

November 22, 2012  
Acts 7

What's up Christ Community? Danny Jacobson here again, coming at you with the November 22<sup>nd</sup> daily reading. We are still in Acts, and today we read in Acts 6 and 7.

We came to an end of the first major section in Acts. It ends with the opposition to the early church hardening, and climaxes with the execution by stoning of the first Christian martyr – Stephen.

Stephen, Philip, and some others were chosen by the apostles to care for the physical and benevolent needs of the early church in Jerusalem. Their accepting this mundane ministry allowed for the network to continue growing so rapidly. Their job was basically to distribute food to the widows in the church.

As the church grew, ministry responsibilities needed to be more spread out and decentralized among a larger and larger group of people. It was obvious that the apostles had a clear structure of priorities, prayer and spreading the Gospel of Jesus. These were the things that they were going to give their time and energy. Others, who were filled with the Spirit and wisdom, were charged with other important and often time consuming ministries in the church.

In this early period of the church, we see that ministry was an “all hands on” ministry. Not just for the leaders. Everyone would distribute pastoral care. In the American church today, this has been forgotten. We see that because the apostles were able to train up new leaders for different areas, the church was able to keep on growing despite the hostile environment.

Most of our reading today covered the charges against Stephen, his defense, and ultimately, his sentencing. These charges were pretty familiar: blasphemy against God and the Law of Moses and disrespect for the Temple, which is where, according to the Jews, God lived. *“He follows Jesus,”* they cried, *“and says that Jesus is going to change the customs we have gotten from Moses.”*

I remember the first time I read this I thought...“why is Stephen giving such a boring speech in his defense for his life!?” But as you read it with a little more attention, you use that his defense is both instructive and inspiring. He's giving a history lesson. He's reminding them of their own national story and he's focusing on some of the greatest men in the line of the Hebrew race – Abraham, Joseph, Moses and Solomon. Let's think a little bit about Stephen's defense. It may help us understand why they were so infuriated to the point of stoning him.

First, Stephen talks to them about Father Abraham – The race of the Jews had begun with Abraham. Stephen reminds them that Abraham was not a preserver of the status quo, or a guardian of history of custom. God's word to Abraham was “go out” and “walk by faith.” He was a man of faith and adventure who obeyed the

word of God, even if it meant leaving the security of the ways had always known. This was not a welcoming message. God appeared to Abraham and he listened. Stephen was telling them that "they aren't acting anything like him." Stephens point was that Abraham had no clue where he was going or how it was going to happen. He just knew that he needed to obey God.

Next, Stephen recounts the story of Joseph. He recited the actions of Joseph's brothers, and brings up that, despite or their malice, "God was with him." This may have been a reference to his own situation and to the confidence he had in the providence of God. Joseph's wisdom is placed in contrast to the lack of wisdom being displayed by the high priest and the leaders of the Jews.