

LESSON 298

EARLY CHURCH PROBLEMS

Related Scripture: Psalm 24:1-10

KEY VERSE: "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith."—Galatians 6:10.

Lesson Scripture: Acts 5:1-5; 6:1-7

Introduction:

No doubt the first church experienced more and faster genuine spiritual growth in its early years than any church since. Miraculous manifestations of divine power attended its ministry. Likewise the powers of evil put forth extraordinary efforts to destroy the church and to stop the spread of the gospel. But then as now there were no problems too hard for God.

This week's lesson reviews two of these early church problems. The first was solved by a swift visitation of divine judgment and the second by a simple rearrangement and reassignment of work with the ordination of the first deacons. The first solution may have been more dramatic than the other, but in each case the Spirit of God, the divine Administrator in Christ's church, knew what was best to do.

We may sometimes be tempted to think that the easiest solution to some church problems might be a few sudden deaths like those of Ananias and Sapphira—but God is able to solve problems without miracles. No miracle was involved in the ordination of deacons—unless we consider it a miracle that the church was pleased to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture passages included in this lesson may be outlined as follows:

1. Emulation, Acts 5:1
2. Exhibition, 5:2
3. Execration, 5:3
4. Examination, 5:4
5. Execution, 5:5
6. Embarrassment, Acts 6:1
7. Explanation, 6:2
8. Exhortation, 6:3
9. Edification, 6:4
10. Election, 6:5
11. Enlistment, 6:6
12. Enlargement, 6:7

Notes on the Printed Text:

Emulation, Acts 5:1.

Among the works of the flesh are emulations. (Gal. 5:20.) In last week's lesson we noted (Acts 4:34-37) the sacrificial giving by the wealthier members of the church, including especially Barnabas. We may reasonably suppose that these members were properly praised for their unselfishness, and so Ananias and Sapphira sought similar praise for themselves.

Most people in this world are more eager to get rewards than to earn them, more ambitious to receive praise than to merit it. Too many Baptist church members (not to talk about others) bring this fleshly disposition to their religious service. They desire religious honors without any personal sacrifice, or with as little sacrifice as possible. They wish to wear a crown, but they shrink from bearing the cross.

Exhibition, Acts 5:2.

Putting their best foot forward, this pair of hypocrites carefully made a public exhibition of their pretended generosity, while trying to conceal their actual selfishness. The exhibition might have served a useful purpose if it had been honest, like the examples in the preceding chapter.

Execration, Acts 5:3.

Hypocrisy ought to be exposed. Evidently the Holy Spirit revealed the truth of the matter to Peter, and gave him the courage to execrate the hypocrite. It was Satan who had filled the heart of Ananias with a lying spirit, leading him to lie not merely to men but to the Holy Ghost. Note that the sin of Ananias was not in keeping back part of the price, but in keeping back part of the price while pretending to give all.

Examination, Acts 5:4.

Further examining the case, Peter pointed out that the "gift" was not compulsory. Ananias could have kept his private property without any interference by the church. After he sold it, the money was his to dispose of as he pleased. He was not required to contribute to the church, except under the law of love. His offering was strictly according to his own will. Note that Ananias was personally responsible for the deception: though it originated with Satan (v. 3), it was Ananias who had "conceived this thing" in his heart.

Execution, Acts 5:5.

"Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord." (Ro. 12:19.) Peter needed to do nothing but state the facts. No human hand, but the hand of God, struck down the liar, and a little later his wife (vv. 7-10). For at least two reasons God does not generally kill liars as He did Ananias and Sapphira: If they are lost sinners He allows them time for repentance (II Pe. 3:9), and if they fail to repent He has more adequate punishment in store for them (Rev. 21:8).

Embarrassment, Acts 6:1.

Murmuring in a Baptist church? Yes, even in the first one. And we might recall that God has not always been patient with murmurers. (I Cor. 10:10.) Surely it was an embarrassment to the apostles that they were accused of partiality in the administration of church funds. The word for "because" in this verse could be translated "that," and so we cannot be sure whether the apostles were actually guilty of neglecting the needs of the Grecian widows or not.

Explanation, Acts 6:2.

Rather than trying to defend themselves privately and individually against such charges, the apostles called a full meeting of the church and brought the matter out into the open. Their explanation was simple and reasonable: if the material needs of any members had been neglected, it was because the apostles had more important things to do.

Exhortation, Acts 6:3.

So the logical remedy for the situation lay in a proper division of labor, and this was a responsibility for the attention of the whole church. Note the qualifications stated for these first deacons: the business affairs of a church need to be managed with wisdom and under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

Edification, Acts 6:4.

Under God nothing is more important to a church than an official ministry devoted to prayer and to the ministry of the word. The first deacons were intended to free the apostles for such a ministry. Paul tells us (Eph. 4:11-16) that true ministers of this kind are gifts of Christ to His church "for the edifying of the body of Christ."

Election, Acts 6:5.

By "the whole multitude" is meant all the church members present at this meeting, a considerable crowd. Before Pentecost the church had only about 120 members (Acts 1:15); then about 3,000 were added (2:41), with others daily in numbers untold (2:47); still later we find reported the conversion of about 5,000 men, with no mention at this point of women and children. This was the multitude that chose or elected the first seven deacons, under divine direction.

Enlistment, Acts 6:6.

Deacons elected by the church were ordained by the apostles with appropriate prayer and the symbolic laying on of hands, and this ceremony set the pattern for the more or less formal ordination in the church of all elders and deacons in the official sense, marking their enlistment or inauguration in their respective offices.

Enlargement, Acts 6:7.

When God's people are obedient to His Spirit, they may not always increase in number; but the word of God will increase in their hearts, and when it pleases Him, as it did on this occasion, the number of disciples will be multiplied, and even "a great company" of our bitterest enemies will be made "obedient to the faith."

Key Verse:

"As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith."—Galatians 6:10.

"Charity begins at home" is not a quotation from scripture, but the familiar proverb does express scriptural truth. Loud and long lamentations over the suffering heathens half way around the world are too often merely an excuse for ignoring the needs in our own neighborhood. Our means and opportunities are limited, so that we simply cannot do all the good that needs to be done. Certainly our benefactions are to extend to all men without prejudice, but it is right and scriptural to do good "especially unto them who are of the household of faith."