

CLASS: SS3
SUBJECT: CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS STUDIES
TOPIC: COMMUNAL LIVING IN THE EARLY CHURCH
WEEK: 10
TERM: FIRST TERM

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ELECTION OF THE SUCCESSOR TO JUDAS ISCARIOT (Acts 1:15-26)

In obedience to the Jesus' injunction to his disciples to stay together in Jerusalem, they all returned to Jerusalem where they went into a house, staying together as a community. One of their earliest actions was the replacement of Judas Iscariot, who had long committed suicide following his betrayal of Jesus. To this end, Barnabas and Matthias were selected, but after several rounds of prayer, they cast lots and finally, Matthias was chosen to replace Judas Iscariot.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY (Acts 2:41-47; 4:32-37)

At the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven, the number of the disciples including women was about one hundred and twenty (120). After Peter's speech on the day of Pentecost about three thousand souls were baptized and added to the Church. Also after the prayer of Peter and John for the crippled man at the beautiful gate who got healed during the hour of prayer, about five thousand men were converted and added to the church.

The converts all stayed in Jerusalem with the disciples. They formed the early Church. There was a sense of togetherness and belonging among members of the early Church. They were of one heart and one mind, they did everything in common.

The characteristics of the early Church can be summarized as follows:

1. They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship.
2. They lived communal life; they had everything common.
3. They broke Bread together. This means they took Holy Communion together.
4. The rich and others sold their properties and possessions and brought all the money to the apostles' feet.
5. They worshipped in the temple daily.
6. They distributed food and clothing to all the members, as any had need.
7. They prayed Together.
8. They were always praising God.
9. They ate food with glad and generous hearts.
10. Everybody worked for the good of others in order to build a strong Church.

THE PROBLEMS OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

(Acts 5:1-11; 6:1)

Like any other organization of human beings, the joy and communal living among the brethren gave way to human weaknesses and problems. In the early church dishonesty and discrimination came in to destroy the spirit of fellowship but was quickly stopped by the apostles.

1. The Fraud/Dishonesty of Ananias and Sapphira

Fraud is a form of cheating or stealing that results from dishonesty. It is a way of denying others their share from the Church, State or Nation through deceit and corruption. In our present day, people in churches and society engage in widespread fraud to enrich themselves. Some people, who collect tithes for the Church or taxes for the nation, keep part of the money collected for their personal use. Such acts are fraudulent. Just as fraud (corruption) is today, so it was in the early Church.

Some members of the early Church were not honest. Ananias and Sapphira were bad people. The two agreed to sell their property and bring the money to a common fund but after they had sold the property, they surrendered part of the money and kept back the rest for their own use. The husband came first and lied to Peter that he had brought the entire money. Peter made it known to him that he had told a lie not to him but to the Holy Spirit. Immediately Ananias fell down and died. Some people came in, carried him away and buried him.

After a while his wife Sapphira came in and also lied that she and her husband had brought the entire amount. Immediately, she also fell down and died and was buried beside her husband. A great fear came upon all the members of the early Church.

Lessons to be drawn from the Incident

1. Ananias and Sapphira were misguided into thinking that they could serve both God and Mammon (money and riches).
2. One can deceive a fellow man but cannot deceive God who reads the heart of man.
3. The Church was established by God and controlled by the Holy Spirit. Members must work in accordance with the guidelines set up by the Holy Spirit.
4. God's judgment is certain.
5. God punishes sin of disobedience.
6. We should give with sincerity/honesty.

2. Discrimination and Murmuring in the Early Church

To murmur is to grumble, to show discontentment. It is also to whisper in low tones to express displeasure; especially when a group of people realize that things are not being done the right way or they are being discriminated against.

There was discrimination among members of the early church. This came about during the distribution of food and other things. The Jews who were from Jerusalem and Palestine (*Hebrews*) were given special treatment while the Jews born outside Jerusalem and Palestine (*Grecian Jews or Hellenites*) especially the widows, were treated differently. They were *discriminated against and were not given the food and other things they requested for*. As a result, the Grecian Jews murmured and complained bitterly.

Solutions to the Problems of the Early Christian Community (Acts 6:2-6)

The problem of dishonesty and hypocrisy was solved by the death of the couple involved (Ananias and Sapphira) the same day. Fear gripped the other disciples and they all served God with singleness of heart.

3. Selection of Deacons

In order to solve the discrimination and partiality problem in the distribution of food and other items among the early Christians, the apostles discussed the matter. Peter made it known, that they (apostles) cannot leave the work of preaching and ministering the word of God to serve tables and supervise the distribution of food and other things. He suggested that they should choose seven men who will become deacons to supervise the distribution of food and other things, and ensure that nobody was discriminated against.

Peter stated the qualities expected of the seven deacons. These qualities are listed below:

1. They should be men of good repute, i.e. men of good character.
2. They should be men of wisdom and understanding.
3. They should be men filled with the Holy Spirit.

The following men that fit into the criteria were chosen by the early Church as deacons:

- A. Stephen
- B. Philip
- C. Prochorus
- D. Nicanor
- E. Timon
- F. Parmenas
- G. Nicolas.

Due to the selection of the seven deacons, the discrimination and the grumbling in the church stopped as there was now equitable distribution of food and other things.

Some Social Problems Facing the Church Today

1. The issue of women ordination.
2. So many pastors take the work of God as part time duty.
3. Local traditions are clashing with Christian values and ethics.
4. Stealing of church funds.
5. The urge to get rich overnight by pastors.
6. Proliferation of churches.
7. The legitimacy or otherwise of polygamy.
8. Lack of unity among members.
9. Differences in doctrines. Others preach doctrines that lead people astray.
10. There are some pastors that live immoral life unworthy of emulation.

ASSIGNMENT

1. What problem brought about the appointment of the deacons in the early church?
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2. Mention three other social problem facing the church today