

The Bible Notebook

THE BOOK OF ACTS

The Ministry of the Holy Spirit

Volume 2

(Chapters 5-8)

A Verse by Verse Study

By

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DEDICATION

To

Will & Joanna Sanders

*You are now 18 years old
I held you both when you were a few hours old
I have loved you ever since
&
I always kept a supply of “ugly pills” for you!*

CHAPTER FIVE

Ananias and Saphira Lie to the Holy Spirit

5:1 - ANANIAS. *“But a man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a piece of property.”* The word “but” stands Ananias in sharp contrast to Barnabas (ch. 4), who was sold his property and gave the money to the apostles to purchase food for the needy. Paradoxically, the name Ananias means “the Lord is Gracious”, something of an irony, considering his hypocrisy - but no more of a paradox than one who bears the name Christian hypocritically today.

5:2 - HE KEPT BACK PART. *“However, he kept back part of the proceeds with his wife’s knowledge, and brought a portion of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”* Ananias “kept back part” a part of the money for himself before taking the balance to the apostles. There was nothing wrong with keeping back either part of the money or all of it. His sin was one of deceit, greed, and hypocrisy. His, with his wife, selfishly and dishonestly tried to create a reputation for themselves within the church.

The hypocrite imitated Joseph and others in selling his property - perhaps he envied the nickname given Joseph when believers called him Barnabas, meaning Son of Consolation. It would be interesting to know whether he planned to lie about the amount of money he got for the property before he sold it or after he had the money in his possession. What we are told is (1) his wife was fully aware of, and a part of the deception, and (2) he brought only a portion of it and laid it at the apostles feet.

It would be interesting to know how many Christians have committed the same kind of deception in some other way. When a Christian holds back a part of his tithes, but professes to be a tither, he is guilty of lying to the Holy Spirit. What about a person who gives money or property because he believes it will help him politically, professionally, or socially, but pretends to do it because of his deep concern for the ministry of the church? A politician went to the new pastor and announced that he wanted to do something for the church: “I think I will replace the carpet in the sanctuary.” The pastor thought it was a good idea and expressed his appreciation, but when he told the man he would ask the deacons to recommend that the church accept the gift, the politician became his enemy that day.

The man, it seems, had discovered a way to do things for the church that attracted attention to himself, so rather than bringing his tithes and offerings to the Lord’s house on the Lord’s Day, he held it back each year and “did something for the church” once a year. The new pastor announced that the Youth Minister had resigned to accept a similar position in another state and that politician arrogantly asked, “Reckon what it cost God to move him?!!” The pastor did not last too long at that church. The politician was elected mayor! Both will stand before the Lord.

5:3 - LIE TO THE HOLY SPIRIT. *“Then Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the proceeds from the field?”* Peter is still the leader and spokesman for the apostles at this point, and led by the Holy Spirit, he goes directly to the motive for the deception. The first remarkable thing here is that the Holy Spirit exposed the hypocrisy to Peter.

SATAN. Satan, the adversary, is an old enemy who is never afraid to approach the Lord’s servant, as the Book of Job dramatically reveals. Very early in the life of the newly empowered church (at Pentecost), Satan moves against God, His church, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Just as he had attacked the one creature created in the image of God in the Garden, and later with Job, he will strike when he is least expected. Who would have expected Satan to show up in the Garden of Eden. And who would have expected him to show up when this new fellowship is experiencing such phenomenal success, when members are praying and continuing in the apostles’ doctrines?

One lesson we should learn from this is that any time there is a mighty move from God, we had better expect Satan to show up, either in our personal life, or in the church. He will show us how to fake revival, counterfeit evangelism, and entertain members by re-focusing their attention on a popular style of worship rather than the preaching of sound doctrine. He will even try to refocus the attention of the church on the style of worship and support both sides of the issue, as long as he can keep the attention on the music and off the preaching of the Word of God.

I sat in an intensive class in Revelation while I was in seminary under a professor who did not believe in the reality of Satan. To this professor, Satan was simply the personification of evil. If Satan will invade a theological seminary and infiltrate it with such a lie, he will not hesitate to attack any individual or church anywhere in the world.

Just as the Holy Spirit is a Person, Satan is a person. The Holy Spirit came to sanctify God’s people; Satan came to destroy God’s people by leading them astray. He will do anything to thwart the progress of the Gospel. With such phenomenal growth so soon after Satan celebrated the death of God’s Messiah, he had to make his move. In response to those professors who denied the existence of Satan as a real person, my roommate and I wrote to leading pastors to ask their position. We explained that one of our professors had just explained why there can be no personal devil.

As I remember, W. A. Criswell responded that it was sufficient to say that he believed what the Bible had to say on the subject. I was particularly pleased to receive the following letter from R. G. Lee, whom I had heard in person a number of times and had heard on TV every Sunday for several years. We got home from our services in time to see Dr. Lee drop down on his knee (in his white Palm Beach suit) by the right side of the pulpit and pray before preaching. I also heard him preach “Payday Someday” in person at FBC, Senatobia, MS and again in Jackson. I used to him at conventions and evangelism conferences and in revivals. His letter states clearly his position on the existence of Satan. His letter will show why liberals did not like this man.

A Letter From Robert G. Lee

Addressed to Johnny L. Sanders

Dated March 1, 1962

Dear Johnny,

I believe the Bible is the divinely inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God – without any taint of error, personal in application, regenerative in power, inspired in totality – the miracle Book of diversity in unity. of harmony in infinite complexity.

Therefore, I believe what it teaches about the devil, Satan, in Job 2.

I believe he was, and is, a Person – just as much as you are a person. I believe he has his wiles, his wisdom, his desires, his power, his angels, his ministers – as the Bible teaches.

I believe he is presumptuous (Job 1:6) and (Matt. 4:5-6) and proud (I Timothy 3:6) and powerful (Ephesians 2:2 and Ephesians 6:12) and wicked (I John 2:13). And malignant (Job 1:9 and Job 2:4), and subtle (Genesis 3:1 with 2 Cor. 3:11), and deceitful (II Cor. 11:4 and Ephesians 6:11), and fierce and cruel (Luke 8:29 and Luke 9:39-42 and I Peter 5:8).

I think the Devil is the one who started and keeps going the Modernist teaching and preaching and writing of our day – where some preachers and some teachers summon the Bible to appear at the bar of human reason and reduce the supernatural to ignorance and look upon the Bible miracles as legends and myths. Read II Thess. 2:9 and II Timothy 4:1)

I believe just what the Bible says in Jude – that the devil, Satan, will be condemned at the judgment along with the fallen angels. I believe that the doom of Satan is set forth just as Revelation 20:10 states.

I believe the temptations of Jesus were just as the Bible says – Jesus being assaulted by this fearful being who fell through pride (Isa. 14:12-14) – as even now the devil makes earth and air the scene of his tireless activity (Ephesians 2:2 and I Peter 5:8).

Just as Jesus was really the Son of God so Satan was really Satan – the Devil.

You can say this about the three temptations of Jesus:

1. The first temptation meant “SERVE yourself.”

2. The second temptation meant “Let GOD serve you.”
3. The third temptation means, “Let Me serve you.”

How glad we are that temptation never loosened a moral fiber in the being of Jesus.

I hope this will be of help to you.

Yours earnestly,

Robert G. Lee

FILLED YOUR HEART. The expression shows both occupation and possession. The heart that was supposed to be filled with the Holy Spirit had been filled by Satan, the great deceiver who will provide the motivation for anyone who would practice hypocrisy.

TO LIE TO THE HOLY SPIRIT. When I was a young pastor, I was surprised by something that happened in a deacons meeting - why I should have been surprised by anything that happens in a deacons meeting, I do not know today. One deacons mentioned the need to fertilize plants that had been put out when the grounds were landscaped. He turned to Perry Talley and asked, “Perry, do you think you can get a bag of fertilizer from the plant?” To which Perry replied, “Yeah, I can steal some.” When others showed surprise, he said, “Well that is what it is. We might as well call it what it is.”

When it comes to lying, we might as well call it what it is. When one lies he breaks one of the Ten Commandments, and that is bad enough. Ananais is guilty of lying to the Holy Spirit, and that is worse. All lying is against the will of God, but this was a sin in the face of God, in the face of the mighty manifestation of the and presence of the Holy Spirit in the newly empowered church.

5:4 - WHY IS IT. *“Wasn’t it yours while you possessed it? And after it was sold, wasn’t it at your disposal? Why is it that you planned this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God!”* The property belonged to Ananais and Saphira before the sold it, and the money was theirs after they sold it. There was no pressure placed on them to sell the property, or to give all the proceeds to the Lord. Others were giving voluntarily, and Ananias had sinned voluntarily.

YOU HAVE LIED TO GOD. “Peter referred to Ananias’ lying ‘to the Holy Spirit’ (v. 3); now Peter referred to his lying to God. This is an affirmation of the Holy Spirit’s deity” [BKC]. One is never acting more like Satan than when he is lying, for Satan is the father of lies, a liar from the beginning. Lying is a diabolical tool with which one tries to cover up all other sins. A former soldier told about the army sergeant who came to the base one day and told his friends that his wife had caught him in the act of adultery while he was supposed to be home sick. Someone asked what he said and he said, “I denied it.” The friend said, “I thought you said she caught you.” The sergeant said, “She did, and I still denied it!” The man who repeated the story did so to entertain his friends,

but the story illustrates how quickly one turns to a lie when caught in some other sin.

5:5 - ANANIAS DROPPED DEAD. *“When he heard these words, Ananias dropped dead, and a great fear came on all who heard.”* The Greek word means to expire. In the NT, it is used of three sudden and terrible deaths: (1) Ananias, (2) Saphira, and (3) Herod Agrippa I. Compare this with the quiet, peaceful “falling asleep” of Stephen (7:60), even though his was a violent death.

The punishment overtook Ananias while he was listening to Peter. Judgment was immediate and unmistakable. No one there would have questioned the connection between his sin and the punishment. There are patterns that we see in the NT, but all events do not become a pattern by which God will deal with man. God moves according to His sovereign will in giving the gifts of the Spirit (i.e., speaking in tongues). There were certain things that became a pattern for believers (worship on the First Day instead of the Seventh Day - it became the pattern, even though there is no indication that God commanded it). God did not strike down everyone who has lied to the Holy Spirit, just as He does not strike down everyone who commits a serious sin today. One time was enough to make His point.

5:6 - BURIED HIM. *“The young men got up, wrapped [his body], carried him out, and buried him.”* The young men were the ones we would expect to undertake such a solemn burial. How sad it is to realize that the first funeral in the fellowship of believers was that of a hypocrite whose life God took because the man lied to the Holy Spirit. Robertson offers the following comment on the word translated wrapped:

”Wrapped him round (sunesteilan). First aorist active indicative of sustellō, old verb, to draw together, or contract (1Co 7:29), to roll together, to wrap with bandages, to enshroud as here. Nowhere else in the N.T. Frequent in medical writers. They may have used their own mantles. The time for burial was short in Jerusalem for sanitary reasons and to avoid ceremonial defilement” [ATR - Word Pictures in the NT].

5:7 - HIS WIFE. *“There was an interval of about three hours; then his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.”* Saphira may have been coming for the next hour of prayer, three hours later. One can imagine that she had dressed and prepared herself for praise for her generosity before entering the place where they were meeting.

5:8 - TELL ME. *“Tell me,” Peter asked her, “did you sell the field for this price?” ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘for that price.’* Would Saphira not have been expecting to see Ananias when she entered the room? It may well have been in response to her surprise at not seeing Ananias in their midst, or the anticipation of praise for their generosity that Peter asked her this question. He gave her an opportunity to confirm or deny the lie Ananias had told. She had a choice and she chose to lie.

5:9 - WHY DID YOU AGREE. *“Then Peter said to her, “Why did you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out!”* This is amazing! While true believers are praying and agreeing in perfect accord,

these hypocrites “agree” to lie, cheat, and deceive, which seems to intensify their guilt. That there was collusion was clearly demonstrated by Peter. The question is, how did he know? It is altogether possible that there was something in his demeanor that gave Ananias away, but it more likely that the Holy Spirit revealed it to him. Even if it had been a matter of discernment, that was still the work of the Holy Spirit.

TEST THE SPIRIT. “To test the Holy Spirit” is to see “how much one can get away with before He judges; it means to presume on Him, to see if He will perform His Word, or to stretch Him to the limits of judgment” [BKC]. When Jesus was being tempted by Satan (Matt. 4:7), Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6:16, which prohibits any one from putting God to the test.

5:10 - SHE DROPPED DEAD. “*Instantly she dropped dead at his feet. When the young men came in, they found her dead, carried her out, and buried her beside her husband.*” The narrative is clear enough. She had agreed with her husband to test the Spirit by lying.

“The sin was not one of being stingy; Ananias and his wife simply wanted to appear more generous than they were, possibly as generous as Barnabas who had sold some land and brought the proceeds to the apostles (4:36, 37). Sudden death for both husband and wife, within three hours of each other, seems to some to be harsh judgment for their “little white lies.” Elymas, the sorcerer, committed one of the worst sins by trying to persuade the proconsul of Cyprus not to believe in Christ (13:8-11). His judgment was only temporary blindness; whereas that of Ananias and Sapphira was sudden death. The necessity for such severity in judgment may be (1) that God wanted to keep the church in Jerusalem in the original purity which had filled it with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and (2) to demonstrate to believers that the Spirit could not be deceived” [BSB].

That Ananias and Sapphira, as believers, would have been held more responsible than Elymas should be taken into consideration.

5:11 - GREAT FEAR. “*Then great fear came on the whole church and on all who heard these things.*” The result of this “judgmental act of God was twofold: “first, God empowered the apostles to work ‘signs and wonders’ (v. 12) beyond the ordinary, which attracted many people to Christ and the church (v. 14). Second, some were afraid to join themselves with the apostles (v. 13). Evident everywhere was the awesome fear of those who learned of the convicting power of the Holy Spirit” [BSB]. The Bible Knowledge Commentary adds:

“The purpose of this account in the narrative is manifold: (1) It revealed God’s displeasure with sin, particularly dishonesty, in His body, the church. (2) It marked the church off as distinct from Israel, for such discipline was not seen in Israel. The word church (used here for the first time in Acts) refers to the universal church here and in 9:31 and 20:28, and to local congregations in 11:26 and 13:1. (3) It indicated God was at work in this new group” [BKC].

There is a significant revelation here, for it is here the word *ekklesia* is used for the first time in the Book of Acts in reference to believers. It is used twice in the Gospels, once of the whole body of believers or the Kingdom (Mat 16:18), and also of the local body of believers (Mat 18:17).

“In Acts 7:38 it is used of the whole congregation of Israel while in Acts 19:32 it is used of a public assembly in Ephesus. But already in Acts 8:3 it is applied to the church which Saul was persecuting in their homes when not assembled. So here the etymological meaning of ‘assembly’ disappears for “the church” were now the scattered saints hiding in their separate homes. The whole body of believers in Jerusalem and all who heard of the fate of Ananias and Sapphira (beautiful, her name means) were in awe and dread. It was already a dangerous thing to be a follower of Christ unless one was willing to walk straight” [ATR].

Signs and Wonders

5:12 - SIGNS AND WONDERS. *“Many signs and wonders were being done among the people through the hands of the apostles. By common consent they would all meet in Solomon’s Colonnade.”* Signs are miracles that each a lesson, whereas “wonders” display the power and presence of the Lord. In John’s Gospel account, the emphasis is upon signs - the feeding of the 5,000 signified that Jesus is the Bread of Life. The raising of Lazarus signified that He is the Resurrection and Life.

One of the “wonders”, or so it would seem in light of church history, is that these people were doing anything “by common consent” for any period of time. We are more familiar with the KJV “With one accord.” To see other references to this spirit, see also, Acts 1:14; Acts 2:46; Acts 4:24 and later Acts 7:57; Acts 8:6; Acts 12:20; Acts 15:25; Acts 18:21; Acts 19:29. The believers agreed to meet in Solomon’s Colonnade, where some would remember walking with Jesus (John 10:23).

5:13 - NONE OF THE REST. *“None of the rest dared to join them, but the people praised them highly.”* Though committed believers made the decision to meet in Solomon’s Colonnade, “none of the rest” dared join them. This may well mean that non-believers were afraid to join them. “Because of what had happened to Ananias and Sapphira, people did not come to the Lord unless they really were serious” [NCWB].

5:14 - INCREASING NUMBERS. *“Believers were added to the Lord in increasing numbers—crowds of both men and women.”* To be “added to the church (or, fellowship) was to be added to the Lord (see 2:47) because the church was one with Christ as his very own body” [NCWB]. In spite of the fact that nonbelievers did not dare meet with them when they were in Solomon’s Colonnade, many continued to believe, and all who believed in Jesus Christ were “added to the Lord in increasing numbers.” This **progress report** includes both men and women.

5:15 - THE SICK. *“As a result, they would carry the sick out into the streets and lay them on*

beds and pallets so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on some of them.” Jesus healed many during His earthly ministry and promised that His disciples would continue to heal the sick after they received the Holy Spirit. “Beds” were the soft beds of the wealthy, and “pallets” were the thin pallets of the poor. In the early days, and into the middle of the Twentieth Century, people would take their babies and toddlers to revival meetings, in which services often ran into the night. Parents would take a quilt and spread it on the floor and place their babies on a “Baptist pallet” (or Methodist pallet). Some people who had overnight visitors might spread a pallet for their guest - or for the children. Those pallets could get hard, but one would find a way to get comfortable and could usually sleep through the night.

HIS SHADOW. Here, it is wise to practice exegesis (to take out from the Scripture), rather than Eisegesis (reading one’s own thoughts, fancies, and desires into it). It was not Simon Peter’s shadow that healed them, but God. When God decides to heal, He does not need a shadow, a handkerchief, or a prayer cloth. Though we are not told this, it seems to have been in response to their faith, since they came to Peter and the other apostles. The Lord may well have healed some because of the faith of Peter and John, as in the case of the man whose healing caused such a commotion earlier.

5:16 - A MULTITUDE. *“In addition, a multitude came together from the towns surrounding Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed.”* In addition to those who lived in Jerusalem, people from outlying towns and villages began bringing their sick people into Jerusalem seeking healing for them. “Came together” is imperfect, which means that they kept on coming together.

UNCLEAN SPIRITS. It is clear that when Jesus was on earth He did not rid the earth of demons. As Jesus cast out unclean spirits while He was on earth, His disciples, filled with the Holy Spirit, continued to cast out these demons. Demons are real, and were seen as real at this time. Many living in the age of psychology might ask if these people were not suffering from some form of mental illness. The fact is, that we do not know from our vantage point in history which ones were mentally ill and which ones were demon possessed. What we do know is that there were people who were believed to have “unclean spirits” who were taken to Peter and they were healed. There were demon possessed people who were cleansed or healed.

We also know that mental illness did not wait for Freud to reveal itself. There have always been mentally ill people and in ancient times many people no doubt viewed mentally ill people as having an unclean spirit. What we also know is that Jesus was not confused and Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, was not confused about unclean spirits. Years ago, Kurt Kotch, a German pastor and psychologist, wrote extensively about his experience with the occult. He concluded that if the psychologist tried and failed to heal an individual, but a Christian prayed and that person was delivered, he probably had a demon and had been cleansed. I would recommend his book, **COUNSELING THE OCCULT** to those who would like to dig a little deeper.

Prison Could Not Hold Them

5:17 - HIGH PRIEST. *“Then the high priest took action. He and all his colleagues, those who belonged to the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy.”* Either Annas or Caiaphas led in the effort to wipe out this new movement. They had plotted and conspired to murder Jesus, assuming that would be the end of this movement. Now, things are really getting out of their control. Caiaphas was high priest at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus, but Annas, his father-in-law had served as high priest, as had some of his sons. It is very possible that Annas, as the head of the family, was the key to keeping the annual appointment within his family.

SADDUCEES. This was the smallest of the Jewish sects, the most influential, the wealthiest, and by far the most secular. Their authority was granted by Rome, but their position guaranteed them power, wealth, and control over the Sanhedrin. They were granted power to judge Jewish issues in Jerusalem, Judea, and throughout the world. They were “filled with jealousy” (implying envy and zeal). In addition to their popularity with the people, they were worried about their popularity among the leaders, which helped to keep them in power.

5:18 - ARRESTED THE APOSTLES. *“So they arrested the apostles and put them in the city jail.”* Peter and John had been arrested before. Here, it appears that all twelve were arrested. The NASB has, “They laid hands on the apostles”, which is explained by, “and put them in a public prison.” Both the NASB and the HCSB are word for word translations, not a “version” of an earlier translation. The HCSB will be more easily understood by a new reader of the Word.

5:19 - ANGEL OF THE LORD. *“But an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail during the night, brought them out, and said...”* While the Sadducees, who didn’t believe in angels, were plotting against the apostles, an angel of the Lord came and set them free. Another paradox!

This angel opened the doors to the jail, and then closed them after the Apostles were released (v. 23). In 12:10, the doors opened of their own accord at the will of God. Often in the OT, we read that the Angel of the Lord appeared to someone, which many interpret to mean the pre-incarnate Son of God. Here, we find “an” angel of the Lord acting for the Lord.

5:20 - THE TEMPLE COMPLEX. *“Go and stand in the temple complex, and tell the people all about this life.”* Now, we find out why this angel of the Lord delivered them from jail. While the Sadducees were trying to shut them up, the Lord commands them to go back to the temple complex and “tell the people about this life”, meaning the new life in Christ. “Tell all about this life” a glorious description of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It also has a familiar ring to it: “Be My witnesses.” This is consistent with the Great Commission. They were not sent to the Temple complex to tell people of their experience (their miraculous deliverance would play well on the news networks today). They were sent to tell people to turn to Jesus for eternal life.

5:21 - OBEDIENCE. *“In obedience to this, they entered the temple complex at daybreak and*

began to teach. When the high priest and those who were with him arrived, they convened the Sanhedrin—the full Senate of the sons of Israel—and sent [orders] to the jail to have them brought.” The apostles, having been miraculously freed from jail, following the instructions from the Lord, were in the temple complex at daybreak. They obeyed the Lord, without considering the consequences.

The high priest and the chief priests arrived at their courtroom and quickly convened the Sanhedrin, which is identified for us as “the full Senate of the sons of Israel.” They convened the Sanhedrin to shut them up, not realizing that they had already lost another battle. They confidently sent the temple police to the jail to have them brought in to stand before them. While these religious leaders met at daybreak to silence the message of Jesus, His servants were witnessing to worshipers as they entered the temple complex.

5:22 - THE TEMPLE POLICE. *“But when the temple police got there, they did not find them in the jail, so they returned and reported...”* The temple police were the first to discover the miraculous deliverance. They returned and reported that they were not in jail. Little did they realize the power of God to open prison doors, nor could they have imagined that He would open other prison doors and free people from the prison of sin death. Today, Jesus is opening the door and freeing people from addiction, fear, guilt, and death and delivering them to the life to which these apostles were commanded to testify (v.20). .

5: 23 - THE JAIL SECURELY LOCKED. *“We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing in front of the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!”* Everything was in order at the jail. The doors were locked and the guards were in place, but the prisoners were gone. The highest power in Israel, under Rome, had convened to judge prisoners they did not have.

5:24 - BAFFLED. *“As the captain of the temple police and the chief priests heard these things, they were baffled about them, as to what could come of this.”* When the temple police reported their “findings” (or what they did not find) both the captain of the temple police and the chief priests were baffled. They were baffled about what they had just heard, but they were no doubt baffled about the implications for themselves and for Israel. They were baffled by that which had happened and by the ramifications of it.

5:25 - REPORTED TO THEM. *“Someone came and reported to them, ‘Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple complex and teaching the people.’”* The highest court of Israel had been convened “to judge prisoners they did not have. While the frenzied leaders were deliberating as to what had happened to the men who had been in their custody, they were told the apostles were preaching in the courts of the temple” [BKC].

5:26 - WITHOUT FORCE. *“Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them in without force, because they were afraid the people might stone them.”* The captain led his police out into the temple complex where the apostles were testifying about the new life in Christ and carefully

took them into custody “without force.” One commentary notes that “It is ironic that they did not fear God whose power they had witnessed so clearly in the miracles that the apostles were doing” [NCWB].

They were afraid the people might stone them. If a Christian in America, England, or Australia today wonders about this fear, all we have to do is watch a scene from some Palestinian street on television. As a matter of fact one cartoon in Holland set of violent demonstrations among Muslims around the world in recent times.

5:27 - BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN. *“When they had brought them in, they had them stand before the Sanhedrin, and the high priest asked...”* They were brought in where they had to stand before the Sanhedrin once again. The high priest began the questioning. Israel had been granted certain rights by Rome, and one of them was that a court of their own people would deal with Jewish issues. This was a special privilege and the Sanhedrin was careful to deal with any issue that might effect either the welfare of the Jews, or their position of power and prestige.

5:28 - IN THIS NAME. *“Didn’t we strictly order you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to bring this man’s blood on us!”* The reluctance of the high priest to use the name of Jesus suggests hatred for Him and for this new movement. “Use of the pronoun this twice underscores the high priest’s reluctance to pronounce the name of Jesus (cf. ‘this name,’ 4:17). Obviously his hatred of Christ Jesus was great!” [BKC]. The high priest never uses the name Jesus, but Peter never misses an opportunity to use it.

The high priest declared, “You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching.” They were certainly trying, but that which filled Jerusalem with the Gospel was the coming of the Holy Spirit to empower these witnesses. The high priest also accused them of being “determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” Not only did they refuse to stop preaching about “this man”, the high priest declared, you “are determined to bring this man’s blood on us!” One can imagine the anger and frustration. They had conspired to have Jesus killed and now they are appalled at the thought that they might be accused of doing that very thing.

5:29 - WE MUST OBEY GOD. *“But Peter and the apostles replied, ‘We must obey God rather than men.’”* Once again, Peter is the spokesman and here he speaks the words that should guide every born again believer in Jesus. Obedience to God is our first consideration. However, for many Christians, the only time they apply this is when all the things of this world are stripped from them. One cannot help but wonder what it would have meant to America if Christians had held this conviction over the past century as we watched America slip into the post-Christian era in our history. Everywhere we turn, some expert is telling us how to have revival, and some are telling us about the revival they are witnessing. The simple fact is that we will see no revival until Peter’s statement becomes our conviction and commitment. What will it take to bring American believers to that point? It may take persecution to awaken America to the will of the Holy Spirit.

5:30 - THE GOD OF OUR FATHERS. *“The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you*

had murdered by hanging Him on a tree.” Peter began with an expression that would assure those on the Sanhedrin that the God they both professed to follow had raised up Jesus from the dead. The high priest had charged that the apostles were “determined to bring this man’s blood on us!” Peter not only does not deny this, he states the charge in no uncertain terms.

5:31 - GOD EXALTED THE MAN. “*God exalted this man to His right hand as ruler and Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.*” There is no doubt that this response by Peter about their guilt and the resurrection of Jesus would have infuriated the Sadducees (cf. 4:1-2; 5:17; 23:8). “Yet it was the same message Peter, once again the apostles’ spokesman, had preached before: (a) they had killed Jesus, but God... raised Him from the dead (cf. 2:23-24, 36; 3:15; 4:10); (b) they could have forgiveness of sins (cf. 2:38; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18) by turning to Him in repentance (cf. 2:38; 3:16; 4:12; 8:22)” [BKC].

Forgiveness of sins is offered to those who believe in Jesus Christ. The idea behind the word forgiveness is a discharge from and obligation. Here, it is the releasing of the sinner from the guilt and consequences of his sins by the Lord Jesus Christ.

5:32 - WE ARE WITNESSES. “*We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.*” Peter, at this point, has but one sermon! It goes like this:

1. God sent His Son to die for our sins.
2. You murdered Him.
3. God raised Him from the dead.
4. We are witnesses to these things.
5. All who believe in Jesus will receive eternal life.

TO THOSE WHO OBEY HIM. The idea is a submissive obedience to another. The Holy Spirit is given to all who obey Jesus Christ. We do not receive the Holy Spirit through a sacrament, or through speaking in tongues, nor to certain phenomenal gifts prove that we have the Holy Spirit. He is freely given to all who obey His Gospel.

Gamaliel’s Counsel

5:33 - THEY WERE ENGAGED. “*When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them.*” They accused the apostles of trying to blame them for the death of Jesus. Peter had told them in no uncertain terms that they are indeed responsible. Rather than repenting, they were enraged - showing violent mental anguish and indignation.

5: 34 - GAMALIEL. “*A Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was respected by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered the men to be taken outside for a little while.*”

Gamaliel, whose name means “the reward of God”, was a famous Pharisee and respected teacher. He was the grandson of the Hillel, the founder of the more moderate (liberal) of the two schools into which the Pharisees were divided. Robertson tells us that he was

“later president of the Sanhedrin, and the first of the seven rabbis termed ‘Rabban.’ It is held by some that he was one of the doctors who heard the Boy Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:47) and that he was a secret disciple like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, but there is no evidence of either position. Besides, he appears here as a loyal Pharisee and “a doctor of the law” (*nomodidaskalos*) [ATR]

He was honored by the title, The Beauty of the Law. After having the apostles removed from the room, Gamaliel addressed the Sanhedrin, who would listen to him. He will proceed to offer a word of caution and a suggested a course of action in dealing with the followers fo Christ. Robertson adds:

“Like other great rabbis he had a great saying: ‘Procure thyself a teacher, avoid being in doubt; and do not accustom thyself to give tithes by guess.’ He was a man of judicial temper and not prone to go off at a tangent, though his brilliant young pupil Saul went to the limit about Stephen without any restraint on the part of Gamaliel so far as the record goes. Gamaliel champions the cause of the apostles as a Pharisee to score a point against the Sadducees. He acts as a theological opportunist, not as a disciple of Christ. He felt that a temporizing policy was best. **There are difficulties in this speech of Gamaliel and it is not clear how Luke obtained the data for the address. It is, of course, possible that Saul was present and made notes of it for Luke afterwards** (bold added by this writer) [ATR, bold added by this writer].

5:35 - BE CAREFUL. “*He said to them, “Men of Israel, be careful about what you’re going to do to these men.”* He addressed them just as Peter had: Men of Israel, the traditional title one would expect. He immediately advised caution. He is not defending Christ or the Gospel here. Rather, he is looking for a more moderate way of dealing with these apostles. Also, just as Democrats and Republicans are continually seeking advantage over each other, this Pharisee may well have been offering the Pharisees’ alternative to the Sadducees on the Sanhedrin.

5:36 - THEUDAS. “*Not long ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about 400 men rallied to him. He was killed, and all his partisans were dispersed and came to nothing.*” Nothing is known of this Theudas with his 400 insurrectionists, “whose cause came to naught. Though Josephus, a Jewish historian of the first century, described a rebellion led by a Theudas, that insurrection was later and much larger. Furthermore, that rebellion followed the one led by the Judas described in verse 37” [BKC]. The Believer’s Study Bible Notes (BSB) adds:

“The uprising led by Theudas was political. The messianic idea in Israel entailed such things as deliverance from the yoke of Rome instead of from sin. In times of despair

almost any vigorous personality could secure a temporary following. Theudas and others attempted such uprisings and finally ‘came to nothing’ [BSB].

5:37 - JUDAS. *“After this man, Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and attracted a following. That man also perished, and all his partisans were scattered.”* Believing that “taxation was an insult and a dishonor to God, Judas of Galilee led a revolt that the Romans quickly ended (Josephus’ Antiquities, 13.1.1)” [NCWB].

“This rising, which had occurred in 8-6 B.C., was hardly more than a pitiful preview in Galilee of the later insurrection of Theudas. Its chief result was the permanent death of its leader, Judas, in contrast to Messiah Jesus, who rose from the dead and attracted numerous followers who were willing to testify throughout the empire that they knew Jesus to be alive” [BSB].

5:38 - LEAVE THEM ALONE. *“And now, I tell you, stay away from these men and leave them alone. For if this plan or this work is of men, it will be overthrown...”* He warns them to stay away from these apostles and to leave them alone. He offers two alternatives in dealing with these men, with the first being the condition of the third class (it may or it may not). “If this plan” is a of men (it may be and it may not be) “it will be overthrown.” The second follows in vs. 39.

5:39 - IF IT IS OF GOD. *“But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even be found fighting against God.’ So they were persuaded by him.”* The second option is a “condition of the first class, determined as fulfilled, *ei* with the present indicative. By the use of this idiom Gamaliel does put the case more strongly in favor of the apostles than against them. This condition assumes that the thing is so without affirming it to be true” [ATR].

Gamaliel is warning the Sanhedrin that, if this is from God, and they fight it they could be fighting against God. Some see Gamaliel as a friend at court, and the Lord used it in this situation. Dr. Eddleman, in his commentary, wrote, “Rapidly multiplying Christians and changed lives accompanied by lightening-like thrusts of heavenly therapy made it at least possible that Christianity just may be true” [HLE: 63]. His advice was to wait and see.

“His suggestion was hard common sense with built-in face saving features for the Sanhedrin. As a basic principle of life, Gamaliel’s or council was an evasion of responsibility and procrastination in decision making. To ‘wait and see’ how any policy how any movement or policy works out before making a commitment is foolish and fruitless. For a church to adopt this philosophy would require neutralism on every issue until success became evident. This would arrest all progress for a church, nation, family, of individual” [HLE: p. 63].

Dr. Eddleman was right, but from time to time, someone will read this and decide that the brilliant rabbi has given us a guideline for dealing with any kind of strange belief. What we have here is the religious and political wisdom of the world, not the sure and certain Word of the living God.

The application of this kind of reasoning would be catastrophic if applied to an evil movement. As a matter of fact, it has been applied by some to evil movements in the past. One of the best examples was the attitude of the church toward Hitler and his Nazi propaganda . By the time the Christians realized that they should have stood up to the Hitler and the Nazis from the beginning it was too late to stand up against that satanic regime. Twenty-two million were killed, and that number does not include fallen soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and Coast Guard members in World War II.

Many Christians never opposed Communism, or even learned enough about it to debate the principles, and Communists have killed a lot more people than Hitler. Today, it is Islam. Sadly, many church members and leaders have remained silent as this evil force spreads across the nation and around the world. God expects us to always be ready to offer a defense.

The advice of Gamaliel seemed wise to the Sanhedrin, and it protected the apostles. It was timely advice and showed a religious wisdom, offering an out for the Sadducees and protection for the church. That does not mean that we should adopt that kind of reasoning today. Professor E. L. Douglas taught Bible classes at Mississippi College back in the days when Christian colleges and universities had Bible Departments instead of Religion Departments. He was the first person I heard quote an old proverb: “Be not the first by which the new is tried, not yet the last to lay the old aside.” This proverb has some of the inherent weaknesses of Gamaliel’s advice, but up to a point one can see some wisdom in it.

5:40 - HAD THEM FLOGGED. *“After they called in the apostles and had them flogged, they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them.”* This flogging was apparently given because of their earlier disobedience (4:18, 21; 5:28). A flogging was brutal and it could be sadistic, but we are not given any more information about this flogging. The flogging was a victory for the apostles and for the church, not for the Sanhedrin.

To summarize verses 36-40, we can look at the notes in the Believer’s Study Bible:

Gamaliel was the first friend in court for Christianity. He had earlier been a teacher of Saul of Tarsus. His advice to the Sanhedrin was to wait and see if Christianity was of the Lord; otherwise, they might “fight against God.” In the providence of God, Gamaliel made this suggestion in a skillful and timely manner. It caused the Sanhedrin for a time to relinquish the pressure being exerted upon the first church in Jerusalem. Significantly, Gamaliel was a Pharisee, as was Saul of Tarsus, whose conversion would soon take place. The Pharisees had clamored for the death of Christ. However, it was the Sadducees who exerted violent opposition to the infant church. The reason for this change was that the Pharisees believed in two orders of reality, the material and the spiritual. The Sadducees believed in only one order of reality, the material. All the outstanding early Christians whose party identification was made known were former Pharisees. The record does not tell of the conversion of a single Sadducee” [BSB].

5:41 - THEY WENT OUT. *“Then they went out from the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to be dishonored on behalf of the name.”* This is the true spirit of Christian courage and devotion: they were rejoicing, even after the flogging. The Sanhedrin had probably never seen anything like this. The apostles took their flogging and left the Sanhedrin rejoicing “that they were counted worthy to be dishonored” in their service of “the name” (the name the high priest had used for Jesus). This is another paradox - they were honored to be dishonored! People often seek honors, but a trial and flogging would not be something the average person would consider an honor. What the Sanhedrin considered a dishonor, they considered an honor.

5:42 - THEY CONTINUED TEACHING. *“Every day in the temple complex, and in various homes, they continued teaching and proclaiming the good news that the Messiah is Jesus.”* The apostles continued teaching and preaching that the Messiah is Jesus. Not only did they teach and preach that in private, they taught it and proclaimed it in the Temple complex.

If we follow the New Testament pattern today, we will focus on the teaching and the preaching of the Word of God. Music is very good. Praise is essential. Children and youth programs and ministries can be a blessing. Recreation is useful and appreciated. Church trips can be a blessing (or a curse!).

I served on the board of trustees for LifeWay Christian Resources for seven years and during that time we met three times at the LifeWay Conference Center at Glorieta, New Mexico, and twice at the Ridgecrest, North Carolina Conference Center. In addition, I visited Ridgecrest on my way back from one executive committee meeting at the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in Greensboro, N.C. We placed a lot of emphasis on the ministry of the conference centers, including recreation, worship, Bible, and private devotions, and we voted to invest a lot of money in those centers. However, if we let any of these good programs get in the way of that which is essential, we are failing the church, failing the Lord, and failing our people - even when they want those things instead of the preaching of the Word. Paul wrote, “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ” (Rom. 10:17). The context in which we find that verse is the preaching of the Gospel.

Life Application

We may read the story of Ananias and Saphira with a certain amount of awe, and then set it aside as an interesting narrative, then dismiss it as being without application in our time. After all, there are a lot of people who lie about what they do for the Lord. Even if they do not outright lie, they do not correct those who credit them for doing more than they do. I have a memory of a friend whom I saw every Sunday morning in the Sunday School office, working on records and, with others, counting the money given in Sunday School. Years later, I visited with my friend after he had asked me to preach the funeral sermon after his wife died. I visited with my friend in a hospital in another part of the state and while I was there we talked about people we had known in that church where he had served. I mentioned one man who was always there, friendly and joking. When I mentioned his faithfulness, my friend told me that this church member would come by the Sunday School office

and write a check for all the change (and I assume, small bills). He said he needed it for his store, and it would help those who were preparing the deposit. My friend said, "He wrote a check for the money, and then he would use that check when he counted his contributions on his income tax report." I do not know whether my friend knew that or just suspected it, but even if that church member was dishonest, the Lord did not strike him dead the first time he did it.

All hypocrites and deceivers are not struck down as were Ananias and Saphira, a fact for which we should be profoundly grateful. Now I will confess that I have been guilty of hypocrisy - in fact, I have been just as guilty as you! Here is a personal illustration I wrote some time ago. It illustrates something of the attitude of some church members.

It was like an oven, except that the heat in the Mississippi Delta was a lot more humid. It was a miserable existence for a thirteen year old boy, day after day after day, with the only break being Sunday when everything shut down so the family could go to church - morning and evening. His mother set the alarm for 4:00 A.M. and called him at 4:15. That is when his day started six days a week, winter and summer. He started his day with what his friends in town might have called "chores." To him it was just his contribution to the family, milking, feeding, and moving livestock around. Slopping hogs! Of course, those "chores" would have to be repeated that evening after a long day in the field.

In a recent book on World War II, the author referred to a young man from Kentucky as a "harvester of cotton and chopper of weeds." City boy! The young man chopped cotton and he picked cotton! Kids in the Mississippi Delta knew the jargon before they started to school. It was hard work, and boring, but someone had to do it. These were the days before farmers used pre-emergence chemicals (pre-merge) to control grass and weeds, so it all had to be done with hoe and plow. When a young boy graduated from hoe to plow it was like a right-of-passage: he was growing up, if not quite a grown-up.

An unexpected shower brought a welcomed recess to the youth's agricultural education early one afternoon. As hot as it was that day, the rain left everything steamy, but at least he would have a break for the rest of the day, allowing time for him to pray for another rain. Or, so he thought. With cotton choppers hired and grass growing the farmer reasoned aloud that it might not have rained on "the lower place," and even if it did it was sandy and they could probably work anyway.

Psychology had not yet arrived in the Green River community, seven miles west of Sledge, MS, so regardless of his disappointment, the youth kept his mouth shut. In the first place, he knew better than to argue with his father and in the second place, he didn't want his father to think he was lazy. A teenager in that community might overcome a lot of shortcomings, but if he was ever labeled "lazy", the label stayed with him. Our lad made an effort to hide his disappointment, knowing the importance of the work but at the moment hating every minute of it.

Family members and hired hands loaded onto the truck and headed for the lower place, the family - less the youth - in the cab, and everyone else on the back. They had to drive down a dirt road for

over half a mile to get to the lower place, but since it was sandy they should have no problem. There were two “mud-holes” on the road, but since the land was sandy no one every thought of getting stuck. But on this day, as the farmer slowed down to ease through one of the holes to avoid splashing muddy water on everyone on the back, and he got the truck stuck. No problem in the Mississippi Delta at that time - and not an uncommon occurrence.

At the word from the farmer, everyone got off to push, including the brilliant youth who was entertaining an Edisonian light bulb that was flickering in his mind. Everyone moved to either side of the truck, standing on solid ground, leaning over to put a hand on the truck so they could push when the word came from the driver. Some of the people were prepared to give it their all, knowing they could push the truck out of the hole. Children would push as hard as they could, regardless of how much good they would do. Some would have their hand on the truck and lean into it, but they would not put out much energy because they knew someone else would do the heavy work.

Then, there was our bright young man who was still rebelling against the task ahead, thinking about the hard work waiting on the lower place, frustrated that he would not be able to spend a couple of hours throwing a baseball with his brother in the front yard. When everyone else got off the truck and moved to the either side, he jumped over the tailgate and found a good place to push. Suddenly a plan came to mind. When the farmer, Mr. Joe, gave the word everyone began to push forward - except our young friend, who had his hands on the top of the tailgate as thought pushing. **But when everyone else leaned into the task, he planted his feet and pulled back with all his might.**

Every time they tried to push backward he pushed forward, and when they pushed forward he planted his feet and pulled against them. They were successful, pushing the truck through to solid ground, dragging the youth through the mud and water. Congratulating themselves on a job well done, they prepared to load onto the truck again. **The young boy stood proudly among them, accepting the praise of those who thought he had tried harder than any of them** - after all, he was the only one who was totally covered with mud and water! He joined in, **“We did it!”**

We will call our young friend Johnny. My wife, who has taught for more years than I have permission to mention, has often reminded me that in all the stories about little boys who can’t read, can’t throw a ball, or can’t be still in class, the boy is always called “little Johnny.” It is sufficient to say that for many years **our young friend would have been too embarrassed to repeat this story.** He would probably never mention it in front of anyone who helped push the truck out of the mud-hole that day. **The father never knew the story.**

This story might be amusing only to those who knew the youth, except for the fact that **I have seen this scene played out in a few churches** during my ministry. Let’s see if we can draw some parallels.

The “lower place” is the task before us, the fields white unto harvest.
The truck is the church.
The workers are the people.

Some take the work very seriously.
Some cannot contribute as much as others, but they do their best.
Some are just going along for the ride, they have hand in, but do not much more.

Then there is the church member like the youth in this story:

He was in a place where he might have done the most good.
He pretended to be working with others, when in reality he is working against them.
When they succeeded, he accepted credit for “doing his part” and more.
He was a hypocrite - at that time (all hypocrites do not practice the art every day).
He was also standing before the Lord and the church wearing filthy garments (KJV).
He needed to confess his sin and receive the Lord’s forgiveness and His cleansing.

Sadly, hypocrisy was not eliminated in the First Century. When we are guilty of hypocrisy we should confess it to the Lord and repent. When we observe what we consider hypocrisy in others, we should pray for them, but we should never try to hide behind them to justify our unfaithfulness. God may not strike the hypocrite dead today, but the sin of lying to the Holy Spirit is just as serious today as it was then. That is one of the lessons we should learn from the fifth chapter of Acts.

CHAPTER 6

The Chosen Seven

6:1 - A COMPLAINT. *“In those days, as the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution.”* There are periodic **progress reports** throughout the first several chapters of the Book of Acts., and before this account is over we will see another one. One reading this chapter for the first time might assume that the Gospel train had suddenly hit a dangerous curve and was in danger of being derailed. In fact, I heard one minister say that the church, after experiencing fantastic growth, had come to a serious crossroads, and that if it had not been handled right the church might have been sidetracked and the progress arrested. In other words, he said, the future of the church was in the balances. That is a wrong assessment of the situation, as well as a faulty understanding of the Lord’s promise that the “gates of hell could not prevail against the church.”

The church was not about to be destroyed. The Head of the church had already promised that would not happen. He did, however, warn that the church, and believers would hit some snags along the way. In fact, there would be severe tests for the saints and the church. Some local congregations

would not make it. In fact, some did not deserve to survive. Jesus made this clear in the letter to the church at Ephesus in the Revelation:

“But I have this against you: you have abandoned the love [you had] at first. Remember then how far you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. Otherwise, **I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent**” (Rev 2:4-5, bold added).

A church without the Light of the World is no church at all. It is simply a gathering of people. Jesus, the Light of the World, threatens to take away the light from a church that was still orthodox in doctrine, even though they had abandoned the love they had for God and for others at the beginning.

What we see in this chapter is a very positive example of how a church should handle complaints and conflicts. Conflicts are certain in this world, and the church is not exempt from controversy. Conflict within a church is not only a threat to fellowship, it is an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to guide, empower, and instruct. That applies to churches as well as to individual saints. In this passage we will learn the secret to dealing with conflicts in a local church. Denominations publish books and hold conferences to teach pastors, staff members, and lay persons how to deal with conflict, and many are helped by the effort. In this passage we will see the principles the Holy Spirit uses and blesses to give us a victory.

We should bear in mind a very important fact at the beginning. Francis Schaeffer stressed in letters and in books that we should not be surprised at how low fallen man will stoop (my paraphrase). Schaeffer often reminded readers of the effects of the Fall. We observe it in our children. As soon as a toddler can talk there are three things you can expect to hear from them (1) “It’s mine!”; (2) “I didn’t do it”; and (3) “He did it.” They show that they, as David expressed it, were born in sin (born with a sinful nature). A parent rushes to school to protect and defend an out of control child who has blamed someone else for his or her problems. She insists, “My child wouldn’t lie!” Teachers who often catch children in lies hear that all the time. The simple fact is, there is the temptation to lie, and most will try a lie to get out of trouble at some time. I had heard classmates in the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades try to get out of trouble by denying something. In the strongest terms and with great earnestness and emotion, they would say, “I swear I didn’t do it!” I had never been permitted to swear, but some of my friend sounded innocent when I knew they were guilty. The day came when I decided to deny something when Miss Jackson asked me, “Did you do that?” I answered, “No, Mam. I SWEAR I DIDN’T DO IT.” As I recall, I got away with it because she believed me to be honest. It would be more accurate to say that I got by my teacher, but I was convicted of the sin by the Holy Spirit and never forgot the experience.

We have church members who are selfish, arrogant, greedy, driven by the desire to have their way and to control others; and when we add anger, jealousy, envy, and gossip to the mix, there is little wonder that there are conflicts in every church. If given time to act, I can handle most situations fairly well, but when something happens and I react instead of waiting to act, I can be the source of the conflict.

THERE AROSE A COMPLAINT. There arose a complaint in the normal course of of ministry. It was bound to happen. The stability and progress of the church is not judged by avoidance of conflict, but by the way in which the conflict is settled. The surprise is not that there arose a complaint - the surprise would have been if they had continued very long without it.

Luke's research (in the Holy Spirit) concluded that there "arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews." Hellenistic Jews (Hellenists) are to be distinguished from Hellenes (which means Greeks). "Hellenistic" here denotes Jews who had grown up under the influence of the Greek civilization and spoke Greek as the vernacular. They used the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew) as their Scripture.

These Hellenistic Jews had grown up in a Gentile culture and spoke Greek, but the term did not mean that they had turned their backs on Judaism, nor that they had adopted the Gentile culture for themselves. Paul, even though he was an Hebrew of the Hebrews, had grown up in Tarsus, a Gentile city, but he surpassed the Palestinian Jew in the Law. He did, however, speak the Greek language, and he had lived among Gentiles and traded with them.

There may well have been a bias on the part of Palestinian Jews against Hellenistic Jews, but that does not automatically mean that these church members were deliberately discriminating against Hellenistic Jewish believers. To give them the benefit of a doubt, we can understand how this could have been an unintentional oversight. After all, the Palestinian Jews would be more likely to know each other, and some would know their circumstances better than they would those new residents, or temporary residents (sojourners) in Jerusalem. There were probably members of this fellowship who had been fired from jobs and turned out of their families because they followed Jesus. My father-in-law, B. F. Turner, told me that a Jewish friend asked him to go with him to his own funeral at a Jewish temple in the Mississippi Delta after the man became a Christian. He was declared dead and a funeral service was held for him. If something like this happened to a widow, only the saints would assume responsibility for her and her children.

As we saw in the case of Barnabas, many of those earliest believers who had property sold it and brought the proceeds to the apostles so that someone could buy food for those in need. In the daily distribution of food, the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked. This does not mean that it was intentional but regardless of that, it was not good. The question is, what would the new church do about it? How would they handle it? What can we learn from their experience? I believe there is a precedence set here that we would be wise to follow.

"The church in 6:1 moves from one mountain peak of practical achievement (rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer for the Name of Christ, 5:41) to another: victory in organizing to feed poor widows more efficiently. We see here a continuation of the church's ability to meet and solve its routine problems, external or internal" [HLE: 66].

The lesson here is not how serious the problem was, as it was one of how quickly and thoroughly the

neglect could be eliminated. They had been neglecting the Hellenistic widows but when the matter was brought to the attention of the apostles they did not neglect to act promptly and decisively.

6:2 - THE TWELVE SUMMONED. *“Then the Twelve summoned the whole company of the disciples and said, ‘It would not be right for us to give up preaching about God to wait on tables.’”* When the murmuring reached the ears of the Twelve Apostles, they summoned the entire fellowship of believers together and addressed them. The Twelve would have been the natural leaders, for they had traveled with Jesus and learned from Him for three years. They had also spent a considerable amount of time with the risen Lord, receiving instructions and encouragement. Then, there is the matter of Apostolic Authority. Paul threatened to deal with a situation at Corinth if the people did not deal with it before he arrived. John, in Third John, warned that if Gaius could not straighten out Diotrephes, he would have a talk with him when he arrived there. They were commissioned by the Messiah and empowered by the Holy Spirit to lead the church and to speak for the Lord. Peter had been the chief spokesman on a number of occasions.

As soon as the Twelve heard the complaints they took action to correct the problem. They must have realized that the complaints were not without merit. That does not mean that the oversight was based upon discrimination toward Hellenistic Jews. There might have been a measure of discrimination, but the neglect may well have been unintentional.

PREACHING ABOUT GOD. The church must look to the NT pattern in both strategy and tactics. We must follow the revealed pattern; in this case the pattern set by the apostles who had walked with Jesus for three years before His death. They had seen and communicated with risen Christ, and they had been filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. They had apostolic authority to set precedence and that is exactly what we see here. The God called pastor must keep the preaching of the Gospel central in his ministry. It was said that when Alexander McClaren was called to a church, he asked the leaders, “What do you want of me, my head or my feet? You can have either, but you cannot have both.” He went on to explain that if they wanted to hear the Gospel preached faithfully, he had make prayer and sermon preparation a priority. He could have spent all of his time going from door to door, but if he did that the preaching of the Gospel would suffer.

Every young pastor will be faced with the temptation to be the “best pastor the church has ever had.” Someone will assure him that the best way to do that is to market himself through numerous PR moves (clothed in religious jargon, however). I was still in my late twenties when I became pastor of a troubled church with a less than desirable reputation. It was obvious that they needed the stability that comes when a pastor forgets about his future and concentrates on the church’s future. It would take five or six years to improve the image of the church in the town. A former pastor came by to visit one day and offered me some good advice: “If you will go down to the Eat-A-Bite and sit around and drink coffee with the men every morning, and then hang out some at city hall, visiting with the prominent citizens who come in there, it won’t be long before everyone in town will be talking about Johnny Sanders.” I was half his age, but I knew that God had not called me into His ministry for me to have people talk about Johnny Sanders.

I was well aware of the kind of preaching the average person in the pew wants to hear. Some want to

be entertained. Others want to “hear a preacher who steps on my toes.” If a young pastor believes that he may also be interested in some ocean front property in Tennessee! That man does not want him to step on his toes, he wants him to step on his neighbor’s toes.

There are people who judge preachers as they judge performers. I decided when I was very young in the ministry that the Lord never called me to entertain His sheep; He never called me to traumatize His sheep; and He never called me to psychoanalyze His sheep. He called me to feed His sheep. Spiritually deep Christians want to hear the Gospel proclaimed in such a way that they will grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. The pastor who preaches expository sermons may well have to wait for a number of years to see the results. He may not be the one who is praised all over the area as a great preacher. However, some of the greatest preachers I have ever heard preached the Word of God under the anointing of the Holy Spirit in such a way that it was both edifying and exciting. Expository preaching should never be dull, nor does it overlook the evangelistic emphasis.

LIFE APPLICATION - FOR PREACHERS

When I enrolled as a student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. H. Leo Eddleman had just become president. My pastor, Henning Andrews was his friend. Dr. Eddleman’s father had been pastor of the church that sponsored the mission church in which I was reared. I loved to hear Dr. Eddleman preach and I spent a lot of time with him in the gym, where we often shot baskets when no one else was there. One summer, Dr. Eddleman preached in revival services at the Lula Baptist Church, Lula, MS, and I attended every service, Monday through Friday. At the end of the week, I could recall every sermon, and could go through the outline in my mind. I have heard preachers who romped and stomped all across the front of the sanctuary to choruses of Amen and Praise the Lord, but when the service was all over, all I could remember was the romping and stomping.

The preacher must make a commitment to use the tools with which he had been blessed and serve the Lord faithfully. He may not have the greatest voice, he may not look good on TV, and he may not tell jokes well, but he can devote himself to prayer and to the preaching of the Word of God. Paul was inspired to write to his son in the ministry Timothy:

“Before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom, I solemnly charge you: proclaim the message; persist in it whether convenient or not; rebuke, correct, and encourage with great patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:1-3).

WAIT ON TABLES. This denotes the tables used in the daily distribution of food to widows and orphans. The word used is the same root as *diakonia*, from which we get the word deacon. It is likely that the office of deacon grew out of this experience. What a glorious thing it would be if all deacons had this servant mentality! Some of the most outstanding people I have ever known have

been deacons, elected and ordained because their church was convinced that they met scriptural qualifications. Some of the most arrogant, divisive, obsessed people I have ever met were deacons who may well have been elected because of their connections, or because some of the older deacons believed they could control them.

It was a privilege to have had the opportunity to work with Bob Moore when I was pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church, Nederland, Texas in the mid-seventies. The former pastor, George Clarke, who left to become editor of the Church Administration for the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, had left word for me that Bob Moore would be a strong and faithful leader, and that I could trust him. When I visited the church the first time, Bob Moore and Therman Levins, another deacon, drove me around the city. At one point, I commended them for the way they their pastor search committee had represented their church. Bob said, "I appreciate what you are saying, but I can assure you that there are a lot of people in our church who could have done as well, or better than we have. We are just the ones they elected." Bob went on to mention Vernon Greenville. Vernon Greenville was unable to travel to Bastrop, Louisiana with the committee when they came to hear me the first time, so he and his wife drove out of the way to come by Bastrop a few weeks later to attend a morning worship service. They were on vacation. I met them and sensed that this was a man who loved the Lord.

What I did not know was that after they visited a few more churches to hear and meet pastors who had been recommended to them, Vernon Greenville would ask the other members of the committee what they thought of the man they went to hear in Bastrop, Louisiana. To which, Bob Moore asked, "Vernon, when you were on vacation, did you go to hear Johnny Sanders?" That day, they decided to come back to hear me again and stay and visit with Becky and me. I was amazed at how well they had been prepared, and how well they represented their church.

On our tour of the city, I commented on their preparation. Bob once again pointed to others. I will never forget his telling me how much he loved and admired Vernon. He said, "If God would call Vernon Greenville to preach, I would vote to call him as my pastor." This, coming from an ex-marine, with a no nonsense expression, revealed the heart of a servant. I will never forget the attitude of a man who, in honor, preferred another.

Waiting on tables is good, not bad. This was not beneath the apostles. It was, however, a serious distraction from the ministry to which they had been called. They might well have taken charge of this themselves, and if they had done so, the results can be calculated: (1) they might well have made a reputation for themselves; (2) **they might well have become the object of praise rather than persecution;** but (3) they would have neglected their first calling.

The Scripture is very clear on the importance of the preaching of the Gospel. Paul wrote to the Roman church, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17, NASB). The context in which we find this verse, clearly denotes the preaching of the Word of Christ. The Lord speaks to us through His Word when we read it, or hear it taught, but it is when the Word of God is preached that the Lord speaks in a special way to the hearts of those who hear it. Every experienced pastor has had people comment on what a sermon meant to them, and discovered that each person may mention something different that he or she got from the message. The pastor

who does not prayerfully and carefully prepare sermons, and call upon the Holy Spirit to make an application of the message in the hearts and lives of those who hear him, is going to fail the Lord and fail his people.

Some people today, especially in churches where the minister of music has become the worship leader, may well decide that when the music is over the worship is over. I even had a minister of music to tell me when the song service was over the worship was over. After that you have the sermon. I said, “Don’t tell me that if the pastor has prepared the sermon under the leadership of the Holy Spirit and delivered that message in the power of the Holy Spirit to people who are praying that the Lord will speak to them through that sermon that you cannot call that worship.” We worship in song and prayer, but it is specifically through the preaching of the Word of God that lost people are saved, and saved people grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:18).

6:3 - SELECT FROM AMONG YOU. *“Therefore, brothers, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom, whom we can appoint to this duty.”* The apostles exercised great wisdom and discretion in letting the people decide for themselves who would be put in charge of this ministry. They might have appointed someone, but they permitted the people to select those who would be put over this ministry. Instead of resenting those who brought the complaints, the apostles readily acknowledged the existence of a problem and the validity of the complaint. They acted graciously and quickly to correct the problem. Christian love is expressed, not in self-justification, but in self-abnegation.

Now that the Holy Spirit had come, the saints no longer had to depend upon the casting of lots in making decisions. The Holy Spirit would provide leadership.

OF GOOD REPUTATION, FULL OF THE SPIRIT AND WISDOM. These qualifications would be desirable in any leader elected to serve in any capacity in the local church, but they are essential in the office of deacon today. Today, the office of deacon is a very important one and while these seven men are not called deacons, the spiritual qualifications listed here are needed in those who serve as deacons.

APPOINT TO THIS DUTY. The people elected the servants who would be in charge of this ministry, and the apostles would appoint them. This is consistent with churches that subscribe to the autonomy of the local church today, in which members elect deacons according to Scriptural guidelines, and then ordained pastors and deacons ordain them in a special service.

I had the privilege of serving on the board of trustees for LifeWay Christian Resources when Dr. Jimmy Draper was president (I also served with Dr. Thom Rainer). At one meeting, Dr. Draper presented his carefully drawn up list of Baptist Essentials, which, he said, paralleled a similar list prepared by Dr. Morris Chapman. He stressed that this is the list of Baptist Essentials (there are many more Baptist distinctives). This list will be used in another volume in this series on the Book of Acts. Note that the autonomy of the local church is an “essential”:

- 1) Salvation by grace through faith, plus nothing.
- 2) The Lordship of Jesus Christ
- 3) Sufficiency of Scripture
- 4) **Autonomy of the Local Church**
- 5) Religious Liberty
- 6) Trinitarian view of God (One in essence, three in person)
- 7) The Great Commission

(Used with permission from Dr. Jimmy Draper)

6:4 - DEVOTE OURSELVES. *“But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the preaching ministry.”* The word “devote” not only implies commitment and dedication, it demands it. There is not a failure in our lives that is not a prayer failure. The disciples did not ask Jesus to teach them *how* to pray, they asked Him to teach them *to* pray. It is easy for a pastor to get so involved in his pastoral responsibilities that he feels that he has no time to pray. Every pastor understands the temptation to “wait on tables” instead of spending time in prayer. People see him when he is waiting on tables; they do not see him when he is in prayer, and may not be aware of it unless he calls attention to his “prayer life” himself.

PRAYER. The Apostles were united in prayer and in encouraging ministry to those in need. If the modern pastor is seen at events all over town, if he can be counted on to show up for every function in the church, if he spends a lot of time sitting with families at the hospital and funeral home, and if he attends all the birthday celebrations and other social events that involve his members, he will be praised. People want to see that, they encourage it, and expect it. He is criticized if he does not do those things. He is not criticized for not praying - as long as he promises to pray for Uncle Fred.

Prayer, we are clearly taught here must be a priority in ministry. The apostles had asked Jesus to teach them to pray. A fruitful prayer ministry demands certain things for the pastor: (1) love for God, (2) obedience to God, (3) love for others, (4) discipline, and (5) faith in the Lord. Stephen Olford used to say, “Faith is not believing God can do it; faith is believing God will do it.”

PREACHING MINISTRY. The sermon is central in worship, not a lecture tacked on to the end of an extended period of praise, songs, and drama. Today, with Power Point and TV, some pastor may well prepare for the service more carefully than pastors who do not have Power Point, and those who are not on TV. Those preachers may well prepare sermons better than their counterparts, and even practice them before the Sunday morning worship service. There are still pastors who may wait until Saturday night to prepare the sermon. Years ago, another pastor saw that I had the set of William Barclay commentaries on the NT, and said, “I see you have every pastor’s Saturday night friend.”

Any sermon worth preaching is worth prayer, research, and careful organization. Charles Roberts, pastor of Denmon Avenue Baptist Church, Lufkin, Texas, begins early Monday morning preparing his sermon for the following Sunday. By Thursday morning, he turns it over to someone to prepare the Power Point outline. There have been times when he has e-mailed me his outline and notes on

Thursday morning. He prepares his sermon the first part of the week. He prepares himself all week long.

Charles Roberts and I served for several years on the board of trustees for LifeWay Christian Resources, during which time we discovered that our paths had cross many times in the past without our knowing each other. We had many mutual friends. He had gone to seminary with my brother-in-law. Charles has a very busy ministry in a church where he has served as pastor for over thirty years. In the early days of that pastorate, he partnered with another pastor who had invited Charles Stanley to preach for him. When he had an opportunity to visit with Charles Stanley, he asked him a question about his pastoral ministry, and was surprised when Dr. Stanley replied, "Charles, I am not a pastor, I am a preacher." Charles Roberts said, "Then, you are not going to be any help me!" That was not a criticism of "America's Pastor", it was a recognition of the truth. Charles Stanley is committed to preaching, and few have ever done it better. Few pastors have ever had the opportunity to only be a preacher!

My wife Becky and I were in the Nashville hotel suit, reserved for us by LifeWay Christian Resources, early one Sunday morning in February, 2007, when she turned on the television and called me to tell me that Charles Stanley was preaching. I stopped and watched for some time. I have always love to hear Dr. Stanley, both in person and on TV. Suddenly, I thought of the contrast between Charles Stanley's preaching and that of some of the most popular preachers on TV today. I could see in my mind, a great auditorium filled with people waving their hands, shouting, swaying back and forth, and at times laughing as they are being entertained. One very popular preacher does not mention sin and its consequences, and he does not tell the people that God demands repentance. He says he just wants his people to feel good about themselves. For some time, I sat there listening to Charles Stanley, and watching as the cameras focused on the congregation. These worshipers were sitting there with Bibles open in their laps, many of them with pens held above a note pad, or a highlighter over their Bible. They were there to hear the Word of God proclaimed by one who places a premium on the preaching of the Word of God. These people were sitting there reverently expecting to be fed, and they were being fed.

I was sitting at a banquet table at a board of trustees meeting in Nashville several years ago when Tony Forehand, a pastor from Las Vegas, looked across the table at a man I did not know at the time, but had seen in meetings, and said, "Tell me what it is like to preach to all those people." To which, the man said, "Sometimes I don't." Tony asked him what he meant, and the man said, "When things are really going great I don't preach." I understood that he was saying that when the people were excited and participating in praise, he didn't want to interrupt them with a sermon. I would like to see him try to convince those apostles - or Jesus, for that matter - that this is scriptural. Many immature worshipers would love to come to church feeling good in the knowledge that they will leave feeling great, and no one is going to confront them with their sin, or share God's demand for repentance. They may not know what their greatest needs are, but the pastor must never forget it.

6:5 - THE PROPOSAL. *"The proposal pleased the whole company. So they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte from Antioch."* The first thing we might note here is that all seven of these

Spirit filled men have Hellenistic names. If there had been a power play in that early church, the Palestinian Jews would have won in any election. The decision made under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, was an unselfish, practical decision that no doubt prevented further complaints. The Hellenistic widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. Who better to place over this ministry to be sure that this neglect was corrected?

The proposal “pleased the whole company.” At this point the fellowship of believers had not yet been called Christians, nor had they been identified as a church.

Were these men the first deacons? Actually, it was nearly 200 years before the church fathers began to identify the election of these seven men with the office described in the epistles as the “diakonate” (See 1 Tim. 3:8-13).

STEPHEN. His name means “crown” and he was the first believer to wear the martyr’s crown. Like all the others, his is a Greek name. Neither the apostles nor the membership could be accused of impartiality. Stephen would become an example to all believers in Jerusalem, and until Jesus returns, his name will stand as an example of one who really took up his cross and followed Jesus.

FULL OF FAITH. All seven men were men of faith, filled with the Holy Spirit, but Stephen was distinguished from the others by his deep faith. He was also filled with the Holy Spirit, which must have accounted for his deep faith.

6:6 - LAID HANDS ON THEM. *“They had them stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.”* The Book of Acts is the book of history in the NT, and we would do well to reflect upon any new step taken by the church in its embryonic state. In this case, (1) there arose a need, (2) the apostles referred it to the congregation, (3) they elected servants to oversee this ministry, (4) the apostles prayed, and (5) they laid their hands on the seven. In time this would become the pattern for the election and ordination of deacons. Prayer also precedes the laying on of hands in 13:8, just as it precedes the election of Matthias in 1:24 as a replacement for Judas.

Deacons today should be filled with faith and the Holy Spirit. They should meet the scriptural qualifications the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to detail in his First Epistle to Timothy. The church should elect deacons based on spiritual and scriptural qualifications, not politics, family affiliation, social class, or wealth. The ordained minister and deacons who examine them should only recommend their ordination if they are convinced that they meet those qualifications. The deacon should never forget why he was elected in the first place. He was elected to serve; not to govern, to lead under the leadership of the Holy Spirit and the guidelines of the church. Some of the most humble, caring, gentle, and gifted one will find in a local church are deacons. Unfortunately, that cannot be said of all deacons.

6:7 - THE PREACHING. *“So the preaching about God flourished, the number of the disciples in Jerusalem multiplied greatly, and a large group of priests became obedient to the faith.”* When preaching about God flourishes, the number of disciples can always be expected to multiply. Here

we have another of those progress reports we have come to expect in Acts. First, new believers were added to the church. In time, the number of saints was multiplied, and in this progress report, the number of disciples “multiplied greatly.” These summary progress reports about the spiritual health and well being of the church related as much to things to come in the life of the church as much as to one which has transpired. “Such statements not only imply that a crisis has been weathered recently but also seem to say that the church is ready for the next even to come” [HLE: 69].

GREAT COMPANY OF PRIESTS. The imperfect tense implies continued conversions. Many priests were Sadducees but these priests may have been Pharisees. The Sadducees were a small but powerful sect and they bitterly opposed Jesus and His followers. As a whole, the priests were strong opponents of Jesus, but now “a great company” of these former enemies of Christ are being converted. Nothing could speak more clearly of the power of the Gospel.

“The glory of the Lord seemed more evident upon the disciples than upon the leaders of the temple. The priests now realized that their ritual and ceremony kept them in an eddy of the stream of spiritual history. The action was with the followers of Christ. Why special mention of priests? Two reasons: they would be the last to break with the ranks of Jewry. Their sacrifices would be greater since they would lose their status and would feel fullest weight of hatred against Christians” [HLE: 69].

LIFE APPLICATION

Progress reports, official or unofficial, help us maintain our focus and motivate us to continue to witness for our Lord. I have often said that we had overnight success in an early pastorate. We had unbelievable numbers coming into the church, mostly on profession of faith but some by transfer of membership. I quickly added that our overnight success followed six years of prayer, intense visitation, soul winning clinics, and a city-wide survey in which we looked for prospects.

The “overnight success” began one morning when a man called to tell me he and his wife needed help. He asked, “Will you talk with us about God?” Before long someone from another church said, “You are reaching people every other church in town has given up on.” My work did not produce the growth. My plans did not save anyone. What we saw was a manifestation of the power of God.

This early fellowship of believers were witnessing the power of the Holy Spirit in many different ways. Thanks to these progress reports, we can follow the growth of the early church through the first part of Acts.

“Luke provides six summary statements which highlight the progress of the gospel and Christian mission (Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31). Each of these verses concludes a section of material, and they can be used as helpful devices in subdividing the book and charting the advance of the word of God” [BSB].

Stephen Accused of Blasphemy

6:8 - STEPHEN, FULL OF GRACE AND POWER. *“Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.”* There were seven who were elected to supervise the daily distribution of food to those in need, but Stephen was a special instrument in the spread of the Gospel, and one would assume that he was especially successful in spreading the Gospel among the foreign Jews present in Jerusalem. He was also the one whose witness launched an intense period of persecution, which in turn led to a great dispersion of Jewish believers. This kind of power is a thing of beauty. Walker observes that the order of the two words is important [Walker: 145]. One should not seek the power without the grace.

WONDERS AND SIGNS. “Wonders” denotes miraculous manifestations of the power of God, and “signs” were miraculous deeds that underscored divine truth. The imperfect tense shows that he continued doing great wonders and signs. Stephen performed these wonders and signs because he was “full of grace and power” - the source of which was the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

6:9 - DISPUTED WITH STEPHEN. *“Then some from what is called the Freedmen’s Synagogue, composed of both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, and some from Cilicia and Asia, came forward and disputed with Stephen.”* The “Freedmen” were apparently freed slaves or their descendants.

“Apparently there were divisions in the Jewish community resulting in at least three synagogues: one for the Cyrenians and Alexandrians, one for those who had come from Cilicia and Asia, and one simply for the freedmen from any region. Some may have endured slavery in Italy, in Sardinia, or elsewhere. Once freed, they sought refuge in Jerusalem and had at least one synagogue there. A rabbinic tradition stated that there were at least 480 synagogues in Jerusalem” [BSB].

SYNAGOGUE. A synagogue (gathering, together) was the place where Jewish communities assembled for the reading of the Scripture and for public worship. Only ten Jewish men were required to establish a synagogue and any number could be found in a city. Pompey had carried a large number of Jews to Rome and sold them as slaves in 63 B. C. Many of them later gained their freedom, and enough of them returned to Jerusalem that they had their own synagogue. By this time, their membership included freedmen from other places, such as those from Asia and northern Africa.

To expand the note above from the Believer’s Study Bible, we may note that “Cyrenians” denotes a colony in Cyrene, a city in Africa. A good number of Cyrenians were now living in Jerusalem. “Alexandrians” here are representatives from the city of Alexandria in Egypt. The principal city in “Cilicia” was Tarsus, the hometown of Saul. Asia is the Roman province of Asia. Thus, we have five different groups of freedmen living in Jerusalem, representing Europe, Africa, and Asia Minor (if we include Rome). Apparently, Stephen, a foreign Jew, reached out to each group.

DISPUTED. In 9:29, the same word is used of Paul after his conversion when he confronted Hellenistic Jews. Stephen may well have been invited to speak in the synagogue. These people

would have agreed with him as long as he talked about the OT Scriptures, but when he identified Jesus as the Messiah, they opposed him vehemently.

It is interesting that the primary opposition to Stephen came, not from Palestinian Jews, but from non-Palestinian Jews (mostly from northern Africa). When Paul returned from his third missionary, the great riot that was incited was begun by Hellenistic Jews from Asia Minor.

6:10 - UNABLE TO STAND. *“But they were unable to stand up against the wisdom and the Spirit by whom he spoke.”* There might have been a number of reasons that they could not stand up against the wisdom of Stephen, and the Scripture provides the number one reason: “The Spirit by whom he spoke.” The usual reasons that a group of people might not be able to stand up against one person might have to do with his training in logic or philosophy, their ignorance of debating skills, or to his preparation for he debate through the teachings of he apostles.

6:11 - THEY INDUCED MEN. *“Then they induced men to say, “We heard him speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God!”* False witnesses were apparently bribed to testify against Stephen. We are reminded of the effort of Caiaphas to find false witnesses to testify against Jesus.

6:12 - STIRRED UP THE PEOPLE. *“They stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; so they came up, dragged him off, and took him to the Sanhedrin.”* The leaders of the Freedmen’s synagogue now use the same methods against Stephen that the enemies of Jesus had used against Him. Considering their apparent success, it is not surprising that they would attempt to stir up these people against the apostles.

We see a distinct change in the attitude of the people here. Previously, only the leaders were persecuting the disciples. Now, the members of the Freedmen’s synagogue are stirring up the people, the elders, and the scribes against them. The results were that the people “came up”, or rushed upon Stephen, and dragged him off to the Sanhedrin. The word translated “dragged” implies excessive violence. They seized him and dragged him long violently.

6:13 - FALSE WITNESSES. *“They also presented false witnesses who said, “This man does not stop speaking blasphemous words against this holy place and the law.”* They had learned well from Caiaphas and now they use the same methods against Stephen that he had used against Jesus. They either brought in witnesses who were perverting Stephen’s message that Jesus is the Messiah, or they were lying outright, or both.

6:14 - WE HEARD HIM SAY. *“For we heard him say that Jesus, this Nazarene, will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us.”* The world hates Jesus, and no one in the world hates Jesus more that religious people who reject Him as the Son of God. Not only does the world hate Him, the world’s religions hate Him. Christianity is not a religion in which people either try to do things to appease an angry god or to claim the attention of a benevolent god who is neither omniscient nor omnipresent. We are saved, not because we have “found” God, but

because Jesus came to seek and save the lost. Robertson summarizes:

“Curiously like the charge brought against Jesus before Caiaphas that he would destroy the temple and build it again in three days. Undoubtedly Stephen had said something about Christianity before as meant for others besides Jews. He had caught the spirit of Jesus about worship as shown to the woman at Sychar in John 4:1-42 that God is spirit and to be worshipped by men anywhere and everywhere without having to come to the temple in Jerusalem. It was inflammable material surely and it was easy to misrepresent and hard to clear up” [ATR]

THIS NAZARENE. There are two specific charges which are brought against Stephen: (1) He taught that Jesus, “this Nazarene”, will (1) destroy the temple (the same charge brought against Jesus, and (2) that Jesus came to change the customs of Moses. These religious Jews in Jerusalem reacted with hate and violence against Stephen because He dared to identify Jesus as the Messiah. He was attacked by people who sought to honor God. They knew the hot button issues, just as surely as Muslim clerics today know how to incite a riot throughout the Islamic world over a cartoon that appeared in a newspaper in Denmark.

To picture the angry mob scene, all one has to do is picture some of the scenes of riots in Iran, or among the Palestinians we see on television. Some Muslim cleric, on a moment’s notice, can fill the streets with young fanatical men who cry for the destruction of Israel and America. It would also be good to contrast those demonstrations with the attitude in Israel today - to be fair and honest. In a recent report, someone reporter stated that the Palestinians have desecrated headstones in a Jewish cemetery in Jerusalem. Across from that cemetery is a Palestinian cemetery which the Jews have never desecrated. The Palestinians have often attacked Israel from a hospital, orphanage, or school, which would force the Israelis to kill innocent children or sick people in order to reach them. Israel, as far as the reports go, does not do anything like that.

6:15 - HIS FACE. *“And all who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at him and saw that his face was like the face of an angel.”* Stephen was standing alone before the Sanhedrin, just as Jesus had. They were looking “intently at him” when his face began to take on the appearance of an angel, which may well mean that it took on some kind of glow. The glory of God was reflected on his face. Tennyson is quoted as saying, “God’s glory smote him on the face.”

This was a special time and there is no reason we should expect many of the phenomenal signs of that time to be repeated today. Interestingly, some of the signs and wonders can be counterfeited today, but I have never heard of anyone who had counterfeited the manifestation of glory on one’s face.

CHAPTER 7

Stephen Addresses the Sanhedrin

7:1 - IS IT TRUE. *“Is this true?” the high priest asked.*” The high priest at this time may well have been Caiaphas, the same high priest who tried Jesus. Here, he was asking, how do you plead, guilty or not guilty? That he was facing martyrdom he had to know. That his name would be honored as the first Christian Martyr two thousand years later he could hardly have imagined.

Stephen has been falsely accused of speaking against the sacred Law and the holy Temple. They had specifically charged him with changing the customs which Moses had delivered, which could apply to any part, or the whole of the Law. He could not simply answer yes or no, because there was an element of truth in the charges, as well as a large mixture of error mixed in with it. The method he elected to use in his defense of his message was the one Paul would adopt later when he addressed the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16ff). He reviewed the history of the Law and the Prophets to show that they both pointed to Jesus as the long awaited Messiah. Their history, and their theology supported this claim and they should have known it. Those who rejected it would pay for it for eternity.

7:2 - THE GOD OF GLORY. *“Brothers and fathers,” he said, “listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he settled in Haran...”* In Stephen’s defense he made every effort to relate Hebrew history (Law and the prophets) and hope to Jesus Christ. He had only a brief time for his defense and he was determined to make the most of it. It is possible that it had occurred to him that they planned to kill him when he finished, but we cannot be certain about that because he would be the first. Regardless of the consequences, he was going to make the most of his opportunity. He was surely aware of what it would mean if he could persuade these leaders of Judaism to trust in Jesus. They may have been able to have convinced the masses to follow Him.

“This is the longest recorded message in Acts, which shows the importance Luke attached to it. Stephen, a Grecian Jew, by his life and words prepared the way for the gospel to reach outside the pale of Judaism.” [BKC]. Stephen began with the address one would have expected before this prestigious and intimidating court. It shows that he identifies with them a fellow Jew, and that he submits to the members of the Sanhedrin as esteemed fathers of Israel.

“The God of glory” is “a magnificent appellation, fitted at the very outset to gain the attention of his audience; denoting not that visible glory that attended many of the divine manifestations, but the glory of those manifestations themselves, of which this was regarded by every Jew as the fundamental one. It is the glory of absolutely free grace” [NCWB].

OUR FATHER ABRAHAM. There was no better way to be sure the Sanhedrin would hear him out than to totally identify with what they believed about the call of Abraham. He was determined to show these leaders that those who really honored the covenant God made with Abraham would accept Jesus, the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. They were in for a surprise, but we can be sure that these Jerusalem Jews knew the story well, and may have been impressed that this Hellenistic Jew had been trained so well in the Scriptures. The Believer's Study Bible Notes holds that Stephen knew their history:

“This lengthy section comprises Stephen’s speech. Though some have accused Stephen of numerous historical inaccuracies, a careful study of the speech in light of the background of the first century will reveal Stephen to be a marvelous student of Hebrew history and a gifted theologian” [BSB].

It would be interesting to know why Stephen began his speech before the Sanhedrin with the title, “the God of glory”, but there is no question that he knew exactly where to begin the speech, if he wanted to be heard. He began with Abraham, the Father of the Faithful, whom God had called two thousand years earlier to leave Mesopotamia (Ur of the Chaldees) and go to a promised land. Mesopotamia was the home of Abraham’s ancestors in and around the Tigris-Euphrates River Valley. The late Hebrew scholar, Dr. Leo Eddleman, notes that “meso” means “in the midst”, and “potamia” means “river” or rivers [HLE: 73].

The first leg of the journey took Abraham, his family, and servants to Haran, where his father Terah died. Haran (meaning “caravan route”) was also the name of Abraham’s brother (Terah’s son, Lot’s father). When Abraham was called to move on to the Promised Land, some family members stayed there (Jacob would return to Haran to visit his uncle Laban, and to marry Rebekah, Gen 27-28).

7:3 - COME TO THE LAND. *“And said to him: Get out of your country and away from your relatives, and come to the land that I will show you.”* Abraham had left Ur and traveled to Haran, where he stayed until God called him a second time and told him it was time to move out of this area with its richness and relative comfort east of the vast hot and unforgiving Arabian desert. In other words, it was time to get out of their comfort zone. The story of the call of Abram to leave his home in Ur of the Chaldees and go to a promised land is found in Genesis 12. God changed his name from Abram (Exalted Father) to Abraham (Father of a Multitude). The members of the Sanhedrin had known the story from their childhood, and they could not have thought of that without thinking of the Abrahamic Covenant, which involved (1) The land, (2) many descendants, (3) blessings, and (4) the Seed of Abraham whom God would send to bless all nations. So far, so good. They are with Stephen up to this point.

7:4 - TO THIS LAND. *“Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. And from there, after his father died, God had him move to this land in which you now live.”* He had called them to leave Ur, but when they reached Haran they stayed there, possibly because of Terah’s age or health. The Lord called Abraham to leave Haran and continue his journey “to the land that I will show you.” This call, and the covenant linked with it are specific, not general. The

Lord was leading them to one specific place, and no other would do.

HARAN. Haran is west of Mesopotamia and Chaldea is in the east, beginning at the northeast end of the Persian Gulf, far to the east of Palestine. Ur is in the southern part of Chaldea. Abraham came from the east and along the way his father died in Haran. “From the time of the events recorded in Genesis 12:1-3 (about 1950 B.C.), the patriarchs and their descendants regarded the Promised Land as much an entity of the covenant as any other aspect thereof” [HLE: 74].

It is easy to see that the Jews throughout their history have often held the concept that the Covenant; the promise of the Land, the promise of innumerable descendants, and promise of a blessing to all nations through the Seed of Abraham was something of a unitary triad. The Patriarchs, beginning with Abraham and continuing through Isaac, Jacob, the twelve patriarchs, and their descendants have always regarded Canaan as their ultimate destination. Even though the Jews were without a homeland for almost two thousand years, but they never lost sight of the promise of a homeland until Jews began returning to Palestine following the Second World War.

7:5 - HE PROMISED. *“He didn’t give him an inheritance in it, not even a foot of ground, but He promised to give it to him as a possession, and to his descendants after him, even though he was childless.”* God had promised Abraham the land and he had accepted God’s gift, even though he never had a title to any of the land. The Jewish leaders to whom Stephen spoke that day knew the promise, and the accepted that part of it that pleased them, and rejected what did not serve their purpose. First. “The Lord said to Abram: Go out from your land, your relatives, and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen.12:1. Then, He promised three promises concerning the Chosen People (Gen. 12:2):

- 1) “I will make you into a great nation,”
- 2) “I will bless you,”
- 2) “I will make your name great, and”
- 4) “You will be a blessing.”

Next, Yahweh made promises that included all other nations: “**I will bless those who bless you, I will curse those who treat you with contempt**, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:1-3). No matter how one interprets this covenant with reference to the nations of the world, there is still no mention of America - or is there? Why has America been blessed above all the nations of the world? Where does America fall in God’s promise? The answer seems obvious: “I will bless those who bless you...” No nation has ever been more supportive of Israel than America and no nation has ever been a better friend to Israel. It may not be politically expedient to support Israel, but many Christians believe is it the right thing to do. The Abrahamic Covenant also focuses on the nations that tread Israel “with contempt”. They will be cursed by the Lord. When the president of Iran calls for the total destruction of Israel he is placing his nation under that curse.

Abraham never settled permanently on any of the land, but he knew that the land would one day belong to his descendants. Abraham had left the Mesopotamia and moved to a narrow strip of land between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea around 2000 B.C. One thousand years later,

David established a nation that reached from the Mediterranean Sea to the Euphrates River. One thousand years later, when Stephen stood before the Sanhedrin, they owned no land at all. They had been conquered by Rome. The members of the Sanhedrin knew the story about the promise God made to a childless couple, just as they knew the story of the miraculous birth of Isaac, through whom they traced their family tree back to Abraham.

CHILDLISS. This part of the promise was a challenge to Abraham's faith, but he still believed every aspect of the covenant, leaving the fulfillment of every aspect to Yahweh. It is necessary to keep in mind all aspects of the original promise in order to understand the nature of the promise regarding the Messiah and Christianity, as well as the intense nationalism of the Jews to this day. This nationalism reached its zenith in the First Century, and then again in the past century. Hebrews 11 amplifies the significance of Abraham's faith, as well as the blessings that resulted from it.

7:6 - HIS DESCENDANTS. *"God spoke in this way: His descendants would be aliens in a foreign country, and they would enslave and oppress them for 400 years."* Of all the nations descended from Abraham, including all the Arab nations that descended from Ishmael, the nation to which Stephen refers is the one nation that traces their lineage from Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob. That nation is Israel.

God is absolutely sovereign in his dealings with individuals and nations, but there is more here. Just as Yahweh was not surprised by Adam's sin, He was not surprised by the slavery of the Israelites in Egypt. He was not even surprised that they would be there 400 years. He was not only not surprised by the Fall, He already had the solution in place. His solution was Jesus, "...the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

ENSLAVE AND OPPRESS. Students of the OT are well aware of the fact that the descendants of Abraham were blessed with the most productive land imaginable, as Joseph secured for them the Land of Goshen in the northeast sector of the Nile Delta. It was occupied by the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel) from the time of Joseph until the Exodus. It was only during the latter part of that 430 year period that they were oppressed, but that oppression was so long and so severe that there was little memory of the longer period of prosperity when they descendants of Jacob multiplied (from 75 to 2,000,000) in number. They were enslaved and oppressed before the birth of Moses, during the first 40 years of his life, during the second 40 years while he an exile in Midian, and for a brief time after his return. Few, if any people would have remembered what life was like in Goshen before the current Pharaoh arose who did not recognize the covenant an earlier Pharaoh had made with Joseph.

ALIENS IN A FOREIGN COUNTRY. Robertson identifies these "aliens" as people "dwelling near one's home, but not of it, so a stranger, foreigner, old word, often in LXX, temporary residence without full rights of citizenship (Acts 7:29; Acts 13:17), and descriptive of Christians (Eph 2:19; 1Pe 1:17; 1Pe 2:11)" [ATR]. All students of the OT know the country to which he refers is Egypt. Some scholars point out inconsistencies between the Genesis account and Stephen's account, and part of the reason is that Stephen says they were enslaved and oppressed for 400 years, whereas Paul

give the length of the stay in Egypt as 430 years. What is the solution to this seeming contradiction? Stated simply, Stephen round it off, dropping the 30 years. According to Adam Clarke's Commentary, this should not be a problem:

“MOSES says, Exodus 12:40, that the sojourning of the children of Israel in Egypt-was 430 years... St. PAUL has the same number, Galatians 3:17; and so has Josephus, Ant. lib. ii. cap. 1, sect. 9; in Bell. lib. v. cap. 9, sect. 4. St. Stephen uses the round number of 400, leaving out the odd tens, a thing very common, not only in the sacred writers, but in all others, those alone excepted who write professedly on chronological matters [*Adam Clarke's Commentary*, *The Bible Navigator*, LifeWay Christian Resources - after this CLARKE].

One slight correction is in order: it was the Lord who first stated that they would be in this nation 400 years, not Stephen. Paul states that the duration of their time in Egypt was 430 years (Gal. 3:17).

7:7 - I WILL JUDGE. *“I will judge the nation that they will serve as slaves, God said. After this, they will come out and worship Me in this place.”* This combines “the promise given to Abraham (Gen. 15:16) with that given to Moses (Exod. 3:12), thus rapidly summarizing the facts” [NCWB]. Neither the 430 year “sojourn” in Egypt nor the intense persecution was a surprise to the Lord, who promised both. The word translated “judge” may mean to try one, to pronounce a sentence, or to execute the sentence. The question might be asked, “Why would God want to judge these innocent victims of this vile oppression?” The Bible does not spell out a specific answer, but it should be remembered that no one is innocent before God, and no one is without sin. Perhaps the problem was that they were comfortable and would never have made the move back to Canaan unless they were forced to do so. It took severe oppression to get the people to call on the Lord for His deliverance. If the judgment of the Hebrews seems harsh, remember that the judgment of the Egyptians was much more severe, as Isaiah 19:1-7 reveals.

WORSHIP ME. This is prophetic of the Exodus and the Conquest of Canaan. Stephen is recalling Exodus 3:12 and “referring to Sinai or Horeb, but Stephen applies it to the Promised Land” [ATR]. Abraham’s descendants would go down into Egypt for an incubation period of 400 years, during which they would grow into a significant force before the Egyptians imposed their version of population control on them. Then, God would lead them out, and bring the back to “this place” (Judea).

7:8 - COVENANT OF CIRCUMCISION. *“Then He gave him the covenant of circumcision. This being so, he fathered Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; Isaac did the same with Jacob, and Jacob with the 12 patriarchs.”* The Jews have placed great emphasis on circumcision as the seal of God’s covenant with Abraham. It was the sign that God would honor the promise made to Abraham in the covenant (Gen. 7:10; 21:4). According to the Holman Bible Dictionary, In ancient Israel circumcision

“was ritually performed on the eighth day after birth upon children of natives, servants, and aliens (Lev. 9:3). Circumcision was carried out by the father initially,

utilizing a flint knife (compare Josh. 5:3). Later specialists were employed among the Jewish people” [HBD].

Circumcision was not limited to the sons of Israel. There are many theories as to the origin and purpose in circumcision: “(1) initiatory rite—before marriage (as the Shechemites in Gen. 34:14-24) or at puberty; (2) physical hygiene—to prevent the attraction or transmission of diseases; (3) tribal mark of distinction; (4) rite of entry into the community of faith” [HBD].

Various Semitic and non-Semitic peoples practiced circumcision according to biblical and other sources.

“Jeremiah depicts Egyptians, Edomites, Ammonites, Moabites, and the desert-dwelling Arabians as circumcised peoples (Jer. 9:25-26; compare Ezek. 32:17-32). On the other hand Philistines, Assyrians, and Babylonians are counted among the uncircumcised. That the Canaanites are not mentioned in either regard is noteworthy. Evidence of their perspective of circumcision is lacking.” [HBD].

The circumcision of Abraham and all the males who accompanied him followed the repetition of the promise, a part of which concerned the land (Promised Land) (Gen. 15) and Abraham’s descendants (Gen. 17). Isaac, Ishmael, and male members of the twelve patriarchs were circumcised (Gen. 17:23-27).

“Moses’ circumcision took place only immediately prior to his confrontation with the Pharaoh (Ex. 4:24-26). The tie between land and circumcision in the covenant is reflected in the purification of Israelites at Gilgal following the entry of Israel into the Promised Land (Josh. 5:2-9). Passover was limited to those who had been circumcised (Ex. 12:48; Josh. 5:10-11) [HBD].

Moral and spiritual implications of circumcision may be observed in the metaphorical usage of the term in both the OT and the NT. The uncircumcised are those who do not follow the Lord with their whole heart. “Circumcision of the heart implies total devotion to God (Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4); however, the uncircumcised ear cannot hear so as to respond to the Lord (Jer. 6:10); and the uncircumcised of lips cannot speak (Ex. 6:12). Circumcision was therefore an external sign of an internal singularity of devotion of Yahweh” [HBD].

THE 12 PATRIARCHS. Members of the Sanhedrin may well have been nodding as Stephen mentions their ancestors, the 12 sons of Jacob (one who follows after to trip up, a trickster), whose name was changed to Israel (prince with Elohim).

7:9 - JOSEPH. “*The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt, but God was with him...*” The brothers of Joseph burned with jealousy and envy toward Joseph, until he presented them with an opportunity to kill him. Reuben interceded to save his life, but while he was away from the group, they sold him to someone in a Midianite trading caravan on their way to Egypt. The Midianites sold him, no doubt for a profit when they reached Egypt.

BUT GOD WAS WITH HIM. The religious leaders are still with Stephen at this point. In fact, in their minds they are probably running ahead of him to count the ways in which God was with Joseph, from the time of the conception of the plan to murder him, to the rescue by Reuben and their selling him into slavery, to his placement in the home of Potipher, to the trap by Potipher's wife which led to his imprisonment, to the deliverance, and his miraculous elevation to power. Stephen knew that they knew this better than he, but he also knew he could hold their attention by reviewing their history.

LIFE APPLICATION

“What a waste! I want what I want and I want it right now!” When my mother read my mind, she often counseled me to “Wait on the Lord.” That is not what I had in mind. When I got what I wanted, then I would wait on the Lord! That attitude may have become more pronounced with the “Me Generation”, with commercials proclaiming, “You owe it to yourself”, or “You deserve it.”

This attitude is one factor in the failure of a lot of Americans to support the war against terrorism, especially when it relates to Iraq. As a number of commentators have diagnosed, we are used to seeing a war launched, won, and peace restored in a two hour movie. America had better wake up to the evil that is Islam, and their commitment to take the world in the name of Mohammed's pagan god. They have waited, planned, and plotted. Now, Islam is spreading across the countries that made up the old Soviet Union, across Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia, and now they are making their move on America. They do not hide their plans to destroy Israel and kill both Jews and those who defend Israel.

America needs to learn the lesson spelled out in the OT as to God's timing. One may read of the call of Abraham and covenant God made with him and declare, “What a waste.” Why wait until he is nearly one hundred years old to bless him with a son? Why wait until he was too old to enjoy it before leading him to the Land of Promise? Even worse, what a waste to send the patriarchs and their families into Egypt where they would seem to be lost to God' plan, and oblivious to His purpose for 430 years.

What a waste! If Moses was going to lead the Children of Israel out of Egypt, he should have been ready at the end of the first 40 years, right? But 40 years in the wilderness of Midian? Doing what? Following sheep instead of leading the flock out of Egypt!

In this day when people seek instant gratification, we do not want to wait for anything. We want to see results. We want action - unless you mention creation, and then the world demands billions of years. You talk about efficiency, that is special creation, as revealed in Genesis. To have taken millions or billions of years would have been the most inefficient action in the history of the universe. For those who do not believe God could create all things in six twenty four hour days, I would suggest that they consider spelling their God with a small “g”. I spell God with a big “G”! Why take so long? It served God's purpose, His sovereign will. His ways are not our ways and His

thoughts are not our thoughts. His plans are not our plans and His time is not our time. In fact, He says,

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways.” This is the Lord’s declaration. For as heaven is higher than earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8-9).

There is more: “A day with the Lord is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day.” Finite man cannot possibly comprehend the strategies, motives, and decisions of the infinite God. Why did it take two thousand years for God to fulfill His promise of the Messiah? It served His purpose. Why have we waited two thousand years for the return of our Lord? It serves His purpose. We understand it in part today, we will understand it fully when we are glorified. For now, we should celebrate that fact that “He has let us in on what he is up to”.

7:10 - RESCUED HIM. *“And rescued him out of all his troubles. He gave him favor and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who appointed him governor over Egypt and over his whole household.”* Stephen summarizes a number of years in two sentences. God rescued Joseph from prison, scandal, and before that, from death itself.

Joseph is one of the pivotal characters in the OT and in the history of Israel. He was the tool with which he delivered Jacob and the patriarchs from famine, and possibly from death. Joseph was “rescued” so that God could use him to rescue the People of the Covenant. He was a deliverer, but he was more than that.

Joseph is seen as a “prototype” of Christ. Numerous parallels can be clearly seen. The patriarchs, whom they would address as “our fathers”, rejected Joseph and sold him into slavery. They made every effort to place him as far from them as possible. They sought to destroy him, but God restored him and gave him a position which enabled him to save those who had sold him into slavery. Peter had accused this same body with killing Jesus, whom God raised from the dead.

Joseph made himself known to his people and identified with them. Jesus “came unto His own, and His own received Him not” (John 1). They rejected Him and delivered Him into the hands of foreigners and demanded His death. They rejoiced in His death, but God raised Him up and this same Jesus offered salvation to them. He still offers salvation to all who go to Him in faith.

There are few stories in the history of mankind like as compelling as that of the selling of Joseph into slavery by his own brothers, and his restoration by God to a position of prominence which enabled him to save his family. His love for his brothers who has sold him is almost without equal in human history. However, Jesus’ love was greater and His deliverance for believers is far greater - **eternal life**. God provided the family of Jacob (Israel) with a deliverer in Joseph. He also sent His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

We have sinned by rebelling against God’s Son but He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and

cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). As God sent His servant Joseph to save the Children of Israel, He sent His only begotten Son to save us.

Joseph's enslavement, temptations, imprisonment, and subsequent rise to authority in Egypt will hardly find a parallel in history. Though familiar to all the members of the Sanhedrin, the story was bound to attract their sympathy and "Stephen wanted to lead them from these thoughts to the conclusion that Christ is the climax of Hebrew history and fulfillment of prophecy" [HLE: 75].

7:11 - A FAMINE. *"Then a famine came over all of Egypt and Canaan, with great suffering, and our forefathers could find no food."* God not only works through the good things that happen in life, but also through natural disasters (Hurricanes, earthquakes, tidal waves), through droughts and floods that destroy crops and cause hunger and starvation, through war, and through epidemics like polio, influenza, and the bubonic plague. The times of great suffering are times when many people turn to the Lord.

7:12 - WHEN JACOB HEARD. *"When Jacob heard there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers the first time."* There was grain in Egypt, not by accident, and not because the Egyptians were blessed by their gods, or because they were wiser or luckier than other nations, but by the providence of God. The question is, how did Jacob hear about the grain in Egypt? A better question might be, what force on earth could have kept him from hearing about it! He may well have heard about it from some of the caravans that traveled between Egypt and Mesopotamia. It would be interesting to imagine that some of the same caravan drivers who had bought Joseph from his brothers and sold him to Potiphar had brought word that there was grain in Egypt. While that is not very likely, it would not have been impossible. If they had been the ones who had bought and sold Joseph they may have recognized these shepherds.

7:13 - JOSEPH WAS REVEALED. *"The second time, Joseph was revealed to his brothers, and Joseph's family became known to Pharaoh."* The members of the Sanhedrin knew the story of the journey of his brothers to Egypt when they found themselves at his mercy, his test of his brothers, and their return at which time he revealed himself to them. They are still with Stephen at this point.

FAMILY. Dr. Gene Jeffries, President of Cambridge Graduate School, was aware of my friendship with Dr. Leo Eddleman, so when he came across a web site that carried an article about Baptists in the Holy Land, he scrolled down and found a note about Leo Eddleman, who was remembered for his mastery of both Hebrew and Arabic. He sent forwarded the article to me. What the article did not state, possibly because there was no one around who would know this, was that Dr. Eddleman went to the Holy Land with a very good working knowledge of Hebrew, as well as an academic knowledge of the language. However, he knew no Arabic at all. He told me he "found an Arab who didn't know a word of English and persuaded him to teach him Arabic. In six months," he said, "I was preaching to Arabs in Arabic."

Dr. Eddleman told me personally that he wrote his commentary on Acts because of the errors made by a well known NT scholar whose purpose seemed to have been to promote racial harmony. The

liberal professor's purpose was noble, but he forced certain points. For example, that respected scholar made every effort to show how the Gospel overcame all barriers, and when he came to the story of the spread of the Gospel to Samaria he claimed that it showed the Gospel overcoming the racial barrier. Dr. Eddleman, who had been a highly respected missionary because of his mastery of both the Hebrew and Arabic, assured me that if you had stood a Jew and a Samaritan side by side and dressed them alike you could not have told them apart. The Gospel did, and does overcome racial barriers, but that was not the issue in reaching out to the Samaritans. The issue there was a religious bias, not a racial bias. They were all descendants of Shem.

The word used here (*genos*, from which we get the words, gynecology and genetics) denotes family, not race. Joseph identified himself to this family, and then he identifies himself with his family before Pharaoh.

7:14 - JOSEPH. *“Joseph then invited his father Jacob and all his relatives, 75 people in all...”* In Genesis 46:27, the number is given as 70, but the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, brings the number to 75 by adding Joseph's family (including sons Manasseh and Ephraim). Abraham's seed increased from 75 to about 2,000,000 during the “incubation period” of their history in Egypt.

7:15 - JACOB WENT DOWN. *“And Jacob went down to Egypt. He and our forefathers died there...”* God used Joseph to prepare a place for his father, his brothers and their families. He provided food for them and secured a fertile delta where his family prospered. In time, Jacob and all his sons died in Egypt. The Pharisees and Sadducees would not miss his identification with them in the reference to “our forefathers”.

7:16 - CARRIED BACK. *“...Were carried back to Shechem, and were placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought for a sum of silver from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.”* Jacob was buried in the Cave of Macpelah (Genesis 50:13). Joseph was buried in Shechem (Joshua 24:23). The land was dear to the hearts of the patriarchs, as it was to the members of the Sanhedrin. The mention of the burial of Jacob at Shechem affirms their deep seated conviction that this land was an essential part of the covenant.

Moses Is Sent to Deliver Israel from Slavery

7:17 - THE TIME. *“As the time was drawing near to fulfill the promise that God had made to Abraham, the people flourished and multiplied in Egypt...”* The time toward which God was working was drawing near. Long before God called Abraham, He knew that he would give the Chosen People the Land of Promise, but before they would possess that land they would live in a foreign land for over 400 years.

FLOURISHED AND MULTIPLIED. This was the incubation period for His people. Canaanites lived in the land and controlled it, and if the Children of Israel had tried to take the land

when there were only 70 of them they could easily have been exterminated. Now, they would return as a nation two million strong, including a significant army, led by possibly the greatest general who had ever lived up until that time.

7:18 - A NEW KING. “...Until a different king ruled over Egypt who did not know Joseph.” This probably denotes a king from a new dynasty that had been established after the shepherd kings had been expelled. “The previous dynasty had been that of the Hyksos: the new king was Ahmes who drove out the Hyksos” [ATR].

DID NOT KNOW JOSEPH. As soon as we learn that the Children of Israel had been in Egypt 400 years we know that this new king could not have known Joseph personally, so there must be another meaning. This new king from a new dynasty did not recognize the covenant that a now ancient Pharaoh had made with Joseph. Joseph’s history and service meant nothing to him. It was completely discounted by the new king.

7:19 - DEALT DECEITFULLY. “ *He dealt deceitfully with our race and oppressed our forefathers by making them leave their infants outside so they wouldn’t survive.*” The word Luke used means to employ deceit, guile, and fraud against another.

WITH OUR RACE. Here the word is race rather than family. The new king took notice of the Hebrews living and flourishing in Goshen, and considered what might happen if an army from Mesopotamia invaded Egypt and persuaded the Israelites to come into the war on their side.

“He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and powerful than we are. Let us deal shrewdly with them; otherwise they will multiply further, and if war breaks out, they may join our enemies, fight against us, and leave the country” (Ex 1:9-10).

That the new king would be concerned about a military alliance between the Hebrews and an enemy is clear enough. His concern that they might “leave the country” implies a contribution the king did not want to lose. He had plans for them! He would weaken them as a military threat through a horrific population control program, and then enslave them and force them to serve him in his vast building programs.

THEIR INFANTS. This new Pharaoh, he said, “oppressed our forefathers by making them leave their infants outside so they wouldn’t survive.” This was a program of genocide as brutal as the world has ever seen, but it would not be the last time a nation or a powerful ruler would seek to destroy the Jews. The Canaanites and Philistines often invaded the land, took what they found of value, and forced the Israelites to pay tribute. Great empires like Assyria, Babylon, and Greece conquered nations so they could control them and force them to pay a heavy tribute. Naaman, on the other hand sought only the complete extermination of all Jews, which places him in the same category with Adolph Hitler, and with radical Islamic nations of this day. The president of Iran constantly calls for the death of the Jews and the destruction of the nation of Israel. They do not

want to profit by forcing Israel to pay tribute or to serve them, they want all Jews dead.

If this birth control program seems too barbarous to be true, just remember that the total number of Israelites was about two million. **America alone, since Roe v. Wade, has slaughtered nearly fifty million unborn babies.** There have been some reports of a botched abortion in which a baby was born alive and then set aside to starve. There have been reports that in orphanages in the Ukraine babies with birth defects are set aside and left to starve. The ancient world had no monopoly on barbarous acts.

7:20 - MOSES. *“At this time Moses was born, and he was beautiful before God. He was nursed in his father’s home three months...”* Stephen is simply stating what every member of the Sanhedrin knew, and would want to hear from this Hellenistic Jew. The Israelites had been in Egypt 400 years, during which time they had flourished. They were not planning to leave the known for the unknown. They would not leave a land of prosperity to travel a great distance under severe conditions only to have to invade Canaan and try to defeat an established populace, with its own trained army.

God knew the mind of Pharaoh as surely as He knew the mind of the Israelites. Even before they knew they would need a deliverer, He was preparing one for them. The Pharaoh had issued a decree that would enslave the Hebrews, but God had a plan of His own. This new king may have seemed invincible, but there was no power on earth that could kill this baby!

7:21 - PHARAOH’S DAUGHTER. *“...And when he was left outside, Pharaoh’s daughter adopted and raised him as her own son.”* Every child who grows up in Sunday School knows the story. God miraculously saves Moses from death, but survival was not all He had in mind. As the Israelites had flourished for 400 years, Moses would flourish for 40 years, during which time he would receive the training he would need to be God’s instrument of salvation for His people. The very king who ordered the killing of the male babies and enslavement of the Hebrews, was responsible for his food, clothing, education, and the training he would need to deliver the Israelites from Egypt, for his daughter could only give Moses what her father provided.

7:22 - EDUCATED. *“So Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was powerful in his speech and actions.”* The Egyptians were advanced far beyond most nations in engineering, mathematics, they had “the most highly developed corpus of theology with sustained emphasis on life after death” [HLE: 78].

I went to see the Rameses Exhibit a number of years ago when it came to Memphis, TN. One of the first things I noticed was that there was no “wall of separation” in ancient Egypt. You cannot study the history of Egypt without studying their religion. Every part of the exhibit was a testimony to their faith in gods that do not exist. One would be tempted to conclude that behind such superstitions there was an ignorant populace. That conclusion would be faulty because, while they chose to reject what ever information they may have had about the true God, they were far from ignorant and uneducated. The Rameses Exhibit confirmed that, for there was evidence of skilled and trained jewelers whose work would challenge the modern jeweler to duplicate, even with power

saws, drills, and polishers. We also learned that physicians in ancient Egypt could diagnose brain tumors and surgically remove them (even if the mortality rate was significantly higher than it is for the same kind of surgery today).

Moses would have been trained in math, history, speech, and military arts. There was no education available to anyone in that amazing system that was denied Moses. The only thing that might surprise us is that Moses “was powerful in speech” as well as in actions. When the Lord called him to lead His people out of Egypt, one of the excuses was that he was not articulate. His brother Aaron became his spokesman. It had been 40 years since he had stood before a Pharaoh and his command of the Egyptian language may have diminished during that time. Another possibility is that, though he had the training in speech, he may not have been comfortable with his knowledge of the language.

7:23 - THE AGE OF 40. *“As he was approaching the age of 40, he decided to visit his brothers, the sons of Israel.”* Moses’ life is divided into three distinct periods: (1) 40 years in Egypt, (2) 40 years in Midian, and (3) 40 years leading Israel in the wilderness. Moses was approaching his 40th birthday when he decided to visit his kinsmen, the sons of Israel. The Lord not only knows what is in the mind of man, He also knows how to influence the thoughts of the individual. I have always wondered **why Moses felt the urge to visit “his brothers” at this particular time.** Why not earlier? Why at all? Perhaps the answer is found in verse 17: “...the time was drawing near to fulfill the promise that God had made to Abraham.”

7:24 - MISTREATED. *“When he saw one of them being mistreated, he came to his rescue and avenged the oppressed man by striking down the Egyptian.”* Stephen continues the well known narrative. We are not told what Moses expected to see, but he must have known that his kinsmen who had once flourished in the land, were now slaves, driven by brutal taskmasters. It may well have been the mistreatment that led Moses to identify more with his “brothers” than his Egyptian family. He moved quickly to rescue a Hebrew who was being mistreated. The man who would one day be known for his meekness, moved to avenge the mistreatment of a Hebrew slave by striking down the Egyptian taskmaster.

7:25 - HE ASSUMED. *“He assumed his brothers would understand that God would give them deliverance through him, but they did not understand.”* We are given additional information here. We are not told how Moses knew he was to be the one God would use to deliver the Children of Israel from bondage. He was assuming that they would understand why he intervened. The Lord had revealed to Moses that He would use him to deliver the Israelites from bondage and for some reason he may have believed they would understand that. They did not understand, and they did not trust him.

7:26 - THE NEXT DAY. *“The next day he showed up while they were fighting and tried to reconcile them peacefully, saying, ‘Men, you are brothers. Why are you mistreating each other?’”* Moses, once again, seeks to identify with his “brothers”, but they want no part of it. The man who had been spared the day before must have been grateful, but that does not mean they would trust this man whose speech and dress would identify him with the enemy.

BROTHERS. Moses appealed to them on the grounds that they were brothers and should not mistreat each other. He was right, but “brothers” often fail to use one of the most effective tools in dealing with each other - mutual loyalty.

Moses knew God had chosen him to deliver Israel. What he obviously did not understand is that God would choose both the time and the method. Here, it seems that Moses was running ahead of God. There is always danger in not doing God’s work, but here is also danger in doing God’s work man’s way. A man or woman may assume that anything he or she decides to do for God is His will. We begin a work and ask God to bless it. If we find what He wants us to do and do it His way He will bless it.

7:27 - PUSHED HIM AWAY. *“But the one who was mistreating his neighbor pushed him away, saying, Who appointed you a ruler and a judge over us?”* Moses assumed that they would understand that he only wanted to help. They saw it only as an intrusion, and possibly a threat. Some people are more comfortable with the known than the unknown, even when the known is oppressive and threatening.

7:28 - THE EGYPTIAN. *“Do you want to kill me, the same way you killed the Egyptian yesterday?”* Moses was shocked to discover that the Israelite he had defended the day before had told others that he had killed the Egyptian. It would not be long before the Egyptian authorities would know that he had killed an Egyptian to protect an Israelite.

7:29 - MOSES FLED. *“At this disclosure, Moses fled and became an exile in the land of Midian, where he fathered two sons.”* Midian was a small country northeast of Egypt and south of Canaan. Moses was God’s choice to deliver Israel from bondage, but now is fleeing to some foreign country where we lose sight of him for another 40 years. Satan had to be rejoicing in his belief that he had thwarted God’s plan once again.

Here is an interesting question: Did Moses forget that he was supposed to be the one to deliver his kinsmen? In verse 25, Stephen had said that, *“He assumed his brothers would understand that God would give them deliverance through him...”* Did he forget that? Or is it possible that he concluded that he had misunderstood this calling? It may be that he had decided that he had blown that opportunity.

The religious leaders knew the story better than Stephen, but they were totally blinded to the fact that they had fled in their sin and rejection of God’s Messiah. They were living in an alien land and did not know it. They were fanatically determined to do God’s will and defend His laws. There are millions of people who, like the members of the Sanhedrin, claim to know and serve God, but reject His Son. There are cults in which people are fanatically committed to false doctrine. There are also millions of people who profess to be God’s children, who are wasting their lives in some spiritually alien land. They are barren and fruitless.

7:30 - AFTER 40 YEARS. *“After 40 years had passed, an angel appeared to him in the desert*

of Mount Sinai, in the flame of a burning bush.” Moses wasted 40 years of his life, but God knew where he was all the time, and when the time was right, He would bring him back to deliver His people from Egypt. We must remember that the Israelites were reluctant and fearful 40 years later. It is possible that they had not reached the point that they were willing to follow Moses at the time he fled to Midian. It is certainly a fact that Moses had decided to take matters into his own hands and had failed miserably.

DESERT OF MOUNT SINAI. It is Horeb in Exodus 3:1, but Stephen says here that it was Sinai. If he had made a serious error, they would have stopped him. What is the answer? Sinai and Horeb may have been two peaks of the same mountain range. Horeb means “the mountain of the dried-up ground,” Sinai ‘the mountain of the thorns’ [ATR].

AN ANGEL. In Exodus 3:20, we are told that it is Yahweh who spoke to Moses. Robertson notes that “angel’ here with Stephen is understood to be the Angel of the Presence, the Eternal Logos of the Father, the Angel of Jehovah” [ATR].

7:31 - THE VOICE OF THE LORD. “*When Moses saw it, he was amazed at the sight. As he was approaching to look at it, the voice of the Lord came...*” Though he had said an angel had appeared to Moses in Midian, he knows that it was the voice of the Lord that he heard. “Amazed at the sight” means that he stood in awe of the sight. “Spiritual sensitivity reacts with wonderment and curiosity. Moses did not disparage or minimize what he saw. Neither did he ‘psychoanalyze’ or ‘demythologize’ it” [HLE: 79].

Some have claimed that Moses may have only seen a red bush, or one covered with red berries. “This view says in effect that Moses was powerful enough to lead a million complaining Jews out of Egyptian slavery to the Promised Land, but so weak he could not distinguish between a red berry bush and a shrub on fire but not being consumed” [HLE].

7:32 - I AM THE GOD. “*I am the God of your forefathers—the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. So Moses began to tremble and did not dare to look.*” God speaks and Moses is terrified. Whenever God identifies Himself in the Bible, man’s first response is fear. Anytime God sends an angel to speak with someone in Scripture, the angel must tell the man, to “fear not:.

7:33 - HOLY GROUND. “*Then the Lord said to him: Take the sandals off your feet, because the place where you are standing is holy ground.*” God is literally talking to a man. How long had it been since He had done that? As far as we know, He had not spoken to a man since He spoke to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Not since Abraham had God spoken so to any person as He would speak to Moses.

Moses was on holy ground because God was there! There was no temple there, just a flame in a bush, but the Lord was not impeded in any way. Today, we would like to see people show reverence in the house of God - and they should - but we are constantly in His presence and should show reverence for Him at all times.

7:34 - I HAVE SEEN. *“I have certainly seen the oppression of My people in Egypt; I have heard their groaning and have come down to rescue them. And now, come, I will send you to Egypt.”* It would not be fair to claim that Moses had forgotten his people but God remembered them. We do not know that Moses had forgotten them, but we do know that the Lord remembered them. Why, then, had He not acted 40 years earlier? We may not be able to answer that, but we can be sure that He acted according to His sovereign purpose. It is possible that Israel had not suffered to the point that they were willing to leave the known for the unknown, the oppressive security of Egypt which they could see for a land of which they had only heard and dreamed.

Now that the time had come to deliver those He calls “My people”, He acts decisively. He says, “I have certainly seen”; “I have heard”; and “come down to rescue them”. There is no hesitation, no doubt expressed here. He is both willing and able to deliver them.

I WILL SEND YOU. The One who sent the ten plagues on Egypt might have chosen to deliver His people by means of a natural disaster, famine, or plague, but He chose to send a man. The question is why? He is the only One who understands fully, but it seems obvious that He could use Moses to lead them, whereas a natural disaster might only drive them out of the land and into the wilderness where they would have perished without leadership, protection, and provisions. Through Moses, he would offer these three things that would be essential to their survival and prosperity.

7:35 - THIS MOSES. *“This Moses, whom they rejected when they said, Who appointed you a ruler and a judge? —this one God sent as a ruler and a redeemer by means of the angel who appeared to him in the bush.”* Robertson calls attention to the “Rhetorical repetition follows this description of Moses (five times, anaphora, besides the use here, six cases of *houtos* here about Moses: verse Acts 7:35 twice, Acts 7:36, 37, 38, 40)” [ATR]. This is significant and we must not miss it. We are not looking at a random, pointless repetition. **It is clear that Stephen is going somewhere with this.** In fact, he is drawing a parallel between Moses and Jesus. Their ancestors had rejected Moses as their deliverer, just as the members of the Sanhedrin and their witnesses had rejected Jesus. If there is any doubt about this, he will make the point a little later. God sent Moses and the Israelites rejected him. God sent His son and these descendants of those who rejected Moses had rejected Jesus.

BY MEANS OF AN ANGEL. Stephen had been accused of blasphemy against both Moses and God. He states here that Moses led the people out of Egypt, across the Red Sea, and through the wilderness by means of an angel of YAHWEH. The people had rejected Moses, but God’s choice was irrevocable. They either followed Moses out or they didn’t get out of bondage. These people before whom Stephen stood had rejected His Son, but Jesus was God’s choice to save us from our sins and He had no backup plan. If we do not follow Jesus we will never be set free from the bonds of sin, for there is no other name known among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

7:36 - LED THEM OUT. *“This man led them out and performed wonders and signs in the land of Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the desert for 40 years.”* Stephen is giving a brief overview but his

audience could fill in the blanks in their minds. They knew the story. “Wonders” denotes something so strange that it demands closer attention. “Signs” denotes something that transcends ordinary events so as to capture our attention and to make or illustrate a point. The signs and wonders in Egypt included the ten plagues, each of which was a direct attack on some pagan god worshiped by the Egyptians. At the Red Sea, God parted the waters so the Israelites could walk over on dry ground, and then he let the waters collapse on the Egyptians when they pursued their former slaves.

The signs and wonders of the crossing of the Red Sea continue to amaze us, even after some 3400 years. A recent e-mail message received by this writer (March 5, 2007) contained both comments and pictures the author believes proves the location of the crossing of the Red Sea and the drowning of the Egyptians who pursued them (note reference to Ron Wyatt. No credit was associated with the message, so I do not know the source):

One of the most dramatic records of Divine intervention in history is the account of the Hebrews’ exodus from Egypt. The subsequent drowning of the entire Egyptian army in the Red Sea was not an insignificant event, and confirmation of this event is compelling evidence that the Biblical narrative is truly authentic. Over the years, many divers have searched the Gulf of Suez in vain for artifacts to verify the Biblical account. But carefully following the Biblical and historical records of the Exodus brings you to Nuweiba, a large beach in the Gulf of Aqaba, as Ron Wyatt discovered in 1978. Repeated dives in depths ranging from 60 to 200 feet deep (18m to 60m), over a stretch of almost 2.5 km, has shown that the chariot parts are scattered across the sea bed. Artifacts found include wheels, chariot bodies as well as human and horse bones. Divers have located wreckage on the Saudi coastline opposite Nuweiba as well. Since 1987, Ron Wyatt found three 4-spoke gilded chariot wheels. Coral does not grow on gold, hence the shape has remained very distinct, although the wood inside the gold veneer has disintegrated making them too fragile to move.

The message continues after various pictures and diagrams were shown:

The Gulf of Aqaba is very deep, in places over a mile (1,600m) deep. Even with the sea dried up, walking across would be difficult due to the steep grade down the sides. But there is one spot where if the water were removed, it would be an easy descent for people and animals. This is the line between Nuweiba and the opposite shore in Saudi Arabia. Depth-sounding expeditions have revealed a smooth, gentle slope descending from Nuweiba out into the Gulf. This shows up almost like a pathway on depth-recording equipment, confirming it's Biblical description "*...a way in the sea, and a path in the mighty waters.*" (Isaiah 43:16). The Bible writers frequently refer to the miracle of the Red Sea crossing, for it was an event which finds no equal in history. The Hebrew prophets describe the sea at the crossing site as "*...the waters of the great deep ...the depths of the sea..*" (Isaiah 51:10). Knowing the exact spot to which the Bible writers were referring, what is the depth there? The distance between Nuweiba and where artifacts have been found on Saudi coast is about 18km (11 miles). Along this line the deepest point is about 800m (2,600 feet). No wonder that

Inspired writers of the Bible described it as the mighty waters. And no wonder that not a single Egyptian survived when the water collapsed in upon them.

For further study on the crossing of the Red Sea during the Exodus, see the book, *THE GOLD OF EXODUS: The Discovery of the True Mount Sinai*, by Howard Blum, Simon and Schuster, NY, 1998). J. D. Sagley sent me a copy to read, along with a DVD on the discovery of evidence of the true site for Sinai. J. D. is a retired business man from Fort Smith, Arkansas, who loves to study the Bible. He and I served together on the board of trustees for LifeWay Christian Resources, and we both served on the executive committee and during visits before and after meetings I developed a sincere appreciation for him and for his wife. I had made an effort to refute similar claims not too long before I saw the above article and then read J. D.'s book (which I must return!), but the book and the DVD make a strong, if not compelling case. It would be interesting to know what the religious leaders of Stephen's day knew about the actual place where their forefathers crossed the Red Sea.

Israel Rebels Against the Lord

7:37 - THIS IS THE MOSES. *“This is the Moses who said to the sons of Israel, God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from among your brothers.”* In vs. 35, it was “This Moses”; in vs. 36, “This man”; and here he says, “This is the Man...” Clearly, Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit had been going somewhere with this. Now we know where he was going. What he is saying - without saying it - was, “You profess great reverence for Moses, so why don't you receive the Messiah about whom he spoke?”

LIKE ME. This is one of a number of “double futuristic” prophecies found in the OT. Yahweh raised up Joshua as the immediate successor to Moses and used him to lead the Israelites into the Land of Promised (one aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant). Stephen sees this as a Messianic prophecy which was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Prophet in the likeness of Moses (another aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant). Moses was the law-giver and Jesus came to establish the Kingdom of God, which is based on love. He fulfilled all Moses hoped for and all for which he prayed.

“Stephen quotes Moses to remind his audience that Moses should not be the object of the church's devotion but only a humble forerunner of the one to whom they would completely submit” [NCWB]. Stephen is saying that Moses was prophesying of the Messiah, who as a prophet like Moses, and that Prophet was Jesus whom they crucified. That being the case, these Pharisees and Sadducees were the ones who were really opposing Moses, not Stephen. “It was a neat turn” [ATR].

Stephen had been accused by the crowd of defiling the laws of Moses, and the Sanhedrin is sitting in judgment on him for violating the Mosaic Law. In his defense, he stresses the fact that Moses had prophesied of coming of Jesus. That being the case, these Jewish leaders should have turned to Him. Stephen had accepted Him as the promised Messiah; the Sanhedrin had rejected Him. That being the case, the question then is, who really opposed the Law of Moses? Who was really guilty of

opposing the Law and prophets?

7:38 - CONGREGATION IN THE DESERT. *“He is the one who was in the congregation in the desert together with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our forefathers. He received living oracles to give to us.”* Stephen began with a review of Hebrew history, with special emphasis on the calling and work of Abraham and Moses. By now, it must have been obvious to the members of the Sanhedrin he was not trying to teach them a history lesson. The congregation denotes “The collective body of God’s chosen people. In the Septuagint (from which Stephen, a Greek, consistently quoted) the *ekkleôsia* was often used to describe Israel” [NCWB].

THE ANGEL WHO SPOKE TO HIM. Moses was close to Yahweh, and Yahweh spoke directly to Moses. “By offering this highly respectful and valid opinion of Moses, Stephen refutes the main charge for which he had been arrested” [NCWB].

AND WITH. Moses was with God to receive the divine oracles from Him, and “with our forefathers” to communicate the revelation to them.

ORACLES. The word oracles had been associated with a divine message, or the medium by which God reveals hidden knowledge or a divine purpose. The word “living” equates oracles to the very word of life (Heb. 4:12; Phil.2:16; 5:20)” [HLE],

7:39 - UNWILLING TO OBEY. *“Our forefathers were unwilling to obey him, but pushed him away, and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.”* Those religious leaders who were sitting in judgment on Stephen were well aware of the fact that their forefathers were wrong in being unwilling to obey Moses. Sadly, a greater than Moses had been sent by God, and they had killed him. However, what they could not seem to appreciate was the incongruity of their zealous defense of Moses, while condemning Stephen obeying the One of whom Moses prophesied.

PUSHED HIM AWAY. This carries the idea of thrusting someone away from you, which describes the attitude of their “forefathers” when Moses tried help them. These judges knew how foolish their forefathers had. What they refused to see is that they had been guilty of a greater sin. Their ancestors rejected Moses, but they rejected the Savior. They had thrust Him away from them.

7:40 - MAKE US GODS. *“They told Aaron: Make us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we don’t know what’s become of him.”* Stephen here touches on the faculty their ancestors had for turning from Yahweh to other gods. In fact, the sin of idolatry had been the sin that often led Israel to break relationship with Yahweh throughout their history, from Egypt to the Babylonian Captivity.

Often in the study of the Word of God, we learn the meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence through a word study, grammatical analysis, running references, or through a number of sound principles of interpretation (Hermeneutics). However, we often hear people make claims for a passage that sound good, but when you look at the verse you realize that the statement the individual has just made is consistent with Scripture, but not taught specifically in that passage. For example, Stephen does not

say anything about the worship of the Children of Israel while they lived in Egypt, but one wonders how these people could demand that Aaron make them idols to lead them if they had not come under the influence of idols in their past. Yet, when conditions became desperate in Egypt, they called on the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, they had lived in a pagan land that was saturated with idolatry. They knew about the gods represented by idols in Egypt and now they demand that Aaron make them idols to lead them.

Their stubborn rejection of Yahweh and their repeated embrace of gods who were not gods is detailed in various books of prophecy, none more clearly than in Jeremiah, where God accused them of two sins:

“Has a nation [ever] exchanged its gods? (but they were not gods!) Yet My people have exchanged their Glory for useless idols. Be horrified at this, heavens; be shocked and utterly appalled. This is the Lord’s declaration. For My people have committed a double evil: They have abandoned Me, the fountain of living water, and dug cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that cannot hold water” (Jer 2:11-13, bold added for emphasis).

WE DON’T KNOW WHAT’S BECOME OF HIM. Moses had not appeared to them for many days and they had to see him to believe God was with them. Jim Allen had told me he was with Secret Service in Tokyo at the end of the Second World War, and that he saw General Douglas MacArthur every afternoon at 4:00 when he went out and got into an open jeep and had someone drive him through downtown Tokyo so the Japanese people could see him. They had lost their god when the emperor confessed that he was not one. They found great security in the presence of General MacArthur, who had assured the Japanese people that they would be given help in rebuilding their nation. Later, Jim Allen confided that he was really not with Secret Service, after I asked him if he knew Dr. Leo Eddleman. Dr. Eddleman had been hand-picked by someone in “a high level secret organization within our government” to do high level translations during the time when Israel’s leaders were meeting with both America and the USSR to see where they could get the most help. Jim said, “I did not know Dr. Eddleman,” he said, and then after giving me a knowing look, added, “but we knew about him.”

People want a visible leader, whether in a Middle East wilderness or in the middle of a bombed out Tokyo. Throughout history, people have turned their backs on the invisible God for useless gods, artefacts, rituals and ceremonies.

7:41 - MADE A CALF. *“They even made a calf in those days, offered sacrifice to the idol, and were celebrating what their hands had made.”* The calf was probably a small bull. “The people said it was their way of worshipping Jehovah! So the Egyptians worshipped the bull Apis at Memphis as the symbol of Osiris (the sun). They had another sacred bull Mnevis at Leontopolis”; ATR].

How did they know to make an idol in the form of a calf? Who made the calf? And, where did they get the gold to use in making the calf? Good questions for which there are some very good answers.

In the first place, any student of ancient Egypt has seen statues or pictures of statues of bulls. In the second place, many of these Israelites had been trained in the school of artisans in the Valley of Kings to do this kind of work. There were many skilled craftsmen among the Hebrew people. All of them did not make bricks. In the third place, there was plenty of gold among the newly freed slaves because the Egyptians had given them all kinds of gifts to get them to leave the land after the ten plagues.

If you go into the Baptist Medical Center in Jackson, look to the left side of the lobby and you will see THE STUDENT NURSE, the sculpture of Dr. Samuel M Gore. A Mississippi farmer called his mother, a member of our church, and told her about going to the Mississippi Agricultural Museum on Lakeland Drive in Jackson where he had seen THE AMERICAN LABORER, another sculpture by Sam Gore. The mother said, "Yes, the sculptor is my pastor's friend." If you go to the Stenis Office Building in Washington you will see a sculpture of Senator John Stenis,. Yet another work by Sam Gore. If you look on a book case in my living room, you will see THE HEAD OF CHRIST, still another work by Sam Gore, who has touched lives of students and friends of Mississippi College since 1951.

It is not a sin to produce a piece of sculpture. To use it as an object of worship is a sin. Sam Gore and I spend a lot of time down in the basement of the building that houses the Samuel M. Gore Art Gallery one day as he explained to me how he made the sculpture, using his own father as a model for part of it. I knew his father. In fact, My parents saw him on the steps of Ratliff Hall at Mississippi College when I moved into Crestman Hall next door as a very green freshman. I knew that Brother John Gore had baptized my father. Sam and I talked a long time on another occasion about Francis Schaeffer and his contribution to our understanding of the training of these artisans in the wilderness. Dr. Gore also spent a lot of time explaining the use of art in Solomon's Temple. A sculpture is just that - a work of art. It can be a thing of beauty. However, if it becomes the object of worship, it flies in the face of Almighty God. It is then a horrible sin. This calf must have shown brilliantly in the sun, but this was a dark day in the history of Israel.

7:42 - GOD TURNED AWAY. *"Then God turned away and gave them up to worship the host of heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: Did you bring Me offerings and sacrifices for 40 years in the desert, O house of Israel?"* They turned away from God and then He turned away from them. Pharaoh hardened his heart, then God hardened his heart. Physically and spiritually speaking, God permits people the freedom to choose to worship false gods, but when they do so, and when they refuse to repent and turn to Him, they can expect to pay the price, both in time and in eternity.

God gave the Israelites up to worship false gods, and they not only worshiped the gold calf in the wilderness, they continually turned to idols, almost from the time they entered the Promised Land until the time of the Babylonian Captivity, some 800 years later. They went through a vicious, evil cycle between 12 and 15 times during the period of the Judges alone: (1) they turned to idols, (2) God sent a pagan nation to conquer them and oppress them, (3) they cried out for Yahweh to deliverer them, (4) He sent a deliverer, and (5) they lived in peace as long as that judge lived. Then after the death of that judge they turned again to idols. From the time of David until the Babylonian

Captivity, the besetting sin of the nation was idolatry. Israel, the Northern Kingdom, was destroyed because of this sin. Judah saw what happened to their kinsmen and still refused to follow Yahweh. The members of the Sanhedrin, before whom Stephen stood, knew the words from Jeremiah:

“In the days of King Josiah the Lord asked me, “**Have you seen what unfaithful Israel has done?** She has ascended every high hill and gone under every green tree to prostitute herself there. I thought: After she has done all these things, she will return to Me. But she didn’t return, and **her treacherous sister Judah saw it**” (Jer.3:6-7).

Their most grievous sin was idolatry, which is often portrayed in the Bible as spiritual adultery. The shocking message from Yahweh continues:

“I observed that it was because unfaithful Israel had committed adultery that I had sent her away and had given her a certificate of divorce. Nevertheless, **her treacherous sister Judah** was not afraid but also went and prostituted herself. Indifferent to her prostitution, she defiled the land and committed adultery with stone and tree. Yet in spite of all this, **her treacherous sister Judah** didn’t return to Me with all her heart—only in pretense.” [This is] the Lord’s declaration” (Jer 3:8-10).

“The Lord announced to me, “**Unfaithful Israel** has shown herself more righteous than **treacherous Judah**” (Jer. 3:11, bold added by this writer).

Paul, in writing to the Colossians, expands our understanding of idolatry to include anything and everything you put between yourself and God. “Therefore, put to death whatever in you is worldly: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry” (Col 3:5).

The reigning Miss USA, who kept her title after bringing shame on herself and her title, appeared on the Hannity and Colmes television program, March 20, 2007, to talk about her addiction to alcohol, about Donald Trump’s help in getting her into rehabilitation, and her goals for the future. She was very open about her addiction and the fact that she can never drink again. As the interview concluded, Sean Hannity stated that he understood that she was a person of faith. She said, “Yes.” Hannity looked at her and said, “You are a Christian?” She hesitated briefly before saying, “I’m spiritual.” If she is not a Christian but she is spiritual, she is an idolater and the object of her devotion is Satan.

7:43 - YOU TOOK UP. “*No, you took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship. So I will deport you beyond Babylon!*” They were instructed to take up the “tent” (tabernacle) of Yahweh and follow it in their journey through the wilderness. Instead of taking up the tent of Yahweh those ancient Israelites took up the tent of Moloch after each stop. “Moloch was the god of the Amorites to whom children were offered as live sacrifices, an ox-headed image with arms outstretched in which children were placed and hollow underneath so that fire could burn underneath” [ATR].

Kings Ahaz and Manasseh promoted Moloch worship vigorously. Manasseh made his own son pass through the fire (2 Kings 21:6). The chief worship site was Tophet, in the Valley of Hinnon, often called the Valley of Children, located slightly southwest of Jerusalem, perhaps at the edge of Gehenna [HLE: 84].

BABYLON. The Lord sent His prophets with the warning that if the people of Israel did not repent and turn from their idols to Him, He would destroy the Northern Kingdom, made up of ten tribes. He then sent Isaiah and Micah to warn Judah that if they did not repent and obey Him, He would send them into captivity in Babylon. Assyria was the world power at the time, but He told them that when the time came to judge Judah it would be Babylon that would take them into captivity. God raised up nations and empires to serve His purpose, and when He was finished with them, He either replaced them with another power or destroyed them. Before anyone could have imagined a vast empire, the Lord revealed His plans for Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and Rome (as well as the eternal Kingdom of Christ).

Yahweh's Real Tabernacle

7:44 - THE TABERNACLE OF THE TESTIMONY. *“Our forefathers had the tabernacle of the testimony in the desert, just as He who spoke to Moses commanded him to make it according to the pattern he had seen.”* Stephen was not given any time to prepare a defense - he had been dragged violently by an enraged mob to appear before the Sanhedrin. However, if he had been prepared it would have been a challenge to have come up with a more appropriate defense. The use of “our forefathers” identifies himself with them, and may well have delayed his ultimate martyrdom long enough for him to finish his defense. Had Jesus not promised that the Holy Spirit would empower them and guide them so that His followers would know what to say in situations like this?

The tabernacle was the tent Yahweh instructed Moses to have built. The plans were very specific, and each item in the materials used in the construction served a purpose. A tent was the dwelling place of the Jews during their wanderings in the wilderness. The tabernacle of the testimony represented God's dwelling place with the Children of Israel.

The tent was called the tabernacle of the testimony because it housed, in the Most Holy Place, the ark of the Covenant, in which the two tablets of stone written by the finger of God were placed, as a testimony that he had delivered these laws to the people, and that they had entered a covenant with Him and would obey the Ten Commandments.

“As one great design of St. Stephen was to show the Jews that they placed too much dependence on outward privileges, and had not used the law, the tabernacle, the temple, nor the temple service, for the purpose of their institution, he labors to bring them to a due sense of this, that conviction might lead to repentance and conversion. And he farther shows that God did not confine his worship to one place, or form. He was worshiped without any shrine in the times of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac,

Jacob, etc. He was worshiped with a tabernacle, or portable temple, in the wilderness. He was worshiped also in the fixed temple projected by David, but built by Solomon. He asserts farther that his infinite majesty cannot be confined to temples, made by human hands; and where there is neither tabernacle nor temple, (in any part of his vast dominions,) he may be worshiped acceptably by the upright in heart. Thus he proves that neither tabernacle nor temple are essentially requisite for the true worship of the true God. Concerning the tabernacle to which St. Stephen here refers, the reader is requested to consult the notes on Exodus 25:8, etc., and the subsequent chapter” [CARKE - The Bible Navigator Electronic Library, LifeWay Christian Resources, Technology Division].

Dr. Gene Jeffries, President of Cambridge Graduate School, knowing how much I loved and respected Dr. Leo Eddleman, forwarded to me an interesting newsletter, written by David Smith and posted March 8m 2007, and Updated Mar. 11, 2007. Following are two excerpts from that newsletter:

Baptists in the Holy LandBy DAVID SMITH

“As a Baptist journalist in Israel for the past 25 years, I’ve often been shocked at how little Israelis know about my denomination.

With more than 90 million Baptists in the world, about half of whom are in the United States, and 17 million in my denomination - the Southern Baptist Convention - it’s a shock that Israelis, so interested in all things American, overlook this phenomenon.”

“During the 1930s a number of American Southern Baptists arrived in the Holy Land to bolster the local work. **They included Leo Eddleman, later a college Hebrew professor, who was noted for his mastery of both Hebrew and Arabic.** He attributed those skills to the curfew maintained during the British Mandate, saying there was little else to do but study from sunrise to sunset (bold added).

By the end of the 1930s, Southern Baptists had seven Americans working in Palestine, but World War II forced them to leave and the work floundered for a time.”

Dr. Eddleman was writing his commentary on Acts when I was working on my initial study on that book, so we talked often about Israel, as late as the mid-seventies. Even after all those years, he carried a burden for Israel. In the eighties, Dr. T. J. DeLaughter, who had taught me Old Testament at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, told me he had been to Israel and met Baptists who remembered Dr. Eddleman. They were impressed that he still spoke the language like a native. I asked him in 1979, when was preaching in revival services in the church I served as pastor, how he kept up the conversational Hebrew, and he said, “This week I am reading Sherlock Holmes in un-voveled Hebrew.” He expressed his burden for Israel in his commentary:

“Stephen was stressing the fact that his Jewish compatriots had lost their sense of mission as had their forefathers by many reversions to idolatry. A great gap in the history of one of humanity’s noblest people was caused by the mood of the Jews of the first century. At this point history passed them by, as they were oblivious to their own moment of destiny. The idols to which Stephen refers here, and to which they had reverted intermittently, pale into insignificance by comparison to the idol to which they had transferred their allegiance in the first century. An idolatrous attitude toward nationalism and homeland had blinded their eyes to the ethical and spiritual mission to which the Lord of history had called them. Is this why ‘nations’ is the only collective entity mentioned in the Great Commission? A people who had originated as a ‘kingdom of priests’ had reverted to idolizing nationalism with no further sense of destiny and divine mission” [HLE: 84-85].

Idolatry had been the most inexcusable sin of Israel since the Conquest (of Canaan). It continued through the Period of the Judges and the Period of the Kings. A careful study of Jeremiah underscores this sin. It took the Babylonian Captivity to purge them of idolatry, as far as pagan idols were concerned. After the return from captivity, they would die before bowing to an idol, but they were not finished with idolatry. They now worshiped themselves, their race, their land, their laws. Christians have often gone to the Holy Land and returned lamenting the fact that the Jews are still going to the Wailing Wall and praying for the coming of the Messiah. A Reformed Jew scoffed at that suggestion. He stated that when he went there he was praying for his nation.

A Jewish friend with whom I often talked became agitated one day as he told me about going to the funeral service for a friend. He said, “I asked my rabbi, ‘Why do the always talk about Jesus?’” He had told me about going to Christmas dinner at his daughter’s home, “and they kept talking about Jesus.” My friend, in what seemed a state of frustration, shook his head and said, “Jews hate....” He brought himself under control and did not finish the statement. My friend died not too long after that, but I still remember his saying, “I wish I could believe in heaven?” Sadly, he does now.

7:45 - RECEIVED IT IN TURN. *“Our forefathers in turn received it and with Joshua brought it in when they dispossessed the nations that God drove out before our fathers, until the days of David.”* Once again, Stephen refers to “our forefathers” in an effort to identify himself with the members of the Sanhedrin, as far as his race and OT background were concerned. Their forefathers had, in their turn, received the tabernacle of testimony at the death of Moses and carried it with them, as God had instructed, when Joshua led in the conquest of Canaan. “Until the days of David” denotes the Period of the Judges, during which time Israel was a theocracy.

WITH JOSHUA. Joshua, Moses’ assistant through the wanderings in the wilderness, became Moses’ successor at his death, and led the Children of Israel into Canaan. He led in the conquest of that land. When Moses had prophesied that Yahweh would raise up another prophet in his place, there was an immediate fulfillment in Joshua, and yet another, and more important fulfillment in another Joshua (Jesus). Jesus is our NT name for the Hebrew “Yeshua” (Joshua). The name means the salvation of Yahweh. The *Jews for Jesus* organization uses the name, *Jews for Yeshua.*” Joshua

is used as a prototype for Jesus in that he led the Children of Israel into the Promised Land, and Jesus is the One by whom believers enter into the Kingdom of God.

UNTIL THE DAYS OF DAVID. There is no way Stephen could go wrong in reviewing the history of God's dealings with Israel, especially when he begins with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and continues with Joseph, Moses, Joshua, and now David. Joshua was the commander who gave the instructions for the priests to carry the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle of the testimony into Canaan. David became king around 1000 B. C. The kingdom was united and the foundation was laid for the golden era of Solomon's reign. When the battles were over and the boundaries secured, David, came up with a plan by which the tabernacle would be replaced with a house as the symbol of the presence of Yahweh with His people.

7:46 - DWELLING PLACE FOR GOD. *“He found favor in God's sight and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob.”* To provide a dwelling place for is “another anthropomorphism designed to modify thought molds concerning the infinite in order to accommodate limitations of finite minds. David was the most human of Israel's fathers, yet he was vested with almost superhuman attributes of leadership” [HLE].

David was a man after God's own heart, the king by which all other kings would be judged, the one whose star today is the very symbol for the nation of Israel, after 3000 years. The Star of David is a focal point of the national flag of Israel. David had a great desire to see a great house built for “a dwelling place for the God of Jacob” (whose name was changed to Israel). He came up with a plan and the prophet Nathan, without consulting Yahweh, approved the plan. God rejected it, and entered a covenant with David, through which He promised to send One who would establish an eternal kingdom.

It would be our loss not to see the significance of this. Yahweh walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the Garden until the Fall, at which time a great gulf was formed between God and Man. No man has ever been able to span that gulf and reunite himself with the Lord, so God provided a means of reconciliation. The One through whom He would redeem man was His Son, Jesus Christ. Until the coming of Christ, God's presence with His people was symbolized, not fully realized. He spoke with Noah, Abraham, and Moses. His presence was symbolized by the tabernacle and by the temple, but it was in Jesus that God more perfectly revealed His presence. John was inspired to write: “The Word became flesh and **took up residence among us.** We observed His glory, the glory as the One and Only Son from the Father” (John 1:14, bold added).

In Jesus, God's presence was realized, not just symbolized. On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to indwell each believe. From the point of our salvation, the Christian has the living presence of God in his or her heart. In the Revelation 4:6, God pulls back the veil and shows us His throne room. In that passage, there is a sea (of separation) before the throne (“before the throne was something like a sea of glass, similar to crystal”), but in Revelation 21, we see that when we are glorified there is no more sea - we will be fully and eternally in His presence.

7:47 - SOLOMON. *“But it was Solomon who built Him a house.”* In David there was the

inclination, but in Solomon there was the implementation of the plan for a house for God. Solomon's Temple, or the First Temple, was one of the wonders of the ancient world. Of the Second Temple, it was said that you have never seen beauty until you have seen the temple of the Jews in Jerusalem. Regardless of the beauty, the essentials of the tabernacle were built into it: the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place.

7:48 - THE MOST HIGH. *“However, the Most High does not dwell in sanctuaries made with hands, as the prophet says...”* Stephen used a title for God these people would appreciate, “The Most High.” God does not dwell in sanctuaries made by man's hands. He cannot be confined to a house or temple. Yahweh, the God of the Hebrew people, is superior to the deities of the world, and He is especially transcendent in Israel's long history.

MADE WITH HANDS. Literally, “in things made with hands.” The “omnipresence of god may allow for high concentration of divine presence, immanence, in human hearts under certain conditions, but never in brick and mortar, sod and grass, and trees and vines...” [HLE: 86].

7:49 - MY THRONE. *“Heaven is My throne, and earth My footstool. What sort of house will you build for Me? says the Lord, or what is My resting place?”* God transcends brick and mortar: ““Heaven is My throne, and earth My footstool.” The high priest, the chief priests, and other members of the Sanhedrin served in and presided over the affairs of Herod's Temple, or the Second Temple, so the question would apply to them as well as their forefathers. What, indeed, could they add to God's dwelling place? In a day when many in academia are preaching evolution and impeaching special creation, this is still a fair question.

WHAT SORT OF HOUSE? Robertson point out that this “interrogative is sometimes scornful as in Acts 4:7; Luke 6:32” [ATR]. He concludes:

“So Stephen shows by Isaiah that Solomon was right that the temple was not meant to "confine" God's presence and that Jesus had rightly shown that God is a spirit and can be worshiped anywhere by any individual of any race or land. It is a tremendous argument for the universality and spirituality of Christianity free from the shackles of Jewish racial and national limitations, but its very strength only angered the Sanhedrin to desperation” [ATR].

7:50 - MY HANDS. *“Did not My hand make all these things?”* Stephen has his own reasons for asking this question. These people defended the temple but dishonored the God of the temple. They would violate the laws of God to protect the temple of God from His called servants. They should have recalled the words of the Lord to their rebellious forefathers six hundred years earlier (religious leaders who loved the temple, but refused to obey the Lord of the temple):

“This is what the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, says: Correct your ways and your deeds, and I will allow you to live in this place. **Do not trust deceitful words, chanting: This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord** (Jer 7:3-4, bold added).

The Sin of Resisting the Holy Spirit

7:51 - RESISTING THE HOLY SPIRIT. *“You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit; as your forefathers did, so do you.”* For most of his defense, the Pharisees and Sadducees may well have been listening intently, even nodding their agreement. Then Stephen began to make an application, which may well have caused them to wonder where he is going with this. They no longer have to wonder. He lets them have it with both barrels.

“Stiff-necked” was a metaphor the rabbis used of an ox that resisted all efforts to break it to the yoke. These people, while professing to follow the Lord and honor His word, were actually set in rebellion against Him.

Resisting the Holy Spirit is one of the two sins one may commit against the Holy Spirit. Resisting the Holy Spirit may follow either of two actions: grieving the Holy Spirit or quenching the Holy Spirit. These religious leaders had aggressively and unscrupulously resisted Jesus. While professing to uphold God’s law they had crucified God’s Son! Now, they are about to kill one of His servants.

The other sin is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the unpardonable sin (Mark 3:20-30). “If one resists the Holy Spirit on down to the time of his death and dies lost, what difference does it make whether he resisted or blasphemed the Holy Spirit? His destination is ultimately the same” [HLE: 88]. Blasphemy is attributing the work of Christ to the devil.

UNCIRCUMCISED. This was a Jewish expression, often used by the prophets. Adam Clarke states that:

Circumcision was instituted, not only as a sign and seal of the covenant into which the Israelites entered with their Maker, but also as a type of that purity and holiness which the law of God requires; hence there was an excision of what was deemed not only superfluous but also injurious; and by this cutting off, the propensity to that crime which ruins the body, debases the mind, and was generally the forerunner of idolatry, was happily lessened. It would be easy to prove this, were not the subject too delicate. Where the spirit of disobedience was found, where the heart was prone to iniquity, and the ears impatient of reproof and counsel, the person is represented as uncircumcised in those parts, because devoted to iniquity, impatient of reproof, and refusing to obey. In Pirkey Eliezer, chap. 29, "Rabbi Seira said, There are five species of uncircumcision in the world; four in man, and one in trees. Those in man are the following: -

1. Uncircumcision of the EAR. Behold, their EAR is uncircumcised, and they cannot hearken, Jeremiah 6:10.

2. The uncircumcision of the LIPS. How shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised LIPS ? Exodus 6:12.
3. Uncircumcision of HEART. If then their uncircumcised HEARTS be humbled, Leviticus 26:41. Circumcise therefore the FORESKIN of YOUR HEART, Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4. For all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the HEART, Jeremiah 9:26.
4. The uncircumcision of the FLESH. Ye shall circumcise the FLESH of your FORESKIN, etc., Genesis 17:11" [CLARKE].

7:52 - WHICH OF THE PROPHETS. *“Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They even killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become.”* Filled with the Holy Spirit, Stephen now turns up the heat on his accusers and the judges. This time, he does not say, “our forefathers” but “your fathers”, presumably to set himself apart from them. He will no longer identify himself with this crowd. Their fathers had slain various prophets, and brutalized other, like Jeremiah. Jesus had charged them with this very thing (Luke 11:47).

Stephen is standing before priests, who represented the people before God, whereas the prophet represented God before the people. The priest might well just represent the status quo, and as such avoid persecution. The prophet, on the other hand delivered the “Thus saith the Word of the Lord”, and in so doing he confronted the people with their sins. Many prophets had paid the price, not for foretelling future events as much as for forth-telling divine truth.

KILLED THOSE. Their “fathers” had killed prophets who had prophesied the coming of the Messiah. According to tradition, Manasseh had Isaiah stuffed into a hollow log and sawn asunder.

THE RIGHTEOUS ONE. Jesus Christ is the Righteous One. The Scripture stresses the absolute integrity of his heart and life. In one of his earthly trials, Pilate proclaimed, “I find no fault at all in Him.” Mention of Jesus by this title would serve to exacerbate their guilt. The character of Jesus as the Righteous One (or, the Just One) is applied to our Lord in three other passages: Acts 3:14; Acts 22:14; and James 5:6.

BETRAYERS AND MURDERERS. The charges made against Stephen pale in comparison to the charges he now lays at their feet. Peter had, on two occasions accused them of killing the Source of Life. It has been suggested that someone may have interrupted Stephen before he began what some may call a tirade, but there is no reason to accept that. He is reaching the conclusion and, in the power of the Holy Spirit, he will drive the point home before these judges and before the accusers (one of whom may have been a young Pharisee from Tarsus).

7:53 - THE LAW. *“You received the law under the direction of angels and yet have not kept it.”* He drives the point home with even greater force. Those chosen to uphold the law have not kept it.

They had violated the law they professed to obey in the most violent way.

ANGELS. The word translated angel means messenger, and angels were associated with the laws and oracles of God: “He is the one who was in the congregation in the desert together with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our forefathers. He received living oracles to give to us” (Acts 7:38).

OVERVIEW OF STEPHEN’S DEFENSE

From

The Bible Knowledge Commentary

This commentary breaks Stephen’s speech down into three main points:

1. There is progress and change in God’s program.
2. The blessings of God are not limited to the land of Israel and the temple area.

Some of Israel’s greatest favors were bestowed apart from the temple and the land. Stephen gave four examples: (a) Israel’s patriarchs and leaders were blessed outside the land. Abraham was called in Mesopotamia and given promises before he lived in Haran (vv. 2-5). In Egypt... Joseph found favor with Pharaoh because God was with him (vv. 9-10). Moses was commissioned by God in Midian (vv. 29-34). To substantiate the fact that God blessed Moses while he was in Midian, Stephen carefully recounted that two sons were born to Moses there. (b) The Law itself was given outside the land: Moses was in the congregation in the desert (v. 38). (c) The tabernacle was built in the desert. The tabernacle was with them in the desert (v. 44). In fact the Jews brought it with them when they took the land (v. 45). (d) Even the temple, though in the land, was not to be limited in its theology. How could the temple be God’s dwelling place when the Scripture declares, Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool? (v. 49; Isa. 66:1)

3. Israel in its past always evidenced a pattern of opposition to God’s plans and His men.

This is the main point of Stephen’s discourse, as its climax affirms (Acts 7:51-53). You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! This theme is seen throughout the message, but there are some definite specifics [BKC].

Stephen Becomes the First Christian Martyr

7:54 - THEY WERE ENRAGED. “When they heard these things, they were enraged in their hearts and gnashed their teeth at him.” That they would be enraged was predictable, but that they

would take it as far as they did reveals just how intense religious rage can become, especially when self-righteous zealots convince themselves that they are defending God, and they fight as though His future is in their hands. In order to appreciate the intensity of the rage, watch any television news program that shows a Palestinian reaction to anything that happens in Israel today. Or picture angry crowds of Sunis and Shiites who fill the streets of Baghdad to scream and attack others in the name of a god who does not exist.

GNASHED THEIR TEETH AT HIM. We can use our imagination, but Robertson explains the Greek: “Imperfect (inchoative) active of *bruchō* (*Attic brukō*), to bite with loud noise, to grind or gnash the teeth. Literally, They began to gnash their teeth at (*ep'*) him (just like a pack of hungry, snarling wolves). Stephen knew that it meant death for him” [ATR].

Today, the Israelis are very tame compared to Muslim extremists (when thousands fill the streets so quickly, it seems obvious that they not just a few extremists). However, while the Israelis do not lose control and attack the enemy with the rage we have come to associate with the Palestinians, they have maintained a hard line against the proclamation of the Gospel in Israel. Christians in Israel still must be prepared to pay a price. The crowd that reacted so violently against Stephen, however, moved with a rage the average American cannot imagine.

7:55 - BUT STEPHEN. “*But Stephen, filled by the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven. He saw God’s glory, with Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and he said...*” The little conjunction, “but”, sets before the world, from that day until our Lord’s return, the difference between an individual filled with the Holy Spirit and a mob filled with hate. *The Voice of Martyrs* ministry works fervently to keep before us the persecution of Christians, not only in history, but also in the world today. William Tyndale was chained to a stake and burned before a jeering mob. What was his great offense? He translated the New Testament into English, believing that the laity should have the Scripture in their own language.

FILLED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT. There are periodic progress reports in the first part of Acts, as the Gospel is being spread throughout Jerusalem and Judea (and even to Samaria). Luke’s book of history in the NT is called the Acts of the Apostles, but some have suggested that it might more accurately be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit. This is not a moment of defeat, but a declaration of victory. Jesus had assured His followers that they would be persecuted and that many would die for their testimony for Him. They had been persecuted already, but now the first witness is about to be brutally murdered by those who are determined to silence the Gospel message. It had the opposite effect. Not only could they not defeat the Gospel, they could not defeat Stephen.

SAW GOD’S GLORY. This is the Shekinah, the manifestation of the splendor of God’s Divine Majesty. Many believers sense that they are surrounded by the glory of God, but few have been so blessed as Stephen. This is God’s assurance that He was with him, and He surrounded him with His glory.

JESUS STANDING. In the NT, we normally find Jesus seated at the right hand of God. Jesus Himself said, “But I tell you, in the future you will see the Son of Man **seated at the right hand of**

the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt 26:64b). Here, he is standing. One view is that when His servants are in trouble he stands as one standing at a banister, looking down on His faithful followers. Another conclusion is that Jesus is standing to receive him.

7:56 - I SEE. *“Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”* At that moment, Stephen saw clearly something no other person on earth could see. Before an out of control crowd that was attacking him with a blind rage, the object of their murderous hate saw he would not exchange for another day on earth. From that day forth, the name Stephen brings hope and assurance to believers, and will continue to do so until our Lord’s return.

THE SON OF MAN. Only here and in Revelation 1:13 and 14:14 is Jesus called “the Son of man” after the Ascension. “Stephen, filled with the Spirit, repeats the same words that Jesus used before the same council to foretell his glorification (Matt. 26:64), thus suggesting to the council that the exaltation of the Son of man was real and had already begun” [NCWB].

7:57 - THEY SCREAMED. *“Then they screamed at the top of their voices, stopped their ears, and rushed together against him.”* The Holy Spirit filled Stephen’s heart and he stood before the enraged mob in control and in peace. Satan filled the hearts of those in that crowd with one thought, and that was to kill the one they could not silence.

STOPPED THEIR EARS. Clarke held this to be proof that he had uttered blasphemy,

“because he said, He saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. This was a fearful proof against them; for if Jesus was at the right hand of God, then they had murdered an innocent person; and they must infer that God’s justice must speedily avenge his death. They were determined not to suffer a man to live any longer who could say he saw the heavens opened and Jesus Christ standing at the right hand of God” [CLARKE].

7:58 - BEGAN TO STONE HIM. *“They threw him out of the city and began to stone him. And the witnesses laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul.”* According to the Law, two or three witnesses were required before one was stoned. The ones giving the testimony against Stephen could cast the first stone against him (Deut. 13:10; 17:7). The stones they used were, and still are found in abundance in Israel. They were not the little flat sailing rocks little boys like to skip across a pond, but stones big enough to fill one’s hand, rocks big enough to break bones and crush the skull.

If Stephen had “played his cards right” he might have avoided this violent end, but does any child of God believe Stephen would have taken a different course if he had been given another opportunity? He had seen the Shekinah (glory) of the Lord and he had seen Jesus standing to receive him. Stephen became the first Christian martyr that day, but they never stopped the spread of the Gospel. In fact, they launched an evangelistic thrust they could not have imagined, and all the powers of Satan and all the demons of hell have never been able to silence it. In Nazi Germany they tried. In the USSR they tried. In China they tried, and are trying, but as Ken Stephens reported to the Broadman and Holman Committee at a LifeWay Christian Resources trustees meeting (2007), there

are now more Christians than Communists in China (7% Christians and 5% Communists). It gets even better because B & H Outreach International (BHOI) is in the process of publishing a new Mandarin translation of the Scripture. That brings joy to this writer, who had the privilege of voting to create BHOI.

A YOUNG MAN NAMED SAUL. Young Saul approved of the murder of Stephen, and for some time he was a key leader in the persecution of the saints, both in Jerusalem and beyond. This is not the last we will hear from this young fanatic who watched the clothes of the mob that stoned Stephen to death.

7:59 - LORD JESUS. *“They were stoning Stephen as he called out: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!”* They were stoning Stephen, with stones that were breaking bones and opening horrifying wounds, but knowing he would soon be dead, he cried out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” He saw the glory of God. He saw Jesus standing by the right hand of God as if to receive the first martyr of the church age. He had no doubt that he was going to be with his Lord at that moment. Jim Elliot was one of five missionaries who were killed by a savage tribe in Ecuador in the early fifties. All were martyrs, but we heard more about Jim Elliot through the powerful book, *Through Gates of Splendor*, written by his widow, Elizabeth Elliot. Elliot has often been quoted by men and women twice his age (and more). He once said, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep for what he cannot lose.” That is the faith of a martyr. How do you measure up?

7:60 - DO NOT CHARGE THEM. *Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not charge them with this sin!” And saying this, he fell asleep.”* The ministry of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers is to conform them to the image of the Son of God (Romans 8:29). The Holy Spirit so filled the heart of Stephen, and so conformed him to the image of Christ that, like Jesus, he died praying for those who killed him.

I grew up with the King James Version of the Bible and memorized passages from it. When I signed up for my first Bible class at Mississippi College, I discovered that the American Standard Bible was the required text. When I was in seminary, most students carried the old black hardback American Standard Bible to class. Later, when the New American Standard Bible was released, I adopted that as my primary study Bible, but continued to preach from the KJV. In my first meeting as a member of the Broadman and Holman Committee as a trustee with LifeWay Christian Resources, the most pressing business was the a new translation of the Bible, The Holman Christian Standard Bible, a word for word translation. Dr. Ed Blum, the General Editor, met with us and patiently answered our questions. I now preach from the HCSB and use it regularly in my studies.

I have many Bibles in various English translations in my study and in my home. There was a time when the possession of either of these Bibles (in England), should the word get out, would have caused me to be burned at the stake. In England!

God called and equipped a man to translate the Greek New Testament into English. That man was William Tyndale, and every time we pick up a copy of the Bible in English we are indebted to our Lord and to William Tyndale for the privilege. “Indeed, modern computer analysis demonstrates that

approximately eighty-five percent of the words of the King James Version originated with William Tyndale. (Obviously, this applies only to the books translated into English prior to his execution)” [Michael Farris (*FROM TYNDALE TO MADISON: How the death of an English Martyr led to the American Bill of Rights*, B & H, Nashville, 2007, p. 123)].

Farris provides a note about the martyrdom of William Tyndale:

“In August, 1536, Tyndale was formally judged to be a heretic by the Roman Catholic Church and handed over to the secular authorities for execution. Two months later, in early October - perhaps the sixth day of the month - William Tyndale was strangled to death while tied at the stake, and then his dead body was burned in the ritualistic fashion then in vogue. Tyndale’s last words were “Lord, open the king of England’s eyes” [Farris: 37].

HE FELL ASLEEP. Sleep is a common metaphor for death. Steve Cox, a long time friend, owns a number of funeral homes in north east Louisiana and He and I have worked together many times. We have also visited together many times. One day Steve said, “You know something that bothers me? It’s when some says that the deceased person is just sleeping.” I knew what he meant. There are some people who are hesitant to use the word death at a funeral service. The metaphor of sleep applies, but we must remind ourselves that the person who dies only appears to be asleep (the body appears is lying like one who is asleep). Stephen was asleep to this world, but he is eternally awake to the glory of God, and in the presence of Jesus Christ.

LIFE APPLICATION

PROGRESS REPORT: If Satan had been filling out a progress report that day, it would have appeared in his journal as a high water mark. He thought he was winning. But the Holy Spirit, who inspired every word of this testimony in Luke’s account, was the One who was keeping the records that day. The death of Stephen did not stop the spread of the Gospel, it launched it in a way these people could not have imagined. It took persecution to get the saints to take the next step. Jesus had said, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Until the death of Stephen and the vicious persecution of these early saints, the movement was **toward** Jerusalem, not **from** Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

We can thank God that after this shocking and shameful debacle, religious leaders learned their lesson and nothing like this ever happen again, right?!!! Sadly, that is not the case. Church history is filled with stories of men and women who have died for Jesus Christ. Michael Farris (*FROM TYNDALE TO MADISON: How the death of an English Martyr led to the American Bill of Rights*, B & H, Nashville, 2007) has produced a very important work on the price paid by Tyndale and others to get the Bible into hands of the laity, and how this led to freedom to worship as one feels led today. The following story illustrates the point:

Early in 1529, a priest named Thomas Hitton was arrested for heresy after preaching in Kent. He was interrogated - we can assume without mercy - and confessed to have smuggled an English New Testament into England from the continent. He was condemned by Archbishop Warnham and Bishop Fisher. By standard practice, the ecclesiastical condemnation was enforced by the secular authorities to maintain the pretense that the church itself did not shed blood. On February 23, 1529, Hitton was burned at the stake in Maidstone. Those professing to love and serve God ceremoniously executed another professing Christian in a slow, agonizing, and brutally painful death - all for the express purpose of sending this "heretic" straight into the fires of hell" [Farris: 30].

But that martyrdom was almost 500 years ago. We live in a different world today, right? Consider the first few paragraphs from a Broadman Press Release:

This was written by Ron Brackin (Special Correspondent, ASSIST News Service, Friday, February 22, 2002), and the NASHVILLE, TN (ANS) stated, "The sheer volume of hard evidence presented at the press conference was staggering."

Names, addresses and photographs of 23,686 Chinese Christians recently arrested for their faith. Twenty thousand beaten. One hundred twenty-nine killed. More than 4,000 sentenced to labor and "re-education" camps. Homes and property confiscated or destroyed, leaving tens of thousands of children homeless orphans. All this, in a country that boasts total religious freedom. Article 36 of the PRC constitution promises that "Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ, public organization, or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion." The reality, however, is dramatically different for people like 50-year-old Gong Shengliang, pastor of the South China Gospel Mission. He was arrested August 8, 2001 and sentenced to death. Jin Tong (20), was sentenced to two years in prison after she refused to join the government-run Three Self Patriotic Church. And Tonghuan Yin (26) was arrested in November 2001. She has not been heard of since.

Behind the podium, holding a stack of documents nearly two feet high, stood Li Shixiong, founder and chairman of the Committee for Investigation on Persecution of Religion in China (CIRPC). Mr. Li himself had spent over 20 years of his life in labor and re-education camps in the Chinese gulag. "Every Chinese Christian," Li said, "knows that to believe in God is to dedicate your whole life."

I had the privilege of placing a number of copies of the Gospel of John in the new Mandarin translation and the HCSB in the hands of a lady from China. She was excited about giving a copy to her mother. Broadman and Holman Outreach International is in the process of publishing a new

corrected Mandarin Bible. My friend from China is excited about this project, and feels safe taking Scripture to her mother in China today. However, things could change there overnight. Those who attract the attention of authorities are still at risk.

CHAPTER 8

Saul Becomes the Persecutor

8:1 - SAUL AGREED. *“Saul agreed with putting him to death. On that day a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of Judea and Samaria.”* The statement that Saul agreed with putting him to death implies his pleasure in the death of Stephen. Full consent and will are shown. They had not been able to shut him up any other way, but with the stones they could surely silence him. We shall see.

“Chapter 8 is closely linked with chapters 6 and 7. The subject of persecution begun in 6 is continued in 8. Furthermore, the personality of Saul, introduced in 7, is also found in 8. There is a close connection between Philip (chap. 8) and Stephen (chaps. 6-7) because both belonged to the Seven (6:5). Even the order of their two names in 6:5 is followed in the sequence of the narrative in 6:8-8:40” [BKC - The Bible Knowledge Commentary].

Some students of the Word have read that Paul agreed with the decision to mean that he was a member of the Sanhedrin. Eddleman pointed out that “conclusive proof that Saul was a member of the Council does not exist. It may be concluded that he probably was not a member. When Paul tried to stress his Hebrew background and his loyalty to Judaism, he could have proved his point by claiming to have been a member of the Sanhedrin” [HLE: 93]. Paul was probably too young and he was not married, so it is doubtful that he was a member of that body.

Consenting (“agreed with”) does not necessarily mean casting a vote. This was mob action on the part of the crowd, self-righteous approval by the Sanhedrin, and Saul was coolly applauding the violence. “Zealous Saul was living according to his conscience, which let him approve Stephen’s cruel death. Conscience untutored by God’s Spirit is a fallacious guide” [HLE].

A SEVERE PERSECUTION. At first, the Sadducees were leading the persecution of the saints but the attack on Stephen was led by the Pharisees. So now the two opposing parties join together against a common enemy. The adage, “enemy of my enemy is my friend” seems to have united them on that day. “Israel was in the process of confirming its tragic choice to reject Jesus as her Messiah” [BKC]. During this time the Saul, the zealous young Pharisee moved from excited approval to fanatical persecutor.

SCATTERED. The word in the Greek denotes the diaspora, the scattering of the Jews among Gentiles for the purpose of colonization and commerce. Now a new diaspora is launched by the intense persecution of the followers of Christ. The flight of these believers must have seemed like anything but progress at the time. The Greek word is derived from the act of scattering seed and this dispersion proved to be a scattering of the seed of the Gospel throughout the world.

The stoning of Stephen launched a frenzied persecution against the church in Jerusalem. This persecution was so intense that all believers except the apostles were scattered throughout the land of Judea and Samaria. Our first reaction is horror that these fanatical Jews could so viciously attack their fellow Jews. **In the name of God, they attacked those who followed His Son.** Jesus had told them that those persecuting them would be convinced that they were doing it on behalf of God.

We have seen a number of progress reports, and here is one that at first does not seem like a progress report. How could a severe persecution be any indication of progress? Such exciting things were happening in Jerusalem that believers were determined to stay there. After all, that is where the saints were ministering to those in need. That is where the apostles were. That is where the signs and wonders were being seen on a regular basis. And many were wondering when Jesus would return to establish His kingdom. In other words, they were not about to leave Jerusalem. But what was wrong with that? There was a serious problem with that.

The risen Christ had said: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, **in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth**” (Acts 1:8, bold added). It took a severe persecution to drive them out of Jerusalem so that they could carry out the Great Commission, which Jesus (in 1:8) predicts that they will do. What the devil designed for evil purposes, God used for good. They would not leave Jerusalem until they were forced to do so. Now that they were being driven out, they took the Gospel with them in ever broadening circles.

Dr. Jimmy Draper, then President of LifeWay Christian Resources, sent trustees a note in which he quoted a Chinese Christian, who when asked what we can do for them, said “Stop praying for the persecution to end. That is what keep us growing.” Someone asked me what it would take to turn America back to God. I said, “Persecution. I don’ want to go through persecution, but that is what it will take.” I am still convinced of it. When blessings do not **draw** people to God, persecution will **drive** them to Him. You tell me when we have had the last persecution in America and I will tell you when we have had the last great revival! Of course, the Great Awakening continued beyond the persecution and faded away as believers became apathetic.

THE APOSTLES. The amazing thing is that the Pharisees did not have the apostles stoned that day. Could they have remembered the words of Gamaliel (Acts 5:34ff)? Or, do they fear the people because of the popularity of the apostles? Or was it that they were aware of the fact that they might get away with one murder, but a mass slaughter might have brought the wrath of Rome down on them? One would hardly conclude that they were suddenly overwhelmed with mercy.

One added note seems in order: since the survival of a church in Jerusalem is testified to throughout

Acts and in the Pauline Epistles, it would seem that a few believers were left in Jerusalem. Another possibility is that the apostles continued to reach others for Christ. We know that James, the half-brother of Jesus would become the leader in Jerusalem.

JUDEA AND SAMARIA. This denotes the geographical areas beyond Jerusalem mentioned by Jesus in Acts 1:8. This is the area Jesus set as second on His plan for the spread of the Gospel. The literalism is amazing in light of Matthew 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8. “These are geographical entities. No complex structures of human relations are in purview except as they exist coincidentally in the geographical areas mentioned. The gospel will obviously be penetrating all strata of life as men are won to Christ individually. But this is secondary: to get at humanity everywhere, Christ held aloft geographical entities in natural and logical sequence as primary” [HLE].

Judaism, including here the Pharisees, Sadducees, the mob, and Saul, could not accept any image of the Messiah that was both political and powerful enough (militarily) to deliver the nation from Rome. “Enough Jews did believe to accomplish two things:

- (a) to realize the Hebrew destiny of representing God to all others evangelically, and
- (2) to make rapid, efficient transition from Hebrew Messianism as a small sect within Israel to Christianity as a long awaited and inevitable expression of true spiritual monotheism not limited to any national or ethnic entity.

“Any segment of Christianity that is not aggressively missionary and evangelistic either atrophies and withers on the vine, or persecution falls upon it. Unfortunately, the latter was necessary, in the providence of God, to keep the implementation of the Great Commission on schedule” [HLE, bold added].

8:2 - BURIED STEPHEN. *“But devout men buried Stephen and mourned deeply over him.”* Various commentaries agree that these “devout men” who buried Stephen may have been some pious non-Christian Jews who were who had a genuine respect for Stephen and regretted his violent death. Surely, however, when the mob dispersed, there would have been some believers who would have risked the wrath of the Pharisees in order to bury him.

8:3 - SAUL. *“Saul, however, was ravaging the church, and he would enter house after house, drag off men and women, and put them in prison.”* Saul would become the key person in the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles, but at this point the mere thought of Jesus would have sent him into a blind rage. Luke seems to focus on the women who were persecuted, and this seemed to haunt Saul in the years to come, as we see in Paul’s confession (22:4; 26:9, 10; 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13; Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:13).

RAVAGED. The Greek word (*elumaineto*, from *lumainw*) means to destroy, to

“devastate, ravage, signifies the act of ferocious animals, such as bears, wolves, and the like, in seeking and devouring their prey. This shows with what persevering

rancour this man pursued the harmless Christians; and thus we see in him what bigotry and false zeal are capable of performing” [CLARKE].

The intensity of the persecution of the saints would be something Saul would never forget, but there is no regret at this point. He is a religious fanatic who is seeking only to destroy. One of the great influences on James Madison was the writing of Joseph Addison, who once quoted “an Excellent Author” who made the statement, “We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another” [FARRIS, Michael, *From Tyndale to Madison*: 317].

With seeming approval of the leaders of the Pharisees, and probably the Sadducees, Saul launched such a vicious assault on the church that he would on many occasions recall the intensity of his hate and the brutal nature of his assault on, not just men, but women also. He would, with support from others and the approval of the religious leaders, force his way into the homes of believers, arrest them, and take them to prison. The Roman authorities seemed to have looked the other way.

CHURCH. The Greek word, *ekklesia*, means “to call out.” It came to denote a gathering of the saints, who were bound together by salvation by grace, through faith, in Jesus Christ. The church would become more clearly defined by the time the New Testament was completed.

Philip Goes to Samaria

8:4 - SCATTERED. “*So those who were scattered went on their way proclaiming the message of good news.*” For more on the dispersion, see the first chapter on James, which was addressed to the Jewish believers of the Dispersion. Jesus had commanded His followers to remain in Jerusalem until the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4), but they had remained there long after Pentecost and they were not carrying the Gospel to other people as He had commanded in Acts 1:8. The violent persecution led by Saul forced them to do what some of them should have been doing all along.

The Diaspora refers to the scattering of the Jews from Palestine throughout the Roman world. This dispersion was now happening to Christian Jews in a new way: Jews were persecuting Jews for their faith. Eddleman states that this was “not racial strife, as some superficially aver, but theological and Christological issues are at stake” [HLE: 95].

We may illustrate the effects of the violent dispersion of believers in a simple way. If you pour out a sizable but small puddle of water on a table and then slap that little puddle of water with your hand, the water is scattered in every direction. When you look around you will see small drops of water all around the table. Now if you picture each drop of water growing into a puddle the size of the original puddle you get a picture of what was happening as the believers were scattered from Jerusalem throughout Judea and Samaria.

8:5 - PHILIP. “*Philip went down to a city in Samaria and preached the Messiah to them.*” This is Philip the deacon (6:5) and evangelist (21:8), not the apostle by the same name. He has the distinction of being the only one to whom the title “evangelist” is given in Acts. It is interesting that

the first person reported in Acts to have taken the Gospel specifically to Samaria, and later to an Ethiopian Gentile, was a Hellenistic Jewish believer. Contact with a Samaritan or Gentile would not be as abhorrent to a Hellenistic Jew as to a Palestinian Jew.

SAMARIA. The city of Samaria was built by Omri (1 Kings 16:24), but the name is often applied to the nation of Israel, the northern ten tribes. Later, after its capture by Sargon II in 722 B.C., most of its inhabitants were replaced by foreign colonists, after the system of dispersion carried out by the Assyrians. An amalgamation followed in time as the remaining Jews intermarried with the foreigners. Jesus had an earlier, and fruitful ministry in Samaria (John 4). The twelve were forbidden to go there on the third tour of Galilee, but the prohibition was lifted before He ascended (1:8).

In the mid-nineteen seventies, as referenced earlier, I had the privilege of having Dr. H. Leo Eddleman with me for a revival when I was preparing my first study of the Book of Acts in preparation to teach it during the January Bible Study which had been scheduled for the following year. Dr. Eddleman was writing his commentary on Acts while I was preparing my notes, so when I came to a problem I would talk with Dr. Eddleman about it. After he returned to Dallas, I called him one day and discussed a recognized Bible scholar who had written a commentary on Acts which followed his theme of how the Gospel overcame barriers (racial barriers, the barriers between men and women, etc.). That author had stressed that when the Gospel was taken by Philip to the Samaritans the barrier between the Jews and Gentiles had been overcome. Dr. Eddleman told me that one reason he was writing his commentary was to correct the errors made by “the man whose name you just mentioned.” To illustrate, he said, “If you took a Jew and a Samaritan and dressed them alike and stood them side by side you couldn’t tell them apart. They were both Semitic peoples. The people the Assyrians relocated to Samaria were other Semitic people. The barrier was not racial but religious.”

Dr. Eddleman stressed that today’s Samaritans can hardly, if at all, be distinguished from either an Arab or an Israeli born in the Near East. “Proclaiming Christ among Samaritans may not have been easy, but it was Philip’s assignment. He stuck with it instead of falling into the trap of seeking remedies for the supposed racial differences. Christ would take care of this if they would take Christ” [HLE: 97].

EDDLEMAN ON THE SAMARITANS

“Classifying Samaritans as ‘half-breeds’ may stem more from Hebrew hauteur than from racial realities. Assyria took many strong and intelligent Israelites into captivity about 722 B.C. The Semitic military left in charge of (a) weak and decimated population intermarried prolifically with the remnant. Jews and Samaritans had enough determinative ancestry in common to make them of one stock:

(a) Abraham and Shem (Shem is a name...the origin of ‘Semitic’ and “Semite”-worshippers of Yahweh).

(b) Assyrians were descendants of Abraham (about 1950 B.C.); thus Samaritans were

more an example of ‘inbreeding’ than ‘half-bredism’.

(c) Jews were equally snobbish toward other Semitic peoples: Ismaelites, Moabites (descendants of Esau and Jacob?).

(d) Separation of the Northern Kingdom shortly after Solomon’s death (931 B.C., approximately) from Southern (Kingdom) inaugurated a competitive spirit between Epharim (Israel) and Judah based on nationalism, not race” [HLE: 96-97].

PREACHED THE MESSIAH. Philip had but one message to preach and that was “the Messiah”. Luke uses the Imperfect active, which means that he began to preach and kept on at it. “Note *euaggelizomenoi* in verse Acts 8:4 of missionaries of good news (Page) while *ekêrussen* here presents the preacher as a herald. He is also a teacher (*didaskalos*) like Jesus. Luke probably obtained valuable information from Philip and his daughters about these early days when in his home in Caesarea (Acts 21:8) [ATR].

The Samaritans, who worshiped in their temple on Mount Gerizim, held strong Messianic hope. In fact, they were not as concerned with a military Messiah as the Jews were. Philip knew their hope and began by presenting Jesus of Nazareth, whom many would remember, as the Messiah for whom they were looking.

8:6 - THE CROWDS. “*The crowds paid attention with one mind to what Philip said, as they heard and saw the signs he was performing.*” The Samaritan crowds listened to Philip with “one mind”. They continued to pay attention to him (they were spellbound - as in vv. 10, 11). They give him their undivided attention after seeing the signs he was performing. Philip, the layman, is performing the same kind of signs the apostles and Stephen had performed in Jerusalem. These signs were authentic miracles worked by Philip and they stood in sharp contrast to the schemes, plots, deceits, and pseudo-miracles performed by a local magician, Simon-Magus.

WHAT PHILIP SAID. These Samaritans listened “with one mind” to what Philip preached about the Messiah, and they were spellbound as they both listened to his words and “saw the signs he was performing”. He continued to speak and perform signs that verified his message, and these people continued to listen and observe. This denotes the order followed in the early spread of the Gospel. First, there is the proclamation of the Gospel, accompanied by the hearing of the Word. After this, there is the performing of signs and the seeing of the signs. There was no question as to whether the church would concentrate on the spiritual needs of the individual or his physical needs. “Scripture presents no dilemma about this: men personally redeemed eventually correct inequities in the social order, but correctives will not bring personal salvation to anyone. If a perfect environment would save, Adam and Eve would still be in the Garden of Eden” [HLE: 98].

SIGNS. Why are we not seeing similar signs today (signs that can be authenticated)? The answer may well be that the Gospel has been published in a great number of languages, and authenticated through history, archaeology, forensics, and linguistics (and many of these proofs confirmed by computer). Another answer may be that contemporary faith is weak. We often hear of something miraculous that happens, and sometimes these miracles are confirmed by medical science. My

brother James was found to have a malignant tumor around his spinal cord, around arteries, and up against the back of his heart. It was determined that it was lymphoma, which means that it had spread from some other source. Surgery and chemotherapy eliminated the tumor, but left him with a rehab challenge. He worked with great determination to walk again. I went over and built parallel bars on his patio and he practice walking endlessly. He refused to give in to this problem. That was almost twenty years ago. Is that a testimony to a miracle, or a tribute to his dedication to walk? Maybe both, because **they have never found the source of the tumor!** When he had a pain he would return to his oncologist and when they checked, there was no cancer in that area. One day I asked him if it had occurred to him that it might have been there when we began praying about it? He said, "I have thought about that." Stephen Olford used to say, "Faith is not believing God can do it, faith is believing God will do it."

Are there miracles today? Yes. Consider the message I sent to my friend Randy Knepper of Jacksonville, Florida (Sunday, March 25, 2007)

Gene Abbey, one of our deacons called to tell me that his sister had just called to tell him that 25 people had walked the isle, making a profession of faith - in a small country church near Laurel, MS. The pastor, who has been there over 30 years, assured the people he would be counseling the children in that number.

There is more! A friend called our deacon's sister this afternoon and told her that 15 people came forward in their church on profession of faith. The churches are in the same area but the pastors had not been in touch with each other. She added that note because both pastors preached on David's confession this morning. It wasn't the pastor, or the program, it was the Lord at work!

8:7 - UNCLEAN SPIRITS. *"For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed, and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed."* As in 5:16, physician Luke distinguishes between ordinary illnesses and diseases that a physician might diagnose and extraordinary possession by unclean spirits.

We must remember that even though Luke was inspired by the Holy Spirit as he wrote this Scripture, he was also a scientist, and as such he had carefully investigated that about which he wrote (I:1ff). He could distinguish between ordinary physical paralysis and demon possession. Before one protests that Luke's medical knowledge pales in comparison to the modern physician, let me add that God intrusted to Luke's care the single most import missionary and theologian who ever lived. The modern doctor is blessed with skills, facilities, and equipment Luke could not have imagined, but how many of them can detect demon possession when they see it. For that matter, how many psychologists could compare with Luke or Philip in determining demon possession. It is my opinion that one reason for this is that the demons sensed the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in such a way that they felt far more threatened by Philip and the apostles than they are by secular counseling. That is not a condemnation of counseling, but an awareness of the distinction that needs to be made between psychological disorders and true demonic possession.

“It is evident that these unclean spirits were not a species of diseases; as they are here distinguished from the paralytic and the lame. There is nothing more certain than that the New Testament writers mean real diabolic possessions by the terms unclean spirits, devils, etc., which they use. It is absolute trifling to deny it. If we, in our superior sagacity can show that they were mistaken, that is quite a different matter!” [CLARKE].

PARALYZED. “Many who were paralyzed and lame were healed.” This requires the creation, or recreation of new nerve cells and nerve centers, which is theoretically impossible to man since destroyed cells of the nervous system are irreplaceable. This may seem supernatural, and it is to man, but to God all things are possible.

8:8 - GREAT JOY. “*So there was great joy in that city.*” The servant, Philip, was reaping where the Master had sown (John 4), and just as there was great excitement after the encounter with the woman at the well in this same place, there was great joy as they both heard Philip’s message about the Messiah, and saw the miracles. No doubt, some of those who experienced great joy were ones who had been saved and healed physically, or freed from demons. Family and friends would have rejoiced with them.

A Man Named Simon

8:9 - SORCERY. “*A man named Simon had previously practiced sorcery in that city and astounded the Samaritan people, while claiming to be somebody great.*” Simon was a common name at the time. This was Simon Magus.

The Believers Study Bible carries an interesting note here:

“This is Christianity’s first sharp confrontation with the occult. Moses had listed no fewer than 10 ‘abominations’ of the nations, particularly of Canaan. He strongly warned the Israelites just before crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land (Deut 18:9-14). Sorcery is literally ‘magic arts,’ from mageuo (Gk.), the root for the English word “magic.” **Moses warned the Israelites that Canaan would be filled with the practitioners of wizardry, necromancy, and divination.** He then indicated to the chosen people that God was instituting prophecy precisely to teach and warn the Israelites about such things. **Sorcery and its like were wholly unacceptable to the God of Israel** (Lev 20:6, 27; Deut 17:2-5).

Moses indicated that the prophets God would send, apparently beginning with Joshua, would teach the people to resist such practices. **Prophecy would be established alongside the priesthood** (Deut 18:15ff.). This may be an instance of double futuristic application of prophecy because Peter treated this prediction as having been fulfilled by the coming of Christ (2:22-24). In Christianity’s first encounter with the Samaritan culture, **Simon stubbornly resisted and apparently**

never actually became a Christian (8:18-24). Just as Christianity was victorious in its first confrontation with sorcery in the spread of the gospel into Judea and Samaria, so in the final segment of the Great Commission (cf. 1:8, note), the sorcerer Elymas vigorously tried to stop Paul and Barnabas from witnessing to the proconsul Sergius Paulus (13:8, 12). The missionaries demonstrated that the victory of the infant faith in its homeland would be repeated abroad” [BSB, bold added for emphasis].

This was the first conflict between the Gospel and this pseudo-spiritualism (occult practices) so common in that area, and in that time after Pentecost. Anything God produces, Satan counterfeits. Before Philip came to the city, Simon was a well known sorcerer and magician who made his living deceiving people.

Sadly, the occult did not disappear in the First Century. In fact, there was revival of the occult in the latter part of the Twentieth Century. The incredible thing about this is where it occurred - not in the jungles of Africa, South America, or Asia, but in America, which had been called a Christian nation. America, according to Francis Schaeffer, entered **the post-Christians era in our history** in 1935 (England in 1895). To illustrate what it means for something like this to happen, read the note I received from Dr. William R. Cooper, a Bible scholar from England. But first, remember that this is from the land that heard C. H. Spurgeon, John Wesley, and George Whitefield. The letter of March, 2007, (with emphasis added by this writer) reads:

Hi, Johnny!

Yes, it's amazing, isn't it? Over here - as in your country - the enemy has convinced the people that anyone preaching such things is either mad or evil or both. Besides which, they are on the make. I remember some years ago I was preaching in the street about the days of Noah. **The only reaction I got was someone telling me to get back to America!!!** What a nerve! - and me with my Oxford accent as well!

Seriously though, **over here it is just like preaching to a corpse. I'm not kidding. Nor am I exaggerating. The people are dead - in trespasses and sins**, alas - and that's how they wish to stay. As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be....! - how truly our Lord spoke!

That same Lord bless you, my brother!

Bill.

I would add that America entered the post-Christian era just ten years after the Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, a trial that was devised by the ACLU, an ungodly organization that has waged war against God since its inception. How long will it be before Dr. Cooper's pronouncement that "the people are dead" will apply to America?

8:10 - PAID ATTENTION. *"They all paid attention to him, from the least of them to the greatest, and they said, 'This man is called the Great Power of God!'"* It is amazing how gullible some people are when it comes to the occult. Sadly, even though we are twenty centuries removed

from Simon the magician, many people are still caught up in the occult. Witchcraft flourished during the rise of New Age religions during the last quarter of the Twentieth Century, only now they prefer the term wiccan to witch. The foundation for that was seen with the spread of occult beliefs and practices a few decades earlier, with Anton LeVay's Satanic Bible and the establishment of the church of Satan giving it a jump-start.

The people were under the spell of Simon and his sorcery. Some have suggested that there may have been a very limited link to Gnosticism which accepted aeons or supernatural power. An aeon may be defined as a divine power emanating from some supreme being, playing various roles in the operation of the universe [WordPerfect Thesaurus]. Since the people, "from the least to the greatest" were calling him "the Great Power of God", he may well have been passing himself off as one of these aeons of which the Gnostics were speaking. If so, Gnosticism, though still in the embryonic stage, was beginning to spread. Occult practices, however, have been around from the earliest days of human history.

8:11 - HE HAD ASTOUNDED THEM. *"They were attentive to him because he had astounded them with his sorceries for a long time."* These people had been paying attention to Simon because of his sorceries. They were mesmerized by the occult type of magic. A magician may entertain people with a slight of hand, or carefully orchestrated act in which there is no claim of anything supernatural at all. I used to do coin tricks for my nieces and nephews and one time when we stopped by to visit my brother-in-law James in Marks, Mississippi, his young son Nicholas ran out side and called a number of his friends and invited them to come in and see his "magic uncle."

Simon was a practitioner of the occult arts. He may well have deceived people with magic that had nothing to do with the supernatural, but he had for many years kept a following through occult practices. My brother-in-law, Jimmy Furr, was a regional director for the Interfaith Witness Department, a division of the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. He provided training in detecting and dealing with New Age Movements, cults, and the occult for 12 years. One time, after leading a conference on the occult at the Ridgecrest Conference Center in North Carolina, he told me that he was speaking on the occult, and when he arrived at his assigned conference room he discovered an overflow crowd. Other conferences were not well attended. These Christian leaders were seeing enough evidence of occult activity in America to lead them to seek all the help they could get.

This brings up an important question. Are these practitioners of the occult arts fakes, or do they really have supernatural power? There is no way we can imagine that a person who is caught up in any satanic activity would have any scruples against a little deception - or a lot for that matter. However, there have been studies in which some practitioners of the occult did in fact perform feats, or reveal information that seemed to be supernatural. It may be an over simplification, but we can safely say that Satan has more power than human beings and as such he is "supernatural". He may well give occult power to some who serve his purpose. If Satan can possess a man or woman he may well enable them to "tell fortunes", or reveal certain things. At the same time, there are many ways for people to fool people into believing they have supernatural power, and much of what is seen in the world may come under the heading of deception. What we do know for sure is that Satan's power is limited and his doom is fixed, and all who are deceived by him will share the fate already

determined (Rev. 20).

In a conference he led in our church, Jimmy Furr asked why we thought so many people in America have turned to the occult. His answer was that a lot of people who get involved say that they find a “power” in the occult they have never witnessed in the church. What a charge for one to make against the Lord’s church! If we are powerless it is because we are prayerless, and if we are prayerless, it is because we are faithless.

8:12 - BELIEVED PHILIP. *“But when they believed Philip, as he proclaimed the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized.”* I love the “buts” and “therefores” of the Bible. Here the word “but” declares the sharp contrast between the message of Philip and that of Simon. Simon’s magic was designed to deceive and control these people, but the Good News (Gospel) Philip proclaimed was designed to enlighten and set people free. Simon represented an oppressive power designed to deceive and control people; Philip taught people “about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ.” He revealed to these people the spiritual kingdom of God and the reality of the eternal kingdom of God.

THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST. In Scripture, the “name” of a person represented the nature and character of the individual. Thus, Philip proclaimed to them the Person, nature, and character of Jesus Christ. He would have taught them about the miraculous virgin birth, sinless life, sacrificial death on the cross, the burial, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ. “Little if any of the OT ethics and social ideology ever would have seeped through synagogue masonry to the rest of the world without the urgency of the evangelism and missions of personal redemption incited by Christ” [HLE: 100].

BAPTIZED. The word baptize is a transliteration of the Greek word *baptizo* (dip, emerse). The word here is in the imperfect passive tense showing that people were being baptized from time to time (one after another, as people were being saved). Greek scholar, A. T. Robertson points out that the word “believed” (*episteusan*) is constative aorist antecedent to the baptism” [ATR]. One must first believe in Jesus Christ; then he (or she) was to submit himself for baptism. As the different people were being saved they were being baptized as a testimony to their faith in Jesus Christ and their identification with Him in His death, burial, and resurrection.

8:13 - SIMON HIMSELF. *“Then even Simon himself believed. And after he was baptized, he went around constantly with Philip and was astounded as he observed the signs and great miracles that were being performed.”* Simon, the magician, the practitioner of the occult professed to believe. He had found a power greater than his. Is he sincere? Is he deceived, or is he deceiving Philip and his neighbors? Or, does he think he can appropriate a greater power than he had know before?

BELIEVED. In the NT, faith appears in three distinct senses: (1) a saving principle, (2) a composite of truth to be believed, and (3) as a superficial or even superstitious faith which even demons may possess (James 2:19).

Simon probably saw that he miracles worked by Philip in the name of Jesus Christ were genuine, whereas his own were either fraudulent, or maybe performed in the supernatural, but limited power of the devil. He apparently wanted this power so much that he followed Philip around wherever he

went, observing, waiting, and lusting for this power.

Simon apparently believed that the power Philip had demonstrated could be gained through the name of Jesus Christ and he desired it for his own personal gain. There seems to have been no genuine conviction of sin, no personal desire to know Jesus as Savior. He must have made a profession of faith because he was baptized, but he followed Philip around everywhere he went for his one selfish purpose.

SIGNS AND GREAT MIRACLES. We have seen these two designations before (signs and wonders) so we will not define them here, other than to remind ourselves that great miracles declare the power and presence of God, and signs relate the miracles to spiritual truth and moral lessons. That which is significant here is that these “signs and great miracles” are once again performed by a layman (as in the case of Stephen) rather than one of the apostles. In addition, they were performed in Samaria, not in Jerusalem or Judea. The Gospel is breaking out of the safe shell of Jerusalem, as the Lord intended in the Great Commission.

Simon’s Shocking Sin

8:14 - THE APOSTLES. *“When the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had welcomed God’s message, they sent Peter and John to them.”* This is a reminder that when the persecution broke out on the day Stephen was stoned, the disciples in Jerusalem began to scatter throughout Judea and Samaria. This denotes the district, not the city itself. The apostles, however, stayed in Jerusalem. A few believers remained in Jerusalem because there was a church there - and James, the half-brother of our Lord would soon become a leader in that church, as well as one of the key leaders in the Christian movement.

HEARD THAT. This is significant. There was communication between the apostles and the saints who had been scattered, this new Diaspora. Communication kept the apostles informed and provided support for believers. Rumors of some new movement would have reached the temple authorities, not the apostles, so this points to direct and purposeful communication.

When they heard about the response to the Gospel in Samaria, the apostles selected Peter and John to go to the area. This is the last mention of John in Acts, but it would not be the last we would hear from him. In fact, the Romans had to exile him to the Isle of Patmos to try silence him. That didn’t work either. Two millennia later people are still reading the Gospel of John, the three Epistles of John, and the Revelation. During the earthly ministry of Jesus, the inner circle of apostles was made up of Peter and the brothers, James and John, the sons of Zebedee. Following the Ascension, Peter and John became the early leaders of the church. They would have been the logical choice to go to Samaria.

The question is, why did they send them? Did they have authority over them? Is a hierarchy being established? The answer to the last question is no. The answer to the first question seems logical enough. Peter and John could encourage the new believers - both those believers who had been

forced to leave Jerusalem and those new converts in the region. As to the authority, Peter and John were apostles, and a certain apostolic authority is seen within the church. Peter was the mature leader, and John, possibly the youngest of the apostles was the “disciple Jesus loved”. Saints who had fled Jerusalem in the face of the intense persecution, led by young Saul of Tarsus, would know and respect them. New believers among the Samaritans would have heard of them when they heard about Jesus. In fact, there may well have been a few there who would remember Peter and John from the time Jesus met the woman at the well (John 4), following which a number of people believed in Jesus.

Peter and John did not go to Samaria because they had authority over Phillip. It was no reflection on his ministry. They were the ones, however, who had walked with Jesus, so they could answer questions, encourage the people, and be sure to safeguard sound doctrine. The apostles would realize that the news of the acceptance of the Gospel in Samaria would be met with skepticism. Even though the Samaritans were near neighbors, and even though they both subscribed to the Torah, they were hated by the Jews. If Peter and John came back and reported that the spread of the Gospel among the Samaritans was authentic, that the power of God was being manifested there, and they subscribed to sound doctrine, it would improve relations between the two groups of believers. There is a bit of irony here in that John had once wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village (Luke 9:54). Instead of fire falling, as it fell on Sodom and Gomorrah, a spiritual fire was about to fall on them.

8:15 - THEY WENT DOWN. *“After they went down there, they prayed for them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit.”* Any time one left Jerusalem he had to descend from the heights of the hills of Jerusalem. There was more than topography involved, however, because, no matter where the Jew lived, or in which direction, he was always going up to Jerusalem, or when he left Jerusalem he was going down from Jerusalem.

PRAYED. This was no ritualistic prayer, not a mere form or formula, but a sincere prayer with a purpose as they sought divine guidance, grace, and unction.

THE HOLY SPIRIT. Anyone looking for progress reports will note here that this is the first time the Holy Spirit was sent to indwell those who were viewed as Gentiles by the Jews. Robertson asks,

“Did they wish the Samaritan Pentecost to prove beyond a doubt that the Samaritans were really converted when they believed?” They had been baptized on the assumption that the Holy Spirit had given them new hearts. The coming of the Holy Spirit with obvious signs (cf. Acts 10:44-48) as in Jerusalem would make it plain” [ATR].

LIFE APPLICATION

Note from the Bible Knowledge Commentary
The Bible Navigator Electronic Library
(With emphasis and added note by this writer)

Normally the Holy Spirit baptizes, indwells, and seals at the moment of faith, but in this instance the delay served several purposes:

(1) Peter and John's prayer (for bestowing of the Holy Spirit) and their laying on of hands (resulting in the coming of the Spirit) **confirmed Philip's ministry among the Samaritans.** This authenticated this new work to the Jerusalem apostles.

(2) Also this confirmed Philip's ministry **to the Samaritans.** This message Philip had preached was validated by the coming of the Spirit, a mark of the coming kingdom (cf. v. 12; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:23-27; Joel 2:28-32).

(3) **Perhaps the most important aspect of God's withholding the Spirit** till apostolic representatives came from the Jerusalem church was **to prevent schism.** Because of the natural propensity of division between Jews and Samaritans it was essential for Peter and John to welcome the Samaritan believers officially into the church. The contrast between John's attitude here and in Luke 9:52-54 is significant [BKC].

NOTE: the above notes should be remembered in any study of Acts. It should also be noted that to this point no pattern or formula has been established for the sending of the Holy Spirit to indwell believers. This was a unique situation and we must keep the entire New Testament in mind in any study of the Holy Spirit. Peter and John prayed that they might receive Holy Spirit, but the sending of the Holy Spirit, was at the discretion of the Father.

Today, we receive the Holy Spirit at the point of salvation. That is the gift of the Holy Spirit, also known as the baptism of the Holy Spirit, or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Then there must be a daily filling of the Holy Spirit in order for Sanctification to take place. Sanctification, at the risk of an over simplification, occurs when the Holy Spirit conforms us to the image of Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:29). Eddleman makes the point the variation in order here.

“Some maintain the normal order to be: believe, be baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit. However, the order diverged from this on Pentecost and in Cornelius' house (see 2:41; 10:45-47). This is the unpredictable sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. No set formula appears by which we can compel Him to come down, do His work, and occupy the human heart” [HLE: 101].

The usual pattern seen in the NT seems to be that the Holy Spirit convicts lost people when they hear the Gospel, “convinces them of the truth of the Gospel, converts them in the power of heaven, and then simultaneously comes into the hearts where he abides henceforth (cf. 19:2)” [HLE: 101]. This was a transitional period and on a number of occasions variation in the manifestation of the Holy Spirit which do not fit a pattern. It is possible that the Holy Spirit was instrumental in the salvation of these Samaritans, and then when Peter and John prayed and laid their hands on them He came upon them formally and demonstratively.

8:16 - HE HAD NOT COME. *“For He had not yet come down on any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.”* We should always use the pronoun “He” when referring to the Holy Spirit. He is the Third Person of the Trinity, never to be referred to as “It”.

In the early days of the church, the manifestation and the ministry of the Holy Spirit is made available at the discretion of the Father, according to His sovereign will. No pattern is yet established, as in the case of the believers Paul found at Ephesus (Chapter 19). By the time Paul visited Ephesus, it is obvious that believers receive the Holy Spirit at the point of salvation (Acts 19:2). There were times when those who received the Holy Spirit spoke in other languages, but that is not a pattern. It was given according to the sovereign will and purpose of God.

8:17 - PETER AND JOHN. *“Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.”* The verb is imperfect active, showing that they moved from one to another. “They received the Holy Spirit” also employs the imperfect active verb, showing repetition as with the laying on of the hands.

“The laying on of hands did not occur at the great Pentecost (Acts 2:4, 33) nor in Acts 4:31; Acts 10:44 nor is it mentioned in 1Co 12; 1Co 14. It is mentioned in Acts 6:7 about the deacons and in Acts 13:3 when Barnabas and Saul left Antioch. And in Saul's case it was Ananias who laid his hands on him (Acts 9:17). Hence it cannot be concluded that the Holy Spirit was received only by the laying on of the hands of the apostles or by the hands of anyone. The so-called practice of "confirmation" appeals to this passage, but inconclusively” [ATR].

These Samaritans had heard the Gospel, believed in Jesus, received His salvation, and had been baptized in His name. Yet, the Holy Spirit had been withheld, according to the will and purpose of the Lord. The One who had sent Peter and John to them would use their testimony mightily when they told the saints in Jerusalem, including the other apostles what had happened. It would not be long before these apostles would be going out into other nations with the Gospel and this was another important step in preparing them.

In time, the NT pattern would be clear: the Holy Spirit would be sent to indwell believers at the point of salvation. Sin grieves the Holy Spirit, and failure to obey Him quenches the Holy Spirit, but the true believer is still indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who convicts him from within that he must repent (1 John 1:9). This passage should not be used by itself to teach anything that is not revealed clearly here. For example, this does not teach that the Holy Spirit is held back at the point of salvation, and then given as a “second blessing” to a select few. A very devout teenager came by our home with my older son John one day when they were in high school. His brother was in John's class and this student was a grade ahead of them. He stayed with me in the den when his brother went with John to his room to look for something for an FFA project at school. I knew the youth had grown up in church so I asked him if he had received Jesus as his Savior. He hesitated before saying, “You see, our church believes that you have to speak in tongues if you are saved and I have never spoken in tongues.” It broke my heart that a teenager who desired the Lord's salvation as he obviously did not believe he could be saved without this “gift”.

It might also be added that this passage does not teach that the Holy Spirit can be called down by man, or given to one through the laying on of hands of the so-called anointed. It certainly does not provide a biblical basis for what is often called “slaying in the Spirit.” We must remember, God is sovereign, I am not!

If we study this along with the account of the conversion and gift of the Holy Spirit to Cornelius and those of his household, we must conclude that these were extraordinary and abnormal instances, which show no pattern, but underscore the obvious truth that God is sovereign in all His ways. His grace cannot be confined to methods and modes.

8:18 - WHEN SIMON SAW. *“When Simon saw that the Holy Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money...”* This is Simon the sorcerer, who had followed Philip so closely until Simon Peter and John arrive. Now he is watching them just as closely and when the Holy Spirit was given “through the laying on of hands of the apostles”, Simon approached them and offered them money if they would show him how they did it. He had been watching Philip closely, hoping to see some sudden movement that would reveal the secret of the great power he had seen displayed. When he saw the laying on of hands (by Peter and John) he thought he had found the secret. “He was like Houdini in search of a new trick. The laying on of hands had to be that which released the power” [HLE: 102]. It was obvious that a change took place when these people received the Holy Spirit. No one can receive the Holy Spirit without His making a change in that person’s life.

HE OFFERED THEM MONEY. We may render this riches rather than money. He wanted to buy God’s power, which is not for sale. He was not the last to think God’s grace is for sale to the highest bidder. The church today should note that money, education, numbers, and elaborate plants do not assure the power of God. I once saw a man hand a young pastor some money to “help him with his automobile expenses”, but before we left the home he made it obvious that he would be an asset if the church would “make him a deacon”.

God’s power is still not for sell. It is possible that if one looks for a manifestation of genuine power in the church today, he may have to look beyond the degrees, organizations, programs, and the latest church growth strategy to the saints in those house churches in China, or to those living under other Communists regimes, or Islamic governments around the world. The Communist leaders in China have been trying for decades to destroy the church in that nation, but today there are more Christians than Communists in China.

The Communists have always used propaganda to advance their cause - and their goal is a godless, classless, stateless society - once they get below the elite godless class at the top in their government.

They boast freedom of religion and showcase churches, but what they do not tell the world, is that only foreigners are free to go to those authorized churches. Sherri Whitehead accompanied her daughter Tina Murray, son-in-law Paul, and grandson Peyton to China in 2006 to complete the requirements to adopt a Chinese baby. Sherri told me they had to show their passports to get into the church they attended to be sure no Chinese national got into the church building. Yet, all the power, restrictions, and torture this mighty government has unleashed on Christians has not stopped their growth.

8:19 - GIVE ME THIS POWER. “...Saying, ‘Give me this power too, so that anyone I lay hands on may receive the Holy Spirit.’” Still convinced that they are simply more sophisticated magicians than he, Simon approaches Peter and John with a request: “Give me this power.” Now we know what he had on his mind all along: he wanted to add this power to his bag of tricks.

8:20 - PETER TOLD HIM. “But Peter told him, “May your silver be destroyed with you, because you thought the gift of God could be obtained with money!” Peter was filled with righteous indignation. He assumes here that Simon would perish. The apostles were very careful where money was concerned. It would be interesting to see how some modern day pastors and television preacher would adjust to the lifestyle of those early saints. They don’t want their lifestyle but they do want the power they manifested. Their attitude toward money and material reward marked the Christians attitude toward this world for two hundred years.

If we compared their attitude toward money and material possessions with the modern Christian we might discover the key to the power that was so evident in the early church. We might also discover the key to the spiritual anemia so prevalent in the church today.

8:21 - YOU HAVE NO PART. “You have no part or share in this matter, because your heart is not right before God.” The clear implication is that Simon is not a Christian. “Just as the Levites had no inheritance in the Promised Land, so also Simon had no portion in the matter of salvation.) The adverb perhaps does not mean God is reluctant to forgive sin. The question was whether Simon would repent of his heart’s intention” [BKC].

8:22 - REPENT. “Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.” It is interesting that the NT answer to sin was “Repent!”, but today the solution to all sin issues, for many, is “Rehab”. The Hollywood solution to drugs, immorality, gambling, drunken orgies is rehabilitation. They can count on the liberal media and the tabloids to pick up the cry: Confess, say you are sorry, and check yourself into a rehab center for a brief period of time. Then when you come out we will have you on all the talk shows so you can share all the benefits of your rehab with the world. That has not ended with Hollywood and the media, it has made its way into the political arena, and as morals decline the confessions increase. Sadly, an element of that line of thought has made it into the church, as some “popular preachers” avoid preaching a Gospel of repentance, and focus on trying to make people feel good about themselves.

John the Baptist preached repentance. Jesus demanded repentance. Peter and John command Simon to repent. Repentance is not a feeling but a change of mind that is reflected in a change in one’s behavior. If the behavior does not change there has been no repentance, merely a psychological purging. There are those who assume they can continue to commit the sin as long as they go to church, confess, and cry a little. Before long they can begin the same cycle all over again. That is not repentance!

THE INTENT OF YOUR HEART. Peter and John were not deceived by Simon scheme whereby he might get the apostles to reveal the secret of their magic. He had never genuinely

repented. There are people today who have a self-centered plan that includes the Lord's church in their scheme for success. A young girl may go to church to meet boys, rather than to meet Jesus Christ and trust Him to lead her to the right boy. A new business man in town may be advised to join a large church and cultivate a relationship with the most prominent members. Some may believe identification with a well known church will look good on a resume.

A young woman appeared on Hannity and Colmes (a Fox News program) to provide the "fair and balanced" response to a conservative Christian in 2007. She seemed to be testing a new political strategy by stating that "we evangelical Christians" are more compassionate than you right wing extremists. Until recently, conservative Christians thought they were evangelical Christians. Every effort to spread the Gospel by Conservative Christians was met with the rebuff: "Separation of church and state!" The other lady, responded to the charge that liberals (suddenly, evangelical Christians) are more compassionate than conservative Christians by saying, "We conservative Christians don't poke holes in unborn babies' heads and suck their brains out!"

8:23 - POISONED. *"For I see you are poisoned by bitterness and bound by iniquity."* The NASB has "the gall of bitterness." The allusion to bitterness may "to refer to Deuteronomy 29:18, which speaks of idolatry and bitter apostasy (cf. Heb. 12:15). Simon had been captivated by false doctrine and sin. Simon's response may have been genuine or simply an outcry of fear. At least he was apprehensive about the outcome of his tragic request (Acts 8:18-19)" [BKC].

BOUND BY INIQUITY. Peter sees Simon as one bound by iniquity. Sin simply means to miss the mark. Transgression means to cross over the line with your eyes wide open. Iniquity carries the idea of being warped by continuing in sin and transgressions. David confessed all three in Psalm 51.

8:24 - PLEASE PRAY. *"Please pray to the Lord for me," Simon replied, 'so that nothing you have said may happen to me.'* We may assign motives or try to determine Simon's sincerity, but we are not told that he repented.

"Peter urged Simon to pray himself. Simon had no real concern for forgiveness. He was probably hoping that Peter's contact with the spiritual realm might keep these things Peter had threatened from happening. This is the last mention of Simon Magus in the Bible. Tradition describes him as continuing his career, combining Greek or Oriental philosophy with some elements of Christianity" [NCWB].

Simon dreaded the punishment but there is no indication that he hated sin. Dr. William R. Cooper, of England wrote to this writer that preaching to people in England is like preaching to a corpse. He added, "I am not joking." Simon Magus seems to have been dead to the call of the Gospel and the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

8:25 - TESTIFIED. *"Then, after they had testified and spoken the message of the Lord, they traveled back to Jerusalem, evangelizing many villages of the Samaritans."* After they prayed with the new believers in Samaria and laid their hands on them, they testified before them, and preached the message of the Lord. They had personal testimonies. Whoever in the history of Christianity has had more amazing testimonies about Jesus. Paul had an amazing testimony, but he had never walked

with Jesus as had Peter and John.

The original language implies that they enjoyed a preaching journey on their return trip back to Jerusalem. Not only did they affirm Philip's work and his message, they broke new ground in the same region. I grew up on a farm in the Mississippi Delta when many people had moved from the hill country with its small fields in "hollows" between hill, or poor clay soil on the hills. As soon as the Delta, which was actually an alluvial plain, was drained by the Cold Water Canal and other large drainage ditches, people moved in and cleared trees and bushes from the level fields and the ridges. This land was so fertile that many people farmed it for years before they began using commercial fertilize. In time the land would begin to lose many of the natural nutrients in the soil. It is sad that, spiritually speaking, we often see the same thing happen after an area has been evangelized. For years, there may be phenomenal growth, but in time many of the people lose their first love, as did church at Ephesus.

An Ethiopian Official Saved

8:26 - AN ANGEL. *"An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip: 'Get up and go south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to desert Gaza.'" This was a real angel from God, and even though no name is given to him, any angel from the Lord would be sufficient to deliver God's message.*

GET UP AND GO. This is not a suggestion, but a command from the Lord. I had the privilege of listening to Dr. Ed Blum, General Editor of the Holman Christian Standard Bible, explain to a man who sat with me at lunch at trustees meeting for LifeWay Christian Resources why the HCSB uses the word "slave" to translate the word most translations and versions render as "servant". Dr. Blum explained that the HCSB is a word for word translation, and then stressed that after you are saved you are not your own, you are bought with a price. I have mentioned this to a few pastors who have said, "We are slaves but our service is voluntary." How many of the 60 million slaves do you think could have gotten away with that excuse if he had decided he would not obey the master who had just purchased him from the slave block?

When God told Philip to go, debate was not invited, and disobedience was not an option. Philip belong to Jesus Christ. The only choice he had was to obey or rebel against God. He chose to obey. It is not enough for us to admire Philip and then decide the Great Commission is an option.

SOUTH. There were several roads that led from Jerusalem to Gaza, the ancient Philistine city that was eventually destroyed by Rome. If the word means the desert road, it would be the road through Hebron. Gaza was the southern most of the five cities of the Philistine which played such an important part in OT history. It was about two miles from the Mediterranean Sea on a road that led down to Egypt.

The angel gave Philip his marching orders, "Get up and go", but there is more. He told him where to go. He was told to go south until he hit the road that led from "from Jerusalem to desert Gaza." They did not have 911 addresses posted on mail boxes or little signs in the yard, but Philip did not

question the angel. He had all the information he needed.

I recently (in 2007) made a point of arriving at the Cracker Barrel in West Monroe, LA twenty minutes early for an 11:30 appointment with Dr. George Bannister, with whom I had worked for a number of years when we were on the executive board of the Louisiana Baptist Convention. Dr. Bannister is a Director of Missions in Ohio and he was to drive from Shreveport to West Monroe for our meeting. I made a point of arriving early to be sure I did not keep him waiting. He arrived twenty-five minutes early and went in and asked for a table for us. There followed a comedy of errors as I dialed his cell phone number and got some lady in Ohio. I had the wrong number. He couldn't find my cell phone number, but knew I would find him. I looked all over the store area, then walked to the entrance to the restaurant to look for him. He was watching that door and if I had taken two more steps he would have seen me. I went outside and sat in a rocker until 12:00 noon, wondering what had happened to him. The way we figured it, by the time he gave up and went to his car to find my phone number I was probably driving out of the parking lot. I finally got the signal that I had voice mail after I had driven about twenty minutes. I called but didn't get a signal. When I got home I called and we realized that we missed connecting with each other several times: in the store, outside, and at the restaurant door. Two more steps and he would have seen me. There was no way Philip was going to miss the Ethiopian.

8:27 - GOT UP AND WENT. *“So he got up and went. There was an Ethiopian man, a eunuch and high official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to worship in Jerusalem...”* Philip had no Blackberry, no cell phone, no Global Positioning Service, no computer generated map. But he arrived at the right place at exactly the right time. I had witnessed to Mr. Carl for years, after spending a lot of time with him at a deer camp a few years earlier. I went with him to watch his really high-priced beagles run at the local beagle club, of which he was a charter member. I visited with him in his home. He was always glad to see me but when I talked with him about Jesus Christ he simply dismissed the subject as graciously as he knew how. His brother was a minister, a denominational worker in another state, but when their mother became ill, he felt that he had to bear the lion share of the responsibility. His Christian brother didn't “pay for his raising”!

One day as I was driving into town, I realized I was approaching his street. I wanted to get home for lunch, but debated stopping by to see Mr. Carl. I really didn't want to stop. I wanted to go home, but at the last minute I hit the signal to turn onto his street. I stopped and when I went in to visit I learned that he had been in the hospital with heart problems. I witnessed to him, and again there was no response. Finally, I asked if I might have prayer before I left and he agreed. I prayed, but the thought crossed my mind that I had wasted my time again. When I finished the prayer I looked up and saw tears on his face. He said, “God sent you by here today.” For the next several years, he loved his church and he loved his pastor.

The Lord led me to that house on that day, the day He finally had Mr. Carl ready to hear the message of salvation and hope available to us in Jesus Christ. He brought us together as surely as he led Philip to a particular spot on a certain road at a certain time. The Lord will lead if we will listen with a mind to obey.

AN ETHIOPIAN MAN. This Ethiopian, Luke tells us, was “a eunuch and high official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians.” Eunuchs were not allowed to be Jews in the fullest sense of the word, only a proselytes of the gate. We will see that this man was not denied God’s grace either because of his race or his physical defect. The Jews were willing to accept people of other races as proselytes, but not eunuch. Some will remember that the late African-American singer, Sammy Davis, Jr. Became a Jew. In a sense, this is an example of how the Gospel overcame racial barriers, but in reality the Jews put up barriers not so much on racial grounds as religious grounds. They did not actively seek the salvation of Gentiles, but if a Gentile had converted to Judaism he would have been acceptable to the leaders.

The Lord had a witness and He had a time and a location. It is not surprising that there would have been a person there who needed Jesus. This man is identified as a eunuch. Eunuchs were often employed in confidential or important offices by various kings and queens. This was an important official in the court of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. Candace was not her name, but the title for the queens of Ethiopia. This eunuch was placed in charge of her entire treasury. In other words, he was a very important official. Ethiopians are mentioned infrequently in the Bible, but always prominently. Ebed-Melech rescued Jeremiah (Jer. 38).

It is remarkable that the Greek word for “treasure” is gaza. On the way to the city of Gaza, this Ethiopian eunuch who was over the treasure (gaza) for the queen of Ethiopia, found the spiritual treasure of everlasting life. Luke tells us that he had come to Jerusalem to worship. “As a Gentile converted to the Jewish faith, he had gone to keep the recent Feast of Pentecost (Isa. 56:3-8; John 12:20)” [NCWB].

NOTE OF INTEREST: I recall that Dr. Leo Eddleman, who had mastered both Hebrew and Greek (as well as Arabic), explained something of interest to me about this passage. For many years, the highly respected emperor of Ethiopia was a man named **Haille Selassie**. That name is almost identical in Hebrew and Arabic. It means “The Power of the Three” or “**the Glory of the Trinity**” which is a testimony to what God accomplished when he placed the scroll of Isaiah in the hands of this high ranking official of Ethiopia, and then provided someone to take that scroll and lead him to faith in Jesus.

8:28 - IN HIS CHARIOT. “...*And was sitting in his chariot on his way home, reading the prophet Isaiah aloud.*” There are many factors involved in witnessing for the Lord, and the **circumstances** in which the witness finds the lost person will often lead to the next step, which is the initial **contact**. Sometimes we have an opportunity to determine the circumstances under which we witness to a lost person. At other times the Lord simply has us in the right place at the right time.

The circumstances under which Philip came into contact with the eunuch show that the Lord was working from both ends. The man had been to Jerusalem to worship at the temple, possibly for Pentecost [NCWB]. He was now on his way home and he was “reading Isaiah aloud.” It doesn’t get any better than this! It would be interesting to know why he was reading aloud. Was he reading aloud to those in his entourage? We can assume that there was a large group traveling with so important an official. If he was reading the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew, we have a

clue as to why God raised up the Geek Empire under Alexander the Great - to Hellenize that part of the world, thus assuring a common language. The Lord was getting the stage set for the coming of the Messiah even then.

8:29 - THE SPIRIT. *“The Spirit told Philip, “Go and join that chariot.”* Here we find the next ingredient in a successful witnessing attempt. This time we are looking at a **Person** rather than a **factor** involving the circumstances. The Holy Spirit must be working to bring together an obedient witness and a lost person with whom He is dealing. With the witness, this encounter is intentional, but to the lost person the contact may seem accidental, and often uninvited.

The Book of Acts, as previously noted, might more appropriately be called The Acts of the Holy Spirit. It is certainly true that nothing was happening among the believers until Pentecost. In my youth I recall hearing people say that we need to pray for another Pentecost. I agree that we need to pray that the church will surrender to the leadership of the Holy Spirit, but Pentecost is as irrepeatable as the crucifixion. Neither needs to be repeated. The power of the Cross has never diminished, not has the power of the Holy Spirit.

GO AND JOIN. The Holy Spirit had brought Philip and the eunuch to this point on the road. Now he compels him to go and join the eunuch. Under normal circumstances he might have been prevented from joining him, but the Holy Spirit is working from both sides here. We often have a desire to witness to a person, but do not know how to open the conversation. Depend on the Holy Spirit to guide in all circumstances. Dr. Mike Minnix, editor of PastorLife.Com, a ministry of the Georgia Baptist Convention, and I were visiting by phone when he told me about an unusual witness experience. He and a friend were in a restaurant and each time the waitress came to the table he asked her a question or made a comment. Finally, he asked her if she would like to pray to receive Jesus. She stood there with a tray in one hand and asked the Lord to forgive her sins and give her eternal life.

On the other hand, I recall watching a few people who were so determined to witness to everyone they saw that they actually created problems for the one to whom they wanted to witness. I saw this when I saw someone stopping a nurse on the floor who was taking medication to patients. He was putting the nurse in a difficult situation. The pastor’s motives were good but the circumstances could have caused the nurse to have been reprimanded. If he felt compelled to witness to one of the nurses he could have asked permission to visit her and her family at home, or visited with her during a break.

8:30 - PHILIP RAN UP TO IT. *“When Philip ran up to it, he heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, ‘Do you understand what you’re reading?’”* He probably had to run to close in on the chariot. As he approached he could hear the Ethiopian reading from Isaiah. He knew then that the two essential ingredients in a successful witnessing experience were already in place: the Holy Spirit and the Scripture. If the eunuch had continuing reading in Isaiah he would have read these words: “So My word that comes from My mouth will not return to Me empty, but it will accomplish what I please, and will prosper in what I send it to do” (Is. 55:11). The Holy Spirit inspired every word we find in the Bible and now He has led this man to the exact passage he needed to understand in order to lead him to Jesus, the Messiah.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND? This was the right question and it was the right approach. The circumstances did not call for an introduction, an appointment, or the cultivation of a relationship. The question must have been an answer to the desire in the heart of this Ethiopian.

It might be added here that if one is looking for an example of how the Gospel overcame racial barriers, this passage is a prime example. This man was very black, but he was accepted as a proselyte at the temple, as long as he stayed in the court of the Gentiles. His being a eunuch would be a greater barrier than his skin color. It is abundantly clear that this man's color made no difference to Philip, and certainly not to the Holy Spirit. For this we must praise God.

8:31 - UNLESS SOMEONE. *“How can I, he said, ‘unless someone guides me?’ So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.”* We do not know how long this “high official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians” (vs. 27) had been interested in Judaism, but one wonders if he had acquired his copy of the scroll of Isaiah while in Jerusalem for Pentecost, but the reason for the trip may have been political. It may have cost him a considerable sum of money for the Scroll of Isaiah.

What he was reading was new to him, and it was confusing. He had no background for understanding what he was reading. He needed help and was not afraid to ask for it. The Holy Spirit must have been working powerfully in his spirit for this high official to invite this lone stranger to sit with him in his chariot.

8:32 - THE SCRIPTURE. *“Now the Scripture passage he was reading was this: He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb is silent before its shearer, so He does not open His mouth.”* He was reading from Isaiah 53:7. Philip, a Hellenistic Jew, would have had no problem reading the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, if that is what the eunuch was reading.

Once again, the Holy Spirit is controlling this encounter. When one is witnessing to a lost person he first wants to get him into the Word of God, and then he wants to get him to a passage focuses on Jesus as the Savior. It was not just blind luck but divine providence that had this man reading, not just from the scroll of Isaiah, but also from the Suffering Servant passage, (Isaiah 53). The late Jim White, a long time friend and for many years a pastor in West Monroe, LA, went on a Holy Land tour many years ago and the tour group included a Jewish lady who asked him if he didn't think that passage was about Israel. It gave him an opportunity to explain in detail how that great prophecy was fulfilled by Jesus the Messiah.

Peter was inspired to give an overview of the passage from Isaiah 53:

“He did not commit sin, and no deceit was found in His mouth; when reviled, He did not revile in return; when suffering, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to the One who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; by His wounding you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but you have now returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls” (1 Peter 2:22-25).

8:33 - HIS HUMILIATION. *“In His humiliation justice was denied Him. Who will describe His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.”* This points to the self-emptying of which Paul was inspired to write in his letter to the church at Philippi: “...**He emptied Himself** by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men. And when He had come as a man in His external form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even to death on a cross” (Phil 2:7-8, bold added for emphasis).

8:34 - THE EUNUCH REPLIED. *“The eunuch replied to Philip, “I ask you, who is the prophet saying this about—himself or another person?”* A. T. Robertson was not only an academician, he had practical wisdom, as we see in his comment: “a pertinent inquiry surely and one that troubles many critics today” [ATR]. This official was returning from Jerusalem where he had probably been in the temple complex, in the court of Gentiles, and may well have heard some talk about Jesus. One commentary agrees: “The eunuch probably knew that some acknowledged Jesus to be the Messiah, but his question shows that he did not recognize in Jesus the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy” [NCWB].

8:35 - THE GOOD NEWS. *“So Philip proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus, beginning from that Scripture.”* This is so amazing that pastors, evangelists, and evangelism professors are still using this passage to teach personal soul winning classes. It doesn’t get any better than this: You find a person who is reading the Scripture, he is reading about Jesus, and he asks what it means. “Philip showed him that Jesus was the subject of this prophecy and how it was fulfilled by his life, death, and resurrection” [NCWB]. No doubt thousands of Christians have wished (and some prayed) that it would go like this when they knocked on someone’s door. More experiences would go like this if we did two things: (1) wait until the Holy Spirit says, “Go”, and (2) go when He says, “Go”.

The late Dr. J. Hardee Kennedy was one of the most respected Hebrew and Old Testaments professors in the world for many years. He wrote a commentary on the Book of Jonah, in which he followed his outline for teaching the book: (1) Jonah running from God; (2) Jonah running to God; (3) Jonah running with God; and (4) Jonah running ahead of God. The Christian witness who would honor the Great Commission, must avoid running from God when it comes to witnessing. He must also avoid running ahead of God.

As an aside, it is interesting that some modern students of the Word have trouble finding Jesus in the OT. Stephen had no such problem, nor did the apostles. Jesus certainly found Himself in the OT. Philip is in good company, and he is following the leadership of the Holy Spirit, who is doing the work for which He was sent, as Jesus promised:

“When He comes, He will convict the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in Me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will no longer see Me; and about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged” (John 16:8-11).

Spurgeon, who has been often called the greatest preacher since Paul, said that any sermon that does not have Jesus Christ as its theme and purpose loses its right to be called Christian.

8:36 - THEY CAME TO SOME WATER. *“As they were traveling down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, ‘Look, there’s water! What would keep me from being baptized?’”* It is interesting that the eunuch is the one who spots the water and asks about being baptized. His response was immediate and decisive. Once again, we must agree that it doesn’t get any better than this! It is sad when people tell you they know Jesus but refuse to be baptized. The question here is, how did he know he needed to be baptized? The answer must be found in the statement made in verse 35: “Philip proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus.” Philip must have told him the complete story. Those who repent should be baptized as a testimony to the death, burial, and resurrection of our Lord, and as a testimony to our identification with him in death to sin, our burial with Him, and our resurrection to walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:3ff).

8:37 - IF YOU BELIEVE. *“And Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart you may.’ And he replied, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’”* This verse does not appear in all the earliest manuscripts and some believe it was probably added later from a baptismal formula [NCWB]. The verse is set in brackets in the HCSB with a footnote to that effect. The NASB carries the note in the QuickVerse Electronic Library. What we do know for sure is that the order is right: the new birth, a profession of faith, and then baptism.

8:38 - DOWN INTO THE WATER. *“Then he ordered the chariot to stop, and both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him.”* Here, a man of great authority submits himself to a greater Authority. Philip and the Ethiopian climbed down from the chariot and they then went down into the water. Dr. T. J. DeLaughter, who taught Hebrew and Old Testament at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary for years, often illustrated points with interesting stories. He spent a lot of time when he was a child with his saintly Methodist grandmother. On one occasion, he tried to convince her that the proper mode of baptism was immersion, but she refused to accept it. Finally, he pointed out this verse in which “both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water”, and Philip baptized him. She said, “Yes, they went down into the water and Philip broke off a hyssop branch and dipped it into the water and then he held it over his head and sprinkled him!”

The Jews immersed proselytes and when John the Baptist baptized Jesus he immersed Him: “As soon as He came up out of the water, He saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending to Him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven: You are My beloved Son; I take delight in You!” (Mark 1:10-11).

In both cases the mode of baptism was immersion. It is obvious that some people will never be convinced, as one commentary illustrates: “The precise form of his baptism is unclear and is of no consequence” [NCWB]. On the other hand, The Holman Bible Dictionary defines baptism as: “**The immersion or dipping of a believer in water** symbolizing the complete renewal and change in the believer’s life and **testifying to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ** as the way of salvation” [HBD] (bold added).

8:39 - THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD. *“When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him any longer. But he went on his way rejoicing.”* The NASB renders it “snatched Philip away.” The Young’s Literal translation reads,

“Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip” [YLT]. Some see this as a miracle in which Philip disappeared before the eunuch’s eyes, but others believe the Spirit simply led him away. If this had been a critical point, there is no doubt that we would have been given more information. One writer explains that:

“Philip had been led by the Spirit to baptize a Gentile eunuch, which a strict Jew would never have done. Some view Philip’s departure as a miraculous kind of rapture (cf. 1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16; 2 Cor. 12:2, 3; and 1 Thess. 4:17). Others interpret the passage as indicating a Spirit-led departure (cf. Mark 1:12). But to deny a physical miracle does not deny the miraculous leading of God’s Spirit” [NCWB].

THE EUNUCH DID NOT SEE HIM ANY LONGER. Those who believe the Holy Spirit miraculously lifted Philip up will believe these words prove the point. Others may suggest that just as Philip had appeared to him on the road to Gaza, he now goes on his way, never to be seen by him again. What we know for sure is that after this man was saved and baptized the Holy Spirit separated them. The new convert, though a powerful official in Ethiopia, is now a humble slave to the Lord Jesus Christ. His instructor in the Scripture was gone but the Holy Spirit, Who orchestrated this encounter, convicted him of sin, and persuaded him to repent and place his trust in Christ, had now taken up residence in the heart of a man who would take the Gospel of Jesus Christ back home with him. As seen earlier, the very name of a Twentieth Century emperor of Ethiopia, Haillie Salassie (meaning “The Glory of the Trinity”) would suggest that this official not only returned to Ethiopia, he spread the Gospel there.

8:40 - PHILIP APPEARED. *“Philip appeared in Azotus, and passing through, he was evangelizing all the towns until he came to Caesarea.”* Azotus is the Greek name of the city built on the ruins of the ancient Philistine city of Ashdod, another of the five cities making up the Philistine pentapolis. The Holman Bible Dictionary carries the following note:

“In the Greek period Ashdod was known as Azotus and was a flourishing city until being captured by Israel during the Maccabean period. Judas Maccabeus destroyed altars and images in Ashdod (1 Maccabees 5:68), and Jonathan later burned the temple of Dagon, those who took refuge there, and ultimately the city itself (1 Maccabees 10:84-87)” [HBD].

PASSING THROUGH. When Philip left the eunuch, he went on a preaching tour, “evangelizing all the towns” along the sea coast until he came to Caesarea.

CAESAREA. The city of Caesarea would play a prominent role in the Book of Acts and in the life of Paul. Located some 65 miles northwest of Jerusalem, on the Mediterranean Sea, it was the home of the Roman governor of the province (Paul would appear before both Felix and Festus there). The city was “rebuilt by Herod in 13 B.C. and was named in honor of Caesar Augustus. Philip apparently established his home in Caesarea (21:8)” [NCWB]. He most certainly did more than establish his home there. Nothing more is said about Philip for some twenty years. “He is last seen in Scripture when Paul lodged in his home on his last journey to Jerusalem (Acts 21:8). He had four unmarried daughters who were prophetesses (Acts 21:9) [HBD].

LIFE APPLICATION

NOTE ONE. Luke wrote both the Gospel According to Luke and the Book of Acts. His introduction to the Gospel is very interesting and may well have a connection here:

“Many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as **the original eyewitnesses** and servants of the word handed them down to us. It also seemed good to me, since **I have carefully investigated everything from the very first**, to write to you in orderly sequence, most honorable Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things about which you have been instructed” (Luke 1:1-4, bold added by this writer).

The question is, when did Luke “investigate everything”? We are not given that information, but he had two years for this kind of research while Paul was a prisoner in Caesarea. Is it possible that Luke was also a guest in the home of Philip for at least part of this time. It would have given him an opportunity to go to Jerusalem to talk with those who walked with Jesus during his earthly ministry, as well as family members who knew Him in Nazareth from His youth. James, the half-brother of Jesus would have been a valuable source, and an accessible one.

NOTE TWO. When we are reminded that Philip was lay-evangelist, let us remember that it the beginning Christianity was a lay-movement.

NOTE THREE. The Southern Baptist denominational structure is different from most others. In the first place, headquarters for Southern Baptists is not the executive office in Nashville, the state office building, or the associational office building, but the local church. The local church member (and pastor) might say, “We don’t work for them, they work for us.” They are right, even if some over zealous employee may need to be reminded or that at some point.

Every Southern Baptist entity focuses on evangelism. Every seminary teaches evangelism, Each state convention has an evangelism director. Mike Minnix, creator and editor of the PastorLife website, was the Vice-President in Evangelism for the Georgia Baptist Convention. Wayne Jenkins assumes that responsibility for the Louisiana Baptist Convention. One of my early mentors was Dr. H. R. Herrington, pastor of First Baptist Church, Rayville, LA. I stopped by his office one day and found him in a rush to get to an evangelism training program in Monroe. There were pressing issues that needed his attention at the church, but he felt that he had to make the meeting. He looked at me and said, “If we could give our people some compassion for lost souls we wouldn’t need all of these meetings!” He was right. However, we often have to depend on the program to see people sufficiently motivated to get out and witness to lost people.

For the layperson who may never attend a formal training program set up by his denomination, there is a guideline for witnessing here that has never been improved upon by any evangelism director.

Look at this passage and consider the following elements (ingredients) in a successful witnessing experience:

1. There is the Lord Jesus Christ - He saved us and commissioned us.
2. There is the witness - Philip.
3. There is the call - The Holy Spirit said, "Get up and go."
4. There is the lost person - The Holy Spirit had one person in mind (an Ethiopian eunuch).
5. There is the situation - a man in a chariot, reading the Scripture (hardly a chance encounter).
6. There is the Holy Spirit - Bringing the witness and the lost person together.
7. There is the command - "Go and join that chariot."
8. There is the contact - He approached the chariot.
9. There is the Scripture - the man was reading the Scripture (we need to go to the Word)
10. There is the opening - "Do you understand what you are reading?"
11. There is the focus on Jesus - All points and all references must point people to Him.
12. There is faith - the gift from God that enables one to trust Jesus for eternal life.
13. There is the profession of faith - Jesus is the Son of God, Who provides for our salvation.
14. There is the baptism - believer's baptism.
15. There is the commitment to move on to others - as we are going (Matt. 28:19-20).

PLEASE SEE VOLUME 3 IN THIS STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
(For comments on Chs. 9-12 - in The Bible Notebook Series)