



*The Growth  
of  
The Church*

*A study of  
the  
Issues and Solutions  
in the  
Early Church*

**The Acts  
of the  
Apostles**

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## Introduction

This article will examine the functioning of the early church and look at how issues arose and how they were dealt with. We will restrict the discussion primarily to the text of the book of Acts. Through this study, a picture of the early church can help us evaluate our present-day church and apply the principles gleaned from the text.

## Ascension to Pentecost

As soon as Jesus had ascended to heaven, the apostles, Jesus' brothers, the women and other believers were of one mind and continually devoted themselves to prayer. (Act 1:13-14) Judas, the traitor, was replaced by Matthias and joined the eleven apostles. On the day of Pentecost, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues and proclaimed the Gospel to the people that were in Jerusalem and about three thousand people were added to their number that day.

## The Perfect Church

In Acts 2:42-47, we read how they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, prayer and the breaking of bread. Signs and wonders were being performed by the apostles.

*And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. (Act 2:44-45)*

Here we can see the genuine faith and love for one another. They continued with one mind by being together in the temple and sharing their meals and possessions.

*Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Act 2:46-47)*

*And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need. (Act 4:32-35)*

We can see here how God was working powerfully through His people as they were wholeheartedly committed to Him and as they were proclaiming the Gospel with boldness.

The sharing of possessions seems to be following what Jesus said

*The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?" Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." (Matt. 19:20-21)*

Some other reference to look up regarding the sharing of possessions and supporting the poor. Lev 25:35, Isa 58:7, Lu 3:11, Lu 12:33, Act 20:35, Ro 12, 1 Ti 6:18

## Issues Start

When Ananias and Sapphira saw the respect given to people such as Barnabas by selling property and giving the money to the church, they too wanted this respect and honour. While they could have very easily just presented part of the money and kept the rest, they lied and said it was the whole amount that they received for the property. God judged them and they died on the spot. The believers continued to be of one accord and signs and wonders continued to be performed by the apostles. The people held the believers in high esteem and the church continued to grow.

After this, the apostles were arrested, flogged and ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus any more. Their reaction seems to be quite different from what we would expect.

*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. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ. (Act 5:41-42)*

As the church continued to grow and they were taking care of widows, discrimination set in. It appears that the widows of the Hellenistic Jews were not being taken care of like the native Hebrew widows in the daily serving of food. James in his letter addresses the issue of discrimination more. Here we now have some more structure added to the church. The prime responsibility of the apostles is stated as being prayer and the ministry of the Word. The office of deacon (though not called deacon at this time) was instituted to alleviate the issue of the leaders' time being used to serve tables. Note the qualifications of the deacons:

*"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. (Act 6:3)*

In the letters to Timothy and Titus, the requirements for deacons and elders are explained some more. Stephen, one of the seven chosen to be a deacon was full of grace and power. He performed great wonders and signs among the people and debated with some who rose up and argued with him. They were not able to withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which Stephen was speaking. Stephen was brought before the council and false charges were laid against him. Stephen spoke in his defence and when he confronted the council on what they had done to Jesus, they stoned him. After this, a great persecution broke out against the church and the believers were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria.

## Expansion of the Church to the Gentiles

Those who had been scattered because of the persecution started to preach the word in Samaria. We have the incident of Philip preaching and performing signs and miracles there and people being baptized. Simon the magician also believed because of the signs and miracles. When he observed that the Holy Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of hands, he offered Peter money so that he would also be able to bestow the Holy Spirit on people. Peter's response is:

*"May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you. "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity." (Act 8:20-23)*

This is another incident of someone wanting to be important and receive attention. In both instances, this was addressed and rejected. See also Matt 23: 1-12

The inclusion of the Gentiles is a big deal as can be seen by the amount of attention given to the account of Peter going to Cornelius the centurion. (Acts 10:1-11:18) Peter is quite reluctant to go to the Gentiles, but is shown in a vision that this is God's plan. The believers that were circumcised (i.e., following the Mosaic covenant) took issue with Peter. Peter then describes his vision to them and recounts that the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles just like He had come on them in the beginning and:

*"Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?" (Act 11:17)*

As the believers continued to spread out and preach the Gospel to both Jews and Greeks, Paul and Barnabas spent a year with the believers in Antioch. Due to the great famine at the time, these believers sent aid to the church in Jerusalem. Here again, we see the love and caring for fellow believers.

After this, Paul and Barnabas embarked on their first missionary journey preaching and making many disciples. Upon their return to Antioch, after some time, the issue of circumcision came up again as some believers from Judea came and were teaching that the Gentile believers needed to follow the Mosaic law. After Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, they went to Jerusalem to see the elders and apostles to settle this issue. We note here that the first approach to settling an issue is to resolve it at the local level. When this fails, it is bumped up to the higher church authorities. The elders and apostles met to discuss the issue and there was much debate. The believers who were of the sect of the Pharisees believed that the Gentiles needed to follow the law of Moses. Peter, Paul and Barnabas related what God had done. James, in his judgement, uses Scripture to confirm that the Gentiles do not need to follow the law of Moses.

*"Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. (Act 15:19-20)*

A noteworthy observation from Paul's second missionary journey is their time in Berea. We would do well to follow their example.

*Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. (Act 17:11)*

## Overview of the Church as described in Acts

- The believers were wholeheartedly devoted to God
- The believers focus was God centered.

- Money and possessions were not considered personal, they were shared with those that had need. This does not indicate though that they sold the houses in which they lived, merely other property that they owned.
- The apostles and deacons were performing signs and miracles.
- There was a hierarchical authority structure. We also note that the leader, James in this case, made the final decision after hearing the discussion on the subject. Scripture is used in determining the answer. This is not a “democratic” process. We also see this in some of the other letters.
- There is the requirement for the deacons to be “of good reputation and full of the Spirit and wisdom”.
- Problems were addressed and resolved quickly, whether it be issues such as with Ananias and Saphira, Simon the magician or doctrinal issues such as the observance of the Mosaic law.

## How do we compare?

As we look at our own lives and fellowships, we can compare our situation with the early church as described in the book of Acts.

- Are we wholeheartedly devoted to God?
- Is our focus on God?
- Is our focus on this world?
- Are we eager to share the good news of Jesus?
- Are we held in high esteem for our character and love of God?
- Do we hang on to our possessions or are we anxious to help others with them?
- Do we choose deacons, elders and pastors based on their character? Men full of the Spirit, wisdom and of good reputation.
- Is the focus of the elders and pastor prayer and the ministry of the Word?
- Are the pastor and elders doing the work that the deacons and congregation should be doing?
- Is our structure based on God’s design of a hierarchy or is it based on a popularity contest?
- Are issues and problems addressed, and if so in a timely manner?
- Do we promptly address false doctrines and heresy?
- Do we try and avoid confrontation and stay away from issues to avoid conflict and thereby compromise Scriptural truths and allow sin to enter and reign in the church?
- Do we discriminate against others based on ethnicity, place of residence or status?
- Is Scripture our ultimate authority?