

Lesson 8: Acts 5:17-6:7 Further External and Internal Conflict

Introduction

Ananias and Sapphira threatened the moral integrity of the early Christian movement by exchanging a first love of Christ for a love of false honor. God protected his people from the damage their hypocrisy would have caused. Luke continues on after that story with two more threats that arose in the midst of the Jerusalem Awakening. In Acts 5:17-42, he reports on a second external threat which is an intensification of the earlier threat from the Jerusalem establishment, “Do not preach in the name of Jesus or else!” You remember that threat. In Acts 6:1-6, he gives a second report of an internal threat that again touches on the distribution of wealth in the community. But unlike Ananias and Sapphira, this threat does not arise from any clear sin. The threat is logistical. Even so, an unwise response to that internal threat could seriously damage the movement. These two threats bring us to the summary statement of Acts 6:7 which signals the end of Part I of Acts.

In this lesson, we will address the text in that order of external threat, internal threat, summary statement.

Let’s set up the context for this next iteration of establishment opposition: the external threat. The awakening continues. Thousands of Jews in Jerusalem have placed their faith in Jesus Christ. Our update after Ananias and Sapphira in 5:14 reported, “And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number.” That’s not without tension. The believers know they have been threatened by the highest court in the country, “[to not] speak or teach at all in in the name of Jesus (4:18).” They prayed together for boldness as a community and resolved to continue in open witness despite the command of the legal authorities. So now, every time they open their mouth to speak about Jesus, they do so at the risk of arrest and punishment.

There must be tension in the community, and yet, also excitement and joy. Multitudes are coming to Christ. The punishment of Ananias and Sapphira has sobered the community with a holy seriousness that motivates integrity in all they continue to do. Miracles of healing have risen to an unprecedented level, fixing God’s thumbprint of approval on their continued witness.

The established leaders of Jerusalem hover over this growing movement like a snake. They control the political and religious establishment. They control the Temple police force. They control communication with the Roman overlords. All the power of man is on their side. They know they can crush this movement. But they are nervous about potential repercussions from the populace. Knowing victory is inevitable, a snake will still move slowly, it’s hovering patiently over its prey to avoid a lucky blow from the victim that might cause harm. A snake, however, in its patience is not motivated by the very human emotion of jealousy that compels us to rash action. That is a part of this story. Here is the second report of threat. I will read it in two parts, starting with accusation and response, followed by deliberation and threat. First, we read about the Sanhedrin’s accusation and the Apostles’ response. This is Acts 5:17-32,

External Threat (Acts 5:17-42)

Accusation and Response (17-32)

¹⁷ But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy. ¹⁸ They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail. ¹⁹ But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, ²⁰ “Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life.” ²¹ Upon hearing *this*, they entered into the temple about daybreak and *began* to teach. Now when the high priest and his associates came, they called the Council together, even all the Senate of the sons of Israel, and sent *orders* to the prison house for them to be brought. ²² But the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned and reported back, ²³ saying, “We found the prison house locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside.” ²⁴ Now when the

captain of the temple *guard* and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this.²⁵ But someone came and reported to them, “The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!”²⁶ Then the captain went along with the officers and *proceeded* to bring them *back* without violence (for they were afraid of the people, that they might be stoned).²⁷ When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them,²⁸ saying, “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.”²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men.”³⁰ The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross.³¹ He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.³² And we are witnesses of these things; and *so is* the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

I briefly mentioned the analogy to Cain and Abel in our last lesson, hypothesizing that Ananias was motivate in part by jealousy of Barnabas. The comparison works even better here. When Abel sacrificed to the Lord, he received the approval of his heavenly Father. The Apostles have given their lives over to the service of God, and God has blessed them with outward approval through a multitude of followers, the respect of the populace, and a most undeniable abundance of healing miracles. And the approval on the Apostles is quite apparent. Cain’s sacrifice was not blessed with the Father’s approval. And rather than question the sin crouching in his own soul, rather than having it out with the Father, Cain turned his jealous anger on Abel, the one who was doing the will of the Father and receiving the blessing of the Father.

The leadership in Jerusalem is similarly blinded to the real problem. The real problem is in their own souls and has to do with their own relationship with the Father. The response to the Gospel message and the miracles of healing taking place ought to create a reality check for the leadership. They ought to be saying, “Wow, look at the approval of God in this movement! Why is that?” Instead, the Sadducees at the top of the Jerusalem establishment take their anger out on the ones whose sacrifice is approved of by God. Luke says, “They were filled with jealousy.” And this is what jealousy does in the human heart. Rather than causing us to look inward at our own sinfulness, jealousy lashes out at the one receiving the desired blessing.

This arrest and trial feels like a repetition of the previous arrest and trial. So, we might ask, if Luke is selecting his material so carefully, there’s so much he is not including, why include two threats that appear basically synonymous? Repetition in good literature is never merely synonymous. When something is repeated, the author has a reason for it. Even if an author says the exact same thing twice, by saying it twice he is creating an emphasis. He is communicating something. The repetition here intensifies for us both the seriousness of the opposition, we are going to see that opposition again, and the resolve of the Apostles that we see again. The repetition also heightens for us the tension in the narrative. Will the awakening overcome the opposition and bring about a spiritual renewal of the whole culture, starting right here in the capital, in Jerusalem? Or will the establishment eventually strike? And if the establishment strikes, will the blow be decisive? Can the new Christian movement survive?

The arrest order is an intensification. The previous arrest included only Peter and John. But this time all twelve of the Apostles are taken in. It’s the same thing, it’s just worse. And like before, they are left in jail overnight for a trial to come the next day before the Sanhedrin. But they do not have to wait for the outcome of the trial before they resume preaching in the name of Jesus. There is a positive intensification, too. God does something miraculously. He sets them free through the agency of an angel. And later inspectors would have a whole round of questions. How did they get past the guards without being seen? Were the guards put to sleep? Were the guards drugged? How did they get through locked doors? Were the doors unlocked and re-locked, or is there a secret way out? Is

this magic? Is there something spiritual going on? How do we explain this? Luke leaves us wondering, not answering any of these questions for us.

The officials are just as perplexed as we are. Luke tells us that the guard wonders what is going to become of this. And for good reason. If you're in charge of the guards, anybody's first thought has to be that the guards were in on it. Prisoners do not walk through walls without somebody seeing them. But even as the captain of the guards wonders, "What now?", a report comes that the Apostles are out teaching in the Temple." The guard goes to retrieve the Apostles, but they do so with some care, being worried that if they are too rough with the Apostles, the crowd might stone them. In a sense, that's a surprising worry. They have all the power on their side. But it suggests the volatility of the populace in Jerusalem. And Luke is giving us that bit of information to help us understand that their leadership does have to take into account the crowd.

With the apostles back under guard, standing before the Sanhedrin, the high priest levels a charge against them. This is in verse 28. I will break it into three parts. First, they are disobeying the previous judgment of the court not to teach in Jesus' name. Second, they have filled Jerusalem with their teaching. Not only are they teaching in Jesus' name, but they are doing it abundantly. And third, in their teaching they indict the members of the Sanhedrin with the murder of Jesus. All the parts of this charge are true. The high priest hasn't made any false accusation.

Peter responds on behalf of all the Apostles and the response looks just like it did in the previous trial, a little bit different words, there's a little expansion here. But it's the same resolve. Verses 29b-32,

"We must obey God rather than men.³⁰ The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross.³¹ He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.³² And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."

Peter continues, as he has been, to speak boldly and with a consistent message. This is the Gospel. He is not changing his witness. As before, he claims obedience to God as the basis for their civil disobedience. Then he states the facts of this witness. God raised Jesus from the dead. The Sanhedrin had put him to death. After the resurrection, God exalted Jesus as Prince and Savior. Forgiveness comes through him. And Peter supports these claims with the further claim that all twelve men present are witnesses to these truths.

This repetition of claims might be enough to drive the members of the Sanhedrin to a violent judgment. We can expect the snake to strike. Peter adds one more additional claim that arouses their anger further. He claims that the Holy Spirit is witness to the truthfulness of the facts just stated. This statement is equally claim, equally charge against the Sanhedrin because Peter goes on and clarifies the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him, is witness. That indicts the members of the Sanhedrin. Peter is saying, "You have not received the Holy Spirit. If you had the Holy Spirit, you would joyfully agree with the witness of the Apostles. You stand opposed to us because God has not given to you the Holy Spirit."

Now, by standing against the testimony of the miracles and not reflecting on whether or not the message supported by those miracles might be true, the members of the Sanhedrin repeat the unforgivable sin that they committed in their judgment of Jesus. The unforgivable sin is to attribute the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan.

That's the context of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit referred to by Jesus in Matthew 12:31. If the power of the Holy Spirit provides outward proof confirming the spiritual message of the Gospel, then those leaders who reject that outward proof are also rejecting the witness to the Messiah supported by those very miracles. We know, according to the Old Testament, he will come, healing the lame and giving sight to the blind. These men know the prophecies. They know that the Messiah comes

with healing hands. By denying the Holy Spirit, they deny the Messiah. And by denying the Messiah, they deny God's offer of forgiveness. That is why this is an unforgivable sin, because it leads to the rejection of the Savior - the only way to get forgiveness. They rejected the signs of the Holy Spirit when Jesus was among them. They reject the signs again now being performed by the witnesses Jesus has commissioned.

Notice in Peter's response how his words begin and end with obedience. He begins with a refusal to obey the Sanhedrin when that obedience runs contrary to obeying God. They will obey God. Peter ends by saying that the Holy Spirit is given to all who obey God. We will obey God. You are not obeying God.

How do you think the members of the Sanhedrin will respond to that defense? They had been moved by jealousy to arrest the Apostles. But they were held back from striking the Apostles by worry over possible repercussions from the masses if they took action. Because currently the masses heavily favor the Apostles. Fear of what masses might do dissolves in the heat of anger kindled by Peter's rebuke. Luke tells us what happens next in Acts 5:33-42,

Deliberation and Threat (5:33-42)

³³ But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them. ³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. ³⁵ And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. ³⁶ "For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ "After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away *some* people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. ³⁸ "So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God." ⁴⁰ They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and *then* released them. ⁴¹ So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for *His* name. ⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus *as* the Christ.

Peter's blow struck deep and they cut to the heart. They are about to strike back. But before they do, the heat of their anger is tempered by the coolness of one of their members. Gamaliel is a recognized historical figure honored by Jews. Here is the introduction F. F. Bruce gives him in his comments on verses 34-35. I'm just going to read what he says.

There was present at this meeting of the Sanhedrin a Pharisaic leader of quite exceptional eminence, Gamaliel the Elder, the greatest teacher of the day. According to later tradition he was a disciple of Hillel, whom he succeeded as head of his school. But those earlier traditions which reflect some direct memory of Gamaliel and his teaching do not associate him with the school of Hillel; they speak rather of others as belonging to the school of Gamaliel, as though he founded a school of his own. According to Acts 22:3, Paul of Tarsus was one of his pupils. He was remembered in later generations as the embodiment of pure Pharisaism. "When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died," it was said, "the glory of the Torah ceased, and purity and 'separateness' died." He now rose up in court and directed that the apostles should be taken out of the council-chamber in order that he might speak his mind freely to his colleagues. Gamaliel warned the others not to do anything rash. His advice consisted of "sound Pharisaic teaching; God is over all, and needs no help from men for the fulfillment of His purposes; all men must do is to obey, and leave the issue to Him."¹

¹ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 114-115.

After clearing the room, Gamaliel provides two examples in support of his advice to let the apostles go. Bruce informs us that we do not have any collaborating historical information regarding the first man mentioned, Theudas. We do have some recorded information outside the Bible regarding this Judas the Galilean. Just after the birth of Jesus, it was in a census - not the census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem but a later census - Judas led a revolt against Rome, arguing that taxes should be paid only to God as Israel's true king and not to any foreign ruler. The Romans crushed Judas and his followers.² Both movements, the one led by Theudas and the one led by Judas, came to nothing.

Gamaliel's point is articulated in 38-39,

³⁸ So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.

Gamaliel argues spiritual principles. At first glance, his advice does not seem to have anything to do with realpolitik. This is not practical politics. This is spiritual counsel. And perhaps his intervention simply gives the members of the Sanhedrin time to cool down and remember their worry about the favor the Apostles hold with the populace, and they become patient again. But I imagine the Sadducees detected some practical reason in Gamaliel's advice. It's given, as a true Pharisee, "let's just trust God," but I believe there is something behind it. Something very practical. Politics in the first century must always take Rome into account. Israel is not her own master. Religious revolt in Israel rejects the overlordship of any foreign empire. Any kind of revolt that is religious puts the Sanhedrin, the Sadducees, the whole establishment in danger. Because it is going to be a proclamation that God is king. And that's a dangerous message that must ultimately crash up against Rome. In Gamaliel's examples, both movements are crushed. Who does the crushing? This is where I think the practical advice lies. It's not the Sanhedrin. Rome does the crushing, not the Jerusalem establishment. Gamaliel is not only saying, leave them to God. He is saying, leave them to God and the Romans. If they become enough of a problem, the Roman authorities will deal with them. If the populace wants to be angry then, let them be angry at Rome, not us. But in the extremely unlikely event they succeed against Rome, that will prove God is with them. That's the only way that's going to happen. And, in fact, that is what happens.

The Gospel is going to succeed against Rome but not in a military or political way. Peter has just proclaimed Jesus as Prince and Savior. And everybody in those days, all people, they hear that? Those are fighting words and that implies a military king. You know, salvation comes when the leader liberates a nation from the rule of Rome. But as Jesus told the Roman governor Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world." Something else is going on here. Not being of this world, the political leaders of this world, they do not know what to make of it. When they try to judge what is going on with this movement, even this language of Prince and Savior, they are going to misinterpret it. The agenda is all different. Until Jesus comes again to set up a physical reign, the kingdom of God will reign in the hearts of men and women who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. It is, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength," and, "Love your neighbor as yourself." That makes no sense politically. By the end of the book of Acts, the Kingdom of Jesus Christ will have spread throughout the empire of Rome. In the very last verse of the book, we find Paul established under house arrest, "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered (Acts 28:31)." Gamaliel is right. If this movement is of God then the kingdoms of the world will not be able to stop it.

The Apostles are let off, but they are not let off kindly. The Council still has them whipped before ordering them not to speak in the name of Jesus. They know that the Apostles are going to go out and speak in the name of Jesus. The Apostles rejoice that they are granted the honor to experience

² Bruce 116-117.

shame in the name of Jesus. Because, unlike Ananias, who was seeking honor through hypocrisy, the Apostles recognize the honor of being identified with Jesus. And so what is intended as shame becomes honor. Because they receive their honor from God, not from society. I would wish I would respond similarly, that when I get shamed for taking a public stand with Jesus, that my response would be one of joy, that I see my Lord Jesus, who was shamed publicly on the cross but who rejected that shame because he knew he was standing with God and he took his honor from God. I'd love to be able to respond like that. I must be honest that I don't. I tend to take the shame of the world strongly to heart. I think at this stage of the movement that this response is courageous. It is beyond what I would do. At the same time, I think the Apostles do get some strength in their response through the fruitfulness of their ministries. I imagine it is harder to suffer shame for the sake of Jesus when no one comes to know Jesus and no outward miracles are taking place. That kind of seemingly fruitless suffering will come upon the Christian movement, but not yet. If that's what you're experiencing, it is a bit different. It is even harder than what the Apostles are experiencing here. You've got to remember they are seeing thousands come to Jesus. And I think if we knew that was the result, we might be able to experience a little more suffering. At this moment suffering is accompanied by significant reward. The intensified external threat fails. The ministry of the Apostles continues.

Verse 42, the last verse of chapter 5, tells us, "And every day, in the temple and from house to house they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ." We might view the teaching in the Temple as more evangelistic, intended for the broader community, and the teaching from house to house as more for the strengthening of believers. Though we have to assume believers listened to the teaching in the Temple, so that's not just for nonbelievers, and believers also brought non-believing friends and relatives to the meetings in the home. So perhaps the difference is not so much in the audience as in the environment, the preaching in the Temple is a larger public gathering. The teaching in homes is smaller, more intimate. The Apostles recognize value in both. And their core message in both stays the same. Jesus is the Christ.

Following God's protection from this external threat, Luke reports on a second internal threat. This is in Acts 6:1-6 and we'll go through this a little more quickly,

Internal Threat (Acts 6:1-6)

¹ Now at this time while the disciples were increasing *in number*, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic *Jews* against the *native* Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving *of food*. ² So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. ³ "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. ⁴ "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. ⁶ And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

Luke reminds us again that the movement continues to grow. He says, "at this time," and it is at this time while the disciples were increasing in number that another problem arises. The problem is connected to growth. A small community of 50 or so may only have three or four widows in the community. They are known personally, and you know if they are being cared for or not. The movement in Jerusalem has grown quickly by thousands. There could be hundreds of widows in need of care and some of them are being missed.

For some reason, the Greek-speaking widows who grew up outside of Israel are the ones being overlooked whereas the native widows are not. This does not necessarily indicate intentional prejudice by the native Jews who grew up in Israel. Perhaps the Hebrew widows have better interpersonal connections to the movement. They are less likely to be forgotten or missed. Or maybe

the system for distribution is more natural to them. That's one of the regular problems our family faced in the Croatian school system. Rules and expectations were often unspoken; how to go about getting your books, what additional materials to bring to class, how to find out about parent-teacher meetings, when to expect schedule changes. It was not always that the other parents knew these things. They just knew when to ask and who to ask. They had grown up in a similar system. And regarding changes to what they grew up with, they had nieces and nephews who had more recently gone through that system. So who was most likely to show up late, or miss an assignment, or not know to bring bread to class on one special day in the year? Who doesn't know that? The foreigners.

So I do not see a charge in the text of intentional prejudice here. But I do see a lack of awareness regarding the needs of an ethnic minority in the community. Those who have grown up outside of Israel are being overlooked. And there are a number of ways the Apostles' response to this threat could go badly. From a worst-case point of view, they could have denied the problem. Or they could have blamed the ethnic minority for creating a problem - you guys are the problem. They could have diminished the problem out of an overly spiritualized understanding of walking with God, not viewing the physical care of widows as something worth their time to address. On the other hand, they could jump into the solving the problem wholeheartedly, refocusing their attention onto managing the logistical challenges of a growing movement.

Luke's narrative lets us know that the Apostles successfully addressed this threat by reporting to us a positive outcome. In verse 5 we read that the Apostles' "statement found approval with the whole congregation." The Greek-speaking minority thinks this is good and the native Hebrews think it's good. It's approval with the whole. And in verse 7 we read that the growth continues. God continues to build the movement.

Here are four aspects of the Apostles' response that stand out to me.

First, the apostles resist missional drift. Determine to stay true to their calling they assert, "we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Everyone in the Christian community becomes a witness to the hope they have found in Jesus. Still, the Apostles have received a special, full-time vocation to spiritual ministry through the commission of Jesus Christ. They have a job to do as Apostles. And they will remain focused on that spiritual work of prayer and teaching. It's critical that they stay focused on the mission given by Jesus.

Second, the Apostles recognize the importance of the need raised in the community by appointing capable leaders to address this issue. That is how you know they take it so seriously. We might read verse 2 as a downgrading of the act of service, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables." If we just had that, we might think it's condescending. But the Apostles also instruct the community to find "seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task." They are looking for high-level leaders. These men could be leading in the spiritual ministry the Apostles are doing. We are going to see that Stephen is a leader in prayer and in the Word. And that's the kind of men the Apostles want taken from that spiritual kind of ministry, or at least some of their time from that ministry, to focus on this task. Which shows that the Apostles are taking the problem quite seriously.

It looks like a both/and perspective of Christian ministry rather than an either/or perspective. The work of the Church is not either about spiritual truth or about care for people's physical needs. It's about both. The text does imply ordering of these needs. The greater need, the more central mission of the Church is the spiritual proclamation of Jesus Christ. Though, it's often true that we must meet physical needs first in order to help people recognize or give attention to their spiritual needs. But we don't meet their physical needs just so that they'll pay attention to their spiritual needs. Both kinds of need are integrated together. We are whole people. We are whole people. We are spiritual, we are physical, we are relational. Love addresses the various needs of the whole person.

Recognizing two different ministry focuses in this text helps us to think about the calling in the body of Christ, about giftedness in the body of Christ. The Apostles stay true to the vocational calling given

to them by Jesus. And they instruct the Church to call other men to fulfill the ministry of care. That is also a valid calling. And even though we don't have direct comment about spiritual gifting or personality gifting here, this text validates the variety of gifts by validating the importance of these different ministries. The Twelve contribute to the important ministry of prayer and preaching. The Seven contribute to the important ministry of administration and care. Different believers may favor one endeavor over the other through the natural and spiritual motivations of personal giftedness, through God has made us to be may cause us to value this need more than that need. And it's wise for us to recognize that even if we favor one over the other personally, this text helps us to see that these ministries go together.

And in that, I think the text provides a good foundational model, at least it begins to get us thinking about the basic distinction of church leadership. We see Paul make a distinction between elders and deacons in 1 Timothy. And I think you can see the foundation here being laid for elders giving leadership to the spiritual needs of the church community and deacons giving leadership to the administrative and physical needs of the church community. At this point in Acts, in the birth of the Church, we don't have those roles defined so we'll have to see through the story do these roles get defined. However, they are going to be defined we do well to follow the Apostles' qualifications for leadership in the Christian body that they might be "men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom." That's who we want to lead, whether in a position of elder or position of deacon.

Third, I do not see the Apostles micromanaging here. They instruct the community to select other leaders. The Apostles do not appoint these men. And then they trust these men to carry out the task.

Fourth, and finally, the ethnic tension is recognized and addressed in the solution. It's not actually initiated by the Apostles. The community does this by choosing Hellenistic Jews - Greek-speaking Jews - to fill these positions. All seven of the men chosen have Greek names; Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. Nicolas is not even a Jew. He is a proselyte from Antioch.

In addressing this ethnic problem, the leaders of this specific ethnic community are brought in and given both the responsibility and authority to provide a solution. The Apostles show their approval of the community's choice by confirming the Seven. They pray for these men and lay hands on them. In the Jewish tradition, we know that members of the Sanhedrin were inducted through the laying on of hands. It seems to represent that those who have been given special authority are now conferring authority onto others to perform a certain ministry or task. The Apostles don't lay hands on them so they might receive the Holy Spirit. That happened elsewhere in Acts. That is not what is going on here. These men are already full of the Holy Spirit. Their laying hands on them is a formal recognition that they have the authority to address this issue. We see a number of internal challenges with this one threat.

Material needs in the community can create all kinds of challenges. And maintaining the importance of Gospel witness is a challenge. Ethnic tension is a challenge. Here at the beginning of the Church, the Apostles worked together with the community and other leaders in the community to solve the problem in a way that shows love to those in need and maintains the mission of the Church to proclaim the truth about Jesus Christ.

We have now come to the end of the first part of Acts. As he does through the book, Luke ends this first major part with the summary statement. We find that statement in Acts 6:7.

Summary Ending of Part I (Acts 6:7)

⁷ The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

In Acts 1:8 Jesus declares to his Apostles, "you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem..." The Apostles filled the gap left by Judas. The Holy Spirit was poured out upon them. And they began to witness. The result has been astounding.

Neither external threat nor internal threat has derailed the awakening. Even a great many of the priests have come to faith in Jesus. Notice that language, “They have become obedient to the faith.” The prophecy of Jesus has been fulfilled. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem.”

But this is not the time of restoration. A king will not now be seated in Zion. Nations will not stream in. The Jerusalem Awakening is about to end.

We will pick our story up again with Stephen in our next lesson.

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 5:17-42. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. What is different about this arrest and trial from the previous arrest and trial (consider primarily the attitudes and behaviors of the leaders of Israel)? Is there any difference?
3. What claims does Peter repeat at this trial that we have already heard in his previous speeches? What new claims or clarifications are made by Peter?
4. What do you think motivates Gamaliel? What is he recommending and why?
5. Read Acts 6:1-7. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
6. Imagine how this situation could have really gone wrong. What would have been some poor ways to handle this problem?
7. What does the need for the apostles to continue their ministry combined with the need for men to be appointed for this new task suggest about the needs of your church or movement?
8. In the summary of 6:7 Luke uses the phrase obedient to the faith. Paul uses this phrase at the beginning and end of the letter to the Romans (1:5; 16:26). Paul’s use in Romans probably includes two ideas. First, faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is an act of obedience. To be obedient to the faith is to yield to the truth of the gospel message both in your mind and in your will. Second, obedience of faith indicates a new direction of life. When you have yielded in faith to Jesus Christ, you then begin to live according to the implications of the faith.

How does this phrase serve well, both in describing priests who have come to believe and as part of the summary of this whole first section of Acts? (Note the use of the word obedience used earlier in the text of the previous external threat 5:17-42).