

CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian
Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

DHW BIBLE CLASS LESSON 7

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES CHAPTER

INTRODUCTION

The early church so far has been described as being of “one heart and one soul.” The members had a deep concern for their fellow members who were in need and sought to actively provide for their physical welfare. This was a good thing on the part of the early Christians. However, it is true that good things never last long unless they are properly and carefully maintained. In this chapter, we begin to see problems that threatened to divide and split the young church. Thankfully a solution was found and danger was averted. The solution is of instructive value to us. While it is commendable for Christians to be socially and actively concerned for those who are in need, especially to members of the family of God, it is important that such social concern must take its proper place and proportion with respect to the preaching of the Gospel and teaching of the Word of God. This is the main thrust of the chapter. Accompanying this main thrust is an introduction to Stephen, a Greek-speaking Jew, whose character and testimony should motivate us to increase our faith and loyalty to Jesus Christ.

Chapter 6 falls neatly into three sections: (1) the incipient danger that threatens the unity of the church (vv. 1-4); (2) the apostles’ solution to the danger facing the church (vv. 5-7); and (3) Stephen’s defence of the faith against the Greek-speaking Jews (vv.8-15).

COMMENTARY

The Grecian Jews Complained to the Apostles

The number of disciples in the church at Jerusalem had increased. So far, the church had been enjoying a time of relative peace and happiness. The disciples were in fellowship together. The needs of the poor had been met. Every one seemed happy. The setting was about 37 A.D. As the number of disciples increased, problems in the church began to emerge. The church comprised two distinct groups of Jews. One group was made up of Hebrew-speaking Jews who were native Judaeans. The other group was made up of Greek-speaking Jews who came from different parts of the Roman Empire. These Jews were the *diaspora* [dispersed] or those who had fled the land in time past for various reasons. They were the same Jews whom James and the Peter had addressed in their letters.¹

Some of these Grecian Jews had returned to Judaea, many of them were widows. They had their own synagogues where the worship service was conducted in Greek. In the ancient

¹ James 1:1 James, a servant of God and of

1 Peter 1:1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,

world, widows were especially vulnerable. Wage-work was usually not available to them. They had to depend on their male relatives for their livelihood. Many of these destitute widows returned to Jerusalem to find support from among the Jewish community. At the time, the wealthier Jewish community who had been converted to Christianity had contributed to a communal fund. The Apostles were in charge of distributing it to the needy.

The Grecian Jews complained to the Apostles that their widows were neglected in the daily “ministration.” The word “ministration” is *diaconia*, which means “service.” It is not mentioned that they were being discriminated against. The fact is that when the number of disciples was small, it was not a problem for the Apostles to manage the food distribution. But the number had increased and the task of food distribution became more difficult. Some kind of organisation was required.

The Twelve (denoting the twelve Apostles) summoned the Christian community before them and advised the church to appoint seven efficient and godly men to manage the distribution of the food to the needy. The Apostles declared that it was not “reason” (pleasing to God) for them to manage the social concerns of the community at the expense of prayer and preaching of the Word. Praying is the devotional side of private and public worship. Preaching is the instructional or teaching side. In advising them to choose The Seven, the Apostles gave them three essential qualities to look out for. First, they must be “men of honest report”, reputable for their honesty and integrity. The second and third qualities were interlinked -- be “full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom”. They must know the

Word and be under the leading and guidance of the Holy Spirit. They must be able to apply the Word wisely in the discharge of their responsibilities and duties.

The Problem Solved & the Word of God Increased

The Apostles’ advice pleased the whole church. Observe that the Apostles did not high-handedly command the church. Seven men who fulfilled the required criteria were chosen. The first to be mentioned was Stephen. He was described as a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. The other six were Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas who was a proselyte of Antioch. Interestingly, the names were all Greek. All The Seven might have been Greek-speaking Jews. The choice seemed logical since the complaint of negligence arose from the Greek-speaking Jews. These men were brought before the Apostles, who prayed and then laid their hands on them. The laying of hands was a symbolic act that was a common practice in the Old Testament time. It was used to symbolise three different things. First, it symbolised the transfer of guilt (Leviticus 1:4). Second, it was used to confer blessing (Genesis 48:14). Third, it symbolised the setting apart of a person to an office or the commissioning of a person for new responsibility (Leviticus 27:23). In the New Testament, the laying of hands was observed in healing (Acts 28:8, Mark 1:41); blessing (Mark 10:16); ordaining or commissioning (Acts 13:3) and the imparting of spiritual gifts (1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6).

The problem was solved. The social concerns of the church were met. There were no more complaints.

Harmony was restored. At the same time the Apostles had more time to preach the gospel and teach the Word. Indeed, the Word of God “increased”, denoting rapid continuous growth and the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly. Moreover, a large number of priests were converted to “the faith”— the Christian faith. These priests were the keepers of the temple and they were Sadducees! It was definitely the preaching and teaching of the Word that had converted them. It was remarkable.

Stephen Disputing with the Greek-speaking Jews

Stephen is singled out for mention because he is a role model of living true to the Lord. His name in Greek, “*stephanos*” means “a crown.” In Greek culture, “the crown” was a wreath given as a prize for victory or as a public honour for distinguished service. The name was fitting for Stephen. Every aspect of his life overflowed with Christ’s graciousness and the Holy Spirit’s power. He had the disposition of Christ. God worked great wonders and miracles through him marking him as one of His special messengers even though he was not an apostle.

In Jerusalem, the Greek-speaking Jews had their own synagogue. The Libertines and Freedmen congregated there. As their name suggests, they were either former slaves or prisoners of war or their descendants. For example, when the Roman general Pompey conquered Judaea in 64 B.C., he took many Jews as prisoners to Rome. The Cyrenians and the Alexandrians came from the northern parts of Africa and others came from Cilicia and from provinces in Asia Minor. The Apostle Paul who was

called Saul before his conversion, hailed from Tarsus, a major city of Cilicia.²

These men put questions to Stephen just like the Pharisees and scribes had done to Jesus Christ. They could not refute Stephen’s arguments so they resorted to foul means against him. They “suborned” or bribed men to accuse him of speaking “blasphemous words against Moses, and against God” (v.11). They aroused the people, and the Jewish elders and scribes came upon him and arrested him and brought him before the Sanhedrin. The false witnesses, who were bribed, charged that Stephen had not stopped preaching and teaching against the temple and the Law. They further charged that he had said that “this Jesus of Nazareth” would destroy the temple, and change the traditions, which Moses had given to them. The charge against Stephen was made before the Sanhedrin. After the charge had been made against him, all who sat in the Sanhedrin fixed their attention on him. They saw his face as that of “the face of an angel” (v.15). This reminds us of Moses who had been in communion with God in Mount Sinai. When Moses came down from the mountain, his face reflected the glory of God.³

² Acts 22:3 I am verily a man *which am* a Jew, born in Tarsus, *a city* in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, *and* taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day.

³ Exodus 34:29 And it came to pass, when Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses' hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him. 30 And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him.

An examination of the charges against Stephen revealed a mixture of distorted truth and falsehood. Stephen had been accused of speaking incessantly against the Law and the temple. This was clearly false. Stephen quoted Jesus Christ. They claimed that Stephen said that Jesus would destroy the temple and the Law and traditions, which Moses gave them. While it was true that Jesus had said those words about the temple, He was referring to His body sacrificed on the cross once and for all as an atoning sacrifice. That was what the Lord Jesus Christ had meant when He said that the temple would be destroyed. Thus their charges against Stephen were completely false, their accusations were highly distorted.

PRACTICAL VALUE

We learn that when a church grows in numbers, there is bound to be problems. It is therefore prudent to set up a system to meet the new challenges. The early church was in danger of being split. The Apostles wisely prevented this by advising the leaders to choose a group of people to take care of the food-distribution thus averting the split. The Apostles' criteria for nominating The Seven to meet the problem are instructional. We should choose men who are honest, wise, and who trust in God wholeheartedly [full of the Holy Ghost].

The Apostles' declaration that the ministry of prayer and of the Word should not be neglected is a lesson in the priorities of the church. The church is primarily for the preaching of the gospel for the salvation of souls, and the

teaching of God's Word for the edification of the believers. This two-fold aim must never be compromised by any social needs or internal problems of the church. The reason why many modern churches have lost their confidence in the gospel to convert sinners and turn them into disciples for the Lord Jesus Christ is because they concentrate too much on offering social good works to the world. As a result, the world is not aware that there is more to Christianity. The world takes the aid but does not see the need to come to Christ for salvation. And what is worse is that those who do join the church are not true converts. The preaching of the gospel, of repentance of sins and of salvation through Jesus Christ is just not there.

David Gooding's note on what can happen in the church in this regard deserves our attention: "Similarly inside the churches, it can so easily happen that social activities become the cuckoo in the nest and virtually oust the preaching of the word and prayer. Some protest that nowadays one cannot expect congregations to put up sermons that seriously and systematically expound the word of God, one must give them lighter and more relevant fare. That may be true. But if it is, does not that suggest that they are no disciples in the Lukan and apostolic sense of the term at all? And if the churches find the word of God an intolerable bore, how can they expect the world to listen when they preach it? And if the word of God is not preached and does not spread, how will the number of the disciples increase at all, let alone rapidly?" (*True to the Faith*, page 105).

We also learn a form of church governance in this chapter. The Apostles were responsible for the

ministry of prayer and the Word. They advised the church to choose godly leaders among them to look after some pressing social matters. The Apostles' suggestion was accepted by the church. Then the leaders were chosen. We see a system that delineates the function of certain church members. There were the Apostles who took care of the spiritual matters of the church; The Seven who took care of the social matters; and the church leaders who were elected in accordance with biblical qualifications. There are three basic groups, which make up the organization of the church: the disciples or the congregation of the body of believers; the Twelve Apostles or the elders and pastors; and The Seven who served as the deacons. AMEN

2. What could have happened if the apostles had not judiciously guided the church?

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

Monday: Acts 6:1-4; Ephesians 4:11-12.

Tuesday: 1Timothy 5:3-16.

Wednesday: Acts 6:5-8.

Thursday: 1Timothy 3:1-14.

Friday: Acts 6:9-15; 1 Peter 3:15.

3. Who were the seven men and what were their responsibilities? Why are the qualifications for selecting these deacons important? What would be the danger if leaders are not chosen according to these qualifications?

Discussion Questions

1. As the number of disciples increased, what practical needs began to present themselves? How was the problem solved?

4. What did Stephen's opponents do when they could not debate him successfully?

5. Discuss (a) the outstanding features of Stephen's life and ministry (vv. 5, 8); (b) the nature of the persecution against him (vv.11-13); and (c) the charges laid against him (vv.13, 14)?
