

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES - NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY

PART SIX - CHAPTERS 5 AND 6

The church in Jerusalem was facing opposition. Plan A - do good works but keep quiet about the risen Christ - had failed because the Lord in them was so real.(4:19,20)

Plan B was very much more subtle - if you must talk about Jesus, you do not have to mean it and do it. Tell everyone loudly that you are giving everything you have to the Lord, and hold on tight! (5:2) If only the Devil could have established this as normal Christian behaviour, he would have won. The church would have been dead within a generation. Satan filled Ananias' heart in person to make sure the plan was efficiently carried out, just as he had entered into Judas,(Jn.13:27) to attempt to thwart God's plan of salvation on the cross.

Plan B failed because instead of being dazzled by the generous gift in the offering plate, Peter let God give him insight into Ananias and Sapphira's spiritual condition. They could not have been true Christians because, if they had been, the Holy Spirit would not have let the Devil in, just as the strong man will not let the burglar into the house.(Matt.12:29)

God exercised His right as the giver of life to withdraw His gift because He saw how much was at stake. The effect on the church was dramatic. There was a healthy fear of God(5:11) which allowed God to work powerfully through them, and a delightful oneness. (5:12) Outsiders were scared to join the church because they respected enormously the genuineness of the Christians(5:13) but they were keener than ever to join Christ(5:14), and so, many people were restored to normal.(5:15,16)

As Christians were filled with the Spirit, the religious leaders were filled with jealousy(5:17) and the jail was filled with apostles.(5:18) God demonstrated that He, not the high priest, was in charge. He got them out of jail and back on the job with the message of life.(5:19,20) The religious leaders arrested them again but God's purpose was achieved. Jerusalem was filled with their teaching.(5:28)

Peter spelled his message out plainly - they were under God's authority not that of the religious hierarchy. Their task was to bring men to repentance and forgiveness through the cross so that the risen Christ might again be in charge in men's lives.(5:29-32)

Gamaliel, Saul of Tarsus' teacher,(Acts 22:3) was God's unlikely instrument in restraining the extremists(5:34-39) and soon with

blood on their backs and joy in their hearts the apostles were back on the job.(5:40-42)

Chapter 6 unveils plan C. Hellenistic Jews were those brought up outside Israel. There were marked social and cultural differences between them and the locally born Jews.

6:1 Q.1 Do you think the complaints were justified? Why do such complaints so often divide people on racial or social class lines? How do these differences persist and show even after we have become Christians? What damage do they do?

6:2-4 Q.2 Why is division a danger to the effective ministry of teachers? What practical steps did the apostles take to avert such a danger? How are we to respond to such a threat today?

6:3 Q.3 What were the qualifications for Christian leaders in any role in those days? Why were they so important? What happens if we regard other qualifications as more important?

6:5 Q.4 Who chose the seven men to be responsible for the practical needs in the church? How was it that the congregation's choice was unanimous? Does it surprise you that all the names of the deacons were Greek rather than Hebrew?

6:1-5 Q.5 What had been the real problem in the church at this time? How had the apostles solved it? How can we apply the same principles in Christian leadership today?

6:6 Q.6 What was the significance of the apostles laying hands on the seven deacons? Did it give them something that they did not have before?(I Pet.5:6; Lev.1:4)

6:7 Q.7 What happened when their divisions were effectively healed? How would the same process have the same effect for us today?

6:8 Q.8 What was the secret of Stephen being 'full of grace and power'? What was a deacon doing preaching?

6:9-14 Q.9 Tarsus was in Cilicia. Who was likely to have been among Stephen's opponents? Why was Stephen's argument so compelling?(Matt.10:17-20) Why did his enemies resort to such underhanded tactics?(Matt.26:59-61)

6:15 Q.10 Why was Stephen's face like that of an angel? Can we expect to be the same when we are persecuted?(II Cor.3:1-11) What were the conditions for this to happen then and now?