

Introducing Stephen

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Date: 14 June 1998

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on Sunday June the 14th 1998. The preacher is Stephen Carnaby. His sermon is entitled Introducing Stephen and is from Acts chapter 6 verses 1 to 15. I've probably been doing what a lot of you have been doing. I've been looking at the Queensland election with great interest and wondering what is going to happen there. I've been hearing little bits on the radio.

I listened last night at 9 o'clock and I heard little bits and pieces. It seems that the major parties and perhaps the whole of the Queensland population were taken by surprise because One Nation Party has come out of nowhere.

Two or three years ago there wasn't a party and all of a sudden the One Nation Party has possibly grabbed 10 or 11 seats out of the parliament. It's this new organisation and it's established a regional presence in Queensland.

[1 : 09] Now it's got its eye on the national presence. And I remember back a few years ago when the same thing happened in Tasmania with the Green Party. They came out of nowhere as well, riding on the back of the environmental movement, established a presence in the Tasmanian parliament.

And it seemed to me reading the book of Acts that the church must have been a similar surprise and shock to the Jewish leaders, to the Jewish population.

Because there was this man, Jesus, who'd been going around doing a few nifty miracles and things, but they thought they'd got rid of him. They thought they'd stamped him out and certainly got rid of his organisation.

No one would dare to try anything again. But all of a sudden you've got thousands and thousands and thousands of people joining this new movement. The whole city of Jerusalem and the surrounding area is abuzz with it.

There's people joining it day after day. The whole population is pretty much in favour of this movement. They've got the goodwill of the people. They've come out of nowhere.

[2 : 16] They've surprised the leaders of the Jews who don't know exactly what to do about this movement. And I imagine if God were sitting up in heaven with his strategic business plan and ticking off things as he's going along through the different parts of the plan for humanity, he might have got to this point and thought, well, phase one completed.

This is really, really good. The establishment of the church in Jerusalem. We'll give that a big tick. That's all gone off very nice and smoothly. Now we're going to concentrate on phase two. We're going to spread wider. We're going to go national. We're going to go international. We're going to expand the church beyond Jerusalem to the Gentiles, to all the world. And that's what this next part of Acts is about, beginning at chapter six, as we look over this part of Acts over the next few weeks and months.

Now you might want to follow this along. It's on page 889 of the few Bibles. It's Acts chapter six. There are two fairly clear parts to this passage.

It begins with the choosing of the seven. Now during those days when the disciples were increasing in number, now this is in the very early part of the church, not at a specific point in time, but in the early period of the church, we see a positive thing.

[3 : 41] We see growth in the church. We see the church increasing in number day after day. Numbers like thousands and thousands are joining the church. But as we've seen, this positive thing brought a number of challenges to the church.

Earlier in Acts, we saw some of the other problems faced by the church. Opposition from the government, hypocrisy and eternal corruption with Ananias and Sapphira. And now we come to a

third problem.

And any one of these problems could quite easily have stopped the Christian church dead in its tracks. Now this third challenge has two parts, both of which are fairly tricky in their own way for the church to navigate around.

The first is an issue that currently dominates Australian politics and media. Racial tension. You might think, you know, what's this book? It's a couple of thousand years old.

What's it got to do with us? But here it is talking about the very issue that we're facing in Australia today. I mean, I've only got to mention the Queensland election, Wick, Marvo, Pauline Hanson, anything like that.

[4 : 48] And it will conjure up widely differing opinions, feelings. It will bring controversy to the surface. Now, of course, racial tension is nothing new.

And certainly it's an issue that we see worldwide at the moment. Well, it's a big issue. A very outstanding issue. So what happened in the church?

How did they handle racial tension? Did they do it well or did they do it badly? I guess they did it all right. Did they ignore it or did they handle it head on?

Did they perhaps begin some ethnic cleansing within the church? Were they split apart or were they gathered together? Sorry, just waiting for it. Now, we see that during this time when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.

The Hellenists and the Hebrews. Now, both of these groups were Jewish, but they had a number of differences. And the main difference was that of language. The Hellenists spoke Greek, which was the international language of the day.

[6 : 04] The Hebrews spoke Aramaic, and they may have known some Greek as well. The Hellenists had come back to Jerusalem from other lands. The Hebrews were natives of Jerusalem, of Palestine, the Jewish homeland.

The Hellenists had most probably been influenced by Greek customs and culture, whereas the Hebrews were thoroughly immersed in Hebrew culture.

And I suppose it's not dissimilar to differences we might find in Australia today, say, between first and second generation Australians, or those of Aboriginal and British origin, or European and Asian origin.

And as in Australia, there was an ongoing tension and rivalry between the Hellenists and the Hebrews in the Jewish culture. Unfortunately, we find this tension spilling over into the church as well.

And it's a very familiar situation to us. One racial or cultural group complains that they are being neglected in favour of another group. It's in our papers every day.

[7 : 13] And what happened was there was a daily distribution of food to the needy, particularly including widows. There was no social security system at that time, no pension to go on if you're poor or old.

And this was a very important assistance that the church was providing. It was supplied from the land or the money is donated by wealthier church members, which we see earlier in Acts.

But the twelve apostles are all Hebrews. And somehow this gives rise to a murmuring that they're favouring their own over the Hellenists.

Well, how did they handle it? Their action was quick and decisive. Sores were not allowed to fester and grow under the surface. But the problem was openly and quickly laid on the table and a solution sought with the cooperation of the whole church community, some thousands of members. Now we'll come back to their solution in a moment. But before we examine that solution to the race issue, the second prong of the problem facing the church becomes apparent.

[8 : 20] The twelve disciples called together the whole community of the disciples and said, that's not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. The apostles are facing a choice of priorities.

With the rapidly increasing numbers in the church, they could quite easily have become totally involved in the work of caring for the poor, tasks, things that needed to be done.

The church could have become an effective first century welfare agency. It's not their commission from Jesus. Go into all the world and make decisions.

That was their task. That was to be their priority in teaching and preaching. Feeding the poor was an immediate and tangible benefit. They could have felt really good about feeding the poor, all the things they could have done.

Some of you may have heard of a little booklet. It's called The Tyranny of Inner Sentence. Don't let the urgent take the place of the important.

[9 : 24] The urgent will fight and claw and scream for our attention. It'll plead for our attention. But the tragedy of it is this. While you and I were calming, it was left in a holding pattern.

And the important is not necessary. The important patiently and quietly waits for us. For us today, the apostles realised their priorities.

They realised what was extinguished between that and what was merely urgent. They find a quick and wise solution. They voted themselves to their priorities. They did not allow themselves to be sidetracked.

The task of waiting on tables and the task of preaching and teaching are both described. Neither task is of a higher status. One is not better than the other. Feeding the poor body, the apostles have a function.

They are to serve in frustrating welfare. Well, back to the racial tension. They threw the ball back to the whole church. Not abandoning their responsibilities.

[10 : 30] Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the... will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word. A board, a committee, to set aside for a specific task.

And the church appropriates this practice. Selected, needed three qualities. To be of good standing, to be full of the spirit. The church community as a whole needed to respect these leaders.

They need to be in good standing among them. I mean that perhaps in church on a Sunday he or someone in the front row or perhaps like Stephen. Is that what full of the spirit means? Well, no, probably not.

A full of the spirit refers to those who have allowed the Holy Spirit, not necessarily something that's outwardly spectacular. They show the gifts of the spirit.

And then thirdly, these seven selected needed to be wise. And also in the practical management of the distribution of food, the financial affairs of the church today would be strengthened if all of our leaders were chosen in life.

[11 : 36] What the apostles said pleased the whole community. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith from the holists, a proselyte of Antioch. The church community approved these generals.

And now this is the really interesting bit. In an issue of racial tension in power, each ethnic group gets a certain number of members in order to keep an eye on each other.

It says much about the climate of the early church. All seven chosen have Greek names. And it's pretty unlikely that any of them as a solution to this problem, so that no bias towards the Hebrews can be found to distribute welfare to both groups.

Effectively, they're saying, we trust you of any problem, any favouritism can be found. Stand before the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them.

So another problem in the early church has arisen. Another problem is through the minefield of problems that have come up. And the results of their skill in the word of God continued to spread.

[12 : 45] The number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem. The movement's becoming so influential that even a number of the priests might liken it to, say, a few of the Liberal and Labor and National Party going over to one nation.

And then the Hellenistic section of the church is readied, is prepared. We come now to the ministry and the arrest of Stephen. The event, which sparks wholesale persecution of Christians in Jerusalem, gathering doesn't lead to the death of Christianity as you might expect.

You might think, well, on their own or they'll be in small groups, they'll just die out. Their faith will dwindle. It'll be no more. The intention of Christianity throughout the known world. Now, I don't want to steal but this little section will serve to give an introduction to Stephen.

Stephen the man. Now, from this little cameo from verses 8 to 15, Stephen not only has a particular thing. Phil and Paul can say these things when it's their turn. Now, as all the seven chosen were.

But he's also described as a man of power. And then he did great wonders and signs among the people. Something like that. But presumably, they were some sort of supernatural opposing speaker who overcomes opposition in debate.

[14:10] Then just in case you had any of an angel. Now, I've never seen an angel and I was kind of hoping that it might show on the video of it. An angel. Someone said actually that my face looked like the face of an angel in the early service and I thought it was probably the little light.

But I guess we can only guess that something about Stephen at this point was not of this world. The face had a glow about it. Certainly, Stephen is shown to be a man of extraordinary gifts.

He did great wonders and signs among the people. We're still holding the Christian church in great esteem as they had been through the early part of it.

Begin to reach out to the Hellenistic Jews with the Christian message. And this is critical for the rest of the church because if one of their leaders is convicted of blessed him, then the same fate most likely is going to befall the whole Christian church.

I suppose. For some reason, Stephen provokes fierce opposition amongst some former Roman slaves who had now been set free and those from a number of nationalities as a downward spiral.

[15:17] That's a pattern that you can see around the world to discredit and eliminate their opponents. Well, they begin with attempted debate, trumped up legal charges.

In verse 9, we see some of those and others from Silesia and Asia stood up and argued with Stephen. But they couldn't withstand the wisdom and Stephen's views perhaps in the local synagogue, perhaps outside of that, had aroused the eye of some sort of public debate.

This debate probably focused on the Messiah's law and the temple. Now, earlier in Luke, Jesus had promised upon to defend themselves. And we see in these verses that Jesus has come through for Stephen inspired by the Spirit, was too much for these men in a public debate.

Let's spread some false rumours. Let's throw some mud. See if it sticks. In verse 11, they say words against Moses and God. They accuse Stephen of blasphemy against Moses, who was symbolic of the Lord's worship in the temple.

These were two of the primary symbols of Jewish nationalism situation, where the Jews are under Roman occupation. Nationalism, nationalistic fervour, is running high.

[16:38] And they take it a step further and bring Stephen before the Jewish leaders on these charges. And they suddenly confronted him, seized him, and brought him before the council. They set up false witnesses, who said, Well, as with all false charges, there's an element of the truth that's been twisted around.

And this charge is the same as against Jesus, accused him of having said that he would destroy the temple and build a number. In John chapter 2, were, Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it.

So the charge is not true. Stephen appears to have been teaching what Jesus said and may well have gone further in speaking the law of Moses, but in some cases superseded it and certainly challenged the Jewish oral.

Jesus concentrated on the law of the heart. Not just the letter of the law, but had now lost some of its significance with the death and resurrection of Jesus. This was now the saving sacrifice of worship and relationship with God.

And in Jesus, this element of truth but twisted the meaning and missed the fact that Jesus came not to tear the ear up. And all who sat in the council looked intently at Stephen.

[18:02] This verse indicates God's approval of Stephen. Stephen being close to God in three part of Acts. And this chapter is no exception. It's clear that God was closely at numerous points.

The church could have stumbled and fallen. It could have been relegated. Yet through all these events, the good, the bad, God is preparing his church to every point. And we can clearly see the truth of the words that this undertaking is of human origin.

It will fail. But if it is of God, we can be found to be fighting against God. We can be encouraged to overcome and work through these problems.

God can bring them together. Let's pray. We thank you that it was your plan from the beginning, your design, that you brought it to strength.

Lord, we thank you for all that we can trust in your guidance, in your leadership of the church, Lord. In Jesus' name. God, in Jesus' name.

[19:15] Let's pray. May I be educated in your mentor. Lord, I hope I read on this church and what we take look good for and on this church. Let's pray.

Let's pray. Let's pray.