

The First Church Leaders



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 6, Acts 7:48, Heb. 5:11–14, Micah 6:1–16, Acts 7, Acts 8:4–25.*

Memory Text: “The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (*Acts 6:7, NRSV*).

Many converts at Pentecost were Hellenistic Jews; that is, Jews from the Greco-Roman world who now were living in Jerusalem (*Acts 2:5, 9–11*). Despite being Jews, they were different from Judean Jews—the “Hebrews” mentioned in *Acts 6:1*—in many respects, the most visible difference being that usually they were not acquainted with Aramaic, the language then spoken in Judea.

There were several other differences, too, both cultural and religious. For having been born in foreign countries, they had no roots in Judean Jewish traditions, or at least their roots were not as deep as those of Judean Jews. They were presumably not so much attached to the temple ceremonies and to those aspects of the Mosaic law that were applicable only to the land of Israel.

Also, for having spent most of their lives in a Greco-Roman environment and having lived in close contact with Gentiles, they naturally would be more willing to understand the inclusive character of the Christian faith. In fact, it was many Hellenistic believers that God used to fulfill the command of bearing witness to the entire world.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 28.

The Appointment of the Seven

Read Acts 6:1. What was the complaint of the Hellenistic believers?

“The cause of complaint was an alleged neglect of the Greek widows in the daily distribution of assistance. Any inequality would have been contrary to the spirit of the gospel, yet Satan had succeeded in arousing suspicion. Prompt measures now must be taken to remove all occasion for dissatisfaction, lest the enemy triumph in his effort to bring about a division among the believers.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 88.

The solution proposed by the apostles was that the Jews choose seven men from among themselves to “serve [*diakoneō*] tables” (*Acts 6:2*), while they would spend their time in prayer and the “ministry [*diakonia*] of the word” (*Acts 6:4*). Since *diakoneō* and *diakonia* belong to the same word-group, the only real difference is between “tables” in *Acts 6:2* and “the word” in *Acts 6:4*. This, together with the adjective “daily” (*Acts 6:1*), seems to point to the two main elements of the early church’s daily life: teaching (“the word”) and fellowship (“tables”), the latter consisting of the communal meal, the Lord’s Supper, and prayers (*Acts 2:42, 46; 5:42*).

That is, as the authoritative trustees of Jesus’ teachings, the apostles would occupy themselves mostly with the believers’ doctrinal teaching and with prayer, while the Seven would be in charge of the fellowship activities, in the several house-churches. Their duties, however, were not limited to those of deacons as this term is understood today. They were in fact the first congregation leaders of the church.

Read Acts 6:2–6. How were the Seven chosen and commissioned to service?

The candidates were to be distinguished by moral, spiritual, and practical qualities: they should have an honorable reputation and be filled with the Spirit and wisdom. With the community’s approval, the Seven were selected and then commissioned through prayer and laying on of hands. The rite seems to indicate public recognition and the bestowal of authority to work as deacons.

It’s so easy to sow dissension in the ranks, isn’t it? How can we do all in our God-given power to keep peace among us and to focus, instead, on mission?

Stephen's Ministry

After their appointment, the Seven engaged not only in church ministry but also in effective witnessing. The result was that the gospel continued to spread, and the number of believers kept increasing (*Acts 6:7*). This growth started, of course, to bring opposition to the early church. The narrative then focuses on Stephen, a man of rare spiritual stature.

Read Acts 6:8–16. What do these verses teach us about Stephen and his faith and character? Also, what was Stephen preaching that so enraged his opponents?

As a Hellenistic Jew, Stephen shared the gospel in the Hellenistic synagogues of Jerusalem. There were several such synagogues in the city; Acts 6:9 probably refers to two of them, one of southern immigrants (Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria) and one of northern immigrants (those from Cilicia and Asia).

Jesus was no doubt the central issue of the debates, but the charges raised against Stephen indicate an understanding on his part of the gospel and its implications that perhaps surpassed that of the Judean believers. Stephen was accused of speaking blasphemies against Moses and God; that is, against the law and the temple. Even if he was misunderstood on some points—or his words were deliberately twisted—and false witnesses were induced to speak against him, the charges may not have been totally false, as in the case of Jesus Himself (*Mark 14:58, John 2:19*). Stephen's explicit condemnation of the Sanhedrin for the idolatrous veneration of the temple (*Acts 7:48*) reveals that he understood the deeper implications of the death of Jesus and where it would lead, at least in regard to the temple and its ceremonial services.

In other words, while perhaps many Jewish believers of Judean origin were still too attached to the temple and other ceremonial practices (*Acts 3:1; 15:1, 5; 21:17–24*) and were finding it difficult to abandon them (*Gal. 5:2–4, Heb. 5:11–14*), Stephen, and perhaps the other Hellenistic believers as well, quickly understood that Jesus' death signified the end of the entire temple order.

Why must we be careful not to be so locked into some of our cherished notions that we close out new light when it comes?

Before the Sanhedrin

Read Acts 7:1–53. What was Stephen saying to his accusers?

The charges raised against Stephen led to his arrest and trial by the Sanhedrin. According to Jewish tradition, the law and the temple services were two of the three pillars upon which the world rests—the last being good works. The mere insinuation that the Mosaic ceremonies had become outdated was truly considered an assault on that which was most sacred in Judaism; hence, the charge of blasphemy (*Acts 6:11*).

Stephen’s response is the lengthiest speech in Acts, which by itself is an indication of its significance. Though at first sight it seems nothing more than a tedious recital of Israel’s history, we should understand the speech in connection with the Old Testament covenant and the way the prophets used its structure when they stood up as religious reformers to call Israel back to its requirements. When that happened, they sometimes employed the Hebrew word *riḇ*, whose best translation is probably “covenant lawsuit,” to express the idea of God as taking legal action against His people because of their failure to keep the covenant.

In Micah 6:1, 2, for example, *riḇ* occurs three times. Then, following the pattern of the Sinai covenant (*Exodus 20–23*), Micah reminds the people of God’s mighty acts on their behalf (*Micah 6:3–5*), the stipulations and violations of the covenant (*Micah 6:6–12*), and finally the curses for the violations (*Micah 6:13–16*).

This is probably the background of Stephen’s speech. When asked to explain his actions, he made no effort to refute the charges nor to defend his faith. Instead, he raised his voice in the same way the ancient prophets did when they brought God’s *riḇ* against Israel. His long review of God’s past relationship with Israel was intended to illustrate their ingratitude and disobedience.

Indeed, by Acts 7:51–53 Stephen is no longer the defendant but God’s prophetic attorney presenting God’s covenant lawsuit against these leaders. If their fathers were guilty of slaying the prophets, they were even more so. The change from “our fathers” (*Acts 7:11, 19, 38, 44, 45*) to “your fathers” (*Acts 7:51*) is significant: Stephen broke his solidarity with his people and took a definite stand for Jesus. The cost would be enormous; yet, his words reveal no fear nor regret.

When was the last time you needed to take a firm and uncompromising stand for Jesus? Did you, or did you waffle instead? If the latter, what needs to change?

Jesus in the Heavenly Court

Since by definition a prophet (in Hebrew, *nāḥî*) is someone who speaks for God, Stephen became a prophet the very moment he brought God's *riḥ* against Israel. His prophetic ministry, however, was rather short.

Read Acts 7:55, 56. What was the meaning of Stephen's vision?

“When Stephen reached this point, there was a tumult among the people. When he connected Christ with the prophecies and spoke as he did of the temple, the priest, pretending to be horror-stricken, rent his robe. To Stephen this act was a signal that his voice would soon be silenced forever. He saw the resistance that met his words and knew that he was giving his last testimony. Although in the midst of his sermon, he abruptly concluded it.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 100.

While Stephen stood before the Jewish leaders discharging God's case against them, Jesus was standing in the heavenly court—that is, in the heavenly sanctuary, next to the Father, an indication that the judgment on earth was but an expression of the real judgment that would take place in heaven. God would judge the false teachers and leaders in Israel.

This explains why the call to repentance, a common feature in the previous speeches in Acts (2:38, 3:19, 5:31), is missing here. Israel's theocracy was coming to an end, meaning that the world's salvation would no longer be mediated through national Israel as promised to Abraham (*Gen. 12:3, 18:18, 22:18*), but through the followers of Jesus, Jew and Gentile, who were now expected to leave Jerusalem and witness to the world (*Acts 1:8*).

Read Acts 7:57–8:1, 2. How does Luke report Stephen's death?

Stoning was the penalty for blasphemy (*Lev. 24:14*), though it is not clear whether Stephen was sentenced to death or lynched by a crowd of fanatics. At any rate, he was the first recorded believer in Jesus to be killed because of his faith. That the witnesses laid their garments at Saul's feet suggests he was the leader of Stephen's opponents; yet, when Stephen prayed for his executioners, he prayed for Saul, as well. Only a person with a superior character and unwavering faith could do such a thing, a powerful manifestation of his faith and the reality of Christ in his life.

The Spread of the Gospel

The triumph over Stephen ignited a massive persecution against the believers in Jerusalem, no doubt instigated by the same group of opponents. The leader of the group was Saul, who caused no small damage to the church (*Acts 8:3, 26:10*). The persecution, however, was turned to good effect.

Indeed, scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, the believers went about preaching the gospel. The command to witness in those areas (*Acts 1:8*) was then fulfilled.

Read Acts 8:4–25. What lessons are revealed in this account?

The Samaritans were half-Israelites, even from the religious standpoint. They were monotheists who accepted the first five books of Moses (the Pentateuch), practiced circumcision, and expected the Messiah. To the Jews, however, Samaritan religion was corrupted, which means the Samaritans had no share whatsoever in the covenant mercies of Israel.

The unexpected conversion of Samaritans astounded the church in Jerusalem, so the apostles sent out Peter and John to assess the situation. God's withholding the Spirit until the coming of Peter and John (*Acts 8:14–17*) was probably meant to convince the apostles that the Samaritans were to be accepted as full members of the community of faith (see *Acts 11:1–18*).

It didn't stop there, however. In Acts 8:26–39, we have the story of Philip and the Ethiopian, a eunuch, who after a Bible study requested baptism. "Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him" (*Acts 8:38, NIV*).

First there were the Samaritans, then the Ethiopian, a foreigner who had come to Jerusalem to worship, and was now on his way home. The gospel was crossing the borders of Israel and reaching the world, as predicted. All this, though, was just the beginning, as these early Jewish believers would soon travel all over the known world and preach the great news of the death of Jesus, who paid the penalty for their sins and offers everyone, everywhere, the hope of salvation.

Peter told Simon that he was "poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity" (*Acts 8:23, NKJV*). What was the solution for his problem, and for anyone who might be in a similar situation?

Further Thought: “The persecution that came upon the church in Jerusalem resulted in giving a great impetus to the work of the gospel. Success had attended the ministry of the word in that place, and there was danger that the disciples would linger there too long, unmindful of the Saviour’s commission to go to all the world. Forgetting that strength to resist evil is best gained by aggressive service, they began to think that they had no work so important as that of shielding the church in Jerusalem from the attacks of the enemy. Instead of educating the new converts to carry the gospel to those who had not heard it, they were in danger of taking a course that would lead all to be satisfied with what had been accomplished. To scatter His representatives abroad, where they could work for others, God permitted persecution to come upon them. Driven from Jerusalem, the believers ‘went everywhere preaching the word.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 105.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Read carefully the Ellen G. White quote above about the dangers the early church faced in regard to being satisfied with themselves and what was accomplished through them. First, it means that, contrary to popular notions, many Jews did indeed accept Jesus as the Messiah. But even more important, what warning should we as a people take away from this today? How can we be sure that we aren’t getting too caught up in protecting what we already have, as opposed to doing what we really should be doing—reaching out to the world?
- 2 By the time of the apostles, the relations between Jews and Samaritans were marked by centuries of fierce hostilities. What can we learn from the fact that Philip, likely a Jew, bore witness of Jesus in Samaria? Even as Seventh-day Adventists, we are not immune to cultural and ethnic biases. What should the Cross teach us about how we are all the same before God? What, too, should the universality of Christ’s death teach us about the infinite value of every human being?
- 3 How did Philip approach the Ethiopian (8:27–30)? How can we be more open to opportunities to share the gospel with others?
- 4 What have we learned from Acts 6–8 that might help us to fulfill the church mission more effectively?

Converting a Girlfriend

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Yamaji Hiroshi, a 25-year-old pastor's son, was deeply in love. There was a problem: his girlfriend, Sakiko, wasn't a Seventh-day Adventist.

Hiroshi met Sakiko at an Adventist nursing school outside Japan's capital, Tokyo. After that, they worked together at the Adventist Medical Center on the Japanese island of Okinawa. It was there that they started dating.

Hiroshi tried to convince Sakiko to become an Adventist. He invited her to church every Sabbath. He asked the pastor to give her Bible studies. He praised the truthfulness of the Bible and the virtue of becoming a Christian.

"But she was not willing to become a Christian," Hiroshi said. "She emphatically told me, 'I will never become a Christian!'"

Hiroshi gave up. He realized that he could not convince Sakiko to accept Christ and that maybe they should break up. "But I still liked her," he said.

A passage sprang to mind from Ellen White's *Messages to Young People*, a book that he had read thoroughly as a teenager at an Adventist high school. The passage says, "If men and women are in the habit of praying twice a day before they contemplate marriage, they should pray four times a day when such a step is anticipated" (page 460).

Hiroshi packed his Bible and an Ellen White book and retreated up a nearby mountain for three days of prayer and fasting. "I asked God, 'What should I do?'" he said. "I read and kept a daily prayer journal."

After the fast, Hiroshi accepted a job at a nursing home far away on the Japanese mainland. He reckoned that the distance would destroy or strengthen the relationship, and he prayed that the outcome would align with God's will. The distance was difficult for him.

"I couldn't be with her, take her to church, or give her Bible studies," he said. "I couldn't do anything but pray. I prayed a lot."

It was then that God intervened, he said. In just a few weeks, Sakiko announced that she wanted to be baptized. Her heart had been converted fully, he said. Sakiko was baptized, and the couple later got married.



Hiroshi, now 56, has never forgotten Sakiko's conversion story, and it has become the basis for his work as a leader of the Adventist Church in Japan. His positions include Adventist Mission director, health ministries director, and assistant to the president for evangelism.

"As a pastor, I give Bible studies, I preach, and I love people, but that is all I can do," says Hiroshi (pictured left), the father of five. "To change people's hearts to accept Jesus is God's work. That's God's business."