

THE ONCE AND FUTURE CHURCH
#9: Full of the Spirit and Wisdom
April 1-3, 2006

^{6:1}In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ²So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." ⁵This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶They presented them to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith. ⁸Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called)—Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia—who began to argue with Stephen. ¹⁰But they could not stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke. ¹¹Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." ¹²So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. ¹³They produced false witnesses, who testified, "This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. ¹⁴For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us." ¹⁵All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an angel. ^{7:1}Then the high priest asked Stephen, "Are these charges true?" ²To this he replied: "Brothers and fathers, listen to me! . . . [Stephen's Bold Sermon] . . . ⁵¹"You stiff-necked people! Your hearts and ears are still uncircumcised. You are just like your ancestors: You always resist the Holy Spirit! . . . ⁵⁴When the members of the Sanhedrin heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶"Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.

^{8:1}And Saul approved of their killing him. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. ²Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. ³But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. *Acts 6:1-8:3 TNIV*

Introduction: The Apostles "signs and wonders" facilitate the growth of the church, but the real ministry is accomplished by the people. God uses people "full of the Spirit and wisdom" to lead the way.

- I. Longer than the the Apostles' Arms
 - A. Controversy arose in the church because important ministries were being neglected.
 - B. The Apostles knew that their primary mission was teaching God's Word and prayer (i.e., the church's spiritual health).
 - C. The time had come to "equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Ephesians 4:11-12).
- II. Set Aside by the Apostles' Hands
 - A. At the Apostles' instruction, seven men were chosen to be set aside for special ministry.
 - B. The only qualifications of these first deacons were that they be "of good standing" and "full of the Spirit and wisdom," and the Bible still lists only Spiritual qualifications for deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13).
 - C. The Apostles' set aside these first deacons by laying their hands on them.
 - D. The church grew dramatically!
- III. At the Right Hand of God
 - A. The most significant among those chosen was Stephen, "a man full of God's grace and power."
 - B. Stephen is the first person mentioned in Acts other than the Apostles' to have "performed wonders and signs" and preach a sermon among the people.
 - C. The extension of the church's influence concerned the religious officials, who framed Stephen and had him stoned.
 - D. Stephen's martyrdom, the first in church history, mirrors the death of Jesus Christ.
- IV. The Reach of the Church Extended
 - A. The persecution that followed Stephen's martyrdom and was led by Saul scattered the "ministers" of the church.
 - B. According to Acts 8:4, those who were scattered preached the Word wherever they went, and the church grew!

Conclusion: God still sets aside persons full of the Spirit and wisdom and uses persecution and difficulty to scatter the seed of the church into His fields. The church is about signs and wonders!