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## THE TWO WAYS OF THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

### CHAPTER 4

## TROUBLE WITHIN THE JERUSALEM CHURCH

*"Why hath satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Spirit.....and in those days, when the number of disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration"*

Acts 5:3;6:1

**T**he first record we have of any wrong doing within the church is the fifth chapter of Acts. Exactly when the event occurred, we are not told. It occurred sometime within the first five years of the church age and probably during the middle of that time period, say 33 A.D..

In any event, some time must have elapsed between the trial of Peter and John in Acts 4 and the trial of all the apostles in Acts 5. In the former case, the Sanhedrin could find no way to punish Peter and John while in the later case, they did have the apostles beaten. Intervening between the two trials are "great power" and "great grace" (Acts 4:33), the selling of lands and houses (Acts 4:34), "many signs and wonders" (Acts 5:12), multitudes of believers added to the Lord (Acts 5:14) and everyone healed that was brought from the cities around Jerusalem (Acts 5:16).

All this would have had to take time and there was only about five years from the start of the church age until the stoning of Stephen and the conversion of Paul. While it is not my purpose to fix exact dates throughout Acts, and while various authorities differ on the subject, there are well accepted dates that fix the time frame of Acts. The dates of 30 A.D. for Jesus death, 44 A.D. for the death of Herod Agrippa I (recorded in Acts 12:23), and the destruction of the Temple by Titus in 70 A.D., are all well accepted. All the events of Acts fit into the time frame of these recognized dates.

No end of confusion has resulted from not recognizing that Acts is a history that spans most of this forty year period. While some may dispute whether one, or two, or three years passed between certain events, the sequence in Acts is chronological and covers the entire time period from the start of the church until Paul's first imprisonment in Rome, a period of about thirty three years. And, while Luke's history is short, (only about 45 pages), it is complete and accomplishes his purpose. Any assumption other than the author presenting to us the most significant facts from all the facts he had available to him does disservice to a work that many historians feel will stand as supreme compared to all other histories of the time, in fact and in detail, given that they are all measured by the same standards of evaluation.

To assume that the events recorded do not systematically span a large period of time, hides the very purpose of the book of Acts. That purpose is not to show haphazard miracles to fuel mystical speculation. Such a premise assumes a work of fiction and not of fact. The scripture clearly tells us that our faith should not stand in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (I Cor. 2:5), and the power of God is not fiction. The manifestation of that power in the first thirty three years of the church age is not fiction. And, the consequence of God's power being made manifest can be seen in the study of the Roman empire, and every other empire of the first century, and every age since then. If it is not seen, such blindness is due to

a refusal to see rather than an obscurity of the facts (See II Cor. 4:3-4).

The book of Acts shows the factual outpouring of holy spirit over an extended period of time, the consequences of that outpouring, and how the people lived and related to each other after they had received holy spirit. Acts is the foundation on which Christianity stands, and it is a firm, not a precarious, foundation. If it is recognized that a period of fifteen years elapsed from Acts 1 to Acts 12, and another twenty five years from Acts 13 to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, many facets of the first century church come to light.

### **The Trouble with Ananias and Sapphira**

By the time of the apostles second trial, recorded in Acts 5, the authorities were desperate to stop the fame of the apostles caused by the overwhelming amount of healing being accomplished. Truly, the prayer of Acts 4:29-30 was answered! The Lord did stretch forth His hand to heal and therefore the Word of God could be spoken with all boldness.

If we allow two years from the start of the church age until the first trial, and two years between the first and second trials, we can gain some perspective on just how extensive the outpouring of holy spirit was. The outpouring of holy spirit was not limited to a few days or a few weeks, and the consequences of it were felt not only among peasants but in the highest and most powerful levels of society. If we allow four years from the start of Acts until the second trial, then an additional year goes by before the death of Stephen.

Somewhere during the time between the two trials we are introduced to Ananias and Sapphira. The record of them sticks out like a sore thumb in the midst of glorious deliverance. Anyone who reads Acts 4 and 5 must wonder why Luke includes the account at all. We would all rather read only the good things and the great. With Ananias and Sapphira we are introduced to tragedy in the church. Luke waves a big red flag in the middle of the glorious picture he is painting. All is not well with the church in Jerusalem.

Ananias and his wife Sapphira sold a possession and brought part of the money to the apostles. In itself, the act was no different than that of many others in the church. The difference was that Ananias and Sapphira represented their gift as the total amount they had received for their property.

Why would they do such a thing? It is not hard to develop reasons from the "old nature" point of view. Deception and lies seem to be the norm with the ungodly. But, from the "new nature" point of view, such an action is unfathomable. When Peter calls Ananias and Sapphira to task he sounds incredulous as he asks them why they did such a thing.

He reminds them that they didn't have to sell the property in the first place. And, after they sold it, they were under no obligation to give all the proceeds away. He then tells them that they have not lied to men but to God. The record tells us that they both died as a result of their attempted deception and presumably the fear and shame at being found out.

What a record to be included in the history of the early church. Why is it included? Granted that many preachers have used it to give sermons that say, "don't mess with God." Some have even used it to extort money out of the pockets of people in the church. But, certainly God did not have Luke include it for these reasons. There must be a reason for God including this account in His Word.

Consider some of the possible reasons:

1. God wants to caution us that while many are being added to the church, all are not living as they should.
2. We are being shown the magnitude of the "money issue" in Jerusalem and its implications to the Temple treasury. Those who wanted to impress their neighbors or the authorities are now beginning to do so by deceptive giving to the apostles rather than deceptive giving to the Temple.

3. God is showing us a side of the apostles ministry that we may not have otherwise considered. Certainly Peter did not like pointing out their sin or seeing them die.

Certainly many more possible reasons could be generated, but the above does cause us to pause and consider. The account is not included to show that anyone who tries to deceive or lie in the church will die. This is obvious to anyone who attends a church and sees the same thing today. Nor is it included to show the wrath of Peter. He did not kill them.

It is the kind of unique account in Acts that pleads for a reason for its inclusion. It's like talking about apples, oranges and hand grenades. From nice things to eat we are suddenly faced with an explosion. Such is the account in Acts 5. It's an explosion in the midst of wonderful things to eat. It is the first recorded tragedy in the church. We are compelled to think about it, to search the scriptures and to study on the matter.

Perhaps Paul's words in Romans 7:21 apply, "I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me." In any event, the church in Jerusalem is changing. Along with great deliverance, evil raises its ugly head in the church. The common conception of good guys in the church and bad guys outside the church does not fit with our experiences today and the account we are considering shows that it did not fit then either. All did not lead perfect lives after they were saved, never to sin again.

Acts 5:12-13 gives us a hint of how the event of Ananias and Sapphira affected the church. "And they were all with one accord in Solomon's porch. And of the rest, durst no man join himself to them." The people knew from the event of Ananias and Sapphira that Christianity was no casual thing. And, you can bet that the Chief Priest and his cronies were burning the midnight oil to see how they could use the event to their advantage.

And, as much as we would like to point the finger only at Ananias and Sapphira, it should be recognized that there must have been some within the church that Ananias and Sapphira were trying to impress or they never would have thought up the deception in the first place. Were they trying to impress their neighbors? The religious leaders? The Apostles? We are not told, but people do not do what Ananias and Sapphira did without a motive. And, it is clear that their motive was not godly. The "babies" in the church were growing up, and all were not growing up well.

### **A Turning Point in the Jerusalem Church**

This was a turning point in the Jerusalem church, the beginning of decline in Jerusalem. Together with Jerusalem being delivered on a scale never seen before, we see trouble and the high water mark of godliness being reached. It is not long before the tide of godliness begins to recede from Jerusalem.

It is significant to note the timidity of the Sanhedrin in the last half of Acts 5. When the angel of the Lord delivered the apostles from prison and they went back to the Temple to teach, they were not asked by the authorities how they escaped from prison. The authorities were silent before the people and certainly did not want to elicit further testimony from them of supernatural deliverance. God's power was demonstrated by the apostles deliverance from prison and the Sanhedrin was on shaky ground indeed- and they knew it!

The apostles could well have caused an insurrection against the Sanhedrin had they chosen to do so. Their boldness before the Sanhedrin, as contrasted to the Sanhedrin's timidity, shows the popularity of the apostles and the extent of the Christian community in Jerusalem. It seems impossible to exaggerate the prestige of the apostles at this time.

The apostles were tried and this time the Sanhedrin at least had a charge they could use, disobedience to their order. Consequently, they mustered the boldness to have the apostles beaten. They wanted to kill them but dared not for fear of their own lives.

The shame the apostles suffered by the beating they were given did not stop them. They "rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name"(Acts 5:41). And, although they were specifically

commanded not to speak in the name of Jesus Christ by the Sanhedrin, verse forty two tells us that they completely disobeyed and taught not only from house to house, but in the Temple as well.

### **The Choice Facing the People**

The people faced a dilemma. They could not honor the apostles and the Sanhedrin as well. Either the prestige of the Sanhedrin must decline or the prestige of the apostles. Jerusalem could not long continue with such an unresolved conflict in her midst. Either the Sanhedrin must be overthrown or, at least, forced to admit that their command to the apostles was ungodly, or the apostles must be considered lawbreakers. It was a tough choice indeed for the people of Jerusalem.

We see in Acts 6:1 that as time went by, the number of disciples multiplied in Jerusalem, even with the dilemma in their midst. How long a period of time went by, we are not told. Whether it was a few months or a couple of years, we do not know. From the context, it could not have been only days, and from the insubordination evidenced by the apostles, it is unlikely that it was as much as two years.

But, whether a few months or a year had passed, Acts 6:1 introduces us to another tragedy in Jerusalem. This one deals not merely with individuals, but with factions or groups. There was a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews because the Grecian widows were neglected in the daily distribution of food. The dilemma in Jerusalem was causing strain among the people.

The open defiance of the apostles to the order of the Sanhedrin was causing sides to be taken not only among the unsaved but within the believing community as well. In the midst of signs, miracles, wonders, healing and great discovery of God and His ways, the people had to wonder what would be done to settle the dilemma of authority in Jerusalem.

Perhaps it is well to recall the words of the founding fathers of the United States of America. They wrote in the Declaration of Independence that people throughout history "are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But, when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government and to provide new guards for their future security."

Similar thoughts must have been going through the minds of many of the devout men and women during this time of uncertainty. Surely there were those who expected the Lord to return at any moment and establish His Kingdom, but the Apostles had been told by Jesus Christ Himself that it was not for them to know the times or seasons, which the Father did not reveal (Acts 1:7).

Perhaps five years had gone by since Jesus Christ had risen from the dead and although the people would have been hoping for His eminent return, they also had to know that it could well be another five years or longer before He returned. The struggle could not continue for that length of time between the apostles on the one hand and the High Priest and the Sanhedrin on the other. Defiance on the one hand and hate on the other could not coexist for long.

### **The Murmuring of the Grecians Against the Hebrews**

It is difficult to tell the extent to which the authority of the apostles superseded the authority of the Temple. The distribution to the widows was clearly the responsibility of the Temple throughout its long history. In the sixth chapter of Acts, we find this function either being carried out by the church already (as in Acts 2:44 and Acts 4:35) or else being taken out of the hands of the Temple for the first time. Which case is the correct one depends on whether the Grecians and Hebrews in Acts 6:1 were exclusively Christian or whether they were Christian and non-Christian mixed together in a city-wide problem. The verse does not clearly state the matter one way or the other.

As will be explained in more detail, the Grecians in Acts 6:1 were Hellenistic Jews who did not "measure up" in the eyes of the Hebrew Jews who resisted the inclusion of greek customs and philosophy in the

culture of Israel. The contention between the two groups is focused on money and clearly the Hebrews are slighting the Grecians in some way.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the income to the Temple had severely dropped off as the believers gave their wealth directly to those who had need or to the apostles rather than into the Temple for distribution that was controlled by the Sanhedrin and ultimately the High Priest. This would logically follow from the "dilemma" that Jerusalem continued to face. Those that sided with the apostles would surely contribute their money mainly to the church rather than to the Temple.

It should be pointed out that the practice of giving and tithing, among the Jews in the first century, was extensive. It was a way of life and was intimately tied to the laws and customs of Israel. Charity, giving of the first fruits of all their increase, and other categories of giving were all in addition to the tithe. In fact, there was a "second tithe" practiced at the time and the rule of the second tithe was that in addition to the 10% tithe, an additional 10% was required to be spent in Jerusalem. When the required feasts arrived, not only did perhaps two million people come to Jerusalem, but perhaps 20% or more of their income came with them.

Historians also tell us that the Roman tax together with the Temple tax was in the neighborhood of forty per cent of the average income, an intolerable burden. Each tax was calculated without respect for the other and the result of both taxes was considerable unrest and resistance. It seems likely that many Jews could not sustain such a heavy burden and the famines in Israel are no doubt related to the extent of taxation. Twentieth century taxation lends credibility to the correlation of famine and taxation, especially in communist countries where famines are common and private initiative is virtually non-existent because of the dominating power of the state. Even in America, especially in the past twenty years, overbearing taxation is beginning to show disastrous results. Homelessness is a major issue today and was hardly thought of twenty years ago. Few will dispute that our total tax burden exceeds forty per cent (when federal, state, county, and city income taxes are considered as well as social security taxes, property taxes, gasoline and other commodity taxes, sales taxes, various fees and the hidden taxes passed on to consumers in product prices- not to mention the massive tax of inflation which takes not only from income but from savings as well). Surely we were better off as a nation when we voluntarily gave to churches and individuals to provide for education, welfare and other necessities, than we are today by allowing the government to provide the same services through taxation.

The purpose of all this "money talk" is to show that the state of affairs in Jerusalem during the first six years of the church age was not all that different than the state of affairs today. Christianity provided a hope that transcended the worldly system and in spite of a "tight" budget for most of the population and "loose" budget for the Roman government and Temple, the believers prospered.

When many of the Jews in Jerusalem became Christian, they would not have used the excuse that they were not under law to diminish their giving. It is far more likely that their giving would have increased. The New Testament is clear that "offerings" as well as tithes are done away with by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, giving, on a scale even greater than the requirements of the Old Testament, is evidenced in the early church. The giving was out of a thankful heart rather than from compulsion for II Cor. 9:7 says that God loves a cheerful giver.

It may be difficult for some to appreciate the vast amounts of money involved with "the church" and the Temple. Today's churches are hardly an example to use as a comparison. A fairer comparison would be to picture the people in a major city today deciding to give half of their tax money directly to those who have need instead of to the tax collectors. Such an action would cause a revolution in the economy of the city and in the well being of its citizens. So also, Jerusalem must have faced a revolutionary situation in the matter of money at the time of Acts 6:1. It seems that the "murmurings" of the Grecians against the Hebrews were symptomatic of a much greater problem of "money management" rather than being the total problem.

It is difficult to determine to any great extent just who the Grecians and Hebrews were in Acts 6:1. We do

not even know clearly if all these Grecians and Hebrews that were murmuring were among the disciples or if some were outside their number. We assume they were among the number of disciples because the apostles called the multitude of disciples together to discuss the matter. But, it is an assumption. Many "unbelievers" could have been among the Grecians and Hebrews of Acts 6:1 as well as "believers". The "seven" were selected, and there is no indication that they replaced anybody. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the distribution to the widows was administered by the Temple up to that time. Now it seems that at least the "Christian widows" were going to be cared for by the church through the rules, regulations, methods, and direction of the seven.

From what we have shown so far of the state of affairs in Jerusalem, the apostles could well have called a meeting of disciples to discuss a city- wide problem. This problem could well have been caused by a deliberate decision on the part of the High Priest and the Sanhedrin to favor the Hebrews over the Grecians in an effort to divide the people and move the debate in Jerusalem from the supernatural deliverance the people were witnessing to the practical demands of daily life.

In other words, if it was the High Priest determining to favor the Hebrews over the Grecians, his public reasoning would have been that the Hebrews deserved favoritism because they were "purer" in their practices and religion than the Grecians who had adopted many cultural practices of the Gentiles. No other issue could have been so ruthlessly calculated to divide the people of Jerusalem.

On the other hand, if the Grecians and Hebrews referred to in Acts 6:1 were exclusively within the Christian community and the Grecians were slighted by those within the church in control of the distribution of funds to the widows, the reasoning would most likely have been the same. The Hebrews deserved more because they more closely followed the customs, traditions and practices of Israel. In either case, we are led right back to the bondage of the law being contrary to the freedom purchased by Jesus Christ.

Whether the Temple or the "church" was responsible for the problem is unclear. It is clear that the word "church", as used by Luke, does not carry with it all the connotations of today. It is the word "ekklesia" in greek and refers to a group, gathering, or mob. It literally means "that which is called out". It does not imply a hierarchy of priests or synods or boards of elders or boards of deacons, as we associate the word "church" today.

In any event, the problem in Acts 6:1 was a serious one in that seven men full of the holy spirit and wisdom were appointed to resolve the issue. It seems from this fact that no one within the church, up to this time, was responsible for distributing the relief money to the widows since it does not appear that the seven selected were replacing anybody, but were initiating a solution to a new problem.

### **The "Hellinistes" and the "Hebrews"**

The atmosphere in Jerusalem, at the time of Acts 6:1, is filled with tension, not only because the apostles continued to defy a court order to cease to speak in Jesus name, but also because of a deliberate decision by someone or some group, to favor the Hebrew faction over the Grecian faction.

Although we do not know much about the size of the Hebrew and Grecian factions mentioned in Acts 6:1, we do know something about who they were. In Jerusalem, there were many synagogues. Tradition fixes the number of synagogues in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus at four hundred sixty to four hundred eighty. The point is debatable. But, whether two hundred or five hundred, the number certainly was not twenty or fifty. Jerusalem was a large city and had many synagogues.

Centuries before the time of Jesus, the Jews were dispersed during and after the Babylonian captivity. Having been residents of every part of the world for generations, those who returned to Jerusalem would naturally segregate according to their adopted languages, cultures and conditions. The concept of synagogues had its origins after the return from the various "captivities".

Jerusalem was a "melting pot" of Jews from all over the world. It was the power center of Israel. Not only

did Priests and Levites live there. Retired people, wealthy people and students of the Law lived there as well. Among the multitude of Jewish believers in Jerusalem there were many cultural and circumstantial differences. The "Grecians" of Acts 6:1 were evidently greek speaking Jews, the word "Grecian" being translated from the greek word "Hellinistes". A. E. Knoch's Concordant Version of the New Testament translates the word "Greekist". It is the same word used in Acts 9:29 and Acts 11:20.

The greek word "Hellinistes" should not be confused with the greek word "Hellen". "Hellen" is translated into english by the word "Greek". "Hellen" is the greek word used in Acts 14:1; 18:4; 19:10; 19:17; and 20:21. It refers to people who were not Jews but rather Greeks. In contrast, the Grecians of Acts 6:1 were Jews who had adopted the customs and culture of the greeks. They were citizens of Israel living in Jerusalem. Today, we might call them "Reform" as opposed to the Hebrew faction that might today be called "Orthodox".

These "reform" Jews began complaining that the widows among their number were being neglected in the distribution of relief. The accusation was undoubtedly true. We are not told who was responsible for causing the neglect. If it was an "honest mistake", it is hard to imagine that Luke would have included it in his history. We can conclude that it was a legitimate problem because the apostles considered the matter.

We also can get a hint at the nature of the problem when we consider the fact that the apostles declined to solve it- or even have a part in selecting who would look into the problem. They obviously did not want to get involved with this money issue and considered it a distraction from their work of teaching in Jesus name. The High Priest and his people could not have been far removed from the problem and the issue could well have been a trap intended to snare the apostles and allow the Sanhedrin to execute them. If so, the apostles did not go for the bait.

### **The Effect of Factions in the Church**

It is highly significant that factions now exist in Jerusalem. Up until Acts 6:1, there is no evidence of factions. The believers had favor with all the people, all the sick in the city and the surrounding countryside were healed, the apostles were so popular that the Sanhedrin couldn't carry out their desire to kill them.

For how long a time period the Word of God prevailed in Jerusalem, we do not know. There was certainly conflict within the church by the time of Paul's conversion five years after the start of the church age. However, it is not credible to believe that God's Word prevailed for only days or weeks or months. Whether it prevailed for three years or for four years is debatable, but by Acts 6:1, close to five years had passed and there was "murmuring" in Jerusalem. The Hebrews, who evidently looked down on the Grecians because of their lack of adherence to the old laws and customs, were shown favoritism and the Grecians responded to the discrimination by objecting.

Acts 6:2 records the apostles' position that it was not proper for them to be diverted from their teaching of the Word of God to tend to this affair. Therefore, seven men full of the spirit and wisdom were chosen to do so. Note that the names of the seven were all Greek and the implication is that they were all of the "Grecian" faction. We are even told that one of the seven was not a Jew at all but rather a proselyte from Antioch, Nicolas. Also notice that the apostles did not have a part in choosing them.

Stephen was the central member of this group. However, even though he did great wonders and signs, some of the people were not satisfied as evidenced by those who disputed with Stephen in Acts 6:9. It should be noted that this verse does not say the dispute was engaged within the confines of the synagogues listed. In all probability it would have been ongoing in the Temple. It should also be noted that the names of the synagogues listed seem to suggest that they were "Grecian" synagogues. We are told in Acts 22:19 that Paul "imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed" in Jesus Christ. From this fact we see that Christians were in all the synagogues. It seems that elements of the Grecians and the Hebrews were in all the synagogues as well as other groups such as Pharisees, Saducees, Essenes, Scribes, etc. but it is natural that one group or the other would be the dominating force. The names seem to suggest that the synagogues were centered around areas from which people came rather than around doctrinal,

cultural and religious practice. In any event, we are told that certain people in these synagogues could not withstand the wisdom and spirit by which Stephen spoke so they "set him up".

We are told in Acts 6:11 that the accusation against Stephen was that he spoke "blasphemous words against Moses and against God." There is no hint in the accusation, or in Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin, that the issue was an objection to salvation or the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is obviously over the implications rising out of salvation, and in the light of what we have shown regarding the size and extent of the church, it seems much more probable that Stephen's accusers were Christians rather than being non-Christians. The fact that they tried to resist the wisdom of Stephen, but could not, implies that the debate was not over the fact of the resurrection. It is hard to imagine that any debate with Stephen could have been sustained by non-Christians at this time over the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Even the Sanhedrin could not stop the apostles from teaching in the name of Jesus because of the miracles, signs and wonders that were done and were obvious to the people. For all these reasons, the account in Acts 6:9-14 seems to indicate evidence of conflict within the church in Jerusalem rather than persecution from without. Certainly the resurrection of Jesus Christ was established as fact in Jerusalem by this time and those who wanted to deny the fact would hardly have contended with Stephen since he was the selected representative of the Christian community to resolve the dispute between the Grecians and Hebrews.

### **Considerations Pointing to Conflict Within the Church**

Before proceeding, some comments on Acts chapter six are in order. There are those who contend that the record beginning with verse nine is not related to the first eight verses of chapter six. If so, the "setting up" of Stephen and his subsequent death have no relationship to the "murmurings" of verse one. To these people, the selection of Stephen to be one of the seven to effect a solution of the "murmurings" merely launched his career- so to speak- and he went on in other areas of ministry and did great wonders and miracles among the people, as verse eight says.

But, it is a major assumption that the "murmurings" of verse one were solved. There is no scriptural evidence to suggest that they were. And, since the "murmurings" are introduced into the only inspired history we have of the first thirty three years of the church age, we must conclude that of all the many events of that time, these "murmurings" were singularly important. If the murmurings were solved, then the solution of the problem should also be stated or implied. We know that seven men full of the spirit and wisdom were chosen to see to the matter. But, the selection of people to solve a problem does not mean that the problem is automatically solved.

If the scripture said that the seven were selected and no more was said about these seven, we could perhaps conclude that the problem was solved. But, that is not the case. The narrative goes on immediately to show that the chief of the seven was stoned to death and then points out that immediately upon the death of Stephen, the church in Jerusalem was scattered. There is every reason to believe that the murmurings started a chain of events that led to Stephen's death. This may be a startling statement to many, but I hope you will bear with me. If it is true, it may encourage a serious, and extensive, rethinking of the book of Acts. I can think of no better consequence to hope for.

What each link was, in the chain of events started by the murmurings of Acts 6:1, is not evident. But, it is quite possible that the selecting of the seven set a precedent of the church refusing to yield to Temple authority in the distribution of funds to the widows and taking that responsibility into their own hands. If so, teaching why this should be done would have been part of the ministry of the seven. Teaching why the Hebrews should not be favored over the Grecians would also have been part of their ministry.

Part of the problem in seeing a continuity between the first and second part of Acts 6 has to do- I believe- with the picture a person sees of the extent of Christianity within Jerusalem at this time. If someone today thinks that the Christians in Jerusalem represented only a small minority of the people, and the Grecians and Hebrews referred to in Acts 6:1 were exclusively among those in the church, then the "murmurings" would not be important to the majority of the population. But, if the Christian Community was extensive and the Christians made up the majority of the people, then the "murmurings" would be important and a



major issue in Jerusalem.

From what we have seen so far, the thousands and thousands of believers, the multitudes of believers, the church being multiplied, the great company of priests that believed, a picture is developed of a prevailing church in Jerusalem- not an insignificant church. And, Acts chapter six introduces us to the church's first martyr. Why he was martyred is the question that must ultimately be answered.

In Acts 4, the Sanhedrin can find no way to punish Peter and John. In Acts 5, the most they dare to do to the apostles is give them a beating, even though they wanted to kill them. But, by the time of Acts 7, some are bold enough to kill Stephen without even finishing his trial.

These are not unrelated events separated by faded memories over long periods of time. They must have all happened within about three years. It is doubtful if any of the members of the Sanhedrin had changed, let alone all of them. In one way or another, the "murmurings" must have driven a wedge into the believing community and allowed the forces of ungodliness to prevail. The method is not new. Satan has used the same devices throughout all of time. "Divide and Conquer" often allows the enemy to prevail when frontal assaults can do nothing. And, it certainly prevailed in this instance, as shown by the scattering of the church in Acts 8:1.

### **More Considerations on Acts 6**

One of the main problems with the sixth chapter of Acts is the statement by the apostles in verse two, "It is not reason that we should leave the Word of God, and serve tables." It seems to suggest that seven men were picked out to wait on tables. Surely, the "murmurings" were not complaints about the food service. If so, it is hard to conceive that the "Grecians" would say it was the "Hebrews" fault.

This was not a "pot luck dinner" that needed some food servers. We know that it had something to do with the "distribution" to the widows and again, it is hard to believe that the complaint was over delivery service.

It must have had to do with who decided which widows received what. It was an issue over the control of money, or goods, or wealth. And, that the apostles refused to get involved with the issue may well be the only reason they were able to stay in Jerusalem when the persecution of the church started after Stephen's death. This again may be a startling statement, but I hope it causes further research into the matter. I am confident that the record of the apostles refusing to involve themselves with this money issue is not included by chance. It seems of the highest significance in the light of Acts 8:1 which tells us that only the apostles were not scattered.

It seems evident that the events of Acts 6 are included in Luke's account to show us a major turning point in the church. We are led to the conclusion that although the rulers could do nothing to prevent the Word of God from prevailing in Jerusalem from without, factions developing over money distribution allowed them the opportunity they needed to "divide and conquer".

With the selection of the seven and the recognizing of them by the apostles in Acts 6:6, the word of God increased and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. In Acts 2,4, and 5, the numbers 3,000 and 5,000 are listed as well as the general terms "multitude" and "added daily". Now, in Acts 6 we are told that the number of disciples "multiplied greatly" (Acts 6:7). Moffatt translates the phrase "greatly increased" and Knoch translates it "multiplied tremendously". There is no question that a greater increase than ever is being experienced by the church in Acts 6.

And, not only are we told that a greater increase than ever was being experienced, we are also told that a great company of priests became obedient to the faith. Moffatt uses the phrase "a host of priests" and Knoch says "a vast throng of the priests". It is clear that a significant change in the priesthood is being experienced. As mentioned before, there evidently were about five thousand priests living in and around Jerusalem at this time. Of this group, it is hard to imagine any less than an overwhelming majority of priests comprising the "great company" or the "host" or the "vast throng". It was certainly not a handful,

or a dozen, or a hundred. More likely, it was three thousand, or four thousand, or forty nine hundred. I know this is a radical proposal, but, if it is correct, the changes that would be forced to happen in the Temple and among the Temple authorities would be dramatic.

If there were no other indications of the size and influence of the church in Jerusalem than this single reference to the great company of priests, it would suffice to show the extent of godliness in Jerusalem. The priests were honored and respected by the people in Jerusalem and were the servants of the people before God in the Temple. No more unlikely thing can be imagined than that a "great company" or a "host" or a "vast throng" of priests would believe without a corresponding company, or host, or throng of the general population believing.

### **Stephen is Singled Out**

The seriousness of the threat to the High Priest and the Sanhedrin is impossible to overstate. Their prestige, their money, their control were all threatened. The threat was real and it was imminent. The picture is not cloudy. It is clear and in sharp focus. I trust that ample evidence has been given from within the first six chapters of Acts to show that this was so. Jesus Christ was exercising the "all power given to Him" in a way far greater than is commonly perceived. The spirit of God was being "poured out", not "dribbled out" a drop at a time.

In Acts 6:8, we read that Stephen did great wonders and miracles among the people. This is the first record in Acts of someone other than the apostles performing wonders and miracles. This certainly does not mean that no other miracles were done than those done by the apostles for God is not a respecter of persons (Acts 10:34). Certainly many in the church were doing the same. But, Stephen is singled out and by listing the miracles and signs he did, the magnitude of his work is indicated. There is no reason for thinking that the work he was doing was other than that for which he was appointed in Acts 6:3-6. To separate the work he performed in Acts 6:8-10 from the work he was called to perform in Acts 6:3-6, requires totally unfounded speculation. No evidence exists to support such an assumption.

It appears that the main reason people try to divorce the former part of Acts 6 from the latter is that the magnitude of the task Stephen was appointed to do is not appreciated. The law was giving way to grace and the spokesman for grace was Stephen. He must have been saying that there was no difference between Hebrews and Grecians and giving his reasons from the scripture. And, the Lord confirmed Stephen's words by signs following.

In verses nine and ten, we are introduced to people from various synagogues who did not like what Stephen was doing. These verses do not say that Stephen reasoned with them in their synagogues. The scene is probably the Temple. With a great company of priests becoming "obedient to the faith", certainly the Temple was the focal point of Christianity at this time. In any event, verse ten tells us that there were some people who were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which Stephen spoke. The statement is another indication that godliness was still the prevailing attitude in Jerusalem. These people certainly wanted to resist Stephen but could not do it. Stephen's words prevailed among the group or groups he was talking to rather than his detractors words and arguments prevailing.

These people therefore set Stephen up and brought false charges against him. Who these people were is a debatable question. They could have been believers. They could have been unbelievers. They could have been Hebrews. They could have been Grecians. That they had something to gain from setting up Stephen, seems obvious. Their motive was not godly and so some ulterior motive was involved. Perhaps they would win favor with the High Priest or the Sanhedrin. Perhaps they would gain some measure of control in Jerusalem. Perhaps they would receive money.

Whatever the motivation of those who accused Stephen, the accusation against him was that he spoke against the law of Moses and against the Temple. Stephen was therefore brought before the Sanhedrin and in the middle of his testimony, he was stoned to death.

### **Stephen's Speech**

For years, I couldn't understand why Stephen's speech was included in the book of Acts. I read it and reread it in hopes of finding why God placed it where it was. It is by far the longest speech recorded. It must have been of singular importance for Luke to devote about six percent of the whole account of Acts to Stephen's speech and the events surrounding it. It does not seem unreasonable to conclude that chapter six and chapter seven of Acts should be read together as one story, as one entity. And, if we examine Acts from the point of view of those things Luke spends most time with, we see that the events surrounding Stephen's death, those surrounding the conversion of Cornelius, and those surrounding Paul's final trip to Jerusalem account for about half of the entire book of Acts. All three events involve conflict in the church and lead to the conclusion that showing conflict is a major purpose of the book of Acts, rather than being of minor importance or no importance at all.

The stated purpose of the seven being selected (Stephen, with the six others), was to effect a solution to the "murmuring" of Acts 6:1. It seems clear that Stephen was attempting to solve that dispute when he was "set up" and consequently killed. It is not unreasonable to conclude that the speech at his trial was his last effort in trying to solve the dispute.

If Stephen's speech is read alongside Paul's instructions in Galatians chapters three and four, the one account amplifies the other. And, between the two, we can get an idea of just why the Grecian widows were overlooked in the daily distribution. The people in charge of deciding on the distribution of money, etc., were walking by the old nature, not the new! There is at least a hint, if not an obvious picture, that legalism is beginning to grip the Jerusalem church.

Notice that the accusation against Stephen was not that he believed in Jesus Christ and the resurrection. That accusation would have gotten his accusers nowhere. We have established that many, if not most, of the people believed, or professed to believe, in the resurrection by this time.

Stephen was accused of teaching against the law and against the Temple. There must have been an element of truth in the accusation or the people would not have stood for his arrest. It would have been a serious charge for the converted priests to hear. And, it may well be the same charge as is leveled today at Christians who begin to seriously study Paul's epistle to the Romans. To those Christians today who have never heard or considered the truth that the law was weak (Rom. 8:3) or that a new law has replaced the old (Rom. 8:2), statements such as "we are not under the law" are interpreted as advocating stealing, killing, and all the other things that the ten commandments clearly stand against. Paul certainly is saying no such thing. He says, "Shall we continue to sin that grace may abound? God forbid!" (Rom. 6:1-2). But, if a person hears the statement, "we are not under the law" and then does not give the speaker a chance to explain his position, he may consider the speaker to be a heretic and be his enemy forever after. This is all too common an experience in the church today, especially concerning statements like "we are not under law."

Consider the analogous situation of a man having a car that he has driven for years and finally decides to replace after three or four hundred thousand miles. He is likely to say, "my new car is wonderful, my old car is no good" or "my old car is worthless." He is liable to offend someone who happens to have a car of the same make and year as the speaker's old car. If he is not allowed to explain further the advantages of the new car over the old car, or the state of his old car when he finally decided to get a new one, he has no hope of overcoming the antagonism of the hearer. And, if the hearer is by nature antagonistic and hateful, he will spread hatred and lies about the new car owner.

The accusation against Stephen seems similar. He was accused of speaking blasphemous words against Moses and against God. Notice that he was not accused of speaking blasphemous words against God only, but against Moses and against God. The issue was law and not godliness. The accusers tried to make the two synonymous. The powers behind the accusers could not resist the wisdom and the spirit by which Stephen spoke. They could not deny the faith and power of Stephen and the great wonders and miracles that he did among the people.

In Acts 6:14 the false accusers said, "For we have heard him say, that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy

this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered us." We are told that the witnesses against Stephen were false witnesses (Acts 6:13), and so we know that they did not hear Stephen say the words he is accused of saying. The words that the false witnesses were instructed to say were calculated to bring about the desired effect of doing away with Stephen. The "murmuring" over the distribution to the widows allowed the false accusations to stick. If one faction sided with Stephen, the other faction was sure to be against him. If the Hebrews represented Law and the Grecians represented Grace, then the Law won and Grace lost. Stephen was killed. It can well be imagined how the false premise, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" could have spurred good people to nefarious acts. The same slogan has done so throughout history.

Stephen's defense begins with Abraham and God's promise to Abraham that in his seed all the nations of the world would be blessed. As Paul says in Gal. 3:17, "the law, which came four hundred and thirty years after (Abraham), cannot disannul." The people were witnessing the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham as Jesus Christ poured out the spirit to multitudes and multitudes in Jerusalem. Issues of law could not change that reality.

In short, Stephen tries to move the issue to higher ground, from that of Moses and the law to that of the covenant of promise made by God to Abraham: In Jesus Christ, all nations of the earth would be blessed. Moses, the law and the Temple came long after God's promise to Abraham. Paul says in Gal.3:19 that the law was added because of transgressions, until the seed should come to whom the promise was made. Jesus Christ was that seed. The administration of Grace, heading up in Jesus Christ, replaced the administration of Law, heading up in the Temple authority.

But, the accusation against Stephen had touched a sensitive chord among the people in Jerusalem. The factions of Hebrews and Grecians must still have been very much alive. And, the people, in being party to the stoning of Stephen show themselves to be fractured by the issue of law. Stephen tries to move them to the higher level of promise, but does not succeed.

Stephen tries to transcend the righteousness of the law by pointing to the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. One author points out that "the postulate that faith is the only possible ground of righteousness rests on the historic facts of faith antedating and outlasting law." Abraham believed God and his expectation was "reckoned unto him for righteousness". "Reckoned unto him for righteousness" does not mean "instead of righteousness". God does not suggest a legal fiction whereby faith is substituted for a righteousness not forthcoming. Rather He means "so as to amount to righteousness, with a view to righteousness".

The author goes on to make the distinction between the REQUIREMENT of the law and the METHOD of the law. Righteousness is the requirement of the law. The method of the old covenant (the law) was inadequate to achieve its requirement (righteousness). Jesus Christ divorced the requirement of the law (righteousness) from the dead letter of external precept (the law), and the stultifying form of ceremony. He did so by condensing all the law into two commands- love God and love your neighbor. Jesus Christ divorced the form of the law from the requirement of the law. In so doing, He established righteousness by faith. Such righteousness could not come from looking backward to the law. It had to come by looking forward to Christ. It was a "pull" or a "draw" rather than a "push" or a "shove". Law righteousness had been established on the motivation of fear. Faith righteousness builds on a motivation of love. The "buildings" were diametrically opposed.

### **The murder of Stephen and the Introduction of Paul**

Stephen's accusers used the form, the external precept and ceremony, of the law to kill Stephen. Stephen, in his last breath demonstrated his righteousness by faith when he said, "lay not this sin to their charge". In Christ, evil is no longer met merely by an opposition from without, but by a revulsion from within. Stephen did not ask that the people who stoned him be punished. He asked that they be delivered!

Did the murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews stop? Did the discrimination of the Hebrews against the Grecians stop? There is no evidence in Acts that they did. The apostles gave their

recommendation as to how to solve the problem, seven men full of the spirit and wisdom were selected to see to the matter and about all we are told is that one of the seven, Stephen, is set up and killed. (We also see later in Acts that Philip is no longer in Jerusalem and presumably "the seven" are broken up and their work disallowed in Jerusalem).

The record of Stephen's defense and death does at least one other thing. It introduces Paul. He is not introduced as an apostle. He is not even introduced as a believer. He is introduced as one of the people consenting to Stephens death. He may even have been one of the false witnesses against Stephen or more probably the person that paid the false witnesses. He was tied to them in some way. They laid their garments at Saul's feet (Acts 7:58). The false witnesses participated in the stoning of Stephen and Paul approved of Stephen's death as well.

Moffatt translates the word "death" in Acts 8:1 as "murder" and Knoch translates it "assassination". They are better translations than death in that it is clear that Stephen was not given a fair trial but was killed before his defense was finished. He was assassinated. He was murdered. The Sanhedrin got what they wanted and could hide behind the excuse that the crowd got out of hand rather than having to officially decide the issue. They may well have been unable to legally kill Stephen if the trial had been allowed to be finished. But, because the trial was not finished, the Sanhedrin could well have issued the orders to drive the believers out of town by saying it was needful to prevent such an outbreak from happening again. It is clear that they could not drive the apostles out of town, nor could they kill them. But, at least those believers who sided with Stephen were undoubtedly targeted.

Paul's description of himself before his conversion in Philippians 3:5-6 gives us a clear picture of the kind of mentality that allowed Stephen to be murdered. Verse six is particularly revealing, where Paul says of himself before his conversion, "touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." It was that righteousness, self-righteousness, law-righteousness, that resulted in Stephen's death. Many people in Jerusalem sided with the High Priest and the Sanhedrin over this issue. Those who sided with Stephen and the apostles were scattered and persecuted.

As for Paul, the rest of Acts will show that he was stopped in his anti-Christian pursuits by Jesus Christ himself and would become the most hated man in Jerusalem within the next twenty five years. In Acts 23, we see that four hundred seventy Roman soldiers have to escort Paul out of Jerusalem to prevent the people from killing him. But, in contrast to the hate focused on him, Paul would also be the man by whom God fully revealed grace and the man who fully revealed the contrast between law and grace so that not even a fool need to err therein.

### **The Scattering of the Church**

In Acts 8:1, we learn that the church in Jerusalem was subject to a great persecution upon the death of Stephen and the church was scattered. Some say that every Christian left Jerusalem because of the phrase "they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles." The phrase does not say that every Christian left Jerusalem. It is talking about the church being "all scattered" rather than every believer being forced out of Jerusalem. The apostles were not "all scattered" but the church was "all scattered". Nevertheless, a dramatic change occurred in Jerusalem consequent to the killing of Stephen. It is as if the dike of godliness had been breeched and the church was overwhelmed with the tide of evil that came rushing in. It is reminiscent of mob action in the old west when whole towns of good citizens were whipped to a frenzy and innocent men were hung. The blood lust of mob action is hard to comprehend. But, the rulers used it to their advantage and scattered the church. The false accusation against Stephen incited the people to murder by the forces that then drove many of them out of town.

Certainly, Jerusalem did not lose half or more of its population. Certainly the "great company of priests" who believed were not all forced to leave Jerusalem. And, the fact that the church was scattered throughout Judea and Samaria implies that there were some of the believers who stayed in Jerusalem because Jerusalem is in Judea. It should also be remembered that the High Priest and Sanhedrin did not have supreme authority but were under the authority of the Romans. The Romans had no interest in

doctrinal disputes among the Jews but did have an interest in maintaining order in the city of Jerusalem. The persecution following the death of Stephen must have been confined within the framework of what the Roman authority allowed to happen in Jerusalem. Certainly, Roman citizens among the Jews, (like Paul), could not be driven out of Jerusalem easily. And, there is no evidence that the Roman authority participated in the persecution of Acts 8:1.

Also, if every believer left Jerusalem, there would be no one there to make it possible for the apostles to stay in Jerusalem. We've already seen that the Sanhedrin wanted to kill them and they certainly hadn't changed their mind. The only thing that prevented the Sanhedrin was the popularity of the apostles.

For these reasons, the word "all" appears to be linked to the word "scattered" rather than to the word "they". Instead of "all" meaning "every believer", it is more likely that it refers to the effectiveness of the scattering. In other words, instead of being partly scattered, they were "all scattered" or "thoroughly scattered". Perhaps the figure of speech, hyperbole, is being used by Luke.

Some may think the understanding of the usage of the word "all" in this verse is not important. But, it is of the utmost importance. If God is trying to tell us that every believer left Jerusalem, then we must try to find how and when they were allowed back in by the authorities in Jerusalem, because it is evident throughout the rest of Acts that there were substantial numbers of believers in Jerusalem. If they all left and were let back in at a later date, the implication is that the rulers in Jerusalem had a change of heart. There is no evidence that such a change in heart occurred.

On the other hand, if only a part of the believers left Jerusalem, then the implication is that the criterion for being forced out of town was not belief in the resurrection but some other standard. It seems clear that the bogus trial of Stephen was not over salvation but over adherence to the law. The rest of Acts will show that the issue in Jerusalem was no longer the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but had moved to adherence to the law, even after salvation. The purpose of the law was to keep men and women until salvation came, not enslave them after it's arrival. The whole picture hinges on a proper understanding of the meaning of "all" in Acts 8:1.

### **The Law and The Grace of God**

Acts 8:1 begins the era of "Two Ways in the First Century Church," the way of law and the way of grace. The rest of Acts shows a substantial church in Jerusalem, but it is not the same church (Acts 12:1-3). The apostles are no longer in the forefront of the Jerusalem church, and this church becomes the persecutor of Paul and the vehicle of bondage and legalism to the churches of the nations.

The evidence in the rest of Acts suggests that it was the "uncompromising believers" who were forced to leave Jerusalem while the "compromising believers" stayed home. Acts 8:1 says that the apostles stayed in Jerusalem and from that fact we can assume that there was still an official "hands off" policy regarding them. The fact that they refused to select the seven in Acts 6:3 and refused to address the "murmuring" issue in Acts 6:2 seems significant in relation to their being allowed to continue in Jerusalem. They were evidently "outside" the problem or "above" the problem. As we shall see, the "hands off" policy didn't last long.

Those believers who stayed in Jerusalem, must have somehow compromised their position in Christ to avoid persecution. Hints of this are found in Paul's suggestion that some that had begun in the spirit felt they could be made perfect by the law (Gal.3:3). The "Circumcision Party" is first mentioned in Acts 11:2. James, the brother of Jesus was the head of this party (Gal.2:12). Another "hint" seems to be in the statement of Acts 9:31 that after Paul left Jerusalem there was "rest in Judea".

What happened to the "children at play" in Jerusalem that was evident in the first six chapters of Acts? What allowed the breach in the dike of godliness to occur and the forces of evil to wreck havoc on the church? Which believers were forced to flee Jerusalem? What happened to those appointed with Stephen? Did they all have to flee?

There is a lot that we do not know. But, the problem in Acts 6:1 was obviously much deeper than a mistake on the part of someone who forgot to give certain widows among the Grecians their due. When Acts 6:9-10 says that certain disputed with Stephen, and that they could not withstand the wisdom and the spirit by which he spoke, we are lead to the conclusion that what he was speaking had to do with the dispute between the Grecians and the Hebrews. If not, there is no continuity at all in Acts 6. And, if Stephens solution to the problem was so objectionable to some that they had him arrested and finally stoned, then the "murmuring" must have been far more than what appears on the surface. And, if this "murmuring" resulted in persecution of the church to such an extent that many were forced to flee their homes, which faction was forced to flee, Grecians or Hebrews? Perhaps many from both factions had to leave.

Later evidence in Acts shows that the circumcision party contended with Peter (Acts 11) and the sect of the Pharasees had a major say at the council of Jerusalem (Acts 15). Whether the circumcision party was composed of mostly Hebrews or mostly Grecians, is not apparent. Whether the Pharasees were mostly Hebrews or Grecians is not apparent. The evidence would cause us to suspect that both groups were mostly Hebrews but there is not enough known about these groups to come to any definitive conclusions. In fact, the meaning of the word Grecian still causes books to be written (for example, see, C. F. D. Moule, "Once More, Who Were the Hellenists?", in the Expository Times, volume 70, 1958-9, pp. 100 ff)

James declaration in Acts 21:20, "Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous for the law," indicates that those who stayed in Jerusalem had at least in part conformed to the laws and customs and traditions that had gotten the Jews nowhere for hundreds of years. In short, those who stayed in Jerusalem were back to their old ways. Although there is much, much more to find out about the "murmuring" of Acts 6:1, suffice it to say that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was no longer an issue in Jerusalem. No one could dispute that fact. The Saducees were loudly silent on that issue. But it appears that there was still plenty of truth that could get believers in trouble, and many had to leave Jerusalem.

In Acts 8:5, we learn that Philip went down to Samaria and preached Christ unto them. Whether this was Philip the apostle (Acts 1) or the Philip we read about who had four daughters who prophesied to Paul and who was one of the seven along with Stephen (Acts 21:8), is not certain.

However, in Acts 8:1 we read that the apostles stayed in Jerusalem, and in verse fourteen we read that when the apostles heard that Samaria believed, they sent Peter and John to them. The indication is that the Philip mentioned in verse five was not the apostle Philip but one of the seven picked with Stephen. The question is debatable.

In Acts 8:26, we read that the angel of the Lord tells Philip to head toward Gaza. The following verses tell of a man who was the treasurer of Ethiopia and had traveled to Jerusalem to worship. On his way back, God sends Philip all the way down to Gaza to meet him, for he had not heard the Gospel in Jerusalem.

What were all the Christian Jews doing that were still in Jerusalem? What were the "great company" of priests saying? Evidently, they were all either intimidated, discouraged, or simply back to the walk of the old nature, because the man from Ethiopia didn't hear the Gospel from anyone in Jerusalem. Jerusalem had surely changed from the time perhaps two or three years earlier when all the sick were being healed and the apostles were so popular that the Sanhedrin feared for their own lives if any harm came to the apostles. The record of how the Ethiopian eunuch finally heard the Gospel is as much an indictment against the believers remaining in Jerusalem as it is a joyous message of deliverance.

Acts 8:40 tells us that Philip ended up in Caesarea after going to Gaza and Azotus. About twenty years later, Acts 21:8 tells us that Philip the evangelist, one of the seven, lived in Caesarea. All the evidence points in the direction that the Philip of Acts 8 is the same Philip as the Philip of Acts 21, rather than Philip the apostle.

And so, the first five years of the church age in Jerusalem are marked with rapid growth, miracles and healing on an unprecedented scale, and, towards the end, persecution and the scattering of the church.

Paul comes on the scene in chapter nine, and the rest of Acts will show the effectiveness of the gospel diminishing among the Jews and rising among the other nations of the world.

We will see that God did indeed answer Stephens last request, "lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:60) for God did not hold Paul's sin to his charge. Paul consented to Stephens death, but then began with the gospel where Stephen left off. Praise God for Stephen, Philip and the other five who were chosen to solve the dispute between the Grecians and the Hebrews. They did provide the solution, even if it wasn't what Jerusalem wanted to hear. Grace and promise are the solution, not law and bondage!



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