

Thoughts on Acts Six

The Book of Acts, known by several titles from just Acts, through Acts of the Apostles, to Acts of the Holy Spirit, gives a history of the church, from its beginning to its growing spread over the earth. Some have said that without Acts, we could not fully understand the Gospels and Letters. Others have said it describes the life of those in the church and those who would destroy the church. Many read the book as something to occupy time between deep studies of the Gospels and Letters. But there are lessons in Acts that we often overlook and words that explain much when studied in detail. If we study Acts with the problems and concerns of today in our minds, we may find that the problems faced by the first century church are the same problems faced by Christians today.

At the end of chapter 2, it seemed that peace and happiness had finally found those that loved and wanted to serve God and His Christ. Chapter 3 confirms that the miraculous work of the Spirit was active through the apostles. But more importantly, the Word was freely given by the Holy Spirit, through the apostles, just as Jesus had promised (John 16:13-15). Beginning in chapter 4, however, the problems for the new Christians begin. The rulers of the Temple took Peter and John because they were *"teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead"* (Acts 4:1-3). Although they were eventually released, the High Priest and the Sadducees arrested them again for defying the Jew's Council by continuing to preach Jesus (John 5:18). Problems not only came from the jealous Jews but also from within the newly founded church. The sin of lying arose as Ananias and Sapphira made false claims about their contribution to the work (Acts 5:1-11).

As we continue into chapter 6, several problems are apparent but overshadowed by the titles that appear as headers by the Bible publishers. The first "Seven Chosen to Serve," and the second "Stephen Is Seized." With these two captions leading the reader's thoughts, the problems that caused the actions are often overlooked by the reader.

The first words of Acts 6:1 are, *"Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number."* The fact that the church was rapidly growing was wonderful. However, the rapid growth was causing a problem that, if left unresolved, would lead to the great sin of murmuring and gossip. *A complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food"* (Acts 6:1). The new church was not organized yet to handle the daily needs of the different age groups. The apostles' work of evangelism was suffering because they could not keep up with the growing demands for both spiritual and physical growth. The problem was first stated so all could understand it. *"The twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables"* (Acts 6:2).

The solution was simple and is still practiced in the church today. *"Select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word"* (Acts 6:3-4). The selection criteria are still used today as we select deacons to care for the physical needs of the saints and our worship assemblies, (Acts 6:3); (1Timothy 3:7-8). We see the Spirit at work in all these chosen men as Philip is described in Chapter 8, preaching in Samaria and to the Ethiopian. We also read of Stephen's bold teaching in the second part of chapter 6.

"And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people. But some men from what was called the Synagogue of the Freedmen, including both Cyrenians and

Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and argued with Stephen" (Acts 6:8-9). The Jews known as Freedmen had been set free because of their citizenship in a Roman city. They may have felt that Stephen's preaching threatened their freedom. One of Jesus' main points in His last lessons was the destruction of the Temple (Matthew 24:1-2). The exaggerated charge made against Stephen was, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law; for we have heard him say that this Nazarene, Jesus, will destroy this place and alter the customs which Moses handed down to us" (Acts 6:13-14).

Yes, Jesus said the Temple would be destroyed. However, He said He would fulfill the Law, not change or destroy it. He also referred to His own body, dying but rising three days later, as the Temple He would rebuild. *"An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet; for just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth"* (Matthew 12:39-40).

What would you say to the Freedmen?