

FOUR WAYS A CHURCH MAY BE TESTED

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Introduction:

In this section of the book of Acts, the two major themes may again be seen developing side by side. As the Jewish leaders grew harder in their rejection of the Lord Jesus, the local church developed as a more distinct and separate unit. It is interesting to note how Luke wove the two themes together. He spoke of church dealings (5:1-16), then of Jewish rejection (5:17-42), then of church dealings again (6:1-7), and returned to Jewish rejection (6:8-7:60). Yet with each change of scene, a progression can be noted. The church became more separate from Judaism as the Jews became more aggressive in their persecution.

As the Holy Spirit took control of Christians, the influence of the infant church spread, the company of believers grew, and they enjoyed a measure of favor in the community. But it was necessary that they face certain trials in order to purge them and strengthen them. **In Acts 5-7** the Jerusalem church faced four tests; two dealing with problems inside the church, and two consisting of opposition outside the church.

I. Purity Tested: The Sin of Ananias and Sapphira — 5:1-11

A. The Situation — 5:1-2

5:1-2 — For a brief time in the early church, many of the disciples were practicing a communal life where they shared their possessions with one another — cf. 4:32-37. It must be noted that this practice was not commanded of them, but it was a voluntary practice. No doubt they did this to help those brethren who lost their jobs through the hostility of the unsaved Jews who opposed the believers. However, this practice later caused problems for the disciples. When they gave away their wealth they were unable to produce enough money to care for all the needs of the church and they all fell into poverty. They had no reserves for a famine that struck, so later in Acts we find the Gentile Christians sent relief to the poor saints in Judea (cf. Acts 11:29-30; Gal 2:10; 1 Cor 16:1-3).

Note what Ananias and Sapphira did. They chose to sell a possession, keep back part of the price, and bring the rest as an offering to the church. This act was very generous as it appeared to a casual observer, but there was sin in their deed.

B. The Sin — 5:3-4

5:3-4 — Their sin was not in keeping back part of the price, but in lying about their offering. Peter makes it clear in verse 4 that they were at perfect liberty to keep their land or sell it, to keep the money or give it. What Peter rebuked was the lie. Peter called this a sin toward God, and not toward men. Why? Because all sin is primarily against God. Sin is committed when an act or attitude is done against God's command — cf. Ps 51:4.

C. The Punishment — 5:5-10

5:5-10 — Ananias fell dead at Peter's rebuke, and later his wife did likewise. Why was this judgment so severe? This judgment was a warning to the early believers that God would judge and punish sin. This will also be true during Christ's Millennial Kingdom — Zech 14:16-19.

D. The Results — 5:11-16

5:11 — There were several results from this judgment. First, the church developed a holy fear of God that kept it pure. Second, outsiders who were not fully committed to Christ were afraid to join the

church, but, third, those that had a healthy respect for God did join the church. These two results also kept the church pure. Finally, The apostles kept their word when they told the Sanhedrin that they would obey God rather than man. God honored them and they did a great number of public miracles - 5:12. The apostles had a gracious and successful healing ministry like that of the Lord Jesus. This gave the church credibility with the people. Multitudes, even from a great distance, believed on the Lord and joined the church - 5:13-16.

II. Loyalty Tested: The Persecution by the Government — 5:17-42

Although Peter and John had already been threatened by the Sanhedrin that governed the Jewish people, it appears that they held off further punishment for a time. However, the time had come to carry out their threat and take action against the apostles.

A. The Cause — 5:17-18

5:17-18 — The apostles offended the Sadducees who had told them to cease their preaching about Jesus and the resurrection by Him. When the apostles refused to obey them, they were indignant and took action against them. They arrested the apostles and imprisoned them - 5:17-18.

B. Divine Intervention — 5:19-24

5:19-24 — Here there is an example of the Lord's grace. The Sanhedrin needed to be warned that they were tampering with God's purposes. By performing a miraculous release of the apostles from prison, the Lord served the Sanhedrin notice that they were not opposing men alone, but were also opposing God! At the same time, the Lord was giving the apostles assurance that He was with them in their preaching - 5:20, 21. The miracle did cause some doubt to grow in the rulers' hearts - 5:24; nevertheless, they hardened their hearts against the light they were given.

C. Second Arrest and Inquiry — 5:25-40

5:25-27 — The Sanhedrin arrested the apostles a second time, but they did so carefully and without violence, because they were afraid of offending the people. Note that they arrested Jesus in private for the same reason. It showed their hypocrisy. They did not intend to treat the apostles gently once they had them in their power.

5:28-32 — The apostles were accused of disobeying the Sanhedrin's orders and for trying to put the blame for Jesus' death upon them - 5:28. The apostles' answer is that obedience to God comes before obedience to any commands of men - 5:29. Peter then went on to say that the Sanhedrin was guilty of Jesus' death - 5:30, that He was their Messiah and Savior - 5:31, and that the apostles and the Holy Spirit were Jesus' witnesses - 5:32.

5:33-40 — The Sanhedrin, again faced with their sin, were convicted - 5:33, but they responded by planning to kill the apostles. However, Gamaliel counselled moderation. It is interesting to note that Gamaliel, in a true spirit of compromise, neither condemned nor approved the apostles. Instead, he simply advised inactivity. Many men are in hell for following this kind of do-nothing thinking. The attitude of the majority of the Sanhedrin was clear. The apostles were beaten and ordered to stop preaching - 5:40. The persecution had gone from threats to violence. The next step was murder, which is seen in chapter 7.

D. Release of the Apostles — 5:41-42

5:41-42 — Undaunted by the Sanhedrin, the apostles continued their ministry with boldness, rejoicing that they could suffer for the cause of Christ. Apparently they ministered for a while longer without interference from their persecutors.

III. Unity Tested: The Neglect of the Grecian Widows — 6:1-7

Luke now changes scenes to show further development of the church in Jerusalem.

A. The Problem — 6:1-2

6:1-2 — When the church practiced a communal sharing of goods, it was to be expected that sooner or later a dispute concerning the administration of the goods would arise. The Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews) felt that their widows were neglected, and Hebrew-speaking widows were favored. The apostles wisely decided they needed to spend their time in prayer and study of God's Word. Other men needed to care for these widows.

B. The Solution — 6:3-6

6:3-6 — Seven men were chosen by the congregation to oversee this business. They were to be honest men, spirit-filled, and wise men. These men are often considered the deacons of the early church, though they are not called such in this passage.

C. The Results — 6:7

6:7 — The apostles were allowed to concentrate on prayer and the Word of God and the "deacons" avoided a serious division in the church by their care of the widows. This also is the duty and purpose of the deacons in the church today. They are to relieve the pastors of temporal duties that need to be done in the church. The effectiveness of this new ministry resulted in a great increase of believers.

IV. Testimony Tested: The Stoning of Stephen — 6:8- 7:60

One of the seven men chosen by the church was Stephen. His faithful and brilliant testimony caused an immediate collision with the Jewish rulers, and he became the first believer to give his blood for the defense of the faith.

A. The Cause — 6:8-15

6:8-15 — Stephen performed miracles and disputed with synagogue leaders. When they found that they could not resist the wisdom of his words, they hired false witnesses. Stephen was accused of blaspheming the temple and the law. These charges were serious, since the Sanhedrin did have the right to take the life of anyone immediately who desecrated the temple. They could do this without getting permission from the Romans. Stephen was taken before the Sanhedrin and formally charged — 6:12-15.

B. Stephen's Message — 7:1-53

7:1-53 — Stephen went through the early history of Israel up to Moses' day, and then he began to point out Israel's national sin. Israel rejected Moses' first attempt to help them — 7:27, 28, but God sent Moses back — 7:35. Later, they rejected Moses' leadership — 7:39-41. More than this, they rejected the law, and walked in idolatry in spite of God's witness to them — 7:43-50. Finally, Stephen made his application: just as the Jews in the past rejected Moses, God's law and His prophets, so now these leaders were rejecting the Messiah, God's Son — 7:52.

C. The Response — 7:54-60

7:54-60 — The message was true and it cut the heart of the Jewish officials. However, they refused to repent, but responded with hysterical violence. When Stephen testified that he saw a vision of Christ standing on the right hand of God, They dragged him out of city, laid the clothes at Saul's feet and stoned him.. Even so, they could not escape the truth of his words and his gracious attitude when he asked God to forgive them for their sin against him as he was dying.