

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 9

Podcast Audio Overview

Acts 5:1-6:7

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All right, welcome back everybody for another Deep Dive, and this time we're going to be looking into the book of Acts, chapters 5 through 6.7, with the help of a lecture by Dr. Craig Keener, and we're looking at the early Christian church here. It's a really dynamic time, it's right after Jesus ascends, and his followers are just trying to figure out how to be the church, and there's a lot of tension, a lot of political and religious tension, and it's kind of neat because we get to see these stories play out, divine judgment, and clashing authorities, and even internal conflict within the church. Yeah, yeah, it's really interesting; it's a really intense time, because you have this group of people who are convinced that they've encountered the risen Lord, and they're experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit, but they're also trying to build a new community in a world that just doesn't get it yet.

Yeah, and Dr. Keener does a great job of really diving into the historical context and explaining those nuances that would have made a difference to these people. He helps us understand not just what happened, but why it mattered to these early believers. Right, so we're going to start with Ananias and Sapphira.

This is a couple who, well, let's just say, they fudged the numbers on their donation to the church, and it does not go well for them, so I think a lot of us reading this today are like, oh wow, seems a little harsh, doesn't it? It does, yeah. Why such a dramatic reaction to what seems like, you know, maybe a little white lie? Yeah, it's easy to see it that way, through our modern lens, but to really grasp it, we need to understand what was at stake for the early church. Remember, they were living communally; they shared everything. Honesty and trust were absolutely vital for this system to work, and their understanding of God played a huge role here too. They saw deceit as a direct offense against God's holiness, and they believed in divine consequences for that kind of act.

So it wasn't just about the money; it was about the breaking of trust, right, both with the community and with God. Yeah, think of it like this: imagine a group of refugees who have pooled all their resources together just to survive. If one person starts hoarding or lying about what they're giving, it puts everyone at risk.

It threatens the entire group. And Dr. Keener actually points to some parallels in the Old Testament. He does.

Where God's judgment is swift and sometimes pretty intense. He mentions that story of Uzzah and the Ark of the Covenant. Oh, right.

You remember that one? Uzzah reaches out to steady the Ark and is struck dead. It really underscores that profound sense of reverence for the sacred that we see throughout Scripture. It's interesting too, because Dr. Keener points out that the Book of Acts, unlike a

lot of writings of that time, actually holds both men and women equally accountable before God.

Yeah, that's a huge point. That's challenging the societal norms of that time. Both men and women are empowered by the Holy Spirit, but they're also held to the same standard of behavior and judged accordingly.

It reveals this radical equality that you just don't really see in the ancient world. Okay. So we've got divine judgment, we've got a new community trying to figure out how to live, and then we get the apostles who are facing some persecution from the Sadducees, who are the dominant religious authority at the time.

But these guys, they're fearless; they get arrested, they get threatened, they just keep preaching. They just keep on going. It's almost like a real-life David and Goliath, except with 12 Davids.

Where did they get that courage? Well, I mean, their belief in Jesus's resurrection was unshakable. That was the foundation of everything. And they understood that God's authority was higher than any earthly power.

Right, the answer to a higher authority. Yeah. So it's kind of like, you can lock us up, but you can't stop the message, sort of thing.

Yeah. And their defiance really reminds me of other figures throughout history, like Socrates or the Old Testament prophets, people who challenged the status quo even when their lives were on the line. Yeah.

And so the Sadducees are threatened by the apostles' growing popularity, and their message is challenging their authority. Yeah. It's a classic power struggle.

You had the establishment. Who feels threatened by this new movement? And they're motivated by jealousy and fear. Absolutely.

Fear of losing their power, their prestige, their control over the religious narrative. But then right as things are getting really heated, we're introduced to Gamaliel, who's this highly respected Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. Which is the Jewish ruling council.

Right. And he does something completely unexpected. He defends the apostles.

What? It's a little out of character; you'd think he'd be on the side of the establishment. Right. It seems like he should be.

Yeah. But Gamaliel's approach is fascinating. It's not necessarily about siding with the apostles, but more about pragmatism and historical awareness.

He basically says, look, if this movement is from God, you can't stop it. And if it's not, it'll fizzle out on its own. He even compares it to previous uprisings.

It does. Led by Theodos and Judas the Galilean, whose movements dissolved pretty quickly after their leaders died. Right.

So instead of outright opposition, he advocates for a wait-and-see approach. Yeah. But isn't that kind of passive? I mean, shouldn't you actively defend what you believe in? That's a great question.

Yeah. It really highlights the complexity of navigating faith in politics. Right.

Gamaliel, unlike the apostles, was deeply embedded in the existing power structure. So his strategy might've been about trying to mitigate immediate harm while recognizing that God might act independently. Yeah.

And here's where it gets really interesting. Dr. Keener points out that Gamaliel was actually the teacher of Paul. Who would later become a central figure in spreading Christianity.

Right. So it puts a whole new spin on things. It really makes you think about how Gamaliel's approach, his emphasis on observation and historical context, might've influenced Paul even indirectly.

Yeah. It's like a family drama playing out on the stage of history. But the story doesn't end there.

It gets even more complex because the early church is about to face a challenge from within that could actually break their unity. And it's this internal conflict that arises from cultural differences. So we've got the early church facing persecution from the outside.

They're sharing everything, growing in number, standing strong, but then from within, cracks start to appear. Yeah. And it's all centered around the Hellenists and the Hebrews.

Right. Can you break those down for us? Sure. So both groups are Jewish, but the Hellenists are Greek-speaking Jews, often born and raised outside of Judea, while the Hebrews are Aramaic-speaking Jews, more rooted in the traditional Jewish homeland.

So it's more than just language. It's like different cultural backgrounds, different social experiences. Exactly.

Even different interpretations of Jewish law and Messianic expectations. So it's like two branches of the same family, but they grew up in different neighborhoods, speak different slang, maybe even have different views on how things should be done. And in this case, the Hellenists feel like their widows are being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Right, which was a crucial support system in those times. Right, because widows were incredibly vulnerable, especially back then. Absolutely, with little to no social safety net.

So this wasn't just a minor inconvenience. This was a matter of survival for these women. It was.

And to the apostles' credit, they listened. They didn't just dismiss these concerns. They could have easily said, hey, we're all in this together.

Stop complaining. Yeah. But they didn't.

They took action. Yeah, they took action. And their solution is actually pretty brilliant.

They appointed seven men, all with Greek names, to oversee the food distribution. So they're basically saying, we hear you, and we're not just going to give you a seat at the table. We're going to give you a leadership role in addressing this issue.

That is a powerful statement. It is. And it shows a deep understanding of cultural sensitivity and a willingness to empower those who feel marginalized.

It's a model for conflict resolution. And as Dr. Kino points out, this actually foreshadows the expansion of Christianity beyond Jewish communities. Because the Hellenists, with their fluency in the Greek language and culture, would become key in bridging that gap to the Gentile world.

So this seemingly small act of addressing a local complaint becomes a pivotal moment in the growth of the early church. It's amazing how these things ripple outwards. It is.

But wait a minute. You mentioned two of these seven men, Stephen and Philip. Yes.

They become pretty significant figures, right? They do. Stephen in particular. He's a Hellenist filled with the Holy Spirit, known for performing miracles.

He really embodies the potential of this once marginalized group to step into leadership roles. He's like proof of inclusion. And recognizing leadership potential in unexpected places can lead to some pretty amazing things.

It really can. But, oh, Dr. Kiner hints that. Stephen's boldness and his challenges to the religious establishment are going to land him in some hot water.

Yeah. Talk about a cliffhanger. Talk about a cliffhanger.

All right. So what have we learned so far? The early church was this dynamic, diverse community navigating persecution from outside and conflict from within. But their commitment to their faith, their willingness to adapt and include, and their courage to stand up for what they believe in helped them overcome these challenges.

Yeah. And at the heart of it all was this message of radical inclusion. A message that transcended cultural and social boundaries.

And they didn't just talk about it. They lived it out. Even when it was hard.

Like with the Hellenists. They could have easily dismissed their concerns, but they listened. They adapted.

They empowered. What an example for us today. Right.

Especially in our world where it seems like divisions and conflicts are everywhere. The early church's example is a powerful reminder that unity and progress are possible. Even amidst all the diversity and the challenges.

It makes you think about the challenges we face in our own communities, in our workplaces, even in our families. Are we listening to those who feel marginalized? Are we willing to share power and create spaces where everyone feels valued? These are important questions. They are.

And here's another one for you. Dr. Keener highlighted the different leadership styles we see in this section of Acts. The Apostles, Gamaliel, Stephen.

What do you make of their differing approaches? Yeah. It's pretty reasonable. We've got these bold, spiritually driven Apostles and then Gamaliel, who's all about wisdom and political strategy.

And then Stephen, who's just on fire for change. Yeah. And what's so striking is how each of them, in their own way, embodies aspects of leadership that are still relevant today.

Right. You know, the Apostles' unwavering commitment to their mission, Gamaliel's ability to see the bigger picture and navigate those complex situations, and then Stephen's passionate advocacy for the marginalized. It's easy to look back at the early church and be like, wow, they were so on fire for their faith.

But no, they weren't. They had these internal conflicts, and they made mistakes. They struggled to live up to their own ideals.

And that's what makes their story so relatable. They weren't superhuman. They were ordinary people trying to figure things out, relying on their faith to navigate a world that often felt hostile and confusing.

Yeah. And I think that's what makes this deep dive so compelling. You know, we see them grappling with issues that we still face today.

Absolutely. Leadership challenges, cultural differences, standing up for your beliefs, even when it's unpopular. It's a reminder that their struggles and their triumphs can still speak to us today.

And that's the beauty of engaging with these ancient texts. They offer these timeless insights into human nature, the complexities of faith, the challenges of building community. So we've covered a lot.

Divine judgment, political maneuvering, internal conflicts, radical inclusion. What's the one thing you hope our listener takes away from all this? I think the most important lesson here is that the early church, despite its imperfections, offers a really compelling model for how to live out your faith in a complex world. Their unwavering commitment, their willingness to embrace diversity, their courage to challenge the status quo.

These are all inspirations for us today, reminding us that we can make a difference even when faced with seemingly impossible obstacles. And for our listeners who want to go deeper, Dr. Keener's work is just a goldmine of insights. It is.

He connects these ancient stories to modern-day issues in a way that really makes you think. He's like a personal guide through the complexities of early Christianity. Yeah.

And remember, this is just the beginning. There's so much more to discover in the Book of Acts and in the story of how this small group of believers changed the world. So keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep connecting these ancient stories to your own life.

You might be surprised at how relevant they still are. Thanks for joining us on this deep dive into the Book of Acts. We'll see you next time for another fascinating exploration.

Bye. Bye.