of the governing of the church. With the rapid growth, however, it became impossible for the apostles to do all of this work by themselves. This became apparent first in the care of the poor. Apparently there was need at that time for daily provision of food for the poor widows. And in the distribution of that food, some of the many widows in the church were missed. There arose then a _____ of the Grecians against the _____, because their widows were _____ in the _____ ministration (Acts 6:1).

4. Recognizing their inability to give the necessary attention both to the preaching and teaching and to the care of the poor in so large a congregation, the apostles called the multitude together and said, "It is not _____ that we should _____ the word of God, and _____ tables." As a solution to the problem, they proposed that the congregation choose _____ men of _____ report (reputation) and who are _____ of the Holy Ghost and _____, whom the apostles could then _____ to be over this _____ (of caring for the poor). This, they said, would free the apostles of this burden, so that they could give themselves to _____ and to the _____ of the Word (Acts 6:2-4).

5. The advice of the apostles pleased the _____ multitude. Seven men were then elected by the people, and set before the _____, who, when they had _____, laid their _____ on them (Acts 6:5, 6). Thus was introduced in the New Testament church the office of deacon.

6. Among those chosen to serve as the first deacons in the church of Christ was a man by the name of _____, who was not only _____ of faith and power, but also had been given the ability to do great _____ and _____ among the people (Acts 6:8).

7. Stephen soon became a prominent figure in the church, and soon also provoked the enemies of the church to anger and jealousy. A group of unbelieving Jews first began _____ with Stephen (Acts 6:9). But when they were not able to resist (that is, to argue successfully against) the _____ and the _____ by which he spoke, these wicked Jews decided instead to look for evil men who would say that they had heard Stephen speak _____ words against _____ and against _____ (Acts 6:10, 11).

8. The enemies of Stephen did not want for him a *fair* trial; for they knew that this deacon in the church of Christ had neither done nor said anything worthy of punishment. They therefore _____ up the people, before they _____ him and brought him before the _____. And then, once they had him before the Sanhedrin, they set up their _____ witnesses (Acts 6:12, 13).

9. The false witnesses came with testimony that *sounded like* what Stephen had said. Stephen had very likely argued that the ceremonial laws and the types and shadows of the old dispensation were *fulfilled* in Christ. What Stephen had done therefore was explain the *spiritual nature* of the Old Testament types. The "end" or "fulfillment" of the types, of which Stephen spoke, was quite different from the "destruction" of the temple, which his enemies accused him of promoting.

And they knew that. That's why they resorted to *false* witnesses. And they were successful. For the majority of the Jews wanted to cling to the types. They wanted the temple and its service to last forever. They were easily "stirred up" by Stephen's enemies to believe that he had spoken _____ words against this holy place and the law, and to believe that he had taught that Jesus of Nazareth would _____ the temple and change the _____ which Moses had delivered to Israel (Acts 6:13, 14).

10. Standing before the council, Stephen was so filled with the Holy Spirit that his countenance shone with supernatural light. The Sanhedrists were awe-struck, as they looked _____ on him, and saw his _____ as it had been the face of an _____ (Acts 6:15).

11. The high priest, after listening to the testimony of the false witnesses, asked Stephen, "Are these things _____?" In answer, Stephen demonstrated for the Sanhedrin how he had in fact dealt with the temple and the law, namely in close connection with God's Word; and he demonstrated from the history of the Jewish nation itself that the promise of better things to come had always been met with unbelief. It was Moses himself who had prophesied that "A _____ shall the Lord your God _____ up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye _____" (Acts 7:37). It was this Moses whom "our _____ would not _____, but _____ him from them, and in their _____ turned back again to _____" (Acts 7:39). And as for the temple, the Scriptures themselves make clear that "the most High _____ not in temples made with _____" (Acts 7:48). It was therefore only a type of better things to come.

12. Stephen then declared that the Sanhedrists themselves were the ones who were guilty of repudiating Moses and the law. "Ye _____ and uncircumcised in _____ and _____," Stephen said, "ye do always _____ the Holy Ghost.... Which of the

_____ have not your fathers _____? and they have _____ them which showed before of the _____ of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the _____ and _____: who have received the _____ by the disposition of angels, and have not _____ it" (Acts 7:51-53).

13. Thus did Stephen turn the tables. He was accused of blaspheming against the law. Stephen demonstrates that in fact *they* are guilty, by their *form worship*, of repudiating the law of God. And when they _____ these things, they were _____ to the heart and _____ on him with their _____ (Acts 7:54). They understood well that if Stephen's views would prevail, all of their precious ritual connected with worship in the temple would fall away. And they would never allow that. But they knew not how to answer him. So they simply sat and ground their teeth.

14. But then came the gospel message. Stephen looked _____ into heaven, and saw the _____ of God, and _____ standing on the right hand of God, and said, "Behold, I see heavens _____, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55, 56). No longer could the Sanhedrists sit. Hardened reprobates that they were, they would never believe or repent. Rather would they silence forever the testimony of one who professed to see evidence that Jesus was what He said He was. They therefore cried out with a _____ voice, _____ their ears, and ran upon him with one _____, and cast him out of the _____ (Acts 7:55-58).

15. Apparently the false witnesses, in keeping with the law of Moses, cast the first stones. They laid their robes at the feet of a young man whose name was _____ (Acts 7:58). Thus is introduced the man who, more than anyone else, would someday take up the work of Stephen. At this time, however, Saul is still an enemy of the church, and here he is _____ unto the death of Stephen (Acts 8:1).

16. Confident, when the stones began to fly, that he would soon be with the Master he served, Stephen said, “_____ Jesus, receive my spirit.” And then, having cried with a loud voice, “Lord, _____ not this _____ to their charge,” Stephen fell _____ (Acts 7:59, 60).

17. There followed a great _____ against the church that was at Jerusalem. In that persecution Saul soon became a leading figure. He made _____ of the church, even entering houses and _____ men and women committed them to _____ (Acts 8:1, 3).

18. That persecution, though surely grievous, served nevertheless a glorious purpose. For, because of it, the Christians were scattered abroad throughout all of Judea and _____. And they that were scattered went everywhere _____ the Word — that is, they openly confessed their faith to others whom they met. Philip went officially as an evangelist to a city in Samaria and preached Christ there. And the people with one _____ gave heed to the things Philip said, hearing him and seeing also the _____ which he did (Acts 8:1, 4-7). Thus did Christ use the persecution to bring about the beginning of obedience to His command to the church to be His witnesses not only in Jerusalem but also in all Judea, and in _____, and unto the _____ part of the earth (Acts 1:8).

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT

1. We read in Acts 6:1 that a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews occurred “when the number of disciples was multiplied.” How did the growth of the church bring about the problem of which the Grecians complained?

2. When the apostles heard about the complaint of the Grecians, they called the multitude together and said, “It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables” (Acts 6:2). What did they mean by that? What change did they propose be made in the government of the church, to take care of the problem brought to light by the Grecians?

3. In Acts 6:3 the apostles told the people what kind of men should be considered for deacons. Why, do you suppose, should deacons be men who have a reputation for honesty, and who are noted for spirituality and wisdom?

4. How did it happen that the hostility of the enemies of the church came to be directed especially at the deacon Stephen?

5. The first attempt of Stephen’s foes to destroy his influence with the people ended in failure. Can you tell from Acts 6:10 how that happened?

6. Stephen’s enemies decided next to have him tried before the Sanhedrin. With a view to that, they “suborned men...,” and they “stirred up the people” (Acts 6:11, 12). Can you explain why doing those two things was necessary if they wanted the Sanhedrin to condemn Stephen?

7. The enemies of Stephen charged him with blasphemy against the temple (Acts 6:13, 14). The truth of the matter is, however, that *they*, and the *Sanhedrin*, were the ones who were really guilty of dishonoring the temple. Can you explain how the leaders of the Jews were guilty of that?

8. After listening to Stephen’s defense (Acts 7:1-50), the Sanhedrin undoubtedly understood exactly what he meant by his teaching concerning the abolishing of the Old Testament types. Why were they so upset by that teaching? And, if they were so upset, why did they at first just gnash their teeth (Acts 7:54)?

9. Many other Christians, after Stephen, have been called to testify of their faith, and then died for that testimony. Never again, however, did it happen that faces shone during testimony; nor were the heavens again opened to reveal Jesus standing on the right hand of God. Can you think of any possible reason why the Lord did that for the first martyr?

10. Why were the Sanhedrists so enraged by Stephen’s testimony of what he saw in heaven, that they threw all their dignity to the winds?

11. How does the the time immediately after the death of Stephen demonstrate the truth of the saying that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church”?