

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

The Church Alive – The People God Uses to Spread the Gospel Acts 6:1-8

1 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. 2 So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. 3 "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. 4 "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. 6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them. 7 The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith. 8 And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

Martin Luther, the 16th century monk used by God as a catalyst for the Protestant Reformation; that time in church history where God called His people out of the apostate Roman Catholic church, a church which had destroyed its trust and dependence on the Word of God, in order to restore to the Church the true Gospel and a true saving confidence in the Word of God; this Luther once said this:

I have made a covenant with God that He sends me neither visions, dreams, nor even angels. I am well satisfied with the gift of the Holy Scriptures which give me abundant instruction and all that I need to know for both this life and for that which is to come.

When I was elementary school many years ago now, we would receive hand-written grades on a form. On this form was a place for a letter grade for the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic; but below that there was another area of grading and a different means for such grades. The subject of this area was that of things like conduct, interaction with others, promptness to classes, etc. The scale for grading generally had five categories starting with excellent, then good, then satisfactory, then needs improvement and finally, the dreaded "poor."

I share this because as we begin, I would like to exposit Luther's statement when he said, that he was "*well satisfied with the gift of the Holy Scriptures.*" I think that we at times consider the words "satisfied" or "satisfactory" as something just below that which is good or excellent. There are those things that are excellent; and then there are those things that are just satisfactory. Yet for Luther, the word "satisfied" conveyed the highest of peace, pleasure and confidence. The word, as Luther used it, means, "to give full contentment to." It can mean, "to put an end to something by more than ample provision." To be "well-satisfied" is to be abundantly willing to live under the influence or control of something." For Luther, satisfaction for what he needed to know in life was abundantly found in the Word of God; not in the Roman Catholic Church, not in his studies while in law school, not in the pursuit of seemingly extraordinary

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revelations like dreams and visions, nor even in his own reason, but in the Word of God alone. And it was this unashamed satisfaction in God’s Word alone that God used to spread the rediscovered gospel throughout Europe and eventually across the seas.

Keep this idea of being “well satisfied” with God’s Word in mind as we now look at Acts 6. Last week you heard a superb message from Jase that reminded us of the key priority of the church. Let me quote a statement from that message that best summarizes the point. Jase said, “*The life of the church hangs on the Word of God.*” I completely agree and this is the testimony of Scripture. Paul wrote to Timothy that the church is “**the pillar and support of the truth**” (1 Timothy 3:15). All things that a church might do; everything she concerns herself with is to be a vehicle through which to communicate the truth of God. That is why the apostles were concerned with eliminating the problem of those widows who were being overlooked in the daily service of food. Was it important to provide for the widows? Yes. Was the unity of the church at stake? Yes. Was this ministry to the widows of utmost importance? Yes. But not at the cost of diminishing the proclamation of the Word of God. That was the concern.

Let us be reminded that the church’s priority is not to be on children’s ministries, music ministries, fellowships, food pantries, or meeting the needs of a sinful community. Are such things important? Yes, they are. Should such things be done? Yes, they should; so long as they come after the church’s key priority, spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ. The church needs to be reminded of the words of Paul who said to a very messed up and needy church, “**For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified**” (1 Corinthians 2:2). This is not to the exclusion of secondary ministries; but it is to be the priority, or ministry of ministries.

So now we come to Acts 6. If I were to ask you, “What is Acts 6 about?” Our answers might vary initially. Maybe it is about ministering to the needs of widows. That did happen, but that is not what this chapter is about. Maybe Acts 6 is about restoring unity to the fellowship when problems arise. Well, that did happen too, but that is not what this chapter is about. Maybe Acts 6 is about how to select deacons to free up pastors and elders to do the work of teaching the Word. Well, we see some aspects of the priority that is to be given to the teaching of the Word; but again, that is not really what this chapter is about. So what is Acts 6 about? What does Luke want to accomplish in this section of his history of the early church? I submit to you that Luke wants us to know *somebody*, a particular somebody, who, like Luther, would be used of God to see the Word of God spread from place to place. Luke wants us to know a man by the name of Stephen, a man who is given much attention. Notice how Luke sets the stage for what Stephen did and said by giving to his readers a character sketch of who he is.

Beginning in verse 3, Luke records an introduction to Stephen as being of **good reputation, full of the Spirit** and **full of wisdom**. Then, looking at verse 5, we find a list of men who fit these qualifications; and who is listed first? Stephen. Is this simply by random chance, or did Luke list Stephen first on purpose? The context is clear that this is purposeful as Stephen is not only the main character of both this and the next chapter, but notice also that it is only of Stephen that Luke records two additional qualities of his character, namely that he was **full of faith** and **full of the Holy Spirit**.

But Luke is not yet finished recording the attributes of this man as we find something more recorded for us in verse 8 where we are informed that Stephen was also **full of grace** and **full of power**. So then, let me present to you Stephen, **a man of good reputation, full of the Spirit,**

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full of wisdom, full of faith, full of the Holy Spirit, full of grace and full of power. I would like to spend our time this week and next week examining these qualities and to do this because of what our text tells what happens when people of such quality step forward. We see the result of having such people in the church in verse 7 which says, **“The word of God kept on spreading and the number of disciples continued to increase greatly...”** In other words, what we have here in principle, and this is the big idea I desire for us to grab a hold of, are the kind of people God uses to spread His word. If we here at Hope CBC desire to be a church whose very life hangs on the Word of God and then who boldly communicate the word of God, then we must each be striving to be like Stephen. Let us look at the seven qualities of a person God uses to keep the Word of God spreading to the end that we might measure ourselves against these qualities. And where we find ourselves lacking, let us prayerfully determine to cultivate these qualities. And where we might be succeeding, let us prayerfully determine to excel still more to the glory of God. So, what are the qualities of character God uses to spread the good news that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners?

1. **We must be of good reputation (3)**

The first quality we see is found in verse three; described as a person of **“good reputation.”** What does it mean to be a person of good reputation? Let me take you back to Luther’s understanding of being “well-satisfied” – fully content, filled and under the influence or control of something. Here then, we find that Stephen, along with his companions were of good reputation. As we will come to see, they were persons under the control and influence of Jesus Christ; they were well satisfied with being followers of Jesus Christ and everyone knew this.

The word “reputation” means “one who bears witness or testimony of something or someone.” Literally, these were men who were known for their testimony. “Reputation” comes from the Greek *“marturoménous”* – a verb form of the noun *martus* – meaning witness or martyr. The noun form of this word is found in Acts 1:8 where we read, **“but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be my witnesses (my martures)...”** Jesus promised that He would have witnesses or martyrs and if you know the story of Stephen, then you know how apt a description this was as Stephen becomes the first martyr of the church, the first who would die for his testimony of Christ.

What was this man’s reputation or witness? The way Luke uses it, this was a witness of Jesus Christ, one who already was known for speaking of Jesus and was committed to the church. This was a man who, by reputation, was, in the words of Acts 2:42, devoted to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship to prayer and to the breaking of bread. Notice that this reputation is given to Stephen before he is given a title; before he was asked to serve the widows. Too often we desire titles and positions before we will consider serving. Sometimes the church falls into the trap of thinking we need to give people responsibility in order to make them responsible. But the principle we see here is that a Christian is to have a reputation for following Christ, and that reputation for being responsible then leads to further ministry opportunities.

I would like to exhort every Christian here this morning with this; do not pursue a ministry, or a position, or title in the church; rather pursue the fruits that come from simple obedience to Christ. At the end of your life, what is it that you want to be known for? A committed family man? Exceptionally devoted and committed wife and mother? Success in the corporate world? Maybe all you want to be known for is having stayed out of trouble. Maybe you want to be known as

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wealthy; or having had a long healthy life. Maybe what you want to be known for is having caused a bunch of trouble. But hearing the testimony of people who have pursued such things as their priority in life, they almost invariably say that they were not satisfied by such things. If we desire to possess a well-satisfied life, then we must be a people who are known for following Jesus. Listen to the apostle Paul's testimony from 2 Timothy 4:6-8

6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; 8 in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

This was Paul's reputation. What kind of person does God use to keep His word spreading? The person of good reputation, of solid Christian witness, of committed testimony of obedience to God and His Word.

To be of good reputation is to answer the question – ***"what are you known for?"*** Are you, like Stephen, a person who is trustworthy, dependable, proven in matters of godliness, an example to others of what it means to follow Christ? This is the kind of person God uses to spread the gospel. The person of good reputation is one who is well-satisfied with speaking to others about Jesus and His church. A life characterized by an apt willingness to talk to others about Jesus

2. Full of Spirit (3)

Not only did Stephen possess a good reputation, but next in verse three we read that he was, along with the other six men, a man ***"full of Spirit."*** Now, most of your translations probably read, ***"full of the Spirit"*** and if you are reading from the KJV, it says, ***"full of the Holy Spirit."*** However, the literal translation from the Greek would read simply, ***"full of Spirit."*** This very well could be referring to the Holy Spirit and I have no problem with that. However, down in verse 5, Luke is careful to actually say, ***"the Holy Spirit"*** which leads me to think we might need to understand Luke as telling us something a bit different here than simply that Stephen is ***"full of the Holy Spirit."***

But before we delve into that, let me explain this little word that is used to modify each of the remaining characteristics of Stephen. It is the word, ***"full."*** The word "full" is only used in this form 16 times in the NT. Of those 16 times, 8 of them are in the book of Acts and of those 8, 4 of them are used to describe Stephen. The word means "to be filled up; to be under dominion or control; to be well-satisfied; completed; to be abounding in something; to be covered over; or to be mature; fully developed." The concept of filling with regard to people has most to do with domination, control, or influence. What satisfies your heart? What has control over your heart? When it says Stephen was ***"full of Spirit"*** or ***"full of faith,"*** or ***"full of grace"*** and the like; it means that the thing which totally controlled, influenced and satisfied him were such things. The Bible also speaks of people who are full of rage, full of sorrow, full of joy, full of fear, full of madness, full of anger, and so on. In effect, the people having such responses were being controlled or satisfied by the emotions they expressed. What satisfied Stephen were positive, God-given qualities; the first of which is that he was ***"full of Spirit."***

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Rather than seeing this first reference as speaking of the Holy Spirit, as Luke will specifically mention this down in verse 5, I see this rather as speaking of being spiritually-minded. The kind of people God uses to spread His word are spiritually-minded people as opposed to earthly-minded. Spiritually-minded people are those who are well-satisfied with spiritual matters. They have a preoccupation with things spiritual. What does that mean? By way of question, **“what do you think about the most?”** How you answer that question lets you measure how spiritually-minded you are. Do you think more about earthly things; the cares of this world; the opportunities of this world, or do you discipline yourself to think on spiritual things. The apostle Paul exhorted the Philippians in Philippians 4:8-9 with these words:

8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. 9 The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you [you will be well-satisfied].

In other words, these things will well-satisfy your heart! Are you spiritually-minded as you come to church? Are you spiritually-minded as you go do work or school? Are you spiritually-minded as you surf the internet; go out for entertainment, or even when you simply stay home and do “nothing?” God uses spiritually-minded people to spread His Word. Do you understand how this works? It is only spiritually-minded people who will first of all, think to bring God into their circumstances and discussions and second of all, have dwelled on God and His word to the point that they have something to say. Do you have something to say about Jesus when you are with others?

You can say what you want, but we have never been introduced to Stephen before this moment. And in just a few verses, beginning in chapter 7, Stephen gives one of the most prolific accountings of Israel's history. I promise you this, what he said did not just pop out of his mouth, but was the result of a spiritually-minded man dwelling on the things of God to the end that he would have something to say about Jesus. The spiritually minded man is well satisfied to dwell on the glories and wonders of God to the end that he has something to say. This is the exhortation of Scripture as we read in 1 Peter 3:15;

But sanctify [set apart] Christ as the Lord in your hearts always being ready to make a defense [a well thought out argument] to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence...

So then, let me ask you again, **what do you think about most; and do you have something to say about Jesus?**

3. Full of Wisdom (3)

We have time for one more. The next quality listed by Luke describing the kind of people God uses to spread His Word is **“full of wisdom.”** What does it mean to be full of wisdom of *sophia*? Wisdom is simply putting one's knowledge into practice and so to be **“full of wisdom”** is to have a life well-satisfied with living by the principles and precepts of the Word of God (in

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contrast to living according to the wisdom or principles of the world). There is the world's way, and then there is God's way. The two do not line up; the two do not intersect. **There is a way,** Solomon wrote in Proverbs 16:25, **that seems right unto a man, but its end is the way of path.**

That wisdom is the putting of knowledge into practice is spoken clearly in James 3:15-17. If you will turn their and notice with me that wisdom, whether it be the worlds, or gods, results in activity. We read,

Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exists, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy.

Are you well satisfied with the wisdom, the *sophia*, of God? Let me give you an example of ungodly wisdom that is leading to every evil thing. We live in a culture dominated by the pursuit of relationships in almost any manner other than how God prescribed in the Word. Young boys and girls are "dating" in Jr. High and even now elementary school, going from partner to partner, making emotional ties and then divorcing to find someone new to better satisfy their wants. As we have see this take place, we have seen more and more couples co-habiting rather than committing to one another. The institution of marriage, designed by God is rejected now by nearly half the population. In its place is promiscuity, homosexuality, pedophilia and other perverted forms of unbiblical sexuality. That is the world's wisdom. That is not what we are to be satisfied with and those that toy with such things are not apt to spread God's Word. What is wisdom that is from God? Jeremiah 9:23-24 sums it up well saying,

23 Thus says the Lord, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; 24 but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the Lord.

We are to be "**full of wisdom**" – satisfied and controlled by the ways of God that bring life and peace. Is your life "full of wisdom"? How do you answer the question, "**what do I practice, the ways of the world, or the ways of God?**" becomes your measuring stick.

Now, we need to and here for today. And I like to close by reminding you of the three questions that I have asked; three questions that I hope you will take to heart and seek to answer.

1. What are you known for?
2. What do you think about most?
3. Whose wisdom do you practice, the world's or God's?

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Do you have the reputation, the testimony of being a follower of Jesus Christ? Of course I can only be true if you have received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Have you recognize the truths that you are a sinner; that you in and of yourself can do nothing to make yourself right with God as you have missed his mark of righteousness and holiness and perfection; as the Scripture says, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Beloved, there is no one who follows after Jesus by himself or because of himself. The only way to be a follower of Jesus is to be made alive in Jesus. If you are uncertain about being alive in Him, then your prayer this morning is simply this, *"Lord Jesus, bring me to life, that I might be a follower of You, that I might be spiritually minded, and that I might begin this day to practice Your list to Your glory. Make me to be well-satisfied with You, Your Word and Your people."*

Soli Deo Gloria

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