



**Acts: The Story Continues**  
**Week 3: Unity and Diversity**  
**April 21, 2024**

*Bring any notes you may have (Engage & Grow, notes from reading Acts 6-8, etc.)*

**Icebreaker:** When do you feel God's presence most?

**Opening Discussion:** What do you recall, or what stands out to you from Sunday's message?

**Digging Deeper:**

**Read Acts 6:1-7**

As many people from all sorts of different backgrounds are beginning to follow Jesus, a particular subset of disciples (the Hellenists - Greek-speaking Jewish people) voiced some displeasure that their widows were being forgotten about as goods were being distributed. "The Twelve" respond not by getting defensive but by setting up a system where duties are divided, ensuring that those who are inside of the community of faith are cared for through this new care ministry while maintaining the care of people outside of the community of faith through the preaching of the word of God. The full number of disciples then selected seven men, who were already serving God and His people and displayed certain characteristics, to be appointed for a specific duty. Their role isn't one that we would necessarily deem "desirable" or "coveted" because there isn't a lot of recognition or applause involved, yet these men were faithful in serving. And as a result, God used mundane tasks to increase discipleship and the faithfulness of others (see **Acts 6:7**).

- The care ministry that was set up here serves the preaching ministry of the apostles. Likewise, the preaching ministry of the apostles serves the caring ministry. In what ways are you tempted to see one area of ministry as more important than another? What steps can you take to see how all ministries unite in service to God's Kingdom?

- Why do you think the author saw fit to highlight the character of Stephen? Why would he do that with *only* Stephen?
- What do you think it means that a large number of priests “became obedient to the faith”?

### ***Read Acts 6:8-15***

Although seven were chosen in the previous few verses, here we see Stephen singled out as God’s instrument to perform miracles (the first man to do so other than the apostles). This drew the attention of five different nationalities (the Freedmen/Libertine’s, the Cyrenians, the Alexandrians, and those from Cilicia and Asia) who were united in disputing with him. Being filled with wisdom and the Holy Spirit, Stephen prevailed. The opponents then devised a plan. They stirred up a hostile crowd of the people and the authorities, with previously selected men to bear false witness against Stephen, accusing him of the worst crime known in the Jewish legal code: blasphemy (against God, against Moses and the law, and against the Temple). All eyes then turn to Stephen, whose face shone with supernatural radiance and power.

- If Stephen was chosen to serve tables, why do you think he’s now “doing great wonders and signs among the people” in **verse 8**?
- Read **Matthew 26:57-65**. What similarities are there between Jesus’s trial and Stephen’s trial? What does this tell you about the opposition you will encounter?

### ***Read Acts 7:54-60***

Stephen addresses the charges against him by refuting each one in detail (**Acts 7:1-53**), boldly highlighting how the Old Testament points to Jesus. Enraged at his reply, the people threw Stephen out of the city and stoned him to death. In this we see that God had taken Stephen, who was willing to work humbly in the shadows, to do a mighty work for His Kingdom.

- Jesus is often described as sitting at the right hand of God. What is the significance of Stephen’s vision of him now *standing* at God’s right hand?

- With Stephen's final breath he prays urgently and fervently for forgiveness for those who are persecuting him. What do you think is the significance of him having done this "with a loud voice"?

### ***Read Acts 8:1-8***

The death of Stephen and increased persecution of the church caused Christians in Jerusalem to scatter. Yet where the persecution intended to eradicate the young church, God's sovereignty ensured that it did the exact opposite. In fleeing to the regions of Judea and Samaria, we see the beginnings of Jesus's promise in **Acts 1:8** being fulfilled.

Samaria specifically was a region that was detested by the Jews even during the ministry of Jesus. In fact, there had been so much tension between the Jews and the Samaritans that a Jewish person would rather travel a longer route around Samaria than travel through it. So Philip (one of the seven men chosen to serve tables in **Acts 6:5**) proclaiming to the Samaritans that Jesus is the Christ shows that the gospel overlooks any bad blood and meets the outsider.

- Who are the "Samaritans," the outsiders, in your life that God may be directing you toward?

### ***Read Acts 8:9-25***

Since the Israelites had returned from captivity in Babylon in the 530's BC, a chasm existed between the Jews and the Samaritans. In this text, though, we see the chasm being bridged by the Word of God! And this word was proclaimed not by an apostle, but by Philip, a former server of tables. As a result, such a large number of Samaritans believed in the gospel message that word was spread all the way back to the remaining church in Jerusalem! The apostles then send Peter and John to Samaria with the mission of conveying the unity between those who were formerly Jewish and those who were formerly Samaritans in the Body of Christ.

Peter and John pray for the believers in Samaria to receive the Holy Spirit, for it is the Spirit who unites the Church as one. That is not to say that they did not have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as a result of their baptism, but that external gifts of the Spirit and the laying on of the apostle's hands were needed to make the spiritual unity of all believers apparent. In the days when the ethnic boundaries of Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles firmly separated people, it is no wonder that the Spirit waited for the arrival of these apostles to clearly display His power in the Samaritans.

- In **verses 18-19** we see Simon the Magician supposing that the power of the Spirit may be purchased, and he was severely reprimanded for regarding the Holy Spirit as a mere mysterious effect. What are some modern equivalents in our culture of Simon's supposition?
- Give an example of when you've seen God bring unity in seemingly impossible circumstances, as He did with those from Jewish and Samaritan backgrounds here?

**Read Acts 8:26-40**

Even though the Ethiopian eunuch is described as someone who worships God, the fact that he is not an Israelite means that he would be considered a Gentile by the Jews. So in this section we see where the gospel has spread from the Jews to the "half-Jews" (Samaritans) now to the Gentiles. Furthermore, the fact that the angel was sent to instruct Philip on where to go instead of instructing the eunuch as to the meaning of the Scriptures tells us that God has bestowed the office of the ministry upon ordinary people!

Following the prompting of the Holy Spirit, Philip helps the eunuch understand the prophecy concerning Jesus in **Isaiah 53:7-8**. The physical mutilation of eunuchs barred them from entering the inner Temple courts (**Deuteronomy 23:1**). Yet the message in the Isaiah text of God's Suffering Servant speaks of the full satisfaction and atonement of Jesus as our substitute. Upon hearing this good news the eunuch then finds water in the middle of the desert and asks to be baptized, whereby he receives the Holy Spirit.

- Who has been like Philip in your life, helping you understand the Gospel?
- Read **Isaiah 56:3-5**. In light of the fulfillment of the prophecy that Philip had just explained, how do you think the Ethiopian eunuch would have responded to reading God's promise in **Isaiah 56:3-5**?

**Moving Forward:** How might God use you to overcome cultural and/or geographical barriers as He did with Stephen and Philip?

**Prayer**

**Next Session:** *Bring your Engage & Grow notebooks from Sunday and read Acts 9-12.*