

Expansion of the Community

***Key Verse: “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***

***Selected Scripture:
Acts 6:1-15; 8:1-8***

FOLLOWING JESUS’ DEATH, resurrection, and the subsequent imparting of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, it was God’s purpose that the early Christian church expand to other areas of the Roman Empire and beyond. The resurrected Jesus, shortly before his ascension to the Father, had given this commission to his disciples, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”—Matt. 28:19

God supervised this expansion and spreading of the Gospel message in a number of ways. First, in order to free up his chosen apostles for these endeavors, he overruled their decision to select seven honest and upright brethren, full of the Holy Spirit, to take care of the more temporal needs of the church and its members as deacons in the church. (Acts 6:3,5,6) Having done this, it was the apostles’ purpose to “give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.” (vs. 4) The result of this was, as expressed in our Key Verse, a great expansion of the Word of God,

increased numbers of believers, and obedience to the faith by many.

Another means by which the expansion and growth of the Gospel message occurred was through the deacons themselves. In addition to the temporal and pastoral responsibilities laid upon them, they too found time and had the desire to preach the Word of God. One of them, Philip, we find later preaching the word in Samaria, as far away as Ethiopia in Africa, and in many other cities. (Acts 8:5-13,26-40) The success of Philip's preaching is testified in these words, "When they believed Philip preaching the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women."—vs. 12

Another of the deacons, Stephen, likewise zealously preached the word of the Lord. His message was positively received by many, continuing the expansion of the early church. "Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people." (Acts 6:8) Different than Philip, however, Stephen's message also fell upon the ears of the leaders of Israel, who had become enemies of the Gospel. So incensed were they at his preaching (see Acts 7:2-53), they immediately "cast him out of the city, and stoned him." (vs. 58) Yet, the message of Truth once again had spread and expanded.

God continued to overrule the expansion of the Gospel through the very persecution that began with the death of Stephen. "At that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria." (Acts 8:1) This persecution, and the resultant 'scattering' of the church, was God's will, in that it further caused the spreading of the message into entirely new regions. The positive results of this are evident in these words, "Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word."—vs.4 ■