

The Church in Jerusalem

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Introduction

On the Pentecost following our Lord's resurrection and ascension "there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven," plus numerous proselytes (Acts 2:5, 10).¹ One historian estimates that the residents of the city normally numbered approximately 100,000 at the time of the events described in Acts 2.² Of course, the pilgrims at the great feasts swelled its population to perhaps many times more than this number. The faithful from all parts of the world converged on the city for the Passover, and due to the vast distances from which many of them came (and the travel time required to cover them), they would doubtless stay the fifty days till the Pentecost before beginning their homeward trek. A festive, almost carnival, atmosphere must have prevailed in and around Jerusalem during the time involving the two great Mosaic feasts. With but little imagination one can almost see and hear the vendors and merchants whose innumerable shops lined the streets, offering their freshly-caught fish, recently-slaughtered meats, produce, bread, and spices, the mingled smells of which produced an almost overwhelming savor. Because the homes and hostelry in and around Jerusalem were woefully inadequate to cope with such an influx of humanity, it is likely that in the evenings one would be able to see campfires by the thousands of the families camping in every available space up and down the hills and valleys surrounding the city. The sound of children running through the camps and playing their games with their recently-met playmates must have filled the air. Such is the physical setting this writer pictures in his mind as he reads and meditates on the material in Acts 2, the record of which chronicles the establishment of the church of Christ.

The spiritual setting of the establishment of the church in Jerusalem is even more interesting and dramatic to the spiritually minded soul. It was no mere happenstance that in this storied citadel the first Gospel sermon was preached in its fullness, resulting in the beginning of Christ's indestructible kingdom. Seven centuries earlier Isaiah had identified Jerusalem/Zion as the place from which in the "latter days" ("last days," KJV) the law—the Word of the Lord—would be proclaimed, resulting in the establishment of a kingdom that would attract all nations (Isa. 2:2–4). In some of the very last words the Lord spoke to the apostles He told them that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). They were told to wait in the city till they were clothed with power from Heaven—baptized in the Holy Spirit, according to the Father's promise (v. 49; Acts 1:4–5). They were then to begin bearing witness to their Master, first in Jerusalem, then

Judea, and Samaria, and finally, to all the earth (Acts 1:8). It should be evident even to the most casual observer that God had planned for centuries that Jerusalem would be the birthplace of His church.

The establishment of the church in Jerusalem was the culminative step in God's plan for the redemption of mankind. For this reason Acts 2, because of the events it records, stands out as a pivotal, if not **the** pivotal chapter of the Bible. It is interesting to note that in a certain sense two churches were established on Pentecost in Jerusalem. The **universal** church began, which would embrace all of those who on that day obeyed the Gospel, but which would also embrace all in every succeeding generation and in every location who would obey the Gospel. The **local** church in Jerusalem also began on Pentecost. At first it was the universal church in its entirety, but within a few years it was only one of many that sprouted from the seed of the Kingdom, which was being sown in ever-widening fields. It is this local congregation in Jerusalem—the very first church of Christ—to which we now turn our attention. For the first few years of its existence it was an exemplary body of people, from which we may learn much. Later, elements within the church rose to the surface to spoil its pure reputation. But even from these latter events there are lessons we can learn.

Exemplary Characteristics in the Early Years in Jerusalem

What can we observe in the early years of the church in Jerusalem that is worthy of our emulation?

It Was Doctrinally Sound

The first description we read of the three thousand who obeyed the Gospel is that “they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). The “teaching” here referred to was not the private opinions or philosophies of the twelve. They had received the Holy Spirit, which Christ had promised to send upon them upon His ascension to the Father (John 14:26; 15:26–27; 16:13; Acts 1:4–5, 8; 2:1–4; 16–21). With the Holy Spirit’s coming upon them they had the fullness of the Truth, and it was this inspired body of doctrine that constituted the “apostles’ teaching.” The emphasis on both teaching and obeying only the inspired Word is overwhelming in the Bible as a whole, but especially in the New Testament. The Lord sternly warned his followers of false prophets (Mat. 7:15–16; 24:11) and urged upon us uncompromising obedience of the Truth (Mat. 7:21–27; John 8:32; 14:15, 23–24; et al.). The New Testament epistles are filled with statements which exalt the doctrine of Christ and strict adherence to it (e.g., Rom. 16:17–18; 1 Cor. 4:17; 14:37; 16:13; Gal. 1:6–9; Eph. 4:14–15; Phil. 2:12; Col. 2:8; 1 The. 2:13; 2 The. 2:11–12; 1 Tim. 1:3, 19–20; 4:1–3, 6; 6:3–5; 2 Tim. 2:14–18; 3:13–17; 4:1–4;

Tit. 1:9–14; 2:1, 15; 3:8–9; Heb. 13:9; Jam. 1:21–25; 2 Pet. 2:1–3; 1 John 2:3–6; 2 John 9–11; Jude 3; Rev. 22:7, 18–19).

The Jerusalem Church was numerically strong from the first. However, its strength lay not in its size, but in its fidelity to the will of God. A congregation of fifty members who love the Truth is far stronger by the Lord's standard than one of five hundred folk who care more about pleasing men than God. It matters not how sincere people may be or how many "good works" they may do—if they do not abide in the doctrine of Christ they have not God and they strive in vain (Mat. 7:21–23; 15:9; 2 John 9).

Our day is cursed with hundreds of congregations that have sold their souls for public approval, denominational fellowship, numbers, and dollars at the expense of true doctrine and practice. Many of these have already become denominational in concept and practice and are simply not honest enough to remove "Church of Christ" from their marquees; many others are inexorably moving in that direction. The cause of their behavior and change of direction is easily discovered—they ceased to love the Truth and seek its authority for their practice. Denominationalism is the certain and only destiny of any religious body that so behaves, regardless of how large the letters are that spell out "Church of Christ" on their building or sign post. The congregation in Jerusalem remained strong only as long as it continued in the apostles' teaching, and not one minute more. The same is true concerning any congregation of God's people in this modern age.

It is noteworthy that Jerusalem's fidelity was not merely to **Peter's** teaching, but to that of all the apostles (i.e., "apostles" is a plural possessive referring to the teaching of all of the apostles) (Acts 2:42). Roman Catholic dogma elevates Peter to primacy over the other apostles and crowns him as that church's first pope. Were this true, Luke made a grave error in his account of the church's behavior and in the process showed disrespect for Peter. He should have written, "they continued steadfastly in **Peter's** teaching." Anyone who knows anything about the appointment, commission, inspiration, and work of the apostles, to say nothing of the pattern for the church, knows that the entire papal system is a human myth that power-mad apostate clerics "made up as they went along." Peter had no more inspiration, authority, or spirituality than any other apostle. **All** the apostles were filled with the Spirit and spoke in other tongues on Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). It was "Peter **and the eleven**" who declared the Gospel on Pentecost (although we only have the digest of Peter's sermon) (vv. 14, 37). Signs and wonders were done not only by Peter, but also by **all the apostles** (v. 43). We should not be surprised that the teaching in which the church continued is likewise ascribed to **all the apostles**. Were there no

other lines of argumentation to expose the papal claims relating to Peter, Luke's record in Acts 2 alone is sufficient to render a deathblow to the Catholic heresy.

We further notice that the church continued in the "apostles' teaching" ("doctrine," KJV). *Teaching (doctrine)* is singular in this passage, as it is in every other usage in the New Testament when it refers to revealed, inspired Truth. Never do we read of the "doctrines of Christ," "sound doctrines," "doctrines of God," or "good doctrines" in reference to the Gospel message. While all of these phrases appear in the New Testament, **they always appear with the singular form, doctrine.** However, the plural form, *doctrines*, is used in reference to heretical and false teachings, whether of men or demons (Mat. 15:9; Col. 2:2; 1 Tim. 4:1). While the Bible does not tell us why this distinction is made we do not believe it is artificial or accidental. Even though the New Testament is a collection of twenty-seven documents, it is cohesive in its theme and harmonious in its message, thus forming a whole—it is **one body of teaching** (1 Cor. 4:17; Jude 3). Contrariwise, the precepts and teachings of men are as varied as their human authors and their opinions, rightly referred to as "doctrines" and "teachings."

It Was Without Distinctions

The Jerusalem church was composed of all classes of people. There were the apostles, who were spiritual giants compared to all others. But there were also those who had murdered Christ, who must be classed as spiritual pygmies. There were the local Palestinian Jews, but also Hellenistic Jews and even some proselytized Gentiles from various areas, languages, and cultures of the world (Acts 2:5, 10; 6:1). There were those who were wealthy land-owners such as Barnabas (Acts 4:34–37), Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–3), and Mary (12:12–13). But there were numerous members, especially widows, who were in the depths of poverty and dire need (2:44–45; 4:35; 6:1).

Any random group of three thousand, which was the size of this congregation when it began, will generally run the gamut of all classes of people, as did this one. Yet there seemed to be no consciousness of class, caste, economic level, or even race in these early days. Unfortunately, an element eventually arose within the Jerusalem Church that separated between brethren based to some degree on race, but the apostles roundly and soundly rebuked it (Acts 15:1–5; cf. Gal. 2:11–13). James, the Lord's half-brother (and apparently an elder in the Jerusalem congregation [Acts 15:4, 6, 13; 21:18]), at one point used his influence to disenfranchise uncircumcised Gentile saints, not only in Jerusalem, but elsewhere (Gal. 2:12). However, he took the stand for Truth on this issue in the Jerusalem discussion (Acts 15:13–21). Later, when he wrote his epistle, he strictly proscribed drawing any lines of discrimination, much less fellowship, based on mere personal scruples or prejudices:

My brethren, hold not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come into your synagogue a man with a gold ring, in fine clothing, and there come in also a poor man in vile clothing; and ye have regard to him that weareth the fine clothing, and say, Sit thou here in a good place; and ye say to the poor man, Stand thou there, or sit under my footstool; Do ye not make distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Hearken, my beloved brethren; did not God choose them that are poor as to the world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to them that love him? But ye have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you, and themselves drag you before the judgment-seats? Do not they blaspheme the honorable name by which ye are called? Howbeit if ye fulfil the royal law, according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, ye do well: but if ye have respect of persons, ye commit sin, being convicted by the law as transgressors (Jam. 2:1-9).

Any congregation is wrong if it practices respect of persons. Paul reminds us that we are all on the same level as sinners redeemed by the blood of Christ: "There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female; for ye are all one man in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Peter enunciated a lesson which was hard, even for this apostle, to learn: "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34–35). Since God does not recognize social, economic, sex, or racial distinctions when it pertains to redemption from sin and fellowship with Him, we dare not do so. There should never be a preference shown for any fellow-Christian based on the color of skin, economic level, social standing, or sex in any congregation of the Lord's people. Apparently the Jerusalem Church was a model of this righteous policy in its early years. May we all search our hearts and seek to rid them of any such shallow distinctions we may hold.

It Was United

In its early days the Jerusalem Church was bound together in a unity of **purpose** that must have been a source of great joy to all of the brethren. Luke wrote of them: "And all that believed were together, and had all things common; ...And day by day, continuing stedfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they took their food with gladness and singleness of heart" (Acts 2:44, 46). He later added: "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and soul: and not one of them said that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common" (4:32).

The unity thus described in both of the foregoing passages is connected with the fact that they "had all things common." That is, the fact that there was no respect of persons and no discrimination (especially in regard to economic status and provision of the necessities of life) directly promoted their unity. The first occasion of schism among the brethren occurred when this principle began to be neglected in the case involving the Grecian widows (Acts 6:1). It is instructive to observe the way the apostles dealt with the complaint that was brought to them. It

was neither denied nor dismissed as unworthy of consideration. It is apparent that the apostles investigated the complaint sufficiently to determine that it was deserving of their action. They assembled the church and instructed the brethren to appoint seven good men who could correct the problem, and peace was thus restored (vv. 2–6). What was potentially an explosive situation was avoided by the prompt attention and action of the apostles.

Elders can learn much from the response of the apostles in this case. I have seen elders deny the existence of problems and neglect or refuse to deal with complaints in their initial stages until the problems reached massive and destructive proportions in the local church. Not every complaint a brother or sister may bring will be worthy of action, but if elders do not have the facts at hand to know a complaint is unworthy, they would do well to investigate sufficiently to find out whether or not it is. Far too often the attitude toward a potential problem is, “If we ignore it, it will go away.” Ignoring them does not solve problems. When matters that need attention continue to be “swept under the rug,” the pile just gets higher and more troublesome to remove. Many congregational problems that eventually erupt in strife and division could have been avoided altogether had they been promptly addressed at their first sign.

The Jerusalem Church was also characterized by a unity of **place**. Their meeting place was “in the temple.”³ This they did “day by day, continuing stedfastly,” at least in the early existence of the church there (Acts 2:46). They had a meeting place and they must have known when they were to meet. We can hardly imagine any of them discussing how few of these assemblies they could get by with missing or asking, “Do I have to go every time?”

We see in the Jerusalem Church a unity of **prayer**. The very first description of their activities declares that they “continued stedfastly in the prayers” (Acts 2:42). When Peter and John were released after their first arrest they “came to their own” and “lifted up their voice to God with one accord” (4:23–24). When the seven men were chosen by the church to take care of the “daily ministrations” the apostles prayed in connection with their appointment (6:6). When James had been martyred and Peter was imprisoned awaiting the same fate, many brethren came together at the house of Mary “and were praying” when Peter knocked at the door of her gate (12:1–12). Those ancient brethren had an unflinching faith in God that He would, as promised, hear their prayers. We should individually continue in prayer as we live from day to day, but there is no substitute for congregational prayer. The Jerusalem Church is our model in this regard.

In the Jerusalem Church we see a unity of **practice**. Those original three thousand had all heard and believed the same Gospel sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2:37). They had all (“every one”) been commanded to “repent and be baptized unto the remission of their sins,” which they

had done (vv. 38, 41). The Lord thereupon added them all to the church (v. 47). God has never given any other directions to those who want to be saved and become part of His church. Thus all those others who swelled the ranks of the Jerusalem Church in its earliest years obeyed the same Gospel commands.

They not only did the same things in order to be saved and added to the church, but there was unity of practice in their worship activities. I have already emphasized the respect of the Jerusalem saints for apostolic teaching (Acts 2:42). I now emphasize the way in which this respect for the Truth affected their worship: “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers” (v. 42). What was true of all of the saints in Jerusalem concerning their practice was likewise true of all the other congregations all over the world because the same Gospel was preached everywhere by all of the inspired men. Paul remarked to the Corinthians that he was sending Timothy to them “who shall put you in remembrance of my ways which are in Christ, **even as I teach everywhere in every church**” (1 Cor. 4:17, emph. DM). So today, true churches of Christ are one in their worship practices because they have all been taught and they all follow the doctrine of Christ, regardless of the nation in which they exist.

It Was Compassionate

Luke repeatedly describes the compassion of the Jerusalem Church in its early days:

And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and they sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all, according as any man had need (Acts 1:44–45).

And not one of them said that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.... For neither was there among them any that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them as the apostles’ feet: and distribution was made unto each, according as any one had need (4:32, 34–35).

There was a “daily ministrations” of food being made to widows (6:1–2).⁴

Apparently the apostles personally distributed the various items to those in need for some time. However, there came to be so many in need that some, especially among the widows, were being neglected. The needs had outstripped the ability of the apostles to do this work and to continue their work of preaching. Thus to insure an equitable compassion in which the needs of none were neglected, and to allow the apostles to “continue stedfastly in prayer, and in the ministry of the word,” they had the church to appoint a committee of seven men to oversee the distribution. Although the work with which these men were charged is a work that

could well have been (and could presently be) done by deacons, I deny that these were deacons in the sense of later references to them (1 Tim. 3:8–11, 12–13; Phil. 1:1).⁵

Of all people, the Lord's faithful church, not only as individuals, but also as congregations, should be compassionate and generous in responding to the needs of those who are helpless. Those first members of the church were Jews who had been taught in their law to care for the poor, the widow, and the orphan (Exo. 22:22; 23:11; Lev. 19:10; Deu. 14:29; 15:7–9; Psa. 41:1; et al.), and perhaps their compassion resulted from that teaching. The apostles did not have to instruct them in the virtue of benevolence. Also, many of them had heard the Lord, as He taught those who would follow Him, to be mindful of and generous toward the needs of others (Mat. 5:7; 7:12; 23:23; Mark 14:7; Luke 14:13; 18:22; et al.). Doubtless many of them had witnessed one or more occasions on which He demonstrated the traits of compassion and mercy toward the helpless (Acts 2:22). However, as the Gospel spread to the Gentiles and the epistles were written to the congregations that sprang up among them, the inspired men repeatedly taught the nobility and necessity of compassion and care (e.g., Rom. 12:13; 1 Cor. 16:1–2; 2 Cor. 8:1–4; Gal. 6:10; Eph. 4:28; Phi. 2:1–4; et al.).

Having established the duty of helping the helpless, we will do well to heed some cautions concerning its practice:

1. Congregations should not mimic the "Salvation Army," seeking to become primarily a "benevolent" institution. The principal work of the church is preaching the Gospel, "holding forth the word of life," evangelism (Mat. 28:19–20; Mark 16:15–16; Phi. 2:15–16). Jesus was full of compassion for the helpless, and most of His signs and wonders were performed as expressions of the same. However, His compassionate acts went far beyond the momentary relief of physical suffering. His deeper and principal purpose in them was to prove that He was Who He said He was and that He could do what He claimed—bring them relief from the awful, eternally-destructive malady of sin:

Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).

Our Lord did not come to our planet merely to heal broken and diseased bodies. He could have stayed in Heaven and done that through His human servants. Rather, He came to do what neither man nor angel could do—redeem mankind from sin. Time after time He announced this singular aim: "For the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10; cf. Mat. 20:28; John 10:10; 12:47; cf. 1 Tim. 1:15; et al.). The genuineness of His compassion toward the helpless is not lessened by the fact that His intent was to heal their souls more than their bodies. While congregations ought to be sensitive to the physical

needs of others, they ought to ever keep in sight the greater blessing of bringing aliens to a saving knowledge of the Truth and saints to a higher level of devotion to the Lord.

2. Not everyone who seeks help is worthy of it. Paul's inspired rule, "If any will not work, neither let him eat" (2 The. 3:10b), has neither been rescinded nor amended. While there are many who are in dire need due to no fault of their own, there are also many who are without the necessities of life because they have squandered their livelihood through such things as undisciplined spending and gambling. Many have brought financial and/or physical ruin upon themselves through consumption of alcohol, illegal drugs, and tobacco. Until such repent, we actually help perpetuate their sins and their lives as bums when we merely dole out resources to them without attempting to interest them in the Gospel.

I have long considered it outrageous that people will come to a church office seeking money for food (or even food itself) and/or lodging, reeking with the odor of liquor and/or tobacco. If they have enough money for their sinful habits they should have enough for food. If they have wasted their resources on sinful habits they do not deserve to eat—no one forced them to so behave. It is even more outrageous to indiscriminately dole out help to such folk.⁶ The Lord's church has far more important works to do and upon which to spend its money than propping up such folk (many of whom have been exposed as professional deceivers) in their evil habits for one more day.

It Was Evangelistic

The church in Jerusalem could not have begun without the evangelistic effort of the apostles on Pentecost. In fact, no church has ever begun apart from evangelism. The apostles continued to preach the Truth (Acts 3:11–4:2, 31, 34; 5:19–21, 25, 28–29, 42). However, we soon see others taking a leading evangelistic role, including Stephen, who paid for his efforts with his life (6:8–7:60).

Initially their efforts were all in Jerusalem. Their simple procedure involved both public and private proclamation: "And every day, in the temple and at home, they ceased not to teach and to preach Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:42). The enraged Jewish council accused them, correctly no doubt, of filling Jerusalem with the Gospel (5:28). Although the apostles and those early disciples apparently did not at first perceive the meaning of the *all nations* part of the great commission, they admirably executed the "Go make disciples" part of it from the start (Mat. 28:19).

When the church was scattered by the persecution led by Saul, the brethren "went about preaching the word" in numerous places (8:4). Specifically, Philip went to Samaria, where

he established the church (8:5–13). Jerusalem then sent Peter and John to help with this new work, which they did (vv. 14–24). On the way back to Jerusalem they preached in numerous Samaritan villages along the way (v. 25). Through the agency of an angel and the Holy Spirit, Philip was then sent to preach “Jesus” to the Ethiopian, whom he baptized (vv. 26–39). Afterward he preached all along the way to Caesarea (v. 40). Behind Luke’s reference to “the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria” (9:31) is the fact that all of these churches almost certainly owed their existence to evangelistic efforts of Jerusalem Christians.

Peter made an extensive evangelistic tour involving the cities of Lydda, Joppa, and Caesarea before he returned to Jerusalem (9:32–11:2). We can further observe the evangelistic zeal of the Jerusalem Church in the following: When it heard that some of its dispersed members had established the church in Syrian Antioch (300+ miles northwest of Jerusalem), it sent Barnabas (introduced to us most favorably in 4:36–37; cf. 9:26–27) to help those babes in Christ and to add to their evangelistic efforts (11:22–30). The Jerusalem church begins to recede into the background at this point in Luke’s account, as the Gospel spread from Jerusalem to Judea, then to Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth, even as the Lord ordained (1:8). But let us never forget where it began and the evangelistic work of the Jerusalem Church that made it happen. If Jerusalem had failed, the Lord’s plan would have been short-circuited from the start.

As it was then, so it is now—no church can begin without evangelism. Moreover, no church can prosper and grow, either spiritually or numerically, without evangelistic fervor. Evangelism—preaching and teaching the Gospel—is verily the life-blood of the church! This responsibility is not merely that of elders, deacons, and preachers, but one resting upon us all. While we may fault the Jerusalem Church for confining its efforts only to Jerusalem till forced to do otherwise by persecution, in which city anywhere in the past two hundred years have enemies of the cause pointed to us and accused us of filling it with the doctrine of Christ? Jerusalem stands as a noble example for us in this distant age respecting evangelistic zeal.

Interesting Facts Concerning the Early Years in Jerusalem

Besides all of the praiseworthy traits of the Jerusalem saints, we can observe some factual information concerning the church in its early days that are neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy in and of themselves. However, some of these some facts are instructive.

It Was Very Large

The Jerusalem Church, with three thousand members on its first day of existence (Acts 2:41), was larger than any congregation of the Lord’s people in this century of which I am aware. For at least some time it appears that there were daily additions to it, bringing its number

to five thousand (counting only the men) in only a short time (4:4). Its membership is called a multitude (4:32) to which “were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women” (5:14). The numbers multiplied “exceedingly” even beyond these descriptions (6:1, 7).

It is thrilling to read of this explosive numerical growth among a people who were fully dedicated to the Truth. Surely every faithful saint longs to see such duplicated. Among other things we can deduce from the size of the Jerusalem congregation is that it is certainly in harmony with God’s will for congregations to attain great size. In fact, in the very nature of the case, ideally each congregation should ever seek to become larger **as long as it is determined to do so by preaching the Gospel and maintaining its loyalty to the same**. There is most definitely no virtue in smallness merely for the sake of smallness.

However, I quickly point out that neither is there virtue in largeness merely for the sake of largeness. The church is cursed in modern times with many brethren who do not understand this and who appear to be more zealous for numerical growth than they are for the Lord and His Truth. Numerous congregations still advertising themselves as a “Church of Christ” have five hundred or more members, and a few have one thousand or more on their rolls. Alas, in most cases these have not attained their size by uncompromisingly preaching the Gospel and following the New Testament pattern for the church. So very many of them have retreated from a strong stand for Truth and righteousness, have adopted denominational practices to attract people, and have gone to denominational sources to learn “how to grow a church.”

These congregations have swelled in numbers all right, but at a terrible price in most cases. Adulterous marriages, sometimes even among elders, deacons, and teachers, are winked at and tolerated. In some cases people are accepted into fellowship, not on the basis of their obedience to the Lord’s plan of salvation, but on their denominational membership. The straightforward Bible preaching that once universally characterized our pulpits has been scrapped by these churches in favor of insipid 15- or 20-minute sound-bytes composed of a few stories and illustrations borrowed from the *pop-psychology, make-me-feel-good-about-myself* culture. Their pulpits are open only to men of liberal bent among us, and more and more to denominational preachers (not that there is much difference between the two).

While there is neither vice nor virtue in largeness or smallness, it impossible to ignore the fact that there are far more large churches (even those with 250 members and larger) which have apostatized than small churches. One can scarcely avoid observing that the larger a congregation becomes, at least in modern times, the greater the tendency exists for it to digress and apostatize. Or, perhaps, the numerical growth of these congregations has come in direct proportion to the number of compromises they have made. Whichever may be the case, it is

unarguable that a large membership and doctrinal looseness have a very close affinity. I do not claim that this affinity **must** exist, for Jerusalem is a case in point proving otherwise. I am simply saying it does exist in these days. It is worthy of observation that the Jerusalem Church did not set out to grow large as an end. Rather, it grew as a direct result of preaching the Gospel, which attracted the multitudes. The apostles did not have an Easter pageant, a Broadway production, or a “non-judgmental” message inviting sinners to come and feel comfortable in their sins in order to “grow the church.” They did not build a gymnasium, call it a “family life center,” and use basketball and volleyball as opportunities to “witness” to their “unchurched” friends. Those pitiable apostles! They knew nothing better to do than to preach the Gospel!

Was the Jerusalem congregation’s explosive growth intended to serve as a pattern for every congregation? Some apparently thus believe, and attempt to lay a “guilt trip” on the leadership of any congregation that has not achieved such. I beg to differ for at least the following reasons:

1. The astounding response to the Gospel in Jerusalem had unique preparation, as discussed at some length in my earlier introductory remarks. God had been preparing for centuries for the Jerusalem responses that occurred on Pentecost, and soon thereafter. For this reason alone there will never be another Pentecost and there will never be another congregation that will begin and grow as dramatically as the Jerusalem Church did.
2. A unique outpouring and demonstration of the Holy Spirit attended the great positive response to the Gospel. The apostles were baptized in (overwhelmed by) the Spirit, as the Lord had promised they would be (John 14–16). The sights and sounds, which surrounded the outpouring of the Spirit upon the twelve, attracted a great throng of people to them. Their ability to speak in various languages, which they obviously had not studied, amazed the crowd and prepared their hearts to be receptive to the inspired explanation of those phenomena. These were underscored by the continued apostolic demonstration of the mighty power with which they were endued as they worked many signs and wonders, proving the verity and source of their message (Acts 2:43; 3:1–11; 4:14–16; 5:12–16; cf. Mark 16:17–18; John 3:2; Heb. 2:3–4).
3. The events which led up to and surrounded Passover and the Lord’s crucifixion (i.e., the triumphal entry, the “last supper,” His arrest and trials, the Jews’ ugly demonstrations outside Pilate’s Praetorium, the release of Barabbas, the procession to Golgotha, the crucifixion itself, the “rumors” of His resurrection) were all still uniquely fresh in the minds of the vast audience addressed by the twelve on Pentecost and in the days that immediately followed. (While only the apostles and a few others were privy to some of these events, most of the

people were doubtless familiar with most of them.) Cleopas' words to the Lord on the Emmaus Road demonstrate how utterly consumed with these events all of the people in and around Jerusalem were: "Dost thou alone sojourn in Jerusalem and not know the things which are come to pass there in these days?" (Luke 24:18). We know that the people were searching for an explanation of the miraculous events they saw and heard on Pentecost itself (Acts 2:6–8, 12–13). They must also have been laboring to put **all** the remarkable events of the past fifty days into perspective as well (Luke 24:19–24). For the first time all of the loose ends in these spectacular events were tied together by the apostles in the first Gospel sermon to ever instruct men concerning the fullness of remission of sins through the crucified, resurrected, glorified Son of God—the Messiah of their prophets, and the same Jesus of Nazareth Whose death they had demanded! The extensive positive response the message evoked on Pentecost and in the days immediately thereafter in Jerusalem is clearly tied to the immediate dramatic background of the events of the almost two months leading up to it.

4. No such overwhelming response in a brief time span at any other location is recorded in all of the New Testament. This is so in spite of the fact that the apostles preached the same powerful Gospel and verified it by miraculous powers and signs everywhere they went. This all leads to the conclusion that the events that produced the astounding response to the Gospel in Jerusalem were one-time circumstances that never will or can be repeated. There is surely no "pattern" for congregational growth or size to be deduced from them.

Many factors affect the response men will make to the Gospel in any given time or place. As zealous, dedicated, powerful, and determined as Paul was, he met with varied responses in various places, but he never met with such astounding success as that in Jerusalem. An important fact for all who preach the Gospel and for all who serve as elders is that, like Paul, we are not sent "to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (1 Cor. 1:17). That is, the success of our efforts cannot be measured merely by the number who respond to our work, although we should ever strive to pierce the sinful heart with the Spirit's sword. In America we are presently in a circumstance where hearts are generally unreceptive to the Gospel. But in some areas of the world (e.g., India) some thirst for it and respond to it in large numbers. If the Lord delays His coming, the day may—and hopefully, will—come when the hearts of our countrymen will once more be more receptive to the Truth as they were even a few decades ago. But we err if we judge our efforts and the response of people to them by the occurrences in the infancy of the Jerusalem Church.

It Was Disciplined

The first case of “church discipline” is observed in the early days of the Jerusalem Church’s existence (Acts 5:1–11). Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, sold some land and conspired to give part of it to the church, while stating that they were giving it all. Their sin was not in keeping part of it, but in lying about giving it all. Although they appeared to utter their lie only to the apostles (and perhaps in the presence of some others), Peter indicted them for actually lying to the Holy Spirit. They were “disciplined” by being struck dead as they respectively came before the apostles with their lies.⁷ This stroke of discipline both purified the church and put all of the brethren on notice concerning God’s intolerance of such deception. The result was that “great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all that heard these things” (vv. 5, 11).

Luke does not say whether God directly or indirectly (through Peter) struck them down, but in either case, He was behind it. At the very least Peter was involved in the act by miraculously discerning that they lied and by boldly exposing and condemning their lie. While there is no Biblical record of a subsequent case of “discipline by death,” there are numerous passages through which the Holy Spirit obligates local congregations to discipline their members by severing fellowship with them if they will not repent (Mat. 18:15–17; Rom. 16:17–18; 1 Cor. 5; 2 The. 3:6, 14–15; et al.). It would appear that God used this severe (by human judgment) measure of discipline in Jerusalem to impress upon the church from its beginning that He intended for His church to be kept pure. Church leaders still should remember the case of Ananias and Sapphira when they are tempted to ignore the clear Scriptural mandates to withdraw from the disorderly.

It Was Tried

The Lord persistently warned those who followed Him that they would be persecuted (e.g., Mat. 5:10–12, 44; 10:16–39; 24:9 John 15:20). The apostles apparently experienced this to some degree as they carried out the limited commission (Mat. 10:14–15). It was undoubtedly for fear of persecution that all of the apostles fled upon the Lord’s arrest and that Peter denied the Lord at His trials (Mark 14:50, 66–72; cf. Mat. 26:31–35). However, the first extensive persecution came upon the Jerusalem Church in its early days. The initial wave appears to have been instigated by the Sadduceean Party of the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1–2). Peter and John were arrested, jailed, and at their hearing, threatened if they continued to preach (vv. 3–22). When they continued to preach and do their mighty signs, the Sadducees orchestrated an arrest of apparently all of the apostles (5:17–18). Before their hearing they were released by the Lord’s angel, after which they went right back to the temple and resumed their preaching (vv. 19–26),

which must have infuriated the council even further. The court wanted to kill them, and might have done so had Gamaliel not intervened (vv. 33–40a). The councilors settled for beating the apostles and once more warning them “not to speak in the name of Jesus,” after which they nevertheless “ceased not to teach and to preach Jesus as the Christ” (v. 40b–42).

Stephen, one of the seven men chosen to serve the needs of the widows, so mightily confounded and refuted some of the Jews that they brought him before the court, then hired false witnesses against him, and finally stoned him to death (7:54–60). Saul of Tarsus, who had consented to Stephen’s death, then launched a wave of fiery persecution against the church in general which was so severe that most of the saints had to flee for their lives (8:1–3). Sometime later King Herod decided to afflict the church, killing the apostle James and imprisoning Peter till a convenient time to dispatch him (12:1–4). In answer to the earnest prayers of the brethren, the Lord’s angel freed him and allowed him to flee the city (vv. 5–17).

The brethren suffered much, but weathered these painful experiences and were the stronger for them. The apostles boldly withstood the arrests, threats, and beatings of the council. They rejoiced in their sufferings and boldly continued to preach the Word (4:19–20, 29–31; 5:29–32, 41–42). The record gives us little information about the reaction of brethren when Saul began his terrible onslaught against them following Stephen, but Luke gives no hint that they compromised in the face of peril.

When the pressure became so great that most of the brethren had to flee for their lives, they scattered to Judea, Samaria, Phoenicia, Cyprus, and even faraway Syrian Antioch (Acts 8:1; 11:19). With their dispersion, the seed of the kingdom was broadcast far and wide, for they “went about preaching the word” (8:4). Preaching of the Gospel to every nation was what the Lord had ordered (Mat. 28:19; Mark 16:15), but the brethren had been content to preach it only in Jerusalem before Saul’s rampage. It thus appears that the saints had to be **forced** to leave Jerusalem and execute the great commission. Although God did not actively cause His people to suffer, He used their sufferings to bless the world by getting the Gospel to them. Likewise, World War II, which brought death, destruction, and suffering to millions of people, caused the Lord’s people serving in the armed forces to scatter to many areas of Asia and Europe, and with them went the Gospel. Out of that tragedy many were taught the Truth and obeyed the Gospel, and many congregations were established. Sadly the Lord’s people at times have had to be almost forced by severe persecution or the tragedy of war to obey His orders. Could the indifference in the church today toward the lost be possibly inviting another wave of great suffering and tragedy?

There are a few areas of the world today where the church must meet in secret for fear of reprisal. There have always been, and continue to be, isolated cases of persecution of the faithful. However, for the most part the Lord's people, though not always accepted with open arms by those around them, have not experienced widespread, planned, government sponsored physical oppression and persecution over the past fifty years. This has especially been so in our nation, which was founded by men who believed in the God of the Bible, that the Bible was the Word of God, and that "Christianity" (as they comprehended it) was the only true religion. But now men and women in places of great power deny all of the above and are striving to eliminate God and the Bible from the nation's consciousness. Popular philosophy and the culture it has spawned have been so much captured by atheism and hedonism that it not only tolerates, but champions, the most egregious evil and immorality. The only thing it cannot tolerate is any voice raised against its lying, fornication, adultery, homosexuality, and other such despicable behavior. The more power such forces get, the more pressure they will place upon any who dare speak against their "right" to thus act.

How long will it be until a homosexual (male or female) demands membership and the "right" to preach in a congregation of the Lord's people? Or how long will it be until a woman demands that her "civil rights" are being violated by not being appointed as an elder in a local congregation? When (not if) this happens and the ACLU jumps with glee to their defense, given the liberal judges in federal courts and the rulings they have made favoring almost every liberal cause in recent years, the outcome is predictable. Mainline denominations have for the most part surrendered to the *in-your-face* tactics of the rabid homosexual and radical feminist activists. Most of them surrendered their officerships and pulpits long ago to the "women's libbers," with hardly a protest. The homosexuals are now doing the same thing, and one by one, the morally and Scripturally bankrupt denominations are yielding to them rather than resisting them. Whether out of an unwillingness to face the possible reprisals of court judgments against them or out of misplaced sympathy for men and women unwilling to repent of abominable behavior, most of the major denominations have acquiesced.

When these ungodly elements begin their concentrated assault on Zion, we need to be prepared for real persecution—we will be tried if we stand. When a judge or the Supreme Court orders a congregation to admit a homosexual as a member or to appoint a woman as an elder, it will not be without consequence if it refuses to comply. Reprisals (persecution) will follow, which could consist of stiff fines and/or seizure of church property and assets, and/or even prison time for elders and preachers. If the radical liberal and atheistic educators and politicians have their way it will one day be illegal to even preach against homosexual behavior or to write the words the reader is presently reading, much less resist their ambition to infiltrate and pollute

every stratum of society and every public and private institution. Perhaps in His providence the Lord will soon decide that their cup of iniquity is now filled and they will be brought down to defeat. However, unless something prevents the continued increases in the influence of evil men in our nation, the day will surely come when those who dare rebuke their evil deeds, by word or deed, will be made to pay dearly for it.

We need to understand that, ironically, persecution has characteristically served to strengthen, rather than weaken the church. The persecution suffered by the apostles in Jerusalem made both them—and the brethren who saw their determined faith—even stronger (Acts 4:23–32; 5:17–25, 40–42). Although the Gospel is God’s saving power (Rom. 1:16), doubtless, the boldness of the preaching of the apostles in Jerusalem, even after being arrested, threatened, and beaten, broke the hard hearts of many (perhaps even of the priests, Acts 6:7!), enabling the Gospel seed to enter and germinate.

When the disciples were scattered from Jerusalem upon Saul’s campaign of terror against them they did not slink away in silence and fear, but boldly preached the Gospel everywhere they went (8:4). The willingness of Christians to suffer great loss and pain, even to the point of death for the sake of Christ (Rev. 2:10), strengthens the church in at least two ways: (1) As indicated above, such faithful resolve causes some unbelievers to consider seriously a cause for which people are willing to suffer and die. Some of these will obey the Gospel. (2) The members who merely “play church” are weeded out as only the stalwart saints pass the test (those who will not live for Christ will certainly not die for Him in the hour of trial!).

Many among the elect are consumed with apathy, selfishness, compromise, and worldliness. Their hearts are in the world and their lives show it. Although persecution thus causes the church to decrease in numbers, it is thereby made no weaker, but is actually increased in real strength. The blood of martyrs has always served to fertilize the seed of the kingdom. We know not whether the Lord will let another great wave of persecution against His people sweep over the earth. However, we know that in the Jerusalem saints we have a great pattern for our behavior should such come.

A Lamentable Development in Jerusalem’s Later Years

The New Testament not only warns us about persecution. It also repeatedly warns us about the ever-present danger of apostasy and digression. In its beginning, as earlier noted, the church in Jerusalem “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). Unfortunately, this was not always to be so of every member. The Jerusalem congregation was from the start composed almost completely, if not altogether, of Jews (2:5; 21:20b). Among those who obeyed the Gospel was “a great company of the priests” (6:7), many of whom were likely Pharisees.

Jerusalem had been the Jews' civil and religious capitol for a millennium. The Law of Moses (at least their interpretations of it through the rabbis) was so ingrained in their nature that they found it all but inconceivable to accept the end of its authority (21:20b). Moreover, the rite of circumcision, stretching all the way back to their father Abraham and reinforced in Moses' Law as a sign of their national and religious identity, was to the vast majority of them an irrevocable ordinance (21:21). The general attitude of Jews toward all non-Jews—Gentiles— was one of condescension at best, and abhorrence at worst. These attitudes did not die easily in the Jewish heart, even among those who obeyed the Gospel.

Consequently, a strong party grew up in the Jerusalem Church based upon loyalty to the Law and to circumcision. They taught, "Except ye be circumcised after the custom of Moses, ye cannot be saved" (15:1). They were still trying to observe the law and were practicing circumcision themselves, but they were determined that the Gentiles must do the same. They were "legalists" in the worst sense of the term, binding laws which God had not bound—in this case binding laws which God had abolished (Eph. 2:14–16; Col. 2:14; Heb. 10:9–10; et al.). They actually added another act of obedience—circumcision—to the Gospel plan of Salvation! Furthermore, as is often the case with those who advocate a false view, this party was extremely vocal and zealous. While we do not have a record of all the places they took their "gospel of circumcision," we can trace the routes of some of them by means of Paul's opposition to and exposure of them in most of his epistles (e.g., Rom. 2:28; 1 Cor. 7:18–19; 2 Cor. 11:13, 22; Gal. 2:11–14; 5:1–4; Eph. 2:14–16; Phi. 3:2–3; Col. 2:8–17; 1 Tim. 1:3–4, 6–7; Tit. 1:10; Heb. 3:12–14).

Paul alluded to the fact that "certain came from James [in Jerusalem]" to Antioch, whom Cephas correctly feared were "of the circumcision [party]" (Gal. 2:12). Luke apparently records the same incident: "And certain men came down from Judaea and taught the brethren, saying, Except ye be circumcised after the custom of Moses, ye cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). Paul wrote of his going up to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus for somewhat of a "showdown" with the circumcision party (Gal. 2:1–10). Luke described the same occasion: "And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and questioning with them, the brethren appointed that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question" (Acts 15:2).

Acts 15 is devoted almost completely to the great discussion that occurred in Jerusalem over whether or not Moses' Law, particularly circumcision, would be bound upon Christians. Luke specifically identifies the source of these Judaistic contentions: "But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees who believed, saying, It is needful to circumcise them, and to

charge them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). Some of the Pharisees who had been baptized were more devoted to their old sect than they were to the Christ and His Word. While not all of the Jerusalem Church was of this sentiment, a significant and vocal part of it certainly was. To Peter’s credit, he “learned his lesson” from Paul’s rebuke of him in Antioch (Gal. 2:11–16). He set out the issue plainly that the Law was not to be bound on the Gentiles, and James, one of the elders, argued the same. Under the direction of the inspired apostles a letter to the Gentiles was drafted and sent by Paul, Barnabas, and others disclaiming any sponsorship of the circumcision sect (Acts 15:22–29).

Although the entire church was not of the sentiment of these “Pharisee Christians,” they wielded a great amount of influence by their boldness and their indefatigable spread of their doctrine. They made enough noise to leave the impression that the whole church agreed with them—a favorite bluffing tactic of false teachers. It is disappointing that the apostles still in Jerusalem and the Jerusalem elders did not expose and silence the false teachers among them long before the dramatic meeting was required. Had they acted with the same dispatch concerning this problem that was seen in them when the Grecian widows were being neglected a few years earlier (Acts 6:1–6), churches all over the world could have been spared much grief. Peter likely failed to act out of fear (Gal. 2:12). We do not know why James failed.

Here we have a case in point of a neglected problem in a congregation reaching crisis proportions unnecessarily, because it was not dealt with in its inception. This doctrinal problem grew to the point of not only endangering the Jerusalem Church, but the church all over the world, as well. Had it not been for the absolutely uncompromising stand of Paul and Barnabas (but principally Paul, Gal. 2:13b), it appears that the other apostles and the Jerusalem elders would not have withstood the false teachers. Had these Pharisees carried the day, much of the church—perhaps most of the Jewish members—would have been lost to Judaism. The Hebrews letter was addressed to a group of Jewish saints who were on the very verge of elevating Moses’ Law above the Gospel.

What can we learn from these sad events relating to Jerusalem?

1. It is not enough to begin well; we must continue and finish well.
2. Christians can apostatize, even when inspired apostles are among them.
3. Although inspired and infallible in their teaching, the apostles were capable of sin.
4. If Peter were the first Pope he set a sorry precedent for succeeding ones.
5. Small problems, if not dealt with early, can become very large problems.
6. False teachers cannot be coddled; they and their doctrine must be confronted and exposed.
7. Loud-mouthed false teachers can wield influence far out of proportion to their numbers.

8. Elders have a responsibility to feed, watch out for, and protect the church.
9. Only one or two stalwart, uncompromising saints can sometimes prevail over error and sin.
10. When the Truth is at stake we must never give ground.

Conclusion

One of the most exciting bits of history ever recorded is that of the beginning and growth of the church of Christ in Jerusalem as the Gospel was first preached. Let us emulate all of her exemplary traits. Let us learn from observations relating to her early experiences. Let us beware of the trap into which she fell that we may help spare congregations the same problems she suffered with false teachers.

Endnotes

1. All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. Henri Daniel-Rops, *Daily Life in the Time of Jesus* (New York, NY: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1962), pp. 92, 101.
3. By the expression, *in the temple*, we are not to understand within the walls of the temple building itself. *The temple* must here and elsewhere be understood as a reference to the paved acreage of the temple grounds, which was enclosed by the vast retaining walls made of mammoth hewn stones (see Acts 5:20, 25, 42). Thus, the “pinnacle of the temple” from which Satan challenged Jesus to jump (Mat. 4:5) was not the roof of the temple building, but the highest point of the retaining wall (the southeast corner or wing) of the temple area, several times higher than the roof of the temple proper. On the word *pinnacle* in the passage above, the ASV has a footnote, which reads “wing.” Likewise the “door of the temple which is called Beautiful” (Acts 3:2) is actually a gate in the wall through which one entered the temple grounds from the east. One of the prominent areas of the Herodian temple grounds was “the porch of Solomon” (v. 11). This “porch” was a large plaza east of the temple building with a roof supported by a lengthy colonnade. Interestingly, John writes that on one occasion “Jesus was walking in the temple in Solomon’s porch (John 10:23). Note that he locates the porch “in the temple,” clearly meaning in the temple grounds. There was sufficient room for several thousand to gather in the temple courts. It is likely that this is where the vast throng came together to hear the first Gospel sermon (Acts 2:6). The Jerusalem brethren, who numbered 3,000 from the beginning and then grew and multiplied, required far more space than any building in Jerusalem could provide. However, there was sufficient room in the temple area for their meetings, and this was their place of assembly.
4. While we are not informed by Luke about the circumstances which produced such an apparently large number of people in so much need, I offer the following for consideration: At least some of those 3,000 who obeyed the Gospel on Pentecost and of those thousands who were subsequently added to the church in its earliest days were pilgrims from far-flung areas (Acts 2:5–11). As earlier indicated, many of these travelers likely came for the Passover, intending to wait until after Pentecost to begin their homeward journeys. Upon their obedience to the Gospel we suppose that at least some, if not many, of these new Christians decided to stay in Jerusalem longer than originally planned (some perhaps permanently) to remain among their new brethren. Assuming they had budgeted sufficient money and provisions only for their original plans, these would soon be exhausted by their extended sojourns. The men of these families would be without jobs with which to earn money to care for their families, and would thus be dependent upon the mercies of their brethren until they could secure employment. The implied sizable group of widows may have developed because a number of the men among these pilgrims died during the fifty-day visit to Jerusalem, or during the extended stay of these new saints, thus leaving widows and children stranded away from home and destitute. It was almost impossible for a woman to find honorable employment in those days, and if she had children her problems were compounded. Away from home and from relatives to help her, she was even more dependent upon the mercies of others. Whether or not the foregoing explanations have merit, the problem of poverty in Jerusalem, especially among the saints, was severe and long lasting as indicated by subsequent references and responses to it years later (Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:26–27; 1 Cor. 16:1–3; 2 Cor. 8–9).

5. This is my conviction for several reasons: (1) If these were actually deacons we would have a case of the appointment of deacons in the absence of elders. There is no New Testament record of the appointment of deacons prior to or in the absence of elders, unless this case in Jerusalem is the exception (which I do not believe it to be). We do not read of any elders even in the area of Jerusalem until a few years later, and then the general area of Judea, rather than Jerusalem, is specified (although I grant that it is most likely that the earliest elders in Judea would have been in the Jerusalem Church) (Acts 11:29–30). (2) If these men were “official” deacons then we have two different sets of qualifications for this “office.” The qualifications for the men in Acts 6 are considerably different from those specifically given for deacons in 1 Tim. 3. (3) Neither Luke nor any other New Testament writer refers to the seven men in Acts 6 as “deacons.”
6. It would help if each congregation had some person, who could readily be reached, delegated to handle such requests for help. I also suggest that each congregation decide on a set of guidelines for responding to calls for help, especially those of the “drop-in” type. These should include a forthright questionnaire for each applicant, which asks if they drink, use drugs, use tobacco, gamble, etc. It is also appropriate to ask one’s religious affiliation and if he or she is willing to engage in a Bible study. If the person seeking help is a Methodist it is reasonable to ask if he or she has sought help from his or her own and if not, why not. While I am not opposed, as a matter of principle, to congregations helping unbelievers, each congregation has limited resources, which should primarily be used to help the brethren (Gal. 6:10).
7. We can but wonder how decimated the ranks of the Lord’s army might be if the Lord still thus dealt with all His children who lie either explicitly or implicitly concerning their income and their obligation to God to use their resources to advance the kingdom. Many are they who are so captivated by materialism that they live as kings during the week and give as paupers on the Lord’s day, thus implicitly lying about their ability to give according to their prosperity (1 Cor. 16:2).

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