

When I started Bible school my first job was as a busboy at the Curtis Hotel. The Curtis Hotel was a large hotel having over 800 rooms and three restaurants.<sup>1</sup> As a busboy and then a waiter, I learned what service really meant. Eventually I became the manager.



- My morning crew was very professional – they worked quickly and silently. The newest employee had worked there for 21 years, and the longest serving waiter for over 40+. They were like a machine, able to handle any crowd efficiently.
- My evening crew was the opposite. Busboys would drop entire buckets of dirty plates. Waitresses, if they showed up at all, would fight loudly over customers, mumble under their breath about low tips.
- It was my first time managing people. Ugh, people! It was all I could do to keep the place open in the evenings and the uniforms clean.



For my last two years of Bible school, I was a concierge at L'Hotel Sofitel. It was a five-star hotel and restaurant. There I learned about serving with quality and attention to detail.

- I learned why Solomon wrote: 'Do you see any truly competent workers? They will serve kings rather than working for ordinary people (Pro 22:29 NLT).'

As I see it, good service should have just the right touch – not too visible, yet attentive.

- On the one hand, hospitality is physically and emotionally hard work. I respect anyone who waits on tables or cleans hotel rooms for a living. Serving well is a gift.
- On the other hand, we have all had those waiters who upset us. They either ignored us or were too chatty, messed up our order or were slow in bringing the food. We once had one lady who pulled up a chair like she wanted to join our conversation. She just didn't do her job well.

Today, I want to retell the story of the upsetting busboy.

- No, it's not some guy named Frank who spilled coffee all over the customer.

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<sup>1</sup> 1903-1984 on the corner of 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue and 10<sup>th</sup> Street, Minneapolis. Was 'a significant residential hotel.'

- I want to talk about Stephen, who gets a job as busboy and upsets the Jews to the point where they stone him to death.

Stephen's impact as a busboy is a great example of spiritual warfare, of Christlike service, and of doing God's will.

- Stephen's story shows us that even the smallest acts of service become spiritual warfare and love in action.



## The Upsetting Busboy

Acts 6-7

Let's start with some background.

### 1. Background, Acts 4-5.

In Acts 4-5 we see a couple of things that are important to Stephen's story.

1. The church is rapidly growing, Acts 2:47, 5:14, 6:1. The church was growing faster than they could manage and structure.

2. There is intense jealousy from Jewish leaders. 'The high priest and his officials, who were Sadducees, were filled with jealousy (Acts 5:17 NLT).'

- First, Peter & John called before the Sanhedrin, Acts 4:1-22. Peter had healed a blind man and the ordered them not to speak about Jesus.
  - When released, their thanksgiving shook the house, Acts 4:23-31.
  - They were all filled with the Spirit again.
- Second, all the apostles were arrested and put in jail, but the Holy Spirit released them, Acts 5:17-42.
  - Much like what happened to Peter (Acts 12), they walked past the guards and went to preach in the Temple courts.
- For a third time the apostles were brought before the Sanhedrin.
  - But Gamaliel offers wisdom: if this is of men it will fail, but if it is of God, we are fighting God Himself (Acts 5:39).
  - So, the apostles were flogged and set free. The Jewish religious leaders were frustrated because, 'they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good new (Acts 5:42).'

We also see a principle at work here ...

3. Satan seeks to destroy from within, Acts 5:1-11, 6:1.

- Jesus said that Satan comes 'only to steal and kill and destroy (Jn 10:10),' but I believe Satan likes to destroy by dividing us from within.
- For example, Anaias & Sapphira who lied to the Holy Spirit.
- That is why Jesus prayed for our unity (Jn 17:22).
- Division is what brings Stephen's name to the book of Acts.

## 2. The Problem, Acts 6:1.

'But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1 NLT).'

Division – Satan always seeks to divide us. This foothold for Satan to divide arose because the Hellenist Christians, the Greek-speaking Christian widows 'were being discriminated against.'

This is a real situation and problem.

- At that time, the Jews supported their widows by providing them money for 14 meals a week each week.<sup>2</sup>
- The Jewish synagogues felt no obligation to support these widows.
- Therefore, the Christian church stepped up to help these widows, but instead of giving money they chose to provide actual meals.
- Perhaps it was because the church met daily for a meal together (Acts 2:46).

## 3. The Solution, Acts 6:2-7.

'So the Twelve called a meeting of all the believers. They said, "We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program (Acts 6:2 NLT)."

I love that the attitude of the apostles was 'let's talk.'

- Every time there is conflict that threatens division there is a call to work it out (Acts 6). A few weeks ago, I reviewed the conflict in Acts 11 and 15 of including Gentiles. In Acts 21 they discuss Paul not following Jewish expectations.
- The biblical solution is to talk and come to some sort of consensus rather than divide God's people.

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<sup>2</sup> Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1264.

It is interesting is that the apostles were waiting tables. Perhaps they were following Jesus' example in the upper room.

- Jesus washed their feet and told them no job was too lowly or insignificant for them to do as his followers: 'You ought to wash each other's feet (Jn 13:14 NLT).'

Both serving tables and preaching are ministries. Don't think they are talking down to the busboys. Humble service is to be honored.

- Jesus said, 'whoever wants to become great ... must be your servant (Mk 10:43).'
- And someday we will hear Jesus say, 'well done, good and faithful servant (Lk 19:17).' The basis of our judgement will be - did we do what God asked of us, did we become who he wanted us to become.
- Each one of us has been given unique gifts. 'If your gift is serving others, serve them well (Ro 12:7 NLT).'
- Sometimes the more important ministries are unseen.
- Using our gifts is a means of grace to others. 'Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms (1Pe 4:10 NIV).'

**The solution.** 'And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will give them this responsibility. <sup>4</sup>Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word (Acts 6:3-4 NLT).'

This is kind of crazy - from a human perspective, anyone should be able to serve tables. Why look for men 'full of the Spirit and wisdom?'

The apostles saw something spiritual with this position. They were rushing the Marines to a hotspot, to the place where Satan wanted to destroy the church.

Service is spiritual warfare.

- Every time you give a cup of cold water in Jesus' name you are pushing back the powers of darkness (Mt 10:42).
- Every time you bring unity where Satan wants division, you are doing spiritual warfare. Yes, serving food is 'taking a stand against the devil's schemes (Ep 6:11).'

Luke is using this story to introduce us to the Hellenist Christians (Acts 6-9).

- The gospel is expanding from Jerusalem to the Greek speaking Jews, and then the Samaritans in Acts 8, and then the Gentiles in Act 10.
- Stephen and Phillip are 'full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (v. 3).'

They look around and find seven: 'Everyone liked this idea, and they chose the following: Stephen (a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit), Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas of Antioch (an earlier convert to the Jewish faith).<sup>6</sup> These seven were presented to the apostles, who prayed for them as they laid their hands on them.<sup>7</sup> So God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too (Acts 6:5-7 NLT).'

Notice that all seven men had Greek names, and Nicolas is said to be a convert to Judaism and then Christianity.

- So, they chose men whose sympathies would be with the Greek-speaking widows. 'They belong to the offended minority.'<sup>3</sup>
- Because they are men of the Spirit, they can be expected to do what is right.

These seven men were set aside and prayed over to wait tables. Amazing, considering that we consider it an unimportant position. All positions of service are important.

The story of the problem ends with a solution that shows real love and concern for the Greek-speaking widows.

Love is the second thing we learn about service.

Service is ...

1. Service is spiritual warfare.
2. Service is love in action. Love is a verb, which means there must be an action for it to be genuine love and not just a theory. John wrote, 'Let's not merely say that we love each other; let us show the truth by our actions (1Jn 3:18 NLT).'

God is pleased when we take on the family characteristics.

- 'For God so loved that he gave (Jn 3:16).'
- For ... the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 1:45 NIV).'

We are most like God when we pick up the basin and towel and begin to serve others.

So, that was the beginning of Stephen's short story.

He is a servant, a waiter, a busboy – so what's so troubling?

#### **4. The Troubling Busboy Changes the World.**

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<sup>3</sup> Keener, *Acts*, 1279.

It's not so much what he did as a busboy, but what he did in his spare time: 'Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, performed amazing miracles and signs among the people.<sup>9</sup> But one day some men from the Synagogue of Freed Slaves, as it was called, started to debate with him. They were Jews from Cyrene, Alexandria, Cilicia, and the province of Asia.<sup>10</sup> None of them could stand against the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen spoke (Acts 6:8-10 NLT).'

He is just being a normal Christian and the Holy Spirit did amazing things through him.

The official Jewish position, per Gamaliel, was to wait and see what happens to this new sect that follows Jesus.

- But this sub-group of Judaism decided to 'make something happen.'
- They debated and lost because they 'could not stand against the Holy Spirit.'

If Satan cannot get the leader of the Church, he will always attack the second string to bring division. They cannot go after the apostles, but they go after the busboy.

'So they persuaded some men to lie about Stephen, saying, "We heard him blaspheme Moses, and even God."<sup>12</sup> This roused the people, the elders, and the teachers of religious law. So they arrested Stephen and brought him before the high council.<sup>13</sup> The lying witnesses said, "This man is always speaking against the holy Temple and against the law of Moses.<sup>14</sup> We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy the Temple and change the customs Moses handed down to us (Acts 6:11-14 NLT)."

- These 'witnesses' lied about Stephen. Imagine what they could have done with AI.
- The Temple will become a flashpoint in a moment.

'At this point everyone in the high council stared at Stephen, because his face became as bright as an angel's (Acts 6:15 NLT).'

Stephen was given a chance to refute the charges.

- He gave a lengthy retelling of Israel's history.
- However, he retold the true history of Israel, its rebellious and hard-headed nature.
- Then he said 'The Most High doesn't live in temples made by human hands. As the prophet says,  
<sup>49</sup> 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Could you build me a temple as good as that?' asks the Lord (Acts 7:48-49 NLT).'

Then he accused them of resisting the Holy Spirit, because you betrayed and murdered the Messiah. Then 'Full of the Holy Spirit ... (he) saw the glory of God, and he saw Jesus standing in the place of honor at God's right hand (Acts 7:55 NLT).'

The Jewish leaders were so angry they dragged him out of the city and stoned him to death. What a troublesome busboy.

There were several positive effects because of this troublesome busboy and his service.

The positive effects of Stephen's service.

1. Saul saw someone genuinely filled with the Holy Spirit.
2. The first gift of martyrdom. The early church believed that martyrdom was a gift of the Holy Spirit. No one would be able to endure such trouble if it were not for a special anointing to preserve.
3. The believers were scattered. Jesus had said 'Go. Go into all the world.' Instead, they were huddled around Jerusalem. 'A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered (Act 8:1 NLT).'

### **Conclusion.**

There is no labor of service for God's kingdom that is too small to make a major impact.

I believe that ...

- All service is spiritual warfare. Even a cup of cold water given in Jesus' name pushes back the powers of darkness.
- Service is love in action.

### **Prayer.**