

ACTS 6–9

Acts 6:1–8. Precedent 13: Caring for the Widows of the Greeks

The number of converts from non-Jewish families necessitated the development of systems to deal with the new social diversity within the Church. A question arose about how to provide care for Christian widows that came from diverse backgrounds (Acts 6:1–7). For Jewish converts, the previous observance of laws in Exodus 22:22 (which protected widows and orphans) and also the family law of levirate marriage (which provided options for a Jewish widow; Deuteronomy 25:5–10) may have continued to cover at least the immediate needs of Jewish Christian widows. The question arose when Greek members of the Church complained that their widows were being neglected (Acts 6:1).

To provide appropriate care, the Apostles called and ordained a committee of seven men “of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). They were Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, and they were to “serve tables”—feed people and manage the resources to provide for them—so that the Apostles could attend to preaching the word of God. This was done in a similar manner to what Moses did in appointing lower judges to handle routine matters (Exodus 18:22). Temporal matters were important to the Church. It is quite possible that these seven men were assigned to deal with several types of temporal affairs, much like the Presiding Bishopric does in today’s restored Church of Jesus Christ.

The Apostles prayed and laid their hands upon the seven in an ordinance similar to the ordination of Joshua, Moses’s successor (Numbers 27:23; Deuteronomy 34:9). Stephen, one of the seven, was said to be full of faith and the Spirit, just as Joshua was full of the spirit of wisdom. This conveyance of the Spirit that provided faith and wisdom also echoes the occasion in the Old Testament when the Lord came down in the cloud and took “the spirit that was in him, and gave it unto the seventy elders [selected by Moses to handle smaller judgments] and it came to pass that when the spirit rested upon them, they

prophesied, and did not cease” (Numbers 11:25). That outpouring of Spirit demonstrated the efficacy of the ordinances. The legal validity of these ordinations was corroborated by the fact that many temple priests became converted and were obedient to the faith. This precedent for assisting widows was still active later when Paul felt a need to convey a definition of and rules for helping widows among the Ephesian Saints in 1 Timothy 5:3–16.

Acts 6:7–14. Precedent 14: Accusations against Stephen

This and the following episodes are entwined with legal issues arising out of the accusation, arrest, trial, and execution of Stephen (Acts 6:8–7:60). This precedent deals with the accusations that were leveled against him, which are recorded in great detail.

Stephen, the first on the list of those set apart to care for the Greek widows, was performing miracles and wonders by faith and found himself the target of members of a synagogue of diasporic Jews (the body of Jews living in countries other than Israel). These Jews “disputed” against him (6:11). It is unclear what the debate may have been about, but given Stephen’s position, it is possible that it had something to do with the way in which Jewish Christians used their treasury to care for the Greek Christian widows. The followers of Jesus had adopted a new way, but these Jews may have refused to adopt a way that deviated from the customary laws given by Moses (6:14).

Nevertheless, those Jews found that they could not win the debate—they were unable to withstand the wisdom and Spirit by which Stephen spoke (6:10). The accusers stirred up support from “the people, the elders, and the scribes,” then witnesses were pushed forward to commence an official action against Stephen before the council (6:11–12, 15). They accused Stephen of blasphemy against the temple and the law, alleging that he had said that Jesus would destroy the Holy Place and change the law of Moses (6:11–15).

Acts 6:15–7:50. Precedent 15: Stephen’s Defense

Stephen’s defense is an interesting case study. Stephen did not offer a straightforward argument that sought to prove his innocence of the charges. His rebuttal advanced a complicated argument that responded to the charges, but he did not deny those accusations. Instead, he taught, testified, and sought to justify and reframe the accusations against him.

As one would expect in such a circumstance, Stephen’s lengthy self-defense included many legal topics, and it contained a review of the history of the Jews pertaining to the covenant and their relationship to prophetic leaders. The connection between these ancient prophets and Jesus is that they were all redeemers and were all rejected. Moses’s label as the *first redeemer* indicates his role as a prototype for the *last redeemer*—the Messiah.

Stephen was not just preaching a simple sermon. His defense related Moses and Jesus to the history of the Israelite world, to God’s calling and electing of Israel, and to the way God interacted with the major Israelite prophets from the times of Abraham, Moses and now Jesus. Unlike in a usual sermon, however, at every step of this lengthy argument Stephen stopped and made a legal point about the way in which the Israelites had misunderstood and failed to keep the law. His defense strategy was to demonstrate that the accusations against him were spurious because he was not saying anything different about how bad the current Jewish leaders were than what the scriptures already said about their forefathers. In legally accusatory language, Stephen then formally charged the leaders with the crimes of betraying and murdering the Righteous One and, though having received the law from angels, of not having kept or guarded the law (Acts 7:52–53).

Acts 7:54–60. Precedent 16: The Sentencing and Stoning of Stephen

Stephen was found guilty and sentenced rapidly because he accused the Jews of rebuffing and denigrating the covenant and the prophets by rejecting and murdering the Righteous One (Acts 7:52). These words hit a raw spot with the members of the Sanhedrin, and they gnashed their teeth (7:54).

Stephen then claimed to see the Son of Man standing on the right hand of God. The Son of Man was *standing*, a judicial custom that indicated that Jesus was now acting as a judge, pronouncing a verdict of judgment against the Jews, which in their minds was unthinkable and unallowable for two reasons. First, they had not accepted that Jesus was divine—the “Son of Man”—and second, they were the supreme theological judges of Israel. Thus, they considered Stephen to be blaspheming in claiming to see the resurrected Jesus as the Son of Man at all, let alone standing at the right hand of God.

From a Christian perspective, Stephen’s vision made it clear that he had spoken justly, and this case established the precedent that it was legal, if not expected, in the eyes of God for all Christians and not just the Apostles to speak out in opposition to legal errors and unrighteousness (Leviticus 5:1). This was to be required even at the highest levels of government and religious leadership. The Jewish leaders, however, refused to hear any more. Accordingly, they “stopped their ears” to prevent themselves from hearing words or ideas that they considered to be illegal under the law of Moses and that were therefore unacceptable for Jews to hear (Exodus 33:20). They expelled Stephen from the holy city and stoned him.

Acts 7:57–8:4. Precedent 17: Persecution and the Legal Risk of Honoring Stephen’s Death

It was important to devout Jews, and obviously also to Christians, to have a proper and respectful burial, but it was also dangerous to provide a burial for criminals. From a Christian perspective, the execution of Stephen and the subsequent persecution of the early Church set a tradition and even a precedent that

righteous men should now be responsible for burials. These men would have the obligation to care for and honor their dead. It is possible that this shift in tradition may also indicate that a duty to the dead superseded any possible concerns about corpse impurity. Having men perform this act of burial set a new tradition, as women had formerly performed much of the work regarding burial among Jewish families. Stephen's burial was probably done secretly and outside the allowances of the law because of his ignominious death (compare Jeremiah 26:23, in which Urijah's body was discredibly thrown into a common grave, Urijah having been wrongly charged and executed as a false prophet). From Stephen's case, it also directly followed that any Christian could be subject to arrest and imprisonment for supporting his cause.

Saul (later called Paul), at whose feet the coats of those stoning Stephen were thrown (Acts 7:58), either was apparently not legally old enough to have been a participant in the stoning or had not personally witnessed Stephen's blasphemy. Though a "young man," Saul was still connected well enough to the members of the Sanhedrin to have been present in a minor official capacity. The phrase "consenting to his death" (8:1 and 22:20) generally contains a specific legal sense of giving actual permission, but here it more likely refers to Saul's general approval of the situation. This was a time of great persecution of the Church in Jerusalem, and Saul was integral to that persecution.

Acts 8:4–25. Precedent 18: Dealings in Samaria

With Stephen gone, the narrative next follows Philip (the second of the seven appointed men) as he began preaching in Samaria (Acts 8:4–25). There, he was casting out evil spirits and curing crippled people (8:7). After Jesus's Resurrection, the Apostles' ministry was extended to go "and teach all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Thus, authority to teach outside Judaea had been established, but how were the followers of Jesus able to associate with Samaritans, who were partially of Israel but still legally non-Jews that were considered hostile as well as unclean? Even though Samaritans were circumcised and adhered to the Pentateuch, many also mingled Greek, Canaanite, and even Egyptian gods with Jewish law.

However, recognizing the signs and miracles that Philip performed, the people, "with one accord," paid attention to his words, and many Samaritans were converted and baptized (Acts 8:6). By recognizing the earthly nature of the apparent legal barriers, the Apostles opened the opportunity for the gospel of Jesus Christ to be offered more completely and effectively, just as Jesus had done during his life in speaking to the woman at the well (see John 4:5–39). Her testimony and Jesus's extra two-day stay in her village may very well have prepared the way for Philip's success (John 4:39–40).

Apparently, Philip, who clearly knew the rules and procedures of the Church, was not authorized to give the gift of the Holy Ghost by laying on of hands, so Peter and John were summoned, and they hastened to the area to perform the ordinances. They had the appropriate authority. The ministering of Philip, Peter, and John to the Samaritans demonstrated to early Christians that Samaritans, despite their apostate reputation among the Jews in Judea, were approved to be accepted as converts to Jesus's gospel. Any

legal questions about teaching and fellowshiping the circumcised members of a largely unpopular group were resolved by this episode.

In addition, Philip exposed and resolved a case of sorcery when Simon Magus, a noted spellcaster or sorcerer, and many others were converted and baptized (Acts 8:9–13). They began following Philip before Peter and John had arrived to give the converts the gift of the Holy Ghost. When Simon Magus, who appreciated the power exercised by these Apostles, tried to purchase the power so that he could give the gift of the Holy Ghost for money, he was seriously rebuked. Later he repented and was then blessed (8:18–25). This episode is reminiscent of Jewish laws against purchasing Torah scrolls with gold or silver. Holy things were not to be lawfully bought or sold for money.¹ The priesthood precedent set by this story is an example of the retention of a Jewish legal principle, unlike the subsequent relaxing of the food and circumcision laws.

Acts 8:25–40. Precedent 19: Baptizing a Eunuch

Philip, under guidance of an “angel of the Lord,” continued his missionary work farther south, where he encountered, taught, and baptized a eunuch who was a high official of the queen of Ethiopia (Acts 8:26–40). This straightforward story resolved several issues: It clarified the question of who could be legally accepted for baptism, how long proselytes must study, and what they must know and do in order to be acceptable as candidates for baptism and for membership in the Christian community. The eunuch himself had expressed concern that he needed someone to guide him in his understanding. However, after the guidance was given, it seems that acceptance of the message was the essential step required for baptism.

One may assume that when the eunuch asks, “Does anything stand in the way of my being baptized?” he was asking if there were any legal or status barriers preventing him, especially as a eunuch, from receiving Christian baptism. The eunuch immediately accepted the good news of the gospel and was interviewed by Philip as to the depth of his faith: “If thou believest with *all thine heart*, [see Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37] thou mayest [be baptized].’ And he answered and said, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God’” (Acts 8:37).

The answer in this precedential case was “Thou mayest.” In contrast, under Jewish law eunuchs were not allowed as male members of the assembly of Yahweh, even though Isaiah had prophesied of God’s love for eunuchs as an indication of his infinite love: “For thus saith the Lord unto the eunuchs that keep my sabbaths, and choose the things that please me, and take hold of my covenant; Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off” (Isaiah 56:3–5; Deuteronomy 23:1–9).

Interestingly, this eunuch was reading an Isaiah scroll when he met Phillip. Peter, on the day of Pentecost, had taught of Jesus and upon being asked what the converted people needed to do, said, “Repent,

and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” Peter had added that “the promise [of the Abrahamic covenant] is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:37–39). Phillip’s decision in this case set a precedent that a faithful eunuch could receive the blessings of being counted within the household of Abraham and of being heard by the Lord.

Acts 9:1–2, 14:1. Precedent 20: Saul (Paul) Is Empowered to Arrest Christians

Although most studies of Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus focus on Saul’s personal experience as he was temporarily blinded and then healed, the facts of the case also present significant legal questions. The legal themes in this chapter proliferate as Saul’s efforts to arrest Christians intensify. The legality of his warrant to arrest provided by Jewish priests and how it may or may not have applied in Damascus, outside of Judea and in Greek and Roman territory, was complex. Saul was working within a multi-legal environment.

He was heading for Damascus with letters of authority from the chief priests in Jerusalem to arrest and bind all men and women who called upon the name of Jesus (Acts 9:2). But this blanket arrest warrant seems to violate the normal Jewish rules of individual warning, accusation, and legal due process. Moreover, he was being permitted by the Jewish chief priests to arrest Christians in Damascus and bring them back to Jerusalem. Since they were clearly to be brought back forcibly, we may presume that he was planning to imprison them to await trial as he had done with those in Jerusalem.

Saul’s proposed actions toward the Christians in Damascus raise jurisdictional questions. How far did the Sanhedrin’s authority extend? Paul was also crossing Roman borders and was thinking of taking people back to Jerusalem. Where was he getting his authority to transport prisoners? Damascus was in the Roman province of Syria and thus was subject to the civil authority of the Roman governor of the province. Unlike in Judaea proper, no special governing role for the Jews existed within that province. Apart from the Sanhedrin’s religious and moral authority as the Jewish leadership in Judaea, one would think that it could not exercise political power over Jews outside of Judaea.

Saul’s intent was to arrest the converted Jews in Damascus, but for many reasons—in part because this persecution of Christians exceeded the normal rules of law and would have been devastating to the growth of the early Church and also because the Lord knew of Saul’s talents and immense potential to do good—Saul was prevented on the way by the resurrected and glorified Jesus Christ. Saul’s conversion had several far-reaching implications: It indicated that the door to Christianity was open to all, even to anti-Christian Pharisees such as Saul. And also, it gave assurances that there were levels of persecution that the Lord would not tolerate. Saul’s conduct was unacceptable but not unforgivable through the Lord’s infinite Atonement and Saul’s totally sincere repentance.

Acts 9:3–16, 23–31. Precedent 21: God Intervenes to Prevent the Arrest of Christians

Jesus stopped Saul (Paul) on the road to Damascus, addressed him, and caused him to be briefly blind—symbolic of his spiritual blindness. Interestingly, after identifying Himself, Jesus questioned Saul about his actions, following Jewish law procedures: “Then shalt thou inquire, and make search, and ask diligently” (Deuteronomy 13:14). Jesus’s first question, “Why persecutest thou me?” (9:4), implied that to persecute any disciples of Jesus is essentially the same as to persecute Jesus Himself. When Saul asked, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?” (Acts 9:6), Jesus offered him a more righteous alternative, setting a precedent for how repentant sinners might best respond.

Effectively, Saul was required to weigh the authority of the Sanhedrin against the guidance of the resurrected Savior. Peter had faced a similar choice when he had been ordered by the Sanhedrin to refrain from teaching in the name of Jesus (Acts 5:28). Peter’s answer was, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Subsequent actions of many of the early persecuted Saints show that they followed the examples of Peter and Paul.

Meanwhile, a chosen disciple in Damascus named Ananias had been prepared by revelation to receive Saul as a chosen vessel of the Lord, or an instrument to bear the very name that he had been trying to impede (9:15). Ananias was terrified of Saul, whose reputation had preceded his arrival, but after petitioning the Lord, Ananias complied. The repentant Saul’s eyes were healed by the laying on of hands as Ananias said, “Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost” (9:17). Saul was baptized, and then he taught persuasively, forever after, that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God (9:20).

Interestingly, in later recounting his story to Agrippa, Paul described the new commission that Jesus had given him: “For I [Jesus] have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, to open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins” (26:16–18). Thus, Paul’s commission was very similar to the post-Resurrection commission of the eleven Apostles (compare Matthew 28:19–20).

However, the unconverted Jews of Damascus decided to capture Saul, evidently to punish him legally for disloyalty and blasphemy (Acts 9:23). With the help of Barnabas, Saul (later renamed Paul; see 13:9) managed to escape to Jerusalem, where even there, the Christians were afraid of him. The brethren sent him to Caesarea and then to his home in Tarsus for a while, probably to allow the aggression against Paul to die down (9:26–31).

Acts 9:32–43. Precedent 22: Healing the Sick, Raising the Dead, and Addressing Issues of Purity

The text of Acts then follows Peter, who was traveling all through the area and teaching of Christ, from Samaria, south to Lydda, and then west to Joffa. During this journey, Peter performed miracles for formerly impure Gentiles. These miracles included the healing of a Roman and raising a woman of mixed heritage from death. He not only raised the woman from death but also touched her. Again, this action represented another distancing of Christian ministering from the Jewish laws of purity, serving as an example to authorize or justify subsequent acts of the same kind.

The healing of Aeneas, presumably a Roman, occurred in Lydda. Peter simply said, “Jesus Christ maketh thee whole: Arise and make thy bed” (Acts 9:34), and Aeneas arose immediately. We do not know how much Aeneas knew of Jesus, but we are specifically given Aeneas’s name, which is unusual in the records of such healings. The emphases in these sections on dealing with Gentiles and otherwise impure people make it likely that the healed man’s name was published to clarify that Aeneas was Roman. From a precedential perspective, this episode was significant in demonstrating the post-Resurrection opening of missionary work to the Romans (9:34).

The second event, raising a woman from death, occurred in Joppa. In this case, we have two names: “Tabitha, which means Dorcas” (9:36). Tabitha is an Aramaic name meaning “roe buck” and “beautiful, godly, or pleasant.” Dorcas is the Greek version of the same name. When the text discusses her death, she is referred to as Dorcas, but when Peter raised her, he addressed her with the Aramaic Tabitha. Here we see healing among Jews of mixed heritage or custom. There was little to no concern that she was a woman. Additionally, this event proved that there was no concern about impurity in touching the dead.

Meanwhile, while in Joppa, Peter stayed with Simon the tanner or leather worker (9:43), which was one of the unclean, despised trades in Jewish society. Living in the home of such a person was a new departure for faithful Jews, and this became an indicator that Christians could freely associate with Gentiles.

The events of Peter’s travels around this region involved matters that would have been of great legal concern for the brethren, and more so for Pharisees and Essenes (10:1–11:18). Peter’s actions opened the way for converting Romans, for raising the dead without concerns about corpse contamination or charges of necromancy (Leviticus 20:27), and for eating with uncircumcised Gentiles without contracting impurity. These restrictions were absent in Roman and Greek societies but were matters of great legal and therefore social concern for the Jews. They markedly set precedents for behavior and doctrinal inquiry among the early Christians.

Note

- 1 Compare Matthew 6:24: “Ye cannot serve God and mammon [money].”

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Source: *New Testament Insights: Acts*, by John W. Welch and Rita Spencer