

## Acts 6 & 7 Exegetical Meditations



Similar to Acts 3 and 4, Acts 6 and 7 together make one single narrative. The central figure is St Stephen, who is portrayed as the prime witness to the newness and continuity of the gospel in relationship to the old law. This role that Stephen played in salvation history is undisputed given that every single mention of his name in the text coincides with some form of “Stephen.... filled with the Holy Spirit” (see Acts 6:5, 8, 10, 7:55, 59). St Luke props Stephen up in this manner to disclose that following Jesus is synonymous with living in accord with the grace of the Holy Spirit. He is effectively presented as the model Christian in the book of Acts precisely for this reason (Mary is also spoken of throughout Scripture and throughout Tradition for being “The” model Christian for her union with the Holy Spirit). Let us run through Acts 6 and 7 and witness Stephen’s perfect imitation of Jesus.

### **Acts 6 & 7 Breakdown:**

Seven Deacons are appointed- 6:1-7

St Stephen’s Miracles and Preaching- 6:8-15

Stephen’s Discourse address the Abrahamic Covenant- 7:1-16

Stephen explains how Moses was disregarded by his people- 7:17-44

Stephen speaks of the exaggerated views of the holiness of the Temple itself- 7:45-53

St Stephen is stoned- 7:54-60

St Stephen, a Hellenist Christian, is ordained a deacon with six other Hellenist Christians, except maybe Nicholas of Antioch. The Hellenists felt that they were looked down upon because of their pagan associations, and so it seems that this gesture was a way to try and regain their trust and grow in the unity of the Spirit. The unity of the Holy Spirit was held in high regard for the early Church. Many early Church Fathers such as St Clement, St Ignatius of Antioch, and one can argue St Paul held the unity of the Church as the supreme mark and concern for the Church. This concept of the unity of the Holy Spirit itself with the old covenants, and the Spirit’s effects of unity in the body of Christians is the focus of St Stephen’s speech and the driving force of his faith in Christ.

Similar to Peter and John in Acts 3 and all of the Apostles in Acts 5, the Jewish elites were left angered and confused at the miracles and preaching of St Stephen in the public square (see Acts 6:10-15). Stephen is questioned and he responds with a treatise on the history of God’s covenant with Israel.

He begins with God's promise to Abraham that he would provide his descendants with a fitting land to worship and live in right relationship with Him (Acts 7:5-7). This promise was fulfilled through the prophet Moses, who was the instrument appointed by God to free the Israelites from slavery in order to freely worship Him. Stephen compares the Sanhedrin to the Israelite ingrates in the desert to who "pushed him [Moses] aside" (Acts 7:40) because they preferred slavery to freedom. Essentially Stephen communicates that just like the Israelites who built a golden calf as an idol to worship so that they could be in control of their own god.

The Sanhedrin have in actuality rejected Abraham, Moses, and all of the prophets and enslaved themselves within their own system of control of worship. In fact, as Stephen makes clear, the Sanhedrin have entirely inverted their worship of God in the Temple. God is not for the Temple in and of itself; but rather the Temple is a place God has granted His people to offer Him right worship. The Sanhedrin have made the Temple itself an idol. Of course, the sin is not as grave as those who created a golden calf to intentionally reject God, but it is still wrong to worship the instrument that is meant to point to God (the Temple) rather than God Himself. Therefore, St Stephen is justified in his words "you always oppose the Holy Spirit; you are just like your ancestors" (Acts 7:52). Even more pointedly, he is correct to say, "You have received the law as transmitted by angels, but you did not observe it" (Acts 7:53). Clearly, St Stephen recognizes the unity of the Holy Spirit throughout history. Even though the Spirit was not given interiorly to those who followed the old law, it was still active through the covenantal line from Adam all the way to Christ. In other words, it could be said of the righteous who followed the law in worship and in right conduct that they indeed followed the Holy Spirit. Stephen reflects the newness of the gospel, in that he is interiorly filled to the brim with the Spirit, and also reflects the gospel's continuity with the old law.

If you recall, St Stephen comes from a sect that was seeking to be treated with full unification. He was keenly aware of the Holy Spirit's purpose to unify because he experientially knew of its actual power to unify the body of Christians. Therefore, it is proper to see St Stephen's speech here in the most positive sense of attempting to evangelize his audience precisely *within his* rebuke of them, rather than as merely a negative rebuke. Considering that he affirmed these unfulfilled Jews in their beliefs, going so far as to suggest that the law is directly "transmitted by angels" it is impossible to conclude that Stephen was trying to condemn the old law as such (Acts 7:53). He desperately desired their unification, but he knew that in seeking unity, one can never sacrifice hard truths. He held nothing back. He knew that to truly love them, he had to boldly preach and imitate Jesus Christ crucified in his death. The fruits of his martyrdom reveal that his strategy worked (as we will witness in Acts 9).