

# Explore the Bible: Selfless

April 6, 2016

• *The Explore the Bible lesson for April 24 focuses on Acts 6:1-10.*

## **Trouble Brewing**

With the exception of the deception of Ananias and Sapphira, the struggles of the early church during its first years in Jerusalem were external. Two encounters with the Sanhedrin threatened the early church's leadership, but their lives were spared. The experience of the church itself was marked by unity, mutual sharing with those in need, worship and continual growth. The perception of those outside the church toward the believers was positive, even after the Ananias and Sapphira incident (Acts 5:12-16).

Acts 6:1 records the first seeds of potential division. The early church was made up entirely of believers who were Jewish, but within that group were Hebrew-speaking Jews (such as the apostles) and Greek-speaking Jews. The wide variety of languages mentioned in Acts 2 represented the native tongues from around the Roman Empire, but since the days of Alexander the Great's conquests hundreds of years earlier, Greek had been the common language across the Mediterranean world. It was the shared language of politics and commerce for a world made up of a dizzying variety of ethnicities. There is a reason Paul's letters and the rest of the New Testament originally were written in Greek, because if people could read at all, they likely read Greek. Then, as now, more Jews lived outside the traditional land of Israel than inside it. Many of the Greek-speaking Jews of the early church most likely were those who had stayed in Jerusalem after Pentecost to join the movement.

Luke's one-verse summary of the issue does not dwell on the causes or assign blame. He simply records the Greek-speaking widows were

'overlooked' by whomever was distributing the daily offering of food. The previous reference to offerings in Acts was to money laid at the apostles' feet (Acts 5:34-35). Did someone take that money and buy food? Was there a separate food offering each day? Who was responsible for that, and where was the breakdown? Did they just forget? Did the distributors prioritize the Hebrew-speaking widows and deliver food to them first, leaving the Greek-speaking widows empty-handed? Was this distribution at a communal meal or a separate Meals-On-Chariot-Wheels program? We do not know. Whatever the cause of that error, though, motives could and would be guessed whether they were correct or not.

The Greek-speaking Jews (not just the widows, but the whole group) raise a complaint that goes right to the apostles. In the complaint is an issue that could divide the unified church into 'them' and 'us.' The believers who have been one people—the people of the Messiah—could be on the path to becoming "people like them" and "people like us."

### **In This Together**

Luke spends much more space describing the solution than he does the problem. Luke is not interested in recording who is to blame, but he is very interested in recording who is to be praised. The apostles call everyone together—not just the Greek-speaking Jews who raised the complaint, but the whole congregation. Behind the apostles' solution seems to have been the suggestion that they should be responsible personally for overseeing the distribution of food.

The translation "to wait tables" in Acts 6:2 sounds as if the apostles are minimizing the task at hand, but there are reasons to think otherwise. For one, the requirements of the men chosen for the task are those who are "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3). I have waited tables before. It is not an easy job, but while the Holy Spirit and wisdom certainly help in that job, they are not requirements. The apostles ask for those known as

wise and Spirit-filled men not because they will be serving as waiters, but because they will be administrating the church's offerings. They will be doing so in a situation where mistakes already have been made and tensions are high. Second, the apostles set the number of people needed at seven. It would not take too large a group sitting down to eat to require seven people to wait the tables. If their task is to administrate the daily food offering, though, and that job needs seven people to do it, we are talking about a lot of food given to a lot of people each day. The men chosen will need to be responsible to meet the task, as well as possess the desire and ability to work to restore unity where it has been threatened. *That's why they need the Holy Spirit and wisdom.*

The apostles, for their part, give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the word of God. They have been the primary proclaimers of the resurrected Christ, and they will continue to do so. The apostles set the number of people needed, and ask the congregation to choose the men to do it. We don't know the process used to select them, but it is noteworthy that the entire congregation is involved. Stephen is the first named, likely marking him off as the leader (just as Peter always is named first in the lists of the apostles). Stephen is, of course, the most famous, and the rest of the chapter records his personal miraculous ministry and teaching ability, which will result in his death at the hands of the Sanhedrin as the first Christian martyr. It is very noteworthy that, like Stephen, all of those chosen have Greek names. One is even a Gentile convert to Judaism!

The whole congregation, not just the Greek speakers, chose these men. These seven were chosen not only to administer the food offering just to the Greek-speaking widows, but to all of the widows. The choice of men with Greek backgrounds reflects a practical approach to the problem. These men are not likely to repeat the error made, since the Greek-speaking widows are in "their group." It also reflects faith in their ability. These men will not then turn around and allow the Hebrew-speaking

widows to be neglected. The church's choice reflects a conscious decision to say: "We will *not* be two groups. We are one and we will take care of one another."

Despite the common notion that these men were the first deacons, that title is not used for them in this passage. In fact, no title is given to them. They are simply the ones chosen by the church for the task. The congregation chose them, and the apostles laid their hands on them, signifying their recognition of the congregation's choice and their blessing over them for the work ahead. Each of the groups has a role to play in the solution. The apostles determine a course of action to solve the problem and also permit them to attend to their Jesus-given calling. They call on the congregation to choose, and the congregation makes a choice that makes practical and theological sense. The men chosen are affirmed for the character and gifts they have displayed up until this point. Luke does not record whether the church asked themselves, "What solution will best represent the fact that we are witnesses of the risen Christ, and that we are his unified people?" The solution they found, however, certainly reflects their commitment to that call, and the results speak for themselves: "So the word of God spread" (Acts 6:7)