

**Persecution and Growth****Acts 5:33—6:7**

Peter already had three opportunities to preach Jesus Christ to the leaders of Israel. The first was in Acts 2, his so-called first sermon on the Day of Pentecost. His second recorded sermon happened after Peter healed the man lame from birth in Acts 3. Both were public sermons given to the nation of Israel, the first to call individuals to repentance, and the second to call for a national repentance and return to God.

It's with this second sermon that the religious leaders came to question Peter and the Apostles about what they were preaching. They were thrown into jail, but Peter was able to preach Jesus Christ privately to them the next day as they were being questioned (Acts 4:1—22). They were threatened and then released.

They were imprisoned a second time because the leaders were extremely jealous of the Apostles (Acts 5:17). They were trying to find a way to keep them quiet, but everything they tried only made matters worse. God opened the gates of the prison and released the Apostles, and the next day they were seen by the religious leaders of Israel preaching at the temple again, the very thing they were told to stop doing. They were once again brought before the leaders and questioned, giving Peter yet another opportunity to preach Jesus Christ to them. This disregard for following their demands caused great frustration for the religious leaders, especially when Peter told them that they needed to obey God rather than men. These men thought they were the spokesmen for God, so Peter saying this was a real slap in the face to these pious leaders. You can imagine how much Peter had infuriated them. This leads us to Gamaliel's advice given to these leaders of Israel.

**Gamaliel's wise counsel** (verses 5:33—39)

Gamaliel was a wise and respected teacher in the Sanhedrin. He was a Pharisee and expert in the Law and somewhat liberal in his interpretation of the Mosaic Law. He was much respected among the people. The Apostle Paul sat under his teaching (Acts 22:3). His advice was that the Sanhedrin deal cautiously with Peter and the Apostles, and to leave them alone. If they are not of God, their plans will fail, but if they are of God, they would find themselves fighting against Him.

The members of the Sanhedrin took his advice, then called in the apostles to flog them and warn them not to preach the name of Jesus Christ. Once released, the Apostles returned, rejoicing that they were considered worthy to suffer for Him. This experience did nothing to stop them from proclaiming Jesus Christ as Messiah, in fact, it propelled His name even farther, and emboldened the Apostles. They publicly preached Jesus in the temple, and from house to house. As a result, the number of disciples were increasing as many more people believed in what the Apostles were preaching. Not only were many within Israel becoming believers, but there were also many priests who were believing (Acts 6:7).

**Growing pains** (verses 6:1—7)

God was working mightily through the ministry of the Apostles. They were performing many miracles and preaching sermons that confounded the learned religious leaders (Acts 4:13, 33; 5:12—16). The people, having put their belongings in the hands of the Apostles for distribution, were all together in one accord (Acts 5:12). This unity is now being threatened by some discontent in how the material goods were being distributed.

There was a quick growth in the Hebrew church in early Acts. What began with 120 increased by 3,000 in Acts 2:41, and another 5,000 men in Acts 4:4. Many more were continually being added to their numbers (Acts 5:14). There were perhaps at least 15,000 believers within the assembly (the Little Flock,

the remnant of Israel). All these people were said to be together as one as evidenced by selling their possessions and putting it all into a common pot and having agreement on all things (Acts 2:44—47). It was said that they were of one heart and of one soul (Acts 4:32).

This unity seemed to deteriorate following Ananias and Sapphires' deaths. Instead of having perfect unity among the Little Flock of believers, there was a possible hint of ill-will. From having perfect unity and satisfaction in how the supplies were being distributed, there was now some complaining among the believers. There were many thousands of believers that needed to be dealt with, and there was a lack of help. The Apostles felt it would be wise to divest themselves of the job of serving the saints and delegate that task to a select few so that they could deal with the spiritual welfare of the people.

The Grecians (Hellenistic Jews; those who embraced the Greek way of life) complained against the Hebrews (the Jews living in and around Jerusalem) because their widows were being neglected. The distribution of goods was not being done fairly. The solution was to have the Apostles delegate what they were doing to a group who would have time to do that task, allowing the Apostles to be involved with the people on a spiritual level. Notice that both tasks are important.

They chose seven men from all over the region to equitably distribute material goods to the people. With this solution came a peace among the congregation. What would have given rise to much discussion and complaining among church members today was solved quickly, bringing the thousands of believers into perfect unity once again. Instead of seeing this as factional discord within the assembly, it should be looked upon as another example of the Holy Spirit moving among the people to bring them into perfect harmony. Evidence of this is found in verse seven where it is said that the word of God increased, and the number of disciples had multiplied, even among the priests. God was still working powerfully and visibly among the Little Flock of Jewish believers.

### **No Gentiles. No Body of Christ. No Mystery.**

An honest study of this portion of Scripture should lead one to believe that God has not changed His dealing with Israel and that the Church, the Body of Christ has not yet been formed. Acts is a continuation of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It is showing progression in Israel's prophetic program by following what has already been laid out in the Old Testament. Up to this chapter in Acts, the Mystery had not been revealed to the Apostle Paul and therefore no Church, the Body of Christ, had been formed yet. Paul is our pattern (1 Timothy 1:16), therefore all those in the Church came after Paul. Peter is Israel's leader, and promised that he would rule over them in the earthly Kingdom (Matthew 19:28). As long as Peter is in the forefront, God is still dealing with Israel, and Israel is looking forward to the Kingdom.

Big changes are coming in how God deals with mankind. As we advance through the book of Acts, there will be a notable shift away from Peter, and inversely, an emphasis of Paul's ministry. This only makes sense with the understanding that God is beginning a new program with Israel on the back burner, and the Gentiles front and center. These important changes are often missed because most people are looking at the Jewish Feast of Pentecost as the line of demarcation between Israel and the Gentiles. By discarding man's traditions, it is easier to see that that special day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was given, was actually part of a prophetic event that pertains to Israel (Ezekiel 36:26—27). The pouring out of the Holy Spirit over believing Israel has absolutely nothing to do with the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit in the believer today.

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