THE FIRST CHURCH LEADERS

Lesson 4 for
July 28, 2018

The growth of the early Church was extraordinary. Thousands joined the church, including some priests.

However, some problems arose between the brothers and sisters. These problems needed to be addressed and solved before they caused division.

Appointing capable leaders solved those problems and contributed to fulfilling the mission of the Church.

1. Appointing leaders. Acts 6:1-7
2. Stephen's ministry:
   - Preaching and opposition. Acts 6:8-15
   - Speech and warning. Acts 7:1-53
   - Vision and death. Acts 7:54-8:2
3. Philip's ministry:
   - Samaria. Acts 8:3-25
   - "To the ends of the earth." Acts 8:26-40

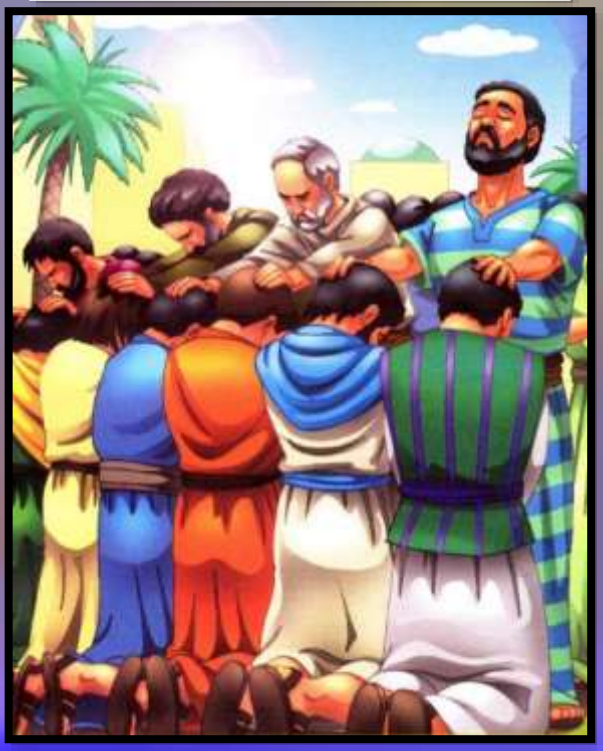
APPOINTING LEADERS

Acts 6:1-7

"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." (Acts 6:5)

THE PROBLEM

All the believers in this case were Jews, but some of them came from outside Judea. Those "Greeks" complained about discrimination against them in the distribution of aid for the widows.



THE SOLUTION

The apostles suggested that leaders be appointed who would "serve [*diakineō*] tables" while they gave themselves to the "ministry [*diakonia*] of the word." Those deacons would serve the physical and spiritual needs of the Church.

THE APTITUDE

The leaders to be appointed by the Church should have a good testimony, be full of the Holy Spirit and have wisdom.

PREACHING AND OPPOSITION

Acts 6:8-15

"And Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people." (Acts 6:8)

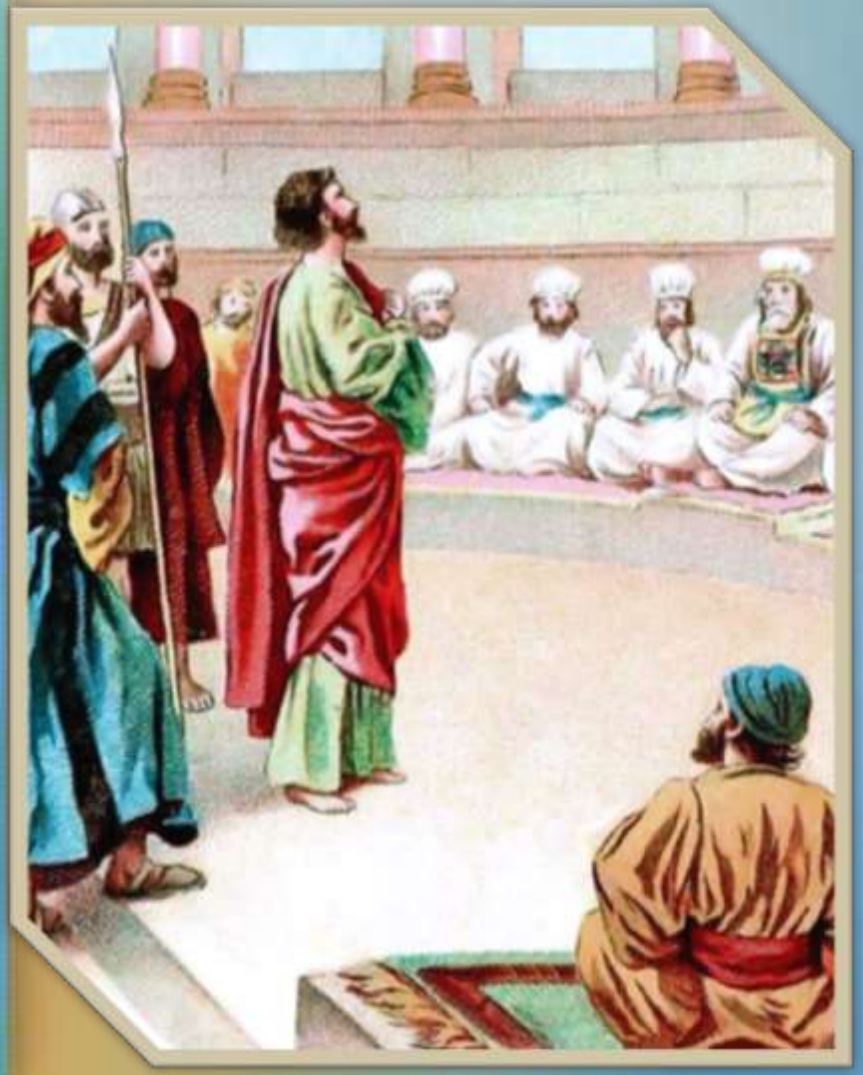
In addition to taking care of the Church, Stephen also preached to the Jews that were not born in Judea.

He found strong opposition in the synagogue. Those opposing him could not contradict his argument (v. 10), so they bribed false witnesses to accuse him before the Sanhedrin (v. 11)

They accused him of speaking against Moses and the temple (v. 14). That implies that Stephen was probably saying that Jesus is the Lamb who takes away sin (and makes the sacrifices of the temple no longer necessary)

SPEECH AND WARNING (I)

"You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you." (Acts 7:51)



Stephen defended himself by talking about how God took care of *OUR* fathers.

The Sanhedrin was rejecting his message, so Stephen stopped his sermon.

Then, he admonished them harshly (v. 51). He detached himself from the Jewish leaders by talking about *THEIR* parents. They killed the Messiah like their parents killed the prophets in the past. There was no call to repentance in Stephen's warning.

The Sanhedrin sealed the destiny of Israel by rejecting Stephen's work.

SPEECH AND WARNING (II)

Stephen's speech follows the same pattern the old prophets used. Let's compare it to Micah 6.

God's covenant with His people
- Micah 6:1-2
- Acts 7:2-8

The powerful acts of God
- Micah 6:3-5
- Acts 7:9-36

The clauses of the covenant and its violation
- Micah 6:6-12
- Acts 7:37-50

The curse after violating the covenant
- Micah 6:13-16
- Acts 7:51-53

VISION AND DEATH

Acts 7:54-8:2

"But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God."
(Acts 7:55)

Stephen changed his speech because of the antagonistic attitude of the members of the Sanhedrin.

In that moment, Stephen received a vision of the exalted Jesus. He understood that those who were judging him on Earth will be judged one day before the Heavenly Judge.

He prayed his last prayer while being stoned. A prayer of mercy for the ones killing him.

That prayer left its imprint in the mind of one witness: Saul of Tarsus.

SAMARIA

"Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them." (Acts 8:5)

Acts 8:3-25

After Stephen's death, Saul led an attack against the Church. Many Christians had to leave Jerusalem to save their lives.

Philip went down to Samaria, thus fulfilling the mission Jesus had commissioned (Acts 1:8)

The Samaritans accepted the Pentateuch (the first five books of Moses) and were expecting the Messiah, but their religion was mixed with paganism.

When they heard Philip and saw the miracles he performed, many accepted Jesus. Peter and John were sent to see what was happening there. Thanks to them many Samaritans received the Holy Spirit. They became members of the Christian Church.

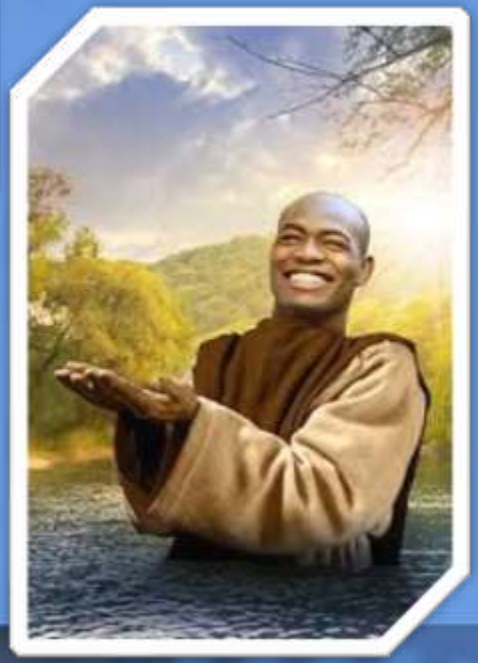
"TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH"

Acts 8:26-40

"Now an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, 'Arise and go toward the south along the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.' This is desert." (Acts 8:26)

Philip was called from preaching to the crowds to preach to one person.

An Ethiopian treasurer needed to understand the Gospel, so he could preach it in Africa.



The Church could not stop in Judea or Samaria. The message of salvation had to reach all the Earth.

Philip baptized the Ethiopian and was carried to Azotus. He preached all over the Mediterranean border up to Caesarea. Many people accepted the Gospel and preached it in distant lands.

E.G.W. (Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing, cp. 2, p. 33)

"In every age God's chosen messengers have been reviled and persecuted, yet through their affliction the knowledge of God has been spread abroad. Every disciple of Christ is to step into the ranks and carry forward the same work, knowing that its foes can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth. God means that truth shall be brought to the front and become the subject of examination and discussion, even through the contempt placed upon it. The minds of the people must be agitated; every controversy, every reproach, every effort to restrict liberty of conscience, is God's means of awakening minds that otherwise might slumber."