

## Unit 4, Lesson 27: Economy and Society

Memory Verse: “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.” (Acts 6:2)

As we've already noted, the book of Acts gives us limited information on the organization and operation of the group of believers whose story it tells. So when it comes to the economic arrangements they had we have little to go on. This means, of course, that different people interpret what has been written in different ways. Read the following passage for yourself and see what conclusions you reach.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. (Acts 4:32-35)

The last two verses of the chapter tell us of a Levite from Cyprus who sold a field and put the money at the apostles' feet. This apparently prompted a similar action on the part of Ananias and his wife Sapphira. But they decided to keep some for themselves.

This apparently wasn't a problem. There was no arrangement saying believers HAD to give all the money to the apostles. The problem is apparently that they tried to make it look like they were giving the whole price when, in fact, they had kept some. We get this from Peter's words to Ananias.

“Didn't it [the land] belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God.” (Acts 5:4)

Then Ananias fell down and died. Three hours later his wife came in and was given an opportunity to tell the truth about the price they had received when they sold the land. She chose, however, to maintain the lie and when Peter confronted her, demonstrating that he knew through the Holy Spirit that they were lying she too fell down and died.

Some people will tell you this is proof that even in the New Testament God will punish sinners. But when you read the text closely you see that nobody killed them, they just fell down and died. When you understand that sin separates us from the source of life and that God is already miraculously sustaining our lives (otherwise sin would already have killed us) then you can see that God merely quit sustaining the lives of these two persons.

Both were given a chance to tell the truth, to admit that they were seeking to glorify themselves. When they passed on that opportunity and persisted in their lie, that is when God let go.

Meanwhile the apostles continued to preach and perform miracles. The high priest and some fellow Sadducees arrested the apostles again and put them in the public jail. During the night an angel released them and told them to go stand in the temple courts. They obeyed the angel, and got arrested again the next morning.

The Jews wanted to kill them this time after the apostles repeated what they had said before. But a

Pharisee named Gamaliel [ga-MAY-lee-el or GAM-a-LEE-el] talked them out of it. So they had the apostles flogged and released them with a warning to stop speaking in the name of Jesus. And the apostles left there rejoicing because they had been allowed to suffer disgrace for the Name. And guess what, they DIDN'T stop speaking in Jesus name!

But even when people are living in such love that they are said to be of one heart and mind, problems can arise. Luke speaks of the problem as if it were real, and not just a perception of one group comparing themselves to another group. Specifically, the followers of Jesus who spoke Greek felt that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food.

That's when the apostles responded in the words of this lesson's memory verse. But they didn't just let the matter drop. They apparently saw that there was a real problem that needed a real solution. Their solution? Appoint seven trustworthy men to tasks like seeing that the food was equitably distributed.

This is generally seen as the first appointment of deacons, though that term is not used here or anywhere else in the book of Acts. "Deacon" comes from the Greek "diakonos" meaning "ministrant." In most modern churches the deacon is someone who sees to the physical structures that belong to the congregation. Taking up the offering is a frequent task assigned to deacons. Thus we have a Biblical basis for distinguishing between those who minister using the word and prayer, and those who minister to physical needs.

Luke then immediately tells us the story of Stephen, one of the seven. Despite having been appointed as deacon, Stephen apparently didn't restrict his activity to dealing with people's physical needs. Luke tells us he did miraculous signs and, when confronted, presented his arguments with great wisdom. A group of opponents developed and eventually used false witnesses to have an excuse to arrest him and take him to the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin.

There Stephen took time to recount the history of Israel. He did it to make the point that the Israelites repeatedly wandered from God and persecuted his prophets. And then he accused them of being just like their forefathers when they killed the promised Messiah. That was all they could take. They took him outside the city and stoned him to death.

In one final indication of the greatness of his character, Stephen asked God to forgive the men who were killing him. And in a form of foreshadowing, Luke notes that Saul was there. Granted, he approved of Stephen's death, but he was there and witnessed the death of this first Christian martyr.

That one event unleashed a torrent of persecution against the followers of Jesus. Most of them left Jerusalem and went to other parts of Judah and Samaria. The apostles, however, remained in Jerusalem.

Possible thought papers:

1. Read Gamaliel's argument in Acts 5:35-39. Was he right? If so, how should Jesus' followers react when someone starts teaching something they think is heresy?
2. Stephen quoted from Isaiah 66:1, 2. Read the next few verses in Isaiah. Why might the Jews have taken offense at Stephen's use of this text?
3. Read Acts 7:54-60. What do the actions of the Jewish religious leaders tell you about their characters? How did they demonstrate that Stephen was right about them?