

Dr. Craig Keener, Acts, Session 9, Acts 5:1-6:7

6-Min. Video Overview

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You know, every new movement, whether it's a startup or a revolution, always faces those early make-or-break moments. And for the early Christian church, oh, they came fast and furious. So today, we're going to break down the three huge crises that could have just snuffed out this movement before it even got going.

And we'll see how the way they solve them, well, it pretty much set the stage for everything that came next. And really, that's the big question, isn't it? When the pressure is on, when your very existence is on the line, not just from enemies on the outside, but even more dangerously, from problems inside, how do you manage to not only survive, but actually come out stronger? Let's dive in and see how they pulled it off. Okay, so the first major threat, it wasn't what you'd expect.

It didn't come from Roman soldiers or angry religious leaders. Nope. It came from two of their own people, right from the heart of the community.

This was a crisis of pure integrity. So here's the story. This community was all about sharing everything they had.

And this couple, Ananias and Sapphira, they sold a piece of property. They came and publicly gave the money to the apostles, but they secretly held some of it back. And the lie wasn't that they didn't give enough.

It was that they pretended they gave the full amount. You see, it was never about the money itself. It was about the deception right at the very core of a group that was supposed to be built on absolute trust.

Now, to wrap our heads around the really severe outcome here, I mean, they were both struck dead. We have to get the context. For the people hearing this story for the first time, it would have instantly reminded them of these really famous Old Testament accounts.

You had Nadab and Abihu, these priests who offered, let's call it, unauthorized fire. And then there was Uzzah, who just reached out and touched the sacred Ark of the Covenant. The lesson in all these stories is exactly the same. You just don't treat holy things lightly or with contempt.

And you can see just how high the stakes were. I mean, look at how Peter frames this. He doesn't just say, hey, you lied.

He basically accuses Ananias of letting Satan fill his heart to lie to the Holy Spirit. This wasn't just some financial fudging. In their eyes, this was a fundamental spiritual betrayal of their entire commitment to God.

So what was the result of all this? Well, it definitely wasn't a boost in membership. It was fear. A great fear swept through the community.

But you know, it was a productive kind of fear. It was a sobering moment that drove home the point: integrity is non-negotiable here. The message was loud and clear.

This whole thing is for real. And hypocrisy has no place in it. Okay, so they've just survived a major crisis of integrity from the inside.

But there's no time to breathe because immediately they're facing a crisis of authority from the outside. They are now on a direct collision course with the most powerful group in all of Jerusalem. Yep, the apostles get arrested and hauled before the Sanhedrin.

Now you can think of the Sanhedrin as basically the Supreme Court and the ruling council of Jerusalem all rolled into one. And it's led by the high priest. This new movement is a direct challenge to their power.

And believe me, they are not happy about it. And what happens next is this wild, almost comical cycle. So they get arrested and thrown in jail.

Then an angel apparently lets them out in the middle of the night. So what do they do with their newfound freedom? Do they hide? No, they go right back to the temple, literally the scene of the crime, and just start preaching again at sunrise. You can just imagine the guards having to go and re-arrest the same guys all over again.

So to really get this conflict, you've got to understand what's motivating everyone. For the Sadducees, they're the ruling priestly class. This was all about jealousy.

See, in the ancient world, honor was kind of like a pie. There's only so much to go around. So as the apostles were gaining popularity and honor with the people, that meant the Sadducees were losing it.

They saw this new movement as a direct threat to their personal honor and their public status. And when the council confronts them, the apostles' defense is just so simple and so defiant. They're basically like, look, our ultimate authority isn't you guys, it's God.

They're just stating where their allegiance lies. And you can probably guess how well that went over with a council that sees itself as the ultimate authority. The council is absolutely furious.

They are ready to have these guys killed right then and there. But then a voice of reason speaks up. A respected, moderate man named Gamaliel steps in, and he completely flips the script on this whole trial.

So who is this Gamaliel guy? Well, he was one of the most influential Pharisees of his day, a student of the famous and more lenient teacher Hillel. And here's a fascinating little historical twist for you. He was also the teacher of a young man named Saul of Tarsus, who you might know better as the future Apostle Paul.

So yeah, when this guy talked to people and they listened, his words carried a ton of weight. Gamaliel basically tells the council to just pump the brakes. He reminds them of other revolutionary movements that just kind of fizzled out on their own once their leaders were gone.

His logic is super simple. Look, if this thing is just a human idea, it's going to fail; leave it alone. But if it's actually from God, then there's nothing you can do to stop it.

And you'd better be careful or you might find yourselves literally fighting against God. And you know what? The council actually listens to him. They don't execute the apostles, but to save face, they have them beaten first.

But here's the crazy part. The crucial point. The apostles don't leave feeling defeated or shamed.

They leave rejoicing. Why? Because in their minds, being considered worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus was a huge honor. It was a sign they were doing something right.

So the punishment totally backfired. All right, so let's recap. They've survived a threat to their integrity and a threat from the authorities.

But this third crisis, this one might be the most dangerous of them all because it's a cultural division that's threatening to just rip the community apart from the inside out. On the surface, the problem sounds pretty simple. There was a daily food distribution for widows and one group of widows felt like they were being overlooked.

But this wasn't just some administrative slip-up. No, it was a symptom of a much deeper cultural crack that was forming between two distinct groups inside the church. The group that was doing the complaining was known as the Hellenists.

Now, these were ethnically Jewish people for sure, but they were culturally Greek. They spoke Greek, they had Greek names and customs, and a lot of them had moved to Jerusalem from other parts of the Roman Empire. And they were definitely a minority compared to the local Aramaic-speaking Jews, the Hebrews.

So why was this such a powder keg? Well, get this: some estimates say that up to 80 percent- that's eight zero- of all Jewish people at this time lived outside of Judea. And it was really common for many of them to move back to Jerusalem when they got older so they could be buried in the Holy Land. What does that mean? It means you had a huge number of foreign-born widows in the city, the exact group that was now feeling neglected.

So here you have it. The community is fracturing right along these cultural lines. How are the apostles going to handle this? Well, their solution is frankly brilliant, and it sets a precedent that is going to shape the entire future of this movement.

And what they do is so radical for its time. I mean, the typical response from any majority group back then would have been to just shut down the complaining minority, tell them to be quiet. But the apostles do the exact opposite.

They don't silence the minority; they empower it. So here's their four-step game plan, which, by the way, seems to be inspired by a story about Moses in the book of Exodus. First, they acknowledge the complaint is legitimate.

They don't dismiss it. Second, they delegate the job of food distribution. They admit it's not their main thing.

Third, and this is the absolute genius move, they tell the community to pick seven respected leaders to run this thing, and all seven guys they pick have Greek names. They're from the complaining Hellenist group. And finally, this frees up the apostles to get back to what they see as their main job: prayer and teaching.

The results were incredible. I mean, the division was healed, like, instantly. But it was so much more than that.

In this amazing feat of social problem-solving, these seven new Hellenist leaders, guys like Stephen and Philip, they became the perfect bridge to take the message outside its Jewish bubble and into the wider Greek-speaking world. The crisis actually became the catalyst for their global expansion. And that brings us right back to our big question from the beginning.

What this story shows us is that an internal crisis, whether it's about integrity, authority, or unity, it doesn't have to be the end of the story. In fact, when a community actually listens, when it delegates, when it empowers the right people, that very point of conflict can become the launchpad for its greatest growth. And it kind of leaves us with this final thought to chew on.

What if our biggest problems actually hold the seeds of our greatest potential?