

THE EXPLOSIVE CHURCH

(3) Growing Pains.

Acts chapter 5. After the initial explosion at Pentecost, the Church continued to stand and grow. This presented a problem for Satan, who cunningly decided an attack from the inside was his best strategy. Hence we have the sorry story of Ananias and Sapphira in **verses 1-11**. They were not bad people or criminals, they simply wanted to be counted among the generous souls who had sold property and given the proceeds to the apostles to be distributed to any in need. Unfortunately their generosity had limits which they were not keen to admit, so they pretended to a whole-heartedness they did not possess. It was not the love of God that prompted them to sell their property: it was their craving for the praise of men. It would have been perfectly okay for them to bring only part of the proceeds, as long as they admitted to it: their sin was the pretence of a commitment they did not have. We might find the judgement they suffered to be harsh. Remember that in the formation of the Church, a world-changing event was taking place, and it was of the utmost importance that everyone learn the rules from the start. Even the apostles still had a lot to learn. It must have been hard for Luke to write about this hiccup to the Church's progress: one of the proofs of the authenticity of the Bible is the honesty with which each sub-story is dealt.

Ananias and Sapphira really only told a little white lie, just neglecting to tell the full truth. Was that sin as bad as the Sadducees who tried to silence Peter and John? Or as bad as the religious leaders who crucified Christ? They did not seem to suffer any judgement at that time. Is hypocrisy so wrong? What really motivates us to do service for God?

Verses 12-16 make for happier reading. Through the grace of God the apostles were enabled to perform many miracles so that even people from outside Jerusalem were convinced of the power of the risen Christ. H.A.Ironside¹ makes the comment that at the beginning of any new ministry that God gives to men at a particular time, miracles are the norm, but that as time moves on and the truth God has given becomes better known, miracles are for the most part withdrawn. God in His grace shows His power so that we poor sceptical souls might believe, but as an ongoing experience His Word is enough to feed our faith.

We still hear of miracles today: how are we to assess these? Are they proof of a person's heightened state of faith? Is God especially near to some people and not to others? How does God usually work in our lives and in the world? What about the myriad miracles that happen "naturally" day by day?

We have seen Satan at work creating inside dissension: now in **verses 17-42** he attacks the Church with outside persecution. The Sadducees had 2 reasons for their anger at the apostles: talk of the resurrection of Christ was a deathblow to every facet of their philosophy and theology, while **Verses 26-28** tell us they were aware that the apostles had filled Jerusalem with their teaching and that in general the blame for Jesus' death was being applied to them. Compare **Matthew 27:25** where the crowd with brazen self-confidence shouted, "Let his blood be on us and on our children!" Were they beginning to rue their boastful words?

Notice that this time it was all the apostles who were involved. If we look at the list of the disciples Jesus chose, we find that out of the 12, there were 2 of whom we have no record of any spoken word. Yet they are all listed in **Acts 1:13** as being there at Pentecost, filled with the Spirit and standing strong as foundation stones for the Church. In any gathering of people there are the leaders and the followers, the vocal and the quiet ones, the active and the contemplative, yet all are needed – in fact, chosen by God – and each has his/her part to play in the fulfilment of God's programme.

Do you look at obviously gifted fellow-Christians with envy, and long to have a share of their gifts? Remember we are all part of the Body and each part needs to be different for the successful working of the whole. We can only work effectively if we are content with the gifts God has given us and use them for His glory alone.

I love the humour of the situation where the Sadducees thought they had the game sewn up as they consigned the apostles to the public gaol, from which the angel simply opened the door and set them free. Then next day we see their self-important activity as the whole Sanhedrin was called together to join them: I can see those pompous dignitaries sitting in the council and waiting for the “criminals” to appear at their command – only to find that they had simply disappeared! **Verse 26** shows they were taken down a peg or two and were careful in their treatment of the apostles, who had the crowd firmly on their side!

As usual, Peter was the spokesman with another powerful sermon in which he once again denounced the leaders and held up the risen Christ as the only hope of salvation. Notice in **verse 31** that Peter says, “that He might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to *Israel*.” Even at this stage the full implication of the gospel had not dawned on the apostles: they did not envision yet that this gospel would reach the whole world! The anger of the council rose to a peak and the apostles were in danger of being annihilated. But God was still in control, and He used a respected and honoured teacher, Gamaliel, to rescue them with his commonsense solution. It is a pity that Gamaliel, for all his learning, had not the wisdom to really listen to the apostles and seek the truth for himself: what a pillar he would have been in the Church!

Can you think of non-believing people whom God used to protect His own from harm, or to be the means of His will being carried out, in public life, or in your own?

So the apostles were released, but not before the unjust punishment of being flogged with the Jewish 39 lashes, ostensibly for their disobedience in continuing to preach Jesus. But amazingly, they could rejoice in being counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name! And following Peter’s injunction that “we must obey God rather than men” they boldly continued to preach in the Temple courts, right under the noses of their accusers, as well as from house to house, the good news that “Jesus is the Christ.”

Throughout the book of Acts we see the unfolding of wisdom in the structure, running and character of the Church as the Holy Spirit guided the apostles on their journey of learning by experience. It was all so new, and new phrases keep popping up, such as “added to the Lord” – rather than, added to the synagogue, or added to the Temple, or to Judaism. Even the name “Church” was new!

Acts 6:1-7 gives an example of another problem that arose and was dealt with skilfully. The Church was almost entirely composed of Jews, but among these were 2 distinct groups – the Grecian Jews, known as Hellenists, born outside the land of Palestine, speaking the Greek language and more Greek than Hebrew in their outlook; and the Hebraic Jews, who spoke the Aramaic and/or Hebrew languages of Palestine and who fiercely sought to preserve Jewish culture and customs. With the funds so generously given by those who could afford it, the apostles were able to care for the widows among them, who had no pension or other social benefits on which to call. But how quickly human nature takes benefits for granted, even to complaining that they are inadequate! Normally there was probably not much love lost between the 2 groups of Jews and the sensitive Hellenists felt their widows were not being given fair treatment in the hand-outs.

It is good to see that the apostles did not abuse their new-found authority: they led strongly, but with true democracy. Realising the danger of distraction from their work of preaching and teaching, they explained their feelings to the Church in general and set down a principle, but still leaving the choice up to the congregation. In **verse 2** the word for “ministry” is in the Greek exactly the same as the word for “wait on tables”; in other words, both activities had equal importance. There is no hierarchy in the service of God! And it is great to see the choice the congregation made – all 7 of the men chosen had Greek names, so were obviously from the Hellenist group. One of them, Nicolas, was even a convert to Judaism – in other words, a Gentile! The apostles accepted the people’s choice and laid commissioning hands on them. No wonder blessing followed, as in **verse 7** – the word of God spread, numbers increased, including those steeped in the Jewish religion – priests – who became obedient to the faith!

Problems arise naturally in the Church because we are human. What are some good rules for dealing with these? Who should be the supreme Arbitrator?

We have seen that the apostles were enabled to perform many miracles as they proclaimed the gospel. Now we follow 2 of the “deacons” to see that they too were given this power through the Holy Spirit. **Acts 6:8-15** tells us that Stephen was a man full of God’s grace and power, doing great wonders and miraculous signs as he preached among the people. Opposition arose from the Synagogue of the Freedmen, made up of Hellenists who had been freed from slavery. They came from many places outside of Palestine, including Tarsus, the home of Saul, and it is possible that he also attended that synagogue and was among those arguing with Stephen. The Sanhedrin gathered together with their false charges, but even these could not diminish the aura of godliness that shone from the face of Stephen as he faced them. Far from convicting them, it only served to heighten their fury.

Chapter 7:1-53 sets out Stephen’s defence, a skilful recital of Israel’s history in which he showed the nation had always rebelled – against Moses, against the prophets, against God, just as now they were rebelling against His Christ. He finished with a strong accusation against these religious leaders, whose anger rose to white heat, exacerbated by his claim to a vision of God in heaven, with Jesus at His right hand! With mindless fury the leaders dragged him out of the city and stoned him – yet even they could not quell his faith in God, as he, like his Master, prayed for forgiveness for them and committed his spirit to his Heavenly Father.

There are some significant comments in **7:58 and 8:1 and 3** concerning “a young man named Saul”: with hindsight we can surmise just how deep an impression was made on Paul by this first Christian martyr. In his epistles he often made regretful references to it, and maybe Stephen’s death was the first step in the long road of Paul’s own journey to Christ.

Was Stephen’s death an accident or a failure in the life of the Church? If it wasn’t in God’s plan, was He able to use it for His ultimate glory? Sometimes it takes many steps for a person to come to faith in Christ: can you think of examples in your own or another’s experience?

And now the Church, which had become strong and comfortable in Jerusalem, received a great shaking up. “You will be My witnesses in Jerusalem”, Jesus had said in **chapter 1:8** but now was the time to remember the next phrase of the verse – “and in all Judea and Samaria.” Fierce persecution broke out and while the apostles remained safely at headquarters, everyone else fled the city for the countryside of Judea and even the despised Samaria. Satan had really shot himself in the foot: he had tried to stamp out the fire of the Church by persecution, but wherever the burning embers landed, more fires sprang up with equal vigour!

In **chapter 8:4-40** we follow a second “deacon”, Philip (not the apostle of the same name) as he went to a Samaritan city and there, accompanied by miraculous signs, he proclaimed Christ. Back in **John chapter 4** the Samaritans at Sychar had become believers through the testimony of the woman at the well and the teaching of Jesus as He stayed with them for a couple of days. It seems the harvest Jesus spoke of then was still ready for reaping as Philip’s words reached Samaritan hearts and lives. “There was great joy in that city.”

News of this reached the leaders in Jerusalem, **verses 14-17**, but the joy was not exactly duplicated there. Rather, their reaction was one of puzzled astonishment, maybe even scepticism. *Samaritans* were actually believing in Jesus and being baptised, both men and women! Whatever next? Feeling the weight of their responsibility, Peter and John were immediately despatched to assess the situation and ascertain whether Philip hadn’t just been carried away in his enthusiasm. In one sense, the old Jewish pride was on the altar. But when they arrived and saw the evidence of God at work, Peter and John had the grace to admit what Jesus had been trying to tell them for years. In the grace of God, they were given a part in this new stage of evangelisation: it was their task to lay their hands on the converts, whereupon these Samaritans received the Holy Spirit, just as had their Jewish brothers! Refer back to **Luke 9:54** and you will find James and John suggesting to Jesus that, as punishment for one Samaritan village being inhospitable, they should call down fire from heaven to destroy them! Thankfully, **verse 25** shows they were ready to act on their new realisation of the heart of God: this time they backed up Philip by preaching the gospel there and to many other Samaritan villages as they passed through them on their way back to Jerusalem.

We can be full of our own preconceived ideas of what's right and what's wrong, but God's love is so much wider than ours – which is just as well for us! Yet we must never compromise with sin. How can we keep a balance between accepting everyone because Christ loves them, yet holding up the standard which He Himself has set for us?

We might feel the chapter could have ended there, but it doesn't. In the midst of Philip's hugely successful mission he had a message from the Lord to leave it all for one lonely road running from Jerusalem to Gaza. Just as a stone thrown into a pool brings about ripples in an ever-widening circle, so **Verses 26-40** give the story of the ever-widening reach of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And here Philip met a man – an important official in a foreign kingdom, but an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a *Gentile* – yet one who had come all the way to Jerusalem to worship the God of the Jews, and who was even now trying to understand more of their religion. He may have been black, and we wonder what sort of reception he had received as he made his way to the Temple with the rest of the crowd? He was probably ostracized in spite of his exalted position in his home country.

But God knew his heart, and sent Philip to give him the light he was seeking. In God's perfect timing, he was reading from the prophet Isaiah, the very chapter that told of Jesus' death, just as Philip ran up to join him. **Isaiah 53:8**, "In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants?" must have struck a chord with the eunuch: he had possibly suffered injustice, and he too would have no descendants. This may have sparked the love for Jesus which he was soon to show!

Upon Philip's proffered help, the Ethiopian invited Philip to join him in the chariot, and Philip, as obedient as ever, accepted the offer without a qualm, telling him simply "the good news about Jesus." The Ethiopian came immediately to a genuine faith, signified by the fact that he wanted to be identified with Christ in baptism straight away. So he and Philip went together into some water that was by the roadside, Jew and Gentile made one in the bonds of Jesus Christ.

Philip then continued his itinerant ministry, settling finally in the coastal city of Caesarea: we will meet him again in chapter 21. But that "interruption" had seen the gospel exploding out of the boundary of nationality, as the Ethiopian took its message back to his homeland and quite probably spread its influence widely there. Meanwhile, in spite of persecution, hardship and martyrdom, the news of Jesus Christ was "exploding" throughout the country of Judea and Samaria, just as Jesus had commanded!

How do you handle interruptions to your schedule? Most of Jesus' miracles were "interruptions" during His ministry to others. Can you trust God to organize your timetable to align with His programme?!

¹Lectures on ACTS, H.A. Ironside, Litt.D., Bible Truth Depot, New York, page 133