

Missions – Acts and Onward

Week 3 – Growth and Organization

Introduction: The church is growing; God is working; people are changing, and opposition has been pretty minimal thus far. The sad news is that Satan knows how to attack from different angles. Elwell and Yarbrough, speaking about these chapters as well as a couple previous said, “Three themes dominate the remainder of Acts’ opening chapters: (1) the continuing work of the gospel through the joint working of miracle and message, (2) life together in the community of believers, and (3) conflict.”¹ **PTQ**

I. Opposition from within

1. The Christians had begun to suffer minor persecution, like overnight stays in prisons and threats. They came together, prayed for continued boldness, and were filled with the Spirit of God again.

† **Acts 4:31-33** – *And when they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.³² And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.³³ And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all.*

- A. This empowering serves to garner both their preaching and their care for one another.

- “In addition to growth, these years were marked by an enviable social cohesion. That is, people lived with an eye to the needs of others and with a common spirit of sacrifice and love that lifted up their neighbor rather than centering on themselves. This high degree of common concern was rooted, however, in a high regard for Christ and his commands, not in bare humanitarian impulse. Luke states that there were “no needy persons among them”² **PTQ**

- B. The premiere example of this is given in the final verses of chapter 4

† **Acts 4:36-37** – *And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus,³⁷ Having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.*

2. Sadly, when something is going well, there is often an equal and opposite reaction.
 - A. Barnabas, who is one of my favorite people in the Bible, was very generous and gave money to others in need via the apostles. **PTQ**
 - B. However, someone saw that must have been jealous of the reception and generosity of Barnabas and tried to make a sinful counterfeit.

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament: A Historical and Theological Survey*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, Fourth Edition, Encountering Biblical Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 203.

² Ibid., 205.

† **Acts 5:1-2** – *But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession,² And kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

- i. “That account (Barnabas’) reveals that the Christians are not simply victims of persecution. The fearsome power of God resides in their midst. The second account prepares for Gamaliel’s warning to the Sanhedrin not to fight against God (5:34–39). Those who are enemies of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and this sacred community place themselves in grave danger of God’s judgment.”³
- ii. Sadly, not all difficulties will come from outside the camp, but what should have been clear historically is that a lot of people’s problems, individually and holistically, come from people’s propensity to sin.
- iii. The tradition of Christian charity to all continued. The Roman emperor Julian, also known as the Apostate, reigned AD 361–63 (after Constantine’s legalization of Christianity) and commented on the impact of Christians on society: “It is disgraceful that when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans [Christians] support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.”⁴
- iv. What counterfeits of Christian charity and abuses of generosity have you seen in the modern day? **PTQ**

C. God takes this sin very seriously.

† **Acts 5:3-5** – *But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land?⁴ Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God.⁵ And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things.*

- i. Peter notes this deceit was a trick of Satan, and ultimately it was Satan attempting to undermine the Spirit.
- ii. In lying to the Spirit, namely, which was in Peter and all believers, they were lying to God. **PTQ**
- iii. This is a great place to address the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

† **Acts 5:9-10** – *Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out.¹⁰ Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband.*

- iv. God took this sin so seriously that God took both Ananias ' and Sapphira’s lives. **PTQ**

³ David E. Garland, *Acts*, ed. Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 50.

⁴ Garland, *Acts*, 52.

- v. “The story recalls Joshua 7 where Achan and his family die as a result of secretly taking plunder from Ai, despite God’s prohibition against doing so. As Bruce puts it, “In both narratives, an act of deceit interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God.”⁵ **PTQ**
- vi. God’s Judgement of this sin helped keep unity in the church and caused fear to extend to those that heard.
 - † **Acts 5:11-14** – *And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things.¹² And by the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people; (and they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch.¹³ And of the rest durst no man join himself to them: but the people magnified them.¹⁴ And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women.)*
 - “Many non-Jews attended Synagogue and believed in Israel’s God without fully converting and keeping Jewish rules (see comment on 10:2); it is possible that a similar group of Jewish outsiders who respect the Jesus movement without converting to it is in view here. In context, people fear to associate with the movement without full commitment, knowing the fate of Ananias and Sapphira.”⁶ **PTQ**

II. Opposition from without

1. The wonders continued magnificently, as did the preaching of the word, leading to a decisive arrest by the Jewish authorities.
 - † **Acts 5:17-20** – *Then the high priest rose up, and all they that were with him, (which is the sect of the Sadducees,) and were filled with indignation,¹⁸ And laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison.¹⁹ But the angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said,²⁰ Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life.*
 - A. The initial response of physically stopping the Apostles and bringing them in for an arraignment was stopped by the Angel of the Lord.
 - B. The Angel of the Lord, when appearing in the New Testament, is never necessarily connected to Christ, so be careful with those comparisons. **PTQ**
 - C. When they were set free, they were again commanded to go and preach.
2. The arraignment was scheduled for the morning, as that would have been required in the Jewish courts. Thus, again showing the way Christ was treated was overtly sinful.⁷
 - A. Upon looking for the disciples in prison they were not found but were told the men sought were found preaching in the temple. **V.21-25**

⁵ Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes: The Gospels & Acts*, vol. I (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 384.

⁶ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, Second Edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2014), 331.

⁷ Ibid., 332.

- B. The captains came and carefully requested the Apostles' presence at the trial, worrying about stirring up the people and ending up on the wrong end of a mob.

PTQ

- C. In this trial while being complained about for this preaching and placement of blame for the death of Christ Peter responds with important and well-known words.

† **Acts 5:29-32** – *Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.³⁰ The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree.³¹ Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.³² And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.*

- *“The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of prophecy inspiring them to witness, so that the apostles claim to speak for God, an authority higher than the Sanhedrin. Many expected the Spirit to be available only in the end time or only to the extremely pious. The apostles’ reply indicates that they do not regard the Sanhedrin as obedient to God (contrast 5:29).”⁸* **PTQ**

- 3. Gamaliel, a highly influential Jewish Pharisee from the house of Hillel and likely Saul’s instructor, gave an important warning to the rest of the Sanhedrin, who were again resorting to the idea of murder. **PTQ**

- A. He began by giving examples of false Christ figures that had occurred in recent times.
- B. This highlights the truth that there was somewhat of a messianic expectation that people were looking for.⁹
- C. The final statements and effects were seen as follows

† **Acts 5:38-42** – *And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought:³⁹ But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.⁴⁰ And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.⁴¹ And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.⁴² And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.*

III. Growth, Organization, and the First Martyr

- 1. As the church grew it also grew in it’s complexity and needs. The same is true today.

† **Acts 6:1-4** – *And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.² Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.³ Wherefore, brethren, look ye out*

⁸ Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 332.

⁹ Bruce W. Longenecker, Elizabeth E. Shively, and T. J. Lang, *Behind the Scenes of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024), 189.

among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.⁴ But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.

- A. Inherent in Jewish society was a kind of pureblood theology. This meant that, in order for the ideals of Christ to be fully manifested, the church was going to have growing pains in overcoming old prejudices. **PTQ**
- B. Specific groups were finding those in need neglected, namely the Grecian Jewish widows. An additional reason for this is that it was often true for Jews that the idea of dying in one's homeland was preferred, and, go figure, women live longer than men, so there were just a lot of Hellenist Jewish women; this would have been a trouble for both the saved and unsaved Jews. **PTQ**
- C. The apostles recognized it to be a problem but not one that they thought should distract them from their particular mission. Thus, the church established and chose deacons. **PTQ**
- D. Those chosen were men full of faith and would have a special care and disposition for this problem.
 - † **Acts 6:5-7** – *And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch.⁶ Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.⁷ And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.*
 - i. “That all seven of these men have Greek names suggests that they are obvious Hellenists (6:1), first-or second-generation Jewish immigrants to Palestine—hence members of the offended minority. One is even a proselyte a former Gentile who had converted to Judaism; many of these lived in Antioch (cf. 11:19).”¹⁰ **PTQ**
 - ii. This care for the poor and love for the outcast had a particular effect on the priestly class, possibly because they knew God's love for the poor and needy. **PTQ**
- 2. Stephen is highlighted among the Deacons as one who did wonders, preached the word, and heartily defeated his opponents with words until their only recourse was to lie about him. V. 8-15
- 3. The case is opened by the High Priest allowing Stephen to deny the claims made; instead, he takes them on a history lesson.
 - A. Stephen goes through the history of the Israelites, highlighting particular people and times.
 - i. He tells the story of Abraham 2-8
 - ii. He tells the story of Joseph 8-19
 - iii. He tells the story of Moses 20-44
 - iv. Conquest and kings 45-50

¹⁰ Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 335.

B. In the midst of these stories he highlights the Israelite people's rebellion against God's leaders and ways. **PTQ**

- i. The initial people refused to see Moses as a deliverer and ruler V. 24-28, 35
- ii. He addresses the giving of the law to Moses on Sinai (by an angel???) and the people's disobedience to it and him V. 39-42 **PTQ**
 - † **Acts 7:39-42** – *To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt,⁴⁰ Saying unto Aaron, Make us gods to go before us: for as for this Moses, which brought us out of the land of Egypt, we wot not what is become of him.⁴¹ And they made a calf in those days, and offered sacrifice unto the idol, and rejoiced in the works of their own hands.⁴² Then God turned, and gave them up to worship the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, O ye house of Israel, have ye offered to me slain beasts and sacrifices by the space of forty years in the wilderness?*
- iii. Stephen essentially makes the claim that people have begun to unduly worship the temple as opposed to the person it was meant to represent V. 43-50
- iv. "Stephen does not deny that God blessed and approved the building of the Old Testament temple; but he denies that God meant it to be the idol that he argues his hearers have made it. In verse 46 Stephen echoes Psalm 132:5."¹¹
- v. Just like the Israelites in the past left the true God for a Golden calf, the modern Jewish leaders have forsaken the prophet like unto Moses for the sake of the temple and all the human tradition it has come to represent. **PTQ**

C. Then Stephen makes his own official charge of the Jewish leaders, and they respond by lashing out.

† **Acts 7:51-54** – *Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.⁵² Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers:⁵³ Who have received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it.⁵⁴ When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth.*

D. Interestingly, Stephen sees Jesus standing for him in the heavens, and the church garners a new and vivacious enemy at the stoning of Stephen.

† **Acts 7:57-60** – *Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord,⁵⁸ And cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul.⁵⁹ And they stoned Stephen, calling upon God, and saying, Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.⁶⁰ And he kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*

- i. Stephen, as the first Martyr of the church, receives great blessing and encouragement from the Lord and responds like Jesus in seeking the forgiveness of his murderers. **PTQ**

¹¹ Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, 339.

- ii. Note that when believers come together of one accord, people are blessed and saved, but when the unbelievers do it, it ends in the death of the righteous.

Conclusion: As the church grows in ability and strength, the demonic realm may try to create disunity from within if it cannot be conquered from without. The proper judgment of sin and desire toward holy living will keep at arm's length people who want a little Jesus but don't holistically want to follow him. Growth brings complexity, but if we keep first things first and plan to distribute needs among the body, it can lead to even better growth and farther reach. We must be intentional that our preaching and teaching do not shy away from the truth, regardless of the pressure against us. The term martyr originally meant witness; the question is, are we such witnesses that we could stand with abandon in the face of such opposition?



"Ivory and bone plaque showing the stoning of St. Stephen, Mosan School, ca. AD 1100"¹²

ca. circa; approximately

AD Anno Domini (identifies the period after the birth of Jesus)

¹² Elwell and Yarbrough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 206.

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