

Stephen Ministry Commissioning

Over the last 5 months we've had seven people, six from our own congregation, and one from another church who've spent 50 hours in training for something called Stephen Ministry. This has been more than just sitting in a classroom, watching a video, or a reading a book. Stephen Ministry training is intense and it has a way of wringing your whole heart out. I know my wife, who has led these training classes, has poured her heart and soul into them. I remember when she first went through her own training. It pulled stuff out of her from way, deep down in her heart. She has come home many Sunday nights these last several months emotionally spent, but also cleansed. She tells me how they laughed, how they cried, they carried one another's burdens, how ministered to one another, all as they prepared to minister to all of us.

Today, we not only want to recognize the completion of their training, we want to commission them, release them to serve, to let the Holy Spirit use them as God sees fit in our body, and even our community.

Stephen Ministry gets its name from Stephen in the New Testament. His appearance in the pages of Holy Scripture is brief but bright. We are first introduced to Stephen in the opening verses of Acts 6. By the end of Acts 7 he is martyred for his faith, being stoned to death by the Jewish religious leaders for detailing the history of their rebellion and disobedience against God. It's as Stephen cries out his last breath to God, that we are first introduced to Saul also known as Paul, the great persecutor who would become the great apostle to the Gentiles.

In Acts 6:8 we learn that Stephen was a man full of grace and power who did great wonders and signs among the people. However, it is through a much more humble ministry where we first meet Stephen in the opening verses of Acts 6. I think this is no accident, because great power and great humility often go together.

We meet Stephen because there were those in the early church whose needs were not being met. Acts 6:1 says, *"Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Greek speaking Jews arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution."* One of the ministries of the church was and is caring for widows in need. Now in the 1st Century some Jews had adapted to the dominant Greco-Roman culture by adopting it. They were called Hellenists. Perhaps your Bible uses that term here. It comes from the Greek word for the

Greek people. The Greek culture was first spread by Alexander the Great, and it was built on by the Roman Empire whose further conquests spread the Greco-Roman culture far and wide. The Hellenistic or Greek speaking Jews adopted this culture. They spoke Greek. They dressed like the Romans. They decorated their homes in Roman style. They ate Roman cuisine. Some did this for business reasons, others for stylistic reasons, some out of marital or family necessity, and others simply because of where they lived.

Most Jews, however, remained defiantly Jewish. They continued to speak Aramaic and Hebrew. They refused Roman customs, and they took great pride in their Jewish heritage. These traditional Jews tended to look down on those who had adopted Hellenistic culture. There was a lot social, cultural, and political tension between these two groups.

However, in Christ they had been made a part of one body. One group isn't superior to the other. Every group has equal place and purpose in the body of Christ no matter their culture, no matter their language, no matter their race. Just as in Christ we are one regardless of what we were before— rich or poor, PhD or high school dropout, Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative, city slicker or country bumpkin, Caucasian, African, Asian. What matters now is that we are all one in Christ, so none of that matters, right? Well, usually.

The text doesn't say whether this was just an accidental oversight or if it was intentional neglect, but you can hear the suspicious resentment in their complaint. It says, *'Their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.'* This is the language of hurt. There were our widows and your widows. Do you hear the us vs. them tension in these words. When you're hurting, that's what happens. It puts barriers between you and others. "They did this." "We feel that." And all of the sudden in a body that should be whole, there is brokenness.

The Greek speaking Jews feel like their widows are being neglected. They feel slighted. They feel wronged, and I imagine they were hurting. We feel for these widows. Not only have they lost their husbands and their means of support and companionship, but now their church, who should be caring for them, whether intentional or not, has left them feeling alone and forgotten.

Listen, to how the apostles respond. They don't try to affix blame. They don't point accusing fingers at anyone. They simply meet the need in a spiritual and loving manner, and they involve the whole church in the process, so I think it's appropriate that we are doing this today as the whole body together. Listen to verses 2 - 4:

And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

So, the first thing we learn about Stephen is that he had a good reputation, and he was known to be full of the Spirit and of wisdom. Let me address the seven we are commissioning here this morning. Your ability to minister to your care receivers doesn't come from your own strength. Your capacity to come alongside people in their time of need isn't the result of your own compassion or your charming personality. It is because you are full of the Holy Spirit and the wisdom of God's truth resides in your heart. It is because you walk in the Spirit and you walk in the Word that you will be able to walk with the hurting in their time of need. This is true for all of us. Our ability to sustain others in a time of trial is directly tied to how much we sustain ourselves in the Spirit and Word of God.

If you try to do this ministry by your own strength, in the end you will only bring yourself down, rather than bring others up. Walk in the Spirit. Clothe yourselves in the truth of God.

Verse 5 says, "*What they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.*" He is the first of the seven they choose, and he is the only one of the seven who has an accompanying character reference. His is a man full of the faith and of the Holy Spirit. This simply underscores what I said before. You are a lamp that provides light and warmth to others only because you are plugged into Him.

Often, these seven are said to be the first deacons in the church. However, nowhere in the Bible are they called deacons, although they are certainly servants, and that's what the name deacon means. But there's no indication that this was a formal office in the church. What we have here is a need that needed to be met, and these are the people that the church and Spirit of God called out to meet that need.

This didn't mean that no one else had to care for the widows. It didn't mean everyone else could simply forget the need and ignore these ladies. And let me say even though we are commissioning our own seven today to listen, to encourage, and to pray, doesn't mean the rest of us don't need to. No, it simply means these seven are setting a standard for the rest of to follow. It simply meant that the church came together and this was their purposeful response to meet that need. Many needs get met in the church as we simply respond to the needs as they arise. A need is made apparent, the Spirit moves, and we respond. Not all needs require a specific ministry or formal training to minister to them. You simply respond with the love of Jesus.

But some needs require an intentional response from God's people. And I think Stephen Ministry is such a response to such a need in our modern world. There is something about living in our age of comfort and convenience that magnifies the pain we feel. By every physical measure we have it so much easier than nearly any culture or any generation that has come before us, and yet with all of our advancements, with all of our medical breakthroughs, with all of our modern conveniences when we do hurt, we hurt all the more. Why do we abuse drugs and alcohol like we do? Prescription drug abuse is at record levels. We consume painkillers at a rate double our next nearest competitor. There are some painkillers, such as hydrocodone where U.S. consumes 99% of the world's supply. That's staggering. Why do we have such a hard time with pain?

And this isn't just to deal with physical pain. We are trying to medicate our emotional, psychological and spiritual wounds. We are seeking some way to cope. We see countless therapists, counselors and psychiatrists to help us deal with the stress of modern life. Depression and anxiety disorders are at epidemic levels. What is about the modern world that makes it so hard to cope with life? Lunch discussion-why is modern life so stressful?

As a Christian though, I believe that the answer to our modern stress problem lies two thousand years in our past. Peter wrote that God has given us everything we need for life and godliness. I believe that the Holy Spirit that indwells us has equipped, enabled, and empowered us to bear one another's burden, to minister to our needs as we love each other with the love of Jesus.

Stephen Ministry is our response to this need. In a disciplined, trained, and organized manner, our Stephen Ministers will do what every Christian is called to do.

They raise the level of love and compassion for the whole church. Stephen Ministers care for people who are grieving, for people who have been betrayed or who at least have been let down by others or by life. They help people who have made poor choices to consider more carefully the decisions they must now make. They give people a place to turn when they feel as though there is no place to turn.

Stephen Ministers care for people whose spouses won't seek help and for those whose spouses need all their help. They care for people before and after surgery, before and after marriage, before and after childbirth, before, during and after divorce. Stephen Ministry assures in our weakest moments of the truth that I shared last week- everyone here has a place and a purpose. Everyone, even when we are at our weakest. Everyone, no matter what we are going through. Everyone, even when we don't have the strength to do what we were doing before.

Now that they have completed their training, our Stephen Ministers will be available to meet with you, to talk with you, to listen, to love and to pray. They will do all of this with gentleness and respect. They will treasure your privacy and protect your confidentiality. You can talk to them, even when you can't talk to anyone else.

We want to commission them as Stephen Ministers not only to recognize all the work they've put into the training, but also to raise our own awareness that we have this ministry, and to avail ourselves of all that Stephen Ministry provides.