

Sabbath School Lesson #4 – The First Church Leaders – 21-27 July 2018

Christ commissioned and empowered His disciples to preach the word. “And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). May we also preach the word.

Sunday: The Appointment of the Seven – “It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables” (Acts 6:2). The apostles did not intimate that it was inconsistent with their dignity for them to perform this service. They were not above even physical labour, for they surely remembered the words of Christ, “Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant; even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister.” But they saw that the care of these matters would detract from their usefulness as ministers of the word. There were others who could do this work, who did not have the important work of preaching to do. The minister of the gospel has to do with high and exalted themes; and while he should be willing to perform any service, he should not allow a round of petty cares to distract his mind. The seven who were chosen to have the charge of this business are usually termed “deacons,” they were not called so in the Bible, but “the seven” (Acts 21:8). And it is worthy of note that in the Greek there is no verbal difference between the “ministration” that was daily, and the “ministry” of the word. Both words are from the same Greek word, the one from which we get our word deacon; it means an “attendant” or “waiter.” The “twelve” and the “seven” had different duties to perform, but both were servants. And so well did the new arrangement work, so well did both classes serve, that “the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.”

It is worth our while also to notice the order of the work which the apostles laid out for themselves: “But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.” First they would get from God, and then they would give to men. They felt the need of constant prayer in connection with their teaching. They had been filled with the Holy Ghost on the day of Pentecost, but that would not suffice for all time. They had a daily work to do, and needed to be continually filled with the Spirit; but as the Spirit was given at Pentecost only in answer to fervent and united prayer, so it was necessary that they should “pray always,” in order to keep it with them. And if this was necessary for them, how much more so for us! If the apostles could not teach without constant prayer, what can be expected of the Sabbath-school teacher who does not “pray without ceasing”?

Monday: Stephen’s Ministry – Although all the seven were full of the Holy Ghost, Stephen had the pre-eminence in this respect. He was “full of faith and power” (Acts 6:8). He had unbounded confidence in the willingness of God to answer prayer, and as a consequence, like Jacob he had “power with God.” As he sought the afflicted ones, his heart was drawn out in sympathy for them, and by means of his faith and power he performed the miracles. From this we may learn that even those whose duty it is to “serve tables” may attain the greatest piety, and that God can work through any one, the only requisite being that he shall be “full of faith and of the Holy Ghost.”

This work in which Stephen engaged naturally attracted much attention. As was the case when Peter and John healed the lame man, the people would naturally inquire by what power these miracles were done, and this gave Stephen an opportunity to teach the resurrection of Christ. The foreign Jews who still clung to their traditions “disputed” with him. This does not imply an angry dispute, but simply a discussion of the truth which Stephen taught. But Stephen spoke with wisdom from above, and the Spirit of God. This “they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake” (Acts 6:10). They were forced to confess to themselves that Stephen was right.

Tuesday: Before the Sanhedrin – But there is always one resource left for those who are honestly beaten in argument yet are too set in their ways to yield to the truth, and that is treachery and force. This they used in the case of Stephen. First they “suborned men” (Acts 6:11) – privately caused the idea to go forth that Stephen was a blasphemer. This they did, not by direct means, but in an underhanded manner, by perverting his doctrine. It is very easy to set an evil report afloat. This report stirred up “the people and the elders and the scribes” to bring Stephen before the Sanhedrin. Then to complete their work they hired false witnesses to testify against him. With their testimony before the bigoted members of the council, Stephen was virtually condemned to death before he had uttered a word. Stephen’s sermon, while it contained nothing that would show a spirit of fear, was admirably adapted to disprove the charges that were made against him.

Stephen spoke of God with the utmost reverence, and proceeded to rehearse the history of the Jewish nation, a history which no Jew ever tired of hearing. And here is a point worth noting, in regard to all these sermons; and that is the use the speakers made of the Old Testament. If they had been as fearful of seeming to endorse all that it said as some of our modern preachers are,

they would have been in a bad condition, for they had nothing else from which to preach. Another thing worthy of note is that when these early teachers were put on trial for their lives, they invariably preached Jesus. Their own safety was a secondary matter with them. Stephen told how God called Abraham out of his own country to go into the land of Canaan, and that he finally came into it. But Stephen says, God “gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet He promised that He would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child” (Acts 7:5). God did not forget His promise to Abraham; Abraham was not disappointed because he did not receive a land. It will not do to say that the promise was fulfilled in giving the land to his descendants, for the promise was that Abraham himself should inherit it; and besides, the land was never fully owned by the Jews. The subject is made plain when we read in Romans 4:13 that it included not merely Palestine, but the whole world; that the “seed” to whom the promise was made was Christ (Galatians 3:16); and that if we are children of God, then we also are heirs (Galatians 3:29; James 2:5). Abraham did not expect to see the promise fulfilled immediately; he received the inheritance through faith. He looked forward to the time when the earth should be made new (Isaiah 65:17); we are to look forward to the same time for our reward.

Wednesday: Jesus in the Heavenly Court – Whilst Christ was in the heavenly court, “there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1). The martyrdom of Stephen was only the beginning of a general persecution. Like wild beasts, one taste of blood made the bigoted Jews clamorous for more. At the close of Stephen’s speech they “gnashed on him with their teeth” – language fit to be applied to a wolf or a tiger. In verse 3 it is said that Saul “made havoc of the church” – literally, Saul was ravaging the church. No stronger metaphor could well have been used. Not content with the visitation of the synagogue, he got the authority for an inquisitorial visit from house to house, and even from the sacred retirement of the Christian home he dragged not only men, but women, to judgment and to prison. So thorough was his search, and so deadly were its effects, that, in referring to it, the Christians of Damascus could only speak of Saul as “he that *devastated* in Jerusalem them that call on this name” (Acts 9:21) – strong word that is strictly applicable to an invading army that scathes a conquered country with fire and sword.

Thursday: The Spread of the Gospel – Due to persecution, the believers at Jerusalem “were scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1). In thus scattering they obeyed the injunction of the Master, “But when they persecute you in this city, flee into another.” Their religious principles would not allow them to resist, and nothing would be gained for the cause of God if they should remain and submit to a wholesale massacre. We can even see the hand of Providence in allowing this persecution, for it was the means of spreading the truth throughout all the region. Luke records that the new converts were “of one heart and of one soul” (Acts 4:32); they loved one another’s society, and since they were necessarily shut off in a great measure from outside associations, there was danger that they would become clannish, and settle down, content with having received the truth. But now they were driven out, and were given a fresh opportunity to prove the sincerity of their conversion by “preaching the word.” Their persecutions did not quench their love of the truth. The wicked Jews thought to root out the rising religion of Jesus, but instead of that they caused the seed to be broadcast. Thus they proved that man “can do nothing against the truth, but for the truth” (2 Corinthians 13:8). All were scattered, “except the apostles” (Acts 8:1) whom God had work for them still in Jerusalem. Christ had instructed them that “repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name among all nations beginning at Jerusalem,” and they were not in haste to leave the city. We cannot tell why they stayed, or what they did, but we may be sure that they followed the leading of the Spirit of God. “Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ unto them.” This Philip was one of the “seven” spoken of in chapter 6. In Acts 21:8 he is further distinguished as “Philip the evangelist.” Some may query, how we know that the Philip who preached in Samaria, and who baptized the eunuch, was Philip the evangelist, and not Philip the apostle. The answer is easy: The apostles all remained in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1), Philip the apostle must have also remained at Jerusalem. Many had embraced the truth at Samaria, and the apostles sent unto them Peter and John. “Now when the apostles which were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God they sent unto them Peter and John.” This disproves the Catholic assumption that Peter occupied the position of pope, taking the place of Christ as head of the church. Instead, Peter was subject to the decisions of the rest, going wherever the majority thought best. Nowhere in the Bible do we find any intimation that any one occupied a higher rank than the rest. The apostles did not even presume to dictate to the body of the church, as shown in Acts 5. In this they simply acted in accordance with their own teaching, especially that of Peter himself, to take the oversight of the flock, not “as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock,” and to “be subject one to another” (1 Peter 5:1-5).