

Eternity Daily Bible Study - No. 374
Series: The Primal Church - Acts Chapters 1-8
Verses: Acts 6:9-15
Topic: The Accusers of Stephen
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Acts 6:9-15 MKJV Then there arose certain of the synagogue which is called the synagogue of the Libertines, and Cyrenians, and Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and from Asia, disputing with Stephen. (10) And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. (11) And they induced men to be saying, We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God. (12) And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes. And coming on, they seized him and brought him to the Sanhedrin. (13) And they set up false witnesses, who said, This man does not cease speaking blasphemous words against this holy place and the Law. (14) For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered to us. (15) And looking intently at him. all those sitting in the Sanhedrin saw his face as if it were the face of an angel.

C. Peter Wagner has an interesting take on today's passage that the synagogue concerned was a synagogue of Jews from the Dispersion who were very anxious to prove their Jewish legitimacy and were thus hyper-zealous. There are a number of explanations about the synagogue of the Libertines/Freedmen (Gk: Libertinos) but the best is probably the following (from the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia):

They were "the freedmen of the Romans" (Chrysostom), the descendants of Jewish freedmen at Rome who had been expelled by Tiberius. In 63 BC Pompey had taken prisoners of war to Rome. These, being liberated by those who had acquired them as slaves, formed a colony on the banks of the Tiber (Philo, Legat. ad Caium). Tacitus relates that the senate decreed (19 AD) that a number of Jewish Libertines should be transported to Sardinia, and that the rest should leave Italy, unless they renounced, before a certain day, their profane customs (Ann. ii, 85; see also Josephus, Ant., XVIII, iii, 5). Many would naturally seek refuge in Jerusalem and build there a synagogue.

Remember Stephen was sent to meet the needs of the Greek-speaking Jews and he preached the gospel to them with signs and wonders converting many. Thus the synagogue of the Libertines, which ministered to Greek-speaking Jews, would have seen many of its members heading across the way to Stephen the evangelist who met their needs and healed their sicknesses. Perhaps there was a church split, perhaps the offerings fell, perhaps the pews were empty, who knows, but Stephen was stealing their sheep!

No-one is quicker to call someone a heretic than a pastor who has lost some of his

flock to the new preacher in town! Such injured clergy say terrible things, which flow from an embittered heart and a poisoned imagination. The fires of jealousy within the mind make them see dastardly things in the new church down the road – especially if the doctrine or practices are a little bit different.

The embittered pastor will maintain that the healings are from the Devil, and the demons are cast out by Beelzebub!

Matthew 10:24-25 ASV A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his lord. (25) It is enough for the disciple that he be as his teacher, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more them of his household!

Matthew 12:22-24 ASV Then was brought unto him one possessed with a demon, blind and dumb: and he healed him, insomuch that the dumb man spake and saw. (23) And all the multitudes were amazed, and said, Can this be the son of David? (24) But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This man doth not cast out demons, but by Beelzebub the prince of the demons.

“And they set up false witnesses, who said, This man does not cease speaking blasphemous words against this holy place and the Law.” Pastor Adam says one thing, Pastor Bob says another and Pastor Charles yet another and soon the rumors fly, the facts are never checked or verified, and the body of Christ is being bruised and afflicted.

“For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth shall destroy this place, and shall change the customs which Moses delivered to us.” This gives us a clue to their concern – maintaining the Temple and the Mosaic traditions. Was God directly available as the Christians maintained - or was He located in the golden Ark of the Covenant, in the secret Holy of Holies, and only accessible via the priests and the traditions?

If spiritual power was available outside the golden box called the Ark of the Covenant, and outside the big religious building called the Temple and outside the priesthood, and outside the traditions – then this was calamitous for their system.

Until this day lay preaching is opposed. One conservative Irish denomination opposed Mel Gibson's film *The Passion Of The Christ* solely on the grounds that the gospel should only be proclaimed in churches and by ordained clergy! The fact is that most gospel proclamation takes place outside the walls of the Church – via TV, radio, tracts, books, and the Internet.

As the Old Testament system crumbled, the bits that were most affected, such as this synagogue tend to react defensively – and in this case violently. In some ways the Church is also going through major changes from the model that worked well enough up until the late 70s and some of us “older Christians” (such as yours truly) can feel threatened. When this happens we need to be very careful of any judgments that we make.

Blessings,

John Edmiston

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