

K.E.Y. Bible Study

Description: K.E.Y. Bible Study introduces the essential biblical narratives, concepts, and themes, and teaches the student how to apply the message of the Bible to daily living. Each teaching session is self-contained, which allows participants to join in the study at any time during the five years.

Purpose: To teach the most significant events, passages, and doctrines of the Bible in a manner and using methods which encourages and empowers the student to:

- Keep the faith that we have received
- Be Equipped to serve the Body of Christ
- Become Yoked, or connect, with others for the purpose of ministry

Dividing The Work So The Word Can Be Rightly Divided Acts 6:1-7 October 7, 2015

General Background

The church has been and always will be an imperfect gathering of the followers of and believers in Jesus. The perfect church will not exist until our Lord returns. In the first five chapters of Acts, Luke described (for the most part) some of the successes of the early church. In Acts 6, he described a potential crisis within the fellowship of the first-century church and explained how the church faced and resolved it. Depending on how you interpret the details of the story, either some Christian widows were being discriminated against or some widows were being petty. Both discrimination and pettiness are serious charges against people who are filled with the Spirit of God. In the book of Acts, Luke does not minimize the problems or idealize the way the church functioned. Instead, he described first-century church life realistically. The church is of divine origin, empowered by the Spirit of God, but filled with imperfect people.

What Happened

Acts 6:1

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

- As a way to show that this was not necessarily a chronological narrative, Luke began with the general statement, “in those days.” This would have been sometime between 30 A.D. and 35 A.D. but not necessarily immediately following the events in Acts 5. New followers were being added regularly, and usually this meant additional tension. Church growth often increases the tension within a church, but tension is not necessarily wrong. When new people are added to a church, both excitement and concerns increase because of the exclusivity of fallen human nature.
- Both groups of widows were Jewish by race and by religion. The Grecian Jewish widows were descendants of people, who had been forced out of Jerusalem and had lived in the countries that were part of the Greek culture. When they eventually moved back to Jerusalem, they spoke Greek and observed some Greek customs. The Hebraic widows

K.E.Y. Bible Study

spoke Aramaic and closely followed the Jewish cultural practices. While the church always has people from different backgrounds, people tend to have the most trust and confidence in those who are from the same subculture. It was a Jewish faith practice to distribute food to the widows and orphans, and the church followed that practice as an act of obedience. Sometimes money would be given to the widows, and other times, food would be given to them. Because there were very few effective methods of food storage, the distribution took place each day.

Acts 6:2

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.”

The disciples apparently acted very quickly to address this issue and did not take time to try to determine who was at fault. Finding who to blame is not a Christian virtue, while feeding the hungry is. The disciples did not see dividing and delivering food as beneath them or as something they did not want to do. They recognized that their gifts were in teaching and doing the actual food distribution would give them less time and opportunity to teach. The term “disciples” referred to all the followers of Jesus and was used frequently in the gospels. The word means “learners.” The apostle Paul rarely used this term to describe Christians in his letters.

Acts 6:3-4

3 “Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them 4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

- The Twelve came up with the solution, but they involved the other disciples in implementing it. They empowered the group at large to choose those who would be given the task of distributing the food to the widows. The criteria to do this benevolence duty required both the presence of the Holy Spirit and the ability to make decisions. These men were not considered less “spiritual” than those who were doing the teaching. All Christian ministry, whether preaching or distributing food, requires spiritual empowerment. Unfortunately, in the centuries following the book of Acts, the church began to see benevolence and administration as a second level, or lower tier, of ministry. All Christians are in ministry, not just those who work for the institutional church and non-profits. The early church involved all three forms of church governance and administration: 1. episcopalian (i.e., one top leader), 2. presbyterian (i.e., a group of leaders), and 3. congregational (i.e., the whole body of believers).
- The word for “ministry” can be, and probably should be, translated “service.” All ministry is service; we serve God through serving others. It is important to note that prayer and preaching/teaching go together. While the Western mind suggests that prayer and study are two different disciplines, they are one and the same for the first-century church teachers/preachers. The early church met in the temple, in the synagogues, and in homes with the ministry, or service, of the word taking place in all three settings.

K.E.Y. Bible Study

Acts 6:5

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

All of these names are more identified with the Greek culture, which suggests that they chose people who would be trusted by the group of widows who felt discriminated. In anticipation of the story of Stephen, which will come later, Luke specifically set him apart from the others and described him as “a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.” This is not to suggest that the others were not, but that Stephen was especially so. The choice of Nicolas, who was not Jewish, for leadership was revolutionary and a precursor of what would come in the life of the church. Later, the church struggled with the idea of the gospel being for all people.

Acts 6:6

They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Presenting them to the apostles does not mean they were asking for the apostles' formal approval but for their blessing. To bless is more important than to approve. “Laying on of hands” is associated with blessing and sharing power. While this verse provided the beginning of a tradition, there is nothing to suggest “laying on hands” is a commanded action of the church. Ordination can be a meaningful tradition, but it is not a biblical command for ministry. This passage cannot be used as a proof-text in support of ordination.

Acts 6:7

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Luke showed the result of this action as being church growth, especially among Jewish leaders. By this time in Jewish history, there were social differences between the Chief Priest and the common priests. Often, the common priests only served part-time and were ignored by the more powerful priests. These people may have admired the real sense of spiritual community they were seeing in the lives of the followers of Jesus. Both the gospel of Jesus and the way His followers practiced community were good news to the alienated.

A Historical Sidebar: Often Baptists interpret this passage as describing the selection of the first deacons. Although their actions were similar to the role of deacons in the modern church, these men were not called deacons. When the Apostle Paul described the qualifications and duties of deacons in I Timothy, he did not reference this event in the Book of Acts.

K.E.Y. Truth

Church ministry, administration, and governance are based on gifts and abilities, not on hierarchical positions of power and authority