

A Unified Story That Leads to Jesus

I enjoy a good biography. Valerie introduced me to author David McCullough and I've been hooked. The Wright Brothers, John Adams, Theodore Roosevelt, great explorers, engineers, artists – individuals seemingly born to do what they did – and yet their character and drive to what they did was almost always born out of hardship and opposition of some kind. Today we're given a brief biography of a man named Stephen. After a complex and serious problem is raised (in the form of a complaint) Stephen is chosen to meet that problem head on. Acts 6:1-7

1. Growing Pains 2. False Accusations 3. Faithful Witness

1. Growing Pains (Acts 6:1-7)

We have an 11 and 13 year old. We hear all about growing pains! Even though they hurt and cause restlessness at night they produce something good - growth! If LCSP is going to grow we better be ready to experience growing pains. If we never experience growing pains we have a bigger problem than when we do experience them.

Followers of Jesus were increasing in number. As you can imagine – there are logistical problems when you're growing at the rate they were growing!

Luke doesn't present the church like a carefully filtered Instagram account – where everyone's happy and everything seems perfect. Grecian Jews complained against the Hebraic Jews *because their widows were overlooked in the daily distribution of food.*

Jews from all over the world – those who had been dispersed and whose primary language was Greek were known as Grecian Jews (influenced by Greek language and culture).

The Hebraic Jews were from the area and spoke Aramaic as their native language.

The church was striving to live as a single family and already this is proving to come with challenges. Normally, widows would be taken care of among their own blood-relationships HOWEVER – what do you do when a widow embraces Christ as Messiah and those family ties are cut off by the family? The widows were welcomed into a new family of course!

Why the neglect? Language barrier, cultural differences, old prejudices, tension and jealousy – it was complicated. Was it intentional? It was happening and if it wasn't addressed it could lead to serious disunity.

The Apostles know what they *shouldn't do*. Why? Calling and responsibility.

Good leadership involves delegation which involves trust.

The Apostles understood their primary responsibility was to give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. They were not about to take on something that would distract them from this primary task however important. And I can't think of a more important task than providing food for widows! Exodus 18; I need discernment!

They have to delegate. This is an administrative crisis but it's more than that and the Apostles put it on the church to *choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.* V3, 5 = qualifications needed in ministering to people of varied backgrounds where there's tension and jealousy.

The responsibility will be turned over to them – to figure it out!

The problem leads to health in the form of qualified leadership and ongoing care.

“wait” on tables = verb is *serve*; *diakoneo* = deacon. 1 Timothy 3:10, 13

The seven were the first deacons – they weren't given the title but they fulfilled the role. The Apostles prayed for them and laid their hands on them – appointing to a specific task. This is where we meet Stephen. The leader and only one described in detail (V5). Last Sunday I introduced you to our HGLs = deacons. As we grow, WE will experience growing pains and these growing pains will most likely be presented in the form of problems or complaints – I'm excited to see who God will raise up from within Local to take on those problems and bring greater health. Stephen's role and responsibility is born out of problems and complaints – for the sake of the church's unity and witness. The result? **6:7!**

2. False Accusations (Acts 6:8-15)

Luke goes on about Stephen in a way that is unique.

6:5 *a man full of faith and the HS*

6:8 *a man full of God's grace and power...to do what? Time out! I thought the Apostles did that!*

His responsibilities to serve the widows and oversee the distribution of food didn't keep him from walking in and exercising *other* gifts!

Have you limited in your mind what God is able to do through you? Dismissed things?

Interestingly the opposition Stephen faced came from a *Greek-speaking* synagogue. They began to argue (dispute, question) with Stephen *but they could not stand against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke*.

Stephen's life, service and faithful witness lead to a pivotal point in the early church.

Stephen is clearly targeted by this synagogue.

They secretly persuade men to say they have heard Stephen speak blasphemy against Moses and against God. Serious accusations!

They stirred up the people, teachers of the law and the elders.

They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. It's gettin real! Has turned into a trial that could end with a serious sentence.

They produced false witnesses *accused of speaking against the temple and the law*. Jn 2:19-21

Jesus was accused of the very same thing! Mark 14:48, 63-64 Reminds us of Jesus' trial.

In John 15:18-21 Jesus said this would happen.

6:15! Never once said of my face! Many ask, "are you mad"? My resting face has a ticked off look to it – and now you know!

like the face of an angel meaning it radiated humble confidence. Innocence; God's presence.

In the middle of arguments, controversies, false accusations and a serious charge before the highest court he didn't look bent out of shape, stressed, angry or scared.

He knew the word of God told a story that was moving forward to a goal – and found its fulfillment in Jesus. And he was about to let *that* story be his defense.

3. Faithful Witness (Acts 7:1-8:3)

This is where the biography gets exciting. I read a biography on Michelangelo recently and the best parts were when the author quoted Michelangelo himself.

Some dismiss his defense as a disconnected history lesson. No way!

It's brilliant! Instead of saying, "No, you're misunderstanding what I'm saying!" - instead of going straight to Jesus and his resurrection - he does something we should learn to do as well! He walks them through *the storyline* of the Bible! The story of Jesus didn't drop out of thin air! It has roots in an ancient story. = A unified story that leads to Jesus. Carefully brings them to the point of the story. Their traditions were in the way! He wants them to connect the dots in ways they had never done before. Stephen draws out specific themes along the way! Israel's *rejection* of God's chosen leaders is a repeated theme throughout his speech – and it all comes to a head in the rejection of JC! It's the longest speech in Acts. Highlighting its importance!

Abraham (VV2-8) = Abraham is where the story of the Jewish people begins.

The promises to Abraham find their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus!

Joseph (VV9-16) = rejected, suffered and yet became a deliverer = points to Jesus!

Moses (VV17-34) = rejected. Encounters YHWH at the burning bush, leads God's people out of Egypt! **7:37-39!** Deuteronomy 18:15; Acts 3:22 Jesus is the one Moses pointed to.

Israel's disobedience and stubborn rejection! (VV35-50) – sinful idolatry!

David (44-50) Don't confine God to a temple – it's pointing to something greater!

7:51 His speech takes a turn and moves into a more prophetic tone.

"Stiff-necked people" "with uncircumcised hearts and ears!" OT language

Your fathers killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One (Jesus) AND now, YOU have betrayed and murdered him! "YOU are repeating the very mistakes of those before you!"

Culminates in their rejection of Jesus! (VV51-53)

The story of Jesus begins where another story ends. It's fulfillment.

What's been anticipated in the OT finds fulfillment.

Like a string of a necklace holding all the beads in place, Jesus holds all the stories we read together.

"Many of us know the stories of the Bible. But if they're left as "unconnected" stories we miss it! We miss the beauty and depth and width of the gospel we proclaim."

Maybe you're just seeing these connections. Heart racing? Mind spinning? Luke 24:32!

Luke 24:44-49 ***"Everything must be fulfilled that was written about me..."***

Fulfilled = bring to completion; accomplished.

7:54 The temple court reach its verdict and a mob rushes at him - while Jesus, the Judge of all and Stephen's righteous advocate stands.

7:57! Stephen is the first martyr of the early church.

Even in his death he follows Jesus - praying for his enemies; entrusting himself to God.

8:1-3 Stephen died and the church scattered (led to great persecution).

Things got dark quick. But what did Jesus say in Acts 1:8?

Stephen's life and death left an unforgettable impression.

What will the growing pains of LCSP produce? Will we take it on with faith, grace and in the power of the HS? The Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus.

Do we know how to tell that story? Will we make it our defense?