

Series: **The Original**
Today's Title: **"Disrupting the Status Quo"**

July 11, 2021 – Acts 6:8-15

Objective: To help us understand Stephen and the radical nature of the gospel.

Turn to Acts 6:8-15

Status quo.

Webster defines status quo as *'the existing state of affairs'*.

Is status quo a good or bad thing?

That depends.

Is the existing state of affairs good and healthy - or not?

Status quo is often more about routines and what we've grown accustomed to - than it is about the merits of the *'existing state of affairs'*.

We see it all the time - especially in recent history - in our government.

Politicians constantly talk about change - but they never really change to the point of upsetting the status quo.

They prefer window dressing and public relations optics - social media likes.

When it comes to our health, we may make some minor changes - but really changing things to make a significant difference - is not very common.

We like the status quo - even if the status quo is not optimal.

In religious circles, status quo is often tied to tradition, which makes change extremely difficult - heretical in the view of some.

In **Acts 6** we see a collision - an incompatible union with the status quo.

Stephen - is one of the 7 chosen and appointed to fix the broken and unfair status quo of how the Hellenistic widows were being treated.

But we see a larger picture in our verses today of Stephen's ministry and the collision that results between the beliefs and practices of Judaism and the gospel that Stephen preaches.

Prayer

The focus of **6:8 - 7:60** is Stephen - who we were introduced to last Sunday.

I was named after this man - spelling is different - and my middle name is Paul - so my parents had high hopes - or they wanted me to be imprisoned or martyred.

Let's look at this man - whose career was very short - but full of impact.

Stephen's qualities. vs. 8

Luke begins this section by telling us a bit more about Stephen.

vs. 5 - He already told us he was "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit..."

Now, he expands on that.

“Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, performed great wonders and signs among the people.”

Stephen is doing some of the same ministry as the apostles. This makes him very unique.

He is “full of God’s grace”.

Not only a reference to the grace of God in his life, but He was a giver of God’s grace.

God’s grace along with the Holy Spirit’s presence in his life enabled the power of God to be manifest in his life and ministry, and he “...performed great wonders and signs among the people.”

Stephen - and the 2nd man on the list in vs. 5, Philip, are both filled by the Holy Spirit - both manifest the power of God through signs and wonders (8:6-7).

They are not officially ‘deacons’ - not apostles - not prophets.

They are new Christians - who are preaching Christ!

They have a rich understanding of the O.T. Scriptures, and they understand how Jesus fulfills the Messianic prophecies, and how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law and the sacrificial system.

They understand how Jesus is greater than Moses - greater than angels - and why His sacrifice is greater than any animal sacrifice offered in the temple according to the practice and regulations of Judaism.

More on this in a bit.

Stephen's ministry to the Hellenist Jews. vs. 9-10

Read vs. 9-10

Stephen himself is a Hellenist Jew, and his ministry seems to be to the Jews from outside of Israel.

Here's some historical background...

Starting around 722 B.C. - when Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, some Jewish people fled their homeland for what they believed would be safer regions.

This continued to happen for hundreds of years, and it is referred to as the **Diaspora**.

In the Roman conquest and occupation of Israel, Pompey, the Roman General, carried off large numbers of Jews back to Rome as slaves.

After a few years many of these slaves were freed, and some returned to Israel.

Others settled in various regions around the Mediterranean.

In Israel, some of these groups, likely due to their shared experiences and speaking a different language, established separate, distinct synagogues.

A synagogue was a place where they would pray, read Scripture, discuss the Law, and help those in need.

It only took 10 men to begin a synagogue, and Historians tell us there were hundreds of synagogues in the Jerusalem area, many of which catered to various groups, like we see in vs. 9 - “the synagogue of the freedman”. This was likely a synagogue started by some who were taken captive and enslaved by Pompey about 90 years earlier.

Luke mentions 4 different places - 2 geographical regions.

“Cyrenians and the Alexandrians” - Northern Africa and Egypt.

“Cilicia and Asia” - Asia Minor - modern-day Turkey. The Apostle Paul was from Tarsus, a city in Cilicia.

Some think Paul would have been in this synagogue and that Stephen’s preaching and debating was his first exposure to the Gospel.

We don’t know if this is true...it’s just conjecture - but it is an interesting link in the text, and we will be introduced to Saul / Paul at the end of the next chapter.

We don’t know if all these men were members of 1 synagogue, or if there were 2 or 3 synagogues - doesn’t really matter.

But we’re told they “rose up and disputed with Stephen.”

“disputed” is a term that means, *‘to discuss, to examine together, to seek together, to dispute’*.

All of these may have been what happened.

What started as a discussion soon turned into a major argument.

As well-versed as these men were in the synagogues, they could not match Stephen's debating skill, because Stephen had an unfair advantage: God.

vs. 10 - "But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking."

Do you realize that you have the same Holy Spirit that Stephen had?

He knew the O.T. Scriptures - he had knowledge of history and God's Word.

But the power of his words was sourced in the Holy Spirit's presence and work in his life.

When you share the gospel - when you have a spiritual conversation, the Holy Spirit will work through you - He will use your words to impact people's mind and heart!

The power in sharing Christ is not in our debating skill. The power is in the Spirit's empowerment of the truth we are sharing.

Stephen is arrested and falsely accused. *vs. 11-14*

Of course, when you can't win the debate - when you lose the argument, have the person arrested and lie about them.

Read vs. 11-14

The false accusations they make are:

1) vs. 11, 13b - “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God...against this holy place and against the law...”

2) vs. 14 - “...for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

A couple of details to note.

- Moses is brought into the legal charges.

“Jesus of Nazareth” - a derisive term.

- What got these men all worked up?
- Why were they so mad at Stephen?

We can tell some generalities of what Stephen argued for - what he taught in the synagogue debates - by what he is accused of.

“blasphemous words against Moses and God...against this holy place and against the law”.

Moses was the mediator between the people and God.

Moses received the Law from God and gave the Law to the people - to Israel.

Moses was referred to as *‘The Lawgiver’* - often was equated with the Law - *‘The Law of Moses’*.

If you spoke against the Law - you were not only speaking against God - for it is God’s Law - but you were also speaking against Moses.

The theological implications of the sacrificed and resurrected Messiah and the Law of Moses were massive.

These implications had tremendous fallout of the O.T. ceremonial Law and the temple sacrifices.

The very essence of Judaism's sacrificial system was gutted by Jesus and His resurrection.

The gospel completely disrupts religion - Judaism included!

It is these implications that Stephen might have proclaimed in these synagogue debates (vs. 9-10).

What could Stephen have said which could be taken to be against Moses - against the Law - and therefore against God?

He might have talked about the greatness of Jesus' sacrifice compared to the lesser sacrifices required in the Law.

Hebrews 10:1-4

“For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near.

2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins?

3 But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.

4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

- The Law was not a final solution.
- It was a temporary solution which detailed the never-ending problem of human sin.
- It was a temporary solution which looked forward to a permanent solution.
- The Law was not designed to save, but to reveal and expose human sinfulness and our need for atonement.

Galatians 3:23-25

“Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed.

So then, the law was our guardian (a trainer or tutor) until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.

But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian...”

You can see how, if this was the territory Stephen ventured into, how this would have enraged devout, pious Jews!

Once again, the writer of Hebrews...

Hebrews 10:11-14

“And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.

12 But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God,

13 waiting from that time until His enemies should be made a footstool for His feet.

14 For by a single offering He has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.”

Hebrews 10:18

“Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.”

Jesus made the temple sacrifices obsolete.

After Jesus, there was no need for the sacrifices of Judaism.

Jesus offered the once-for-all sacrifice for human sin. Never needing to be repeated again!

Later, Paul would look back at his own devotion to Judaism - devotion to the regulations of the Law - and see them in the light of Christ.

Philippians 3:8-9

“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord...and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith...”

When you start to realize the radical nature of the gospel - the upheaval that the resurrected Jesus brings to Judaism and all other religions - you can see how this would be very upsetting to the status quo!

Why does Luke refer to this as “false witnesses”?

Because they are quoting Stephen’s words in ways he did not intend.

What they are doing is dishonest and inaccurate.

“...the falseness of their testimony consisted not in wholesale fabrication but in subtle and deadly misrepresentation of words actually spoken.”

(The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Book of Acts, by F.F. Bruce, Eerdmans, Reprinted 1983, p. 135)

However, don't understate the dramatic difference between the O.T. Law and its ceremonial regulations and sacrifices with the salvation and forgiveness of sin Jesus offers those who believe in Him!

**They have similar concepts, but they are worlds apart!
So far apart that they are incompatible!**

Back to **Acts 6...**

vs. 14 - “For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

This was the same misquoting and misunderstanding that Jesus experienced.

In the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, in **John 2** He 'cleanses' the temple - disrupts the temple market which was ripping off the people.

When the religious establishment asked Jesus for a sign - by what authority did He disrupt the temple market, He said:

John 2:19, 21

“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”

“But He was speaking about the temple of His body.”

Jesus wasn't speaking of the temple building - but that's how the religious leaders took His words.

Jesus did speak of future judgment on the temple - which took place in 70 A.D. when the Roman General Titus conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. But Jesus never talked about destroying the temple Himself.

Jesus did not worship the temple or make it out to be something it wasn't.

The temple was a place for worship - not a place to worship.

The temple is less than the God worshiped in its courts.

Matthew 12:6

"I tell you, something greater than the temple is here."

But the religious establishment - the Jewish leadership had come to the point of venerating the temple to a level of minor deity.

They saw the temple as an inseparable appendage of God - so in their eyes and ears, anything that sounded like a minimization of the temple was a direct attack and offense against God.

Stephen's appearance. vs. 15

"And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel."

I'm not sure what this is.

There are a few other occurrences like this in the Bible.

Exodus 34:34-35

“Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with Him...the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses’ face was shining.”

Luke 9:29 - the Transfiguration of Jesus

“And as He (Jesus) was praying, the appearance of His face was altered, and His clothing became dazzling white.”

These are the only other examples of something like this happening in Scripture, but Stephen’s appearance doesn’t seem to be the same as Moses and Jesus.

This is a very unique occurrence and likely points to his closeness to God and the Spirit’s presence in a time of crisis.

Apply it...

The Holy Spirit works through you with power when you share the gospel.

The same power that worked in/through Stephen will work through you - when you share the truth of God.

Embrace the full implications of the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus.

Do you understand the completeness of Jesus’ sacrifice?

Do you understand how Jesus’ death on the cross paid the price - atoned for your sins - all of them?

Do you understand that His atonement is absolutely thorough - it covers all your sins?

Do you understand His resurrection proves He is God - He defeated sin and death by His resurrection?

Have you put your faith in Jesus?

Do you believe in Him and His sacrifice for you?

I hope you have.

If you haven't, will you let Jesus disrupt the status quo in your life - and radically change you from the inside - with forgiveness, hope, and life of God?

I hope you will right now.

Close in prayer