

**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.

Last week we began a character study of a man that Luke, the author of this account, wanted his readers to be acquainted with; that man being Stephen. We noted that whatever else this chapter may be teaching, the central character; the person we must come to know is Stephen. And when we ask ourselves why, why do we need to know this man as well as others like him, we find our answer in verse 7, words that both summarize verses 1-6, but also start verses 8-15, where we read:

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.

And the point being made is this; the kind of people God uses to keep His word spreading throughout the world are those who are like Stephen, people who are of good reputation, full of spirit, and full of wisdom (as noted in verse 3); and then also those who are full of faith, and full of the Holy Spirit (as noted in verse 5); and finally full of grace and full of power (as noted in verse 8).

These seven characteristics are not just a "Stephen" thing. We noted that the first three qualities were not only expectations of all the men that would be chosen to serve; but also that these were qualities they already were demonstrating. IN other words, they were not given responsibilities in the body of Christ to make them responsible but they were given responsibilities in the church because they had already had proven to be responsible. And then, with Stephen as an example, these were qualities these men continued to possess and exhibit. In light of such things, I submit to you that if the body of Christ today is to be effective in spreading the Word of God; and specifically, if we here at Hope CBC are to be truly a beacon of Hope, spreading the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ to Northwest Arkansas, then we must be a people who are prayerfully, purposely, and persistently persuaded to pursue such personal qualities as that of Stephen.

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

For as we pursue such qualities in our own lives, the Word of God will spread; but where we pass over such qualities; either by negligence or by disobedience (because we are called to pursue such things), the Word of God will not effectively be spread through that person or group. John Flavel, one of the great Puritan preachers, once said, **When Christ ceases to fill the heart with satisfaction, our souls will go in silent search of other lovers.** Let us dare to be a Stephen who was a person well satisfied with Jesus Christ, who loved Him, served Him, and experienced life in Him. Let us dare to be Christ’s witnesses of the great salvation that comes only through Him.

Now then, last week, we noted the first three of these characteristics. Let me briefly remind you of these along with the corresponding question I gave you by which to measure the intensity of that quality in your own life.

First, we noted that those whom God uses to spread His word are those of **“good reputation.”** We see this in verse 3. This phrase means to give a good or solid testimony of another. It means to have your life characterized by something or someone and in this case that someone is Jesus Christ. The question we must answer is this, “What are you known for? Are you known as a follower and witness of Christ? That is to be our first pursuit.

Second, the kind of person God uses to spread His word are those **“full of Spirit”.** We made mention that it would be best to understand this not as speaking of the Holy Spirit, as He will be mentioned verse 5, but rather as meaning, “to be spiritually-minded.” The kind of people God uses to spread His word are those who are thinking about God’s Word. The question we must answer is this, “What do you think about or dwell on most often? The things of God or the cares and concerns of this world?

And the third quality we noted last week was that the kind of person God uses to spread His word are those **“full of wisdom”** These are persons who are not content to just know some facts in their head about God and Jesus Christ, but rather are those who put such knowledge into action. Wisdom is simply knowledge put into practice. And godly wisdom is biblical knowledge live out in everyday life. The question I would pose here is this, **“What do I practice, the ways of the world, or the ways of God?”** This brings us to the final four qualities of the kind of person that God uses to spread His word.

4. Full of Faith (5)

“...Stephen, a man full of faith...”

Beginning in verse 5 we have qualities that are tied directly to Stephen himself; the first of which is that he was a person **“full of faith.”** To be full, that is abounding, satisfied, and saturated, with faith, is to be a person of conviction. Faith is conviction; those things that govern the thoughts and actions of a person. Stephen was a man well satisfied with the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. He did not doubt Jesus’ teachings and life but was thoroughly convinced of who Jesus was and of what Jesus did; even to the point of standing before a hostile crowd to speak the truth about Jesus.

But what was the content of Stephen’s faith? We know in part by what he reveals in his address in Acts 7. Let me briefly walk you through this for we live in a time that has little conviction concerning God, the Bible and Jesus Christ. Therefore, what we find in Acts 7 ought to govern our own convictions, helping us answer the question, “What do I really believe?” For

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what we believe, will be lived out in our lives. Let me list five things that Stephen, a man “full of faith” believed.

He believed in the Sovereignty of God (7:1-51)

This is what Acts 7 is essential about; the way that God rules history. Reading through Acts 7 reveals that one of the convictions that guided Stephen was the knowledge that all things were under God’s control. No matter how out of control things might seem to be, the believer has confidence of knowing that nothing surprises God and that He directs all things to accomplish His glory and our good. Does your life exhibit a genuine trust and faith in the sovereignty of God in all things? If not, why not?

a. He believed in Jesus as the promised Messiah (7:52)

We read these words of Stephen’s testimony in Acts 7:52, ***Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become.*** Stephen had convictions, biblical convictions about who Jesus was as the promised One to come save His people. Do you have full faith that Jesus is the only Savior, the one promised to come?

b. He believed in Jesus as the risen and exalted One (7:55-56).

Stephen continues to reveal his faith in verses 55-56 saying, *“But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”* We might want to balk at this saying, “How can it be faith if he saw Jesus at the right hand of God the faith?” Yet it was faith that allowed him to behold that sight.

c. He believed Jesus cared for him (59)

Even as Stephen faced the hardest suffering anyone might face, death by stoning, even then Stephen knew that Jesus cared for him. We read in verse 59, *“They went on stoning Stephen as he called on the Lord and said, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”* Notice here that faith offered up no complaint, no whining, just the conviction that calling upon Jesus was enough. Do you stop and remember in your dark times that Jesus cares for you?

d. He believed in the Holy Spirit (51)

Another conviction of Stephen was that He believed in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. In verse 59 he said, *“You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did.”* To Stephen, the Holy Spirit was a real person, one who could not only be listened to and followed by means of the Word of God, but also, negatively, one who could be resisted, and grieved. Remember just back in Acts 5 where Peter told Ananias that he had lied to the Holy Spirit. The person who says he has faith and yet resists the work of the Holy Spirit does not truly believe in Him. Many times we can say we believe in the Holy Spirit, but our actions and words betray our thoughts as we do not speak and act as though God of very God is present with us and in us in the person of the Holy Spirit. Do you believe in the personal presence of the Holy Spirit in your life?

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This is the faith of Stephen; this is his full faith in Jesus. How is your faith? Many who call themselves Christians would say they have faith, but they are not full of faith. Do you have mixed faith; a faith of conviction mixed with some doubt? If your faith 60 conviction - 40% doubt, 70-30%, 80-20%? Luke’s history is clear. Stephen was 100% faith. I am reminded of something I read from Spurgeon who said, “*Little faith will save a man, but little faith cannot do great things for God.*” Did Stephen do great things for God? Yes, indeed. And as we have seen, he did not practice a little faith. Spurgeon also wrote, “*Faith is the foot of the soul by which it can march along the road of the commandments.*” Did Stephen march along the road of the command of Jesus who said, “**but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses...**” (Acts 1:8)? Have you followed in the footsteps of faith or in the footsteps of doubt? In the footsteps of conviction concerning God or in the footstep of selfish preoccupation? To be “full of faith” is to ask yourself, “What do I really and fully believe about Jesus and salvation?” This brings us to our next quality...

5. Full of the Holy Spirit (5)

Not only was Stephen said to be “**full of faith**” in verse 5, but also, “**full of the Holy Spirit.**” This means that he had a life that was well satisfied with being under the influence and control of the Holy Spirit. The idea here is that Stephen was totally dominated by both faith and the Holy Spirit. To be dominated by the Holy Spirit is to be under His control. It means that one’s desire increasingly is to trust and obey. Being “full of faith” is to have full convictions about God and then being “full of the Spirit” is to obey His control. How do you know if you are full of faith? Do you do what the Spirit of God tells you do as you read the Word of God? This is to be “full of the Spirit.”

The Scriptures also speak to us of being “filled with the Spirit?” Which, like being full of the Holy Spirit, means to be under the control of the Holy Spirit. Paul says to every Christian, “. . . be filled with the Spirit” in Ephesians 5:18. Note with me back a couple chapters in Acts 4:31; turn there please. There we read, “**they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.**” To be filled or full of the Holy Spirit is not to say, “Hey, I am filled with the Spirit . . . now what am I going to do?” Rather, to be full of the Spirit is just doing what the Spirit has called you to do. You are already doing it.

A great illustration is that of a glove. When you put a hand in a glove, the glove do not say, “Oh hand, show me the way to go.” No, the glove just goes, because the hand is in it. If you are a Christian, you are a glove. If you are filled with the Spirit, you do not need to ask anything--you just need to do whatever the energy of the Spirit does in you.

6. Full of Grace (8)

Beginning in verse 8, we find the final two qualities of the kind of person God uses to spread His word. We read first in verse 8 that Stephen was **...full of grace.** What is grace? *Grace is God’s favor experienced as a result of “full faith” that motivates the believer to life for God.* The key here is that grace motivates; when you know that you are in God’s favor, you are motivated to remain in that experience. And how is grace experienced? Well, as we see here in Acts 6, grace is experienced by serving. Stephen served the church and the result was an increasing experience of God’s grace.

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But what does this grace look like? Notice that Steven did not dabble in the grace, but was full of it. We know that we are saved by grace, by God’s favor and not by our own merits. But grace not only save us, it also changes us. As Pastor John MacArthur has said, “*Grace that does not affect one’s behavior is not the grace of God.*” To be “full of grace” then is to be involved in a life of constant change; a change from the ways and behaviors of the world to the ways and behaviors of Christ.

To be full of grace then is to be a gracious person. Like Stephen, if we are people full of grace, we ought to be a pleasure to be around to the extent that we might be asked to serve widows, or the elderly, or the children, or wherever. The gracious person is a person who serves the church. And from the life of Stephen, we even learn that the person full of grace is gracious even towards those who might malign, harm or even kill us.

How was it that Stephen could respond as he did toward his murderers? If I found myself in that situation, I might be screaming all kinds of things at them! Yet Stephen was forgiving. How come? Beloved, Stephen was a man who followed Jesus, who thought on spiritual things, who followed God’s wisdom, who was full of faith and the Holy Spirit. And so, because he believed God was in control of even his death, Stephen was not concerned with trying to protect himself. He was willing to die, to be that martyr, or witness of Christ, if God so desired. This is how he could respond with grace.

We learn a lesson about being gracious. For the only way a person can ever graciously love others, even those who may be seeking him harm, is when he is not trying to protect himself. When a man really believes God, he is then able to extend grace toward everyone else, because he understands that others are only contributing to the plan of God in his life. But if a person busies himself on trying to salvage his life in some little box that he has built for himself, then he will get irritated when somebody puts a dent in it. Stephen was not concerned with protecting himself, and therefore, being full of grace he could say in effect in Acts 7:59-60, “Lord, to not hold this against them.” This is grace that comes through faith, a faith that cried out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,” because knew by faith that heaven awaited him. Beloved, every time you find or experience the grace of God, it comes to us through faith. Whoever believes God, to that one God dispenses grace. So, Stephen, being full of faith, he was also full of grace. Are you full of grace? How to you answer the question, what motivates you to love and serve both God and others? God’s favor should be the only answer.

So we have seen that the kind of people God uses to spread His word are those of good reputation or testimony of following Jesus, those who are full of spirit (being spiritually-minded), full of wisdom, full of faith, full of the Holy Spirit and full of grace. Finally then, such people are...

7. Full of power (8)

Verse 8 tells us that Stephen was also “**full of power.**” Many of you know the Greek word here for power, *dunamis* – from which we get our English word, “dynamite.” And what is dynamite? It is power, power that changes things and it does so dramatically. And how did this power of God express itself in Stephen’s life. First, and do not miss this, Stephen’s life was empowered to effect change in the church, to serve the church, to minister to the needs of the widows in the church. God so honored this service that He afforded Stephen with other opportunities to show forth the wonders of God as well as to proclaim the gospel of God.

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To be "full of power" to serve was not to be some people pleaser. The power of God marked his life, so much so that he possessed tenacity, and a boldness that enabled him to stand up for God even if it might cost him his life. And in the end, it did. To be full of power is to live a life well satisfied with living by and expressing the life changing influence of God toward others. Such a person is unashamed to be a vehicle through which the power of God is revealed to others.

How do you know if you are living by such a power? Let me ask you this question, "How do you do what you do for God?" This assumes that you are doing something for God of course, but are you doing it of your own power, as a mere duty? Jesus said that there is power to be received when the Holy Spirit comes upon the believer...to what end? To the end that that person becomes a witness of Jesus. If all you do in the name of Jesus does not witness or testify of Jesus, then it is not being done in the power of God, but in the power of man. The power of man is not able to spread the gospel; but the power of God always does.

What kind of people does God use to spread His Word? People of good reputation, full of spirit, wisdom, faith, the Holy Spirit, grace and power. Beloved, these are all expressions of the very person of Jesus Christ, who was all these things as our example. Thomas Brooks, a Puritan preacher made this pointed summary of the believer's life goal. He said, "A Christian's whole life should be nothing but a visible representation of Christ." Is that your life goal? If not, why not? If so, how might you excel still more? Let us believe in the power of God to change us into the kind of people whom He will use to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, to the glory of God and the furtherance of His kingdom of which we longingly await.

Soli Deo Gloria

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