

# ***Rebellion and Redemption***

## ***The Great Controversy in the Early Church***

Lesson #9 for February 27, 2016

Scriptures: Acts 1:6-8; 2:5-12; 4:1-30; 7:54; 10:12-29; Genesis 11:1-9.

1. How difficult was it for Jesus to convince His own disciples that He was not going to become the king of the Jews as they fervently hoped? That was not His only challenge. In this lesson we will discuss the difficulties God had in convincing the early Christian leaders including the disciples that the gospel was to be spread to all mankind and not just to Jews. (Matthew 28:19-20) Such an idea was almost unthinkable to the disciples and church leaders in the early days. What means did Jesus have to accomplish that goal?

The greatest barrier Jesus faced with His followers was their preconceived opinions. The disciples took little notice of what Jesus said if it did not fit with their own ideas of who He should be. [Luke 18:31-34] Right up to the time of His ascension, the disciples still quizzed Jesus about freeing Israel from the Romans. [Acts 1:6-8]

It was only after 10 days of prayer and close fellowship in the presence of God that dominant preconceptions were finally beginning to be replaced with the truth, and the disciples were ready to hear what God told them. This paved the way for the incredible events at that first Pentecost after the death of Jesus.—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for February 20, 2016. [Content in brackets is added.]

2. **How many preconceived opinions do we hold that are in error?** How have those preconceived opinions been developed? Why do we come to believe them? Do we just believe what we want to believe because it fits with what we already believe? How much education do you think the disciples generally had? Had they ever gone to school? Why was it so hard for Jesus to teach them something so important as what was going to happen to Him when they got to Jerusalem? Wasn't Jesus the greatest Teacher? Why were Jesus's words "hidden from them"? Who hid it from them? How did they feel about what Jesus was saying to them? (Matthew 17:22-23; Matthew 17:21; Mark 9:30–32; Luke 9:43b-45) Jesus's words made them sad or even distressed! No human in the world at that point understood what Jesus was doing! How long did it take for the disciples to begin preaching the gospel to Gentiles? How long did it take the Seventh-day Adventist Church to start sending out missionaries to other countries? Thirty years! What does it take for us to change our minds about something important? Do we have open minds? Are we studying to be sure that what we believe is correct?
3. **Do any of our preconceived opinions have a satanic origin?** What would it mean to say that some idea has a satanic origin? Can you think of any church doctrines widely held by Christians today that have a satanic origin? Sunday worship? An eternally-burning hell?
4. What happened to the disciples over crucifixion weekend? What false ideas did they have to give up? What new ideas did they learn? They had an "aha moment."
5. The word *Pentecost* means 50 days, and that was the period of time after Passover until the date for Pentecost. How many times do you think Jesus met with the disciples during the 40 days between the crucifixion and the ten-day period prior to Pentecost? (Acts 1:3; 1 Corinthians 15:4-7) An incredible change! Think about Paul's experience.

6. Read Acts 1:6. Did the disciples really still think that after Jesus had gone back to heaven and only appeared to them from time to time that He would be willing to become the earthly king of Israel? Why is it so hard to give up our favorite ideas?
7. All of the disciples had spent the majority of their time over the previous two years with Jesus. Some had begun to follow Him off-and-on for the previous 3½ years. There were, of course, many other followers as well. Did the twelve disciples get special times of education from Jesus? Do you think the disciples were able to speak multiple languages prior to Pentecost? Do you think they were able to read and write in Aramaic? Did they also speak Greek?
8. How did Jesus respond to the question posed by the disciples recorded in Acts 1:6-8? What do you think Jesus was hoping they would ask? Do you think Jesus would have delayed His return to heaven long enough to answer any serious questions about the great controversy that they had?
9. Read Acts 1:10-11. What do we know about those “two men” who spoke to the disciples as Jesus ascended into heaven? They were two of the most exalted angels in heaven, and they had been given the task of serving as Christ’s guardian angels while He was on this earth. (See *Desire of Ages* 832.1. Compare *DA* 788.3-789.4 and 793.1.) Why do you think Jesus needed two guardian angels? Was it because God recognized that Jesus would need special protection from the attacks of Satan and his angels while on this earth? Was Jesus getting special treatment? When those two angels came down from heaven with God’s power, Satan and all of his fellow evil angels just scattered.
10. Jesus ascended into heaven as a Human Being. He will come again as a Human Being seated on the throne of glory.
11. Read Matthew 20:20-24. In this passage and many others that we could quote, we see the rivalry between the disciples described. What happened during those ten days of prayer and fellowship before Pentecost that changed that rivalry?
12. Unfortunately, the disciples were not yet ready for the work that Jesus wanted to give them. They needed ten days of studying and praying together in preparation for the Pentecost. Even after the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they were still not ready. It took them years before they were ready to preach the gospel to Gentiles.
13. It is interesting to note that just as the Holy Spirit hovered over the waters in the process of creating our world, (Genesis 1) that same Holy Spirit hovered over the disciples in the form of tongues of fire in the process of creating the new church in the short time before Pentecost. (Acts 2:2-3)
14. What was the result of the Pentecostal experience? See Acts 2:5-12.

“There were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven.” During the dispersion the Jews had been scattered to almost every part of the inhabited world, and in their exile they had learned to speak various languages. Many of these Jews were on this occasion in Jerusalem, attending the religious festivals then in progress. Every known tongue was represented by those assembled. This diversity of languages would have been a great hindrance to the proclamation of the gospel; God therefore in a miraculous manner supplied the deficiency of the apostles. **The Holy Spirit did for them that which [40] they could not have accomplished for themselves in a lifetime. They could now proclaim the truths of the**

**gospel abroad, speaking with accuracy the languages of those for whom they were laboring. This miraculous gift was a strong evidence to the world that their commission bore the signet of Heaven. From this time forth the language of the disciples was pure, simple, and accurate, whether they spoke in their native tongue or in a foreign language.**—Ellen G. White, *Acts the Apostles* 39.2-40.0. [Bold type is added.] Compare Genesis 11:1-9.

15. What do we know about those who became Christians at that time or shortly thereafter? Included among that number were a large group of whom were formerly Jewish priests and/or Pharisees. (Acts 6:7; 15:5) But, many of those former priests and Pharisees still held onto their preconceived Jewish ideas even though they claimed to be Christians. (Acts 15:1,5) Even after his third missionary journey when Paul arrived at Jerusalem with that huge offering from the Gentiles to help those who were suffering in Judea, the Christian leaders still asked Paul to perform that traditional ceremony that led to his arrest and imprisonment. Read about that experience in *Acts of the Apostles* 401-405. See especially p. 405.1. They were hoping to bring Paul back under their control.

16. Read Acts 4:1-30.

The priests and rulers saw that Christ was extolled above them. As the Sadducees, who did not believe in a resurrection, heard the apostles declaring that Christ had risen from the dead, they were enraged, realizing that if the apostles were allowed to preach a risen Saviour, and to work miracles in His name, the doctrine that there would be no resurrection would be rejected by all, and the sect of the Sadducees would soon become extinct. The Pharisees were angry as they perceived that the tendency of the disciples' teaching was to undermine the Jewish ceremonies, and make the sacrificial offerings of no effect.—Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* 78.1.

17. Read Acts 5:15-16. The miracle of healing the crippled man at the gate had led to the confrontation between Peter and John and the Sanhedrin. But, as we see from these verses, many others were being healed at that time. What do you think was going on as Peter's shadow fell on people? Were they actually healed? Were demons cast out by that process?

18. Satan must have been incredibly frustrated by this new development. He had thought he had almost won the great controversy before Jesus was born. And after considering the success he had achieved working with Jesus's disciples, Satan had hoped that the work would die out when Jesus was dead. He certainly did not expect what happened next. He must have been stunned to see the changes that came over the disciples.

19. Read Acts 6:1-15. What do we know about the choice of those deacons? Had several of them been followers of Jesus for years? Did they receive the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost? Or, at some later time? Notice that Stephen was performing great miracles and wonders. What do we know about the Synagogue of the Freedmen? It was apparently a synagogue in Jerusalem (of which there were many); but, this synagogue was composed of former slaves from Cyrene in Libya, Alexandria in Egypt, Cilicia, and Asia. But, none of them could answer Stephen's arguments.

The arguments of the apostles alone, though clear and convincing, would not have removed the prejudice that had withstood so much evidence. But the

Holy Spirit sent the arguments home to hearts with divine power. The words of the apostles were as sharp arrows of the Almighty, convicting men of their terrible guilt in rejecting and crucifying the Lord of glory.—Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* 45.1.

20. How would you feel if someone presented to you powerful evidence that you had been involved in trying to kill God? Satan's approach has always been: When one cannot answer God's arguments, try to kill the messenger. So, Stephen was taken before the Sanhedrin. (Acts 6:9-15) There, he gave that incredible speech as recorded in Acts 7:2-53.
21. Read Acts 8:1. That speech coming from someone who was not even one of the disciples must have angered the Sanhedrin enormously. And at that very day, the 70 weeks allotted to the Jews as prophesied by Daniel and as recorded in Daniel 9:24 came to a completion. A terrible persecution of the Christians began, and the gospel was spread to the Gentiles. Unfortunately, the Christians had to suffer persecution before they were willing to scatter and carry the gospel message to other areas! But, still only to Jews in those other areas!
22. But, fortunately, one person who was present holding the coats of those throwing stones at Stephen was later convicted in his heart.

After the death of Stephen, Saul was elected a member of the Sanhedrin council in consideration of the part he had acted on that occasion. For a time he was a mighty instrument in the hands of Satan to carry out his rebellion against the Son of God. But soon this relentless persecutor was to be employed in building up the church that he was now tearing down. A Mightier than Satan had chosen Saul to take the place of the martyred Stephen, to preach and suffer for His name, and to spread far and wide the tidings of salvation through His blood.—Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* 102.1.

23. On that occasion, a wonderful thing resulted from a very bad event. What an incredible response to the death of Stephen. But, it took much time and that incredible experience on the road to Damascus to finally convince Paul to stop "kicking against the pricks." (Acts 26:14) Usually, good things do not come from bad things. How should we respond when good does not result from a bad event?
24. The time had come when God must mount an all-out effort to change the attitude of the Christian leaders and the Christian church toward Gentiles. It was not easy. See John 4:27 and Luke 9:54.
25. Read about the experience of Peter with Cornelius in Acts 10. Peter was staying in the home of a tanner. Such people, dealing with dead animals and animal skins all the time, were perpetually "unclean." Cornelius was already a "follower of the way," that is, already very sympathetic to the Jewish religion and customs. He was, in effect, just waiting for someone to accept him into the church. Peter knew that when he went to visit the home of a Gentile—even a Roman centurion—there would be lots of questions raised back at Jerusalem. So, he took with him a number of people from the church in Joppa. (Acts 10:23) This was very important in light of the response he got when he went back to Jerusalem. (Acts 11:1-3) Compare the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch. (Acts 8)
26. Even after Peter's experience with the Roman centurion, he needed several witnesses to back up his story before the church leaders in Jerusalem accepted the idea that it was acceptable for Peter to enter the home of a Gentile and eat with him! God had to send the Holy Spirit down on the Gentiles as He had sent it down on the apostles at Pentecost

before the Jews would acknowledge that God might actually want the gospel to go to Gentiles! (Acts 11:1-18) How is this event related to the great controversy issues?

27. But, we know that Peter was still not completely ready to accept this new idea. See Galatians 2:11-14.
28. The Christian leaders in Jerusalem were still not ready to preach the gospel to Gentiles. Some of them traveled in Gentile territories, speaking only to Jews. It was not until some unnamed disciples who went from Cyprus and Libya to Antioch began preaching the message to Gentiles as well as Jews that the idea became accepted that the gospel could be preached directly to Gentiles. Read Acts 11:19-26.
29. When Paul and Barnabas were sent forth on the first missionary journey to preach, they spent considerable time preaching directly to Gentiles. That was still not well received in Jerusalem. Read Acts 15:1-5.
30. In contrast to what some other Christian groups preach—that the vision Peter saw of that sheet coming down means that one can eat anything—we need to recognize that Peter’s vision had nothing to do with diet. By comparing Acts 10 and 11, it is very clear that the message was that Peter and other Christians should not despise or look down on Gentiles but rather should carry the gospel message to them.
31. How successful has the Seventh-day Adventist Church been at removing cultural, linguistic, and racial prejudices? Are we good at recognizing those prejudices even in ourselves?
32. What do you think of this comment about the writings of Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky?

Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote about Jesus returning to the earth, but not as predicted in the Bible. Instead, in this made-up story, Jesus returned at the height of the Inquisition, when religious leaders used their power for evil. The Grand Inquisitor had Jesus, who came as a humble peasant, arrested and thrown in a dungeon. That night he visited Jesus in jail and castigated him for giving humans freedom. “Instead of taking men’s freedom from them,” he declares, “Thou didst make it greater than ever! Didst thou forget that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil? Nothing is more seductive for man to his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering.”—*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Friday, February 26.

33. God accepts nothing but the best. That is not a reason for discouragement. He is prepared to make the necessary changes in us if we are willing to allow the Holy Spirit to act in our lives and our minds.

God will accept only those who are determined to aim high. He places every human agent under obligation to do his best. Moral perfection is required of all. **Never should we lower the standard of righteousness in order to accommodate inherited or cultivated tendencies to wrong-doing. We need to understand that imperfection of character is sin. All righteous attributes of character dwell in God as a perfect, harmonious whole, and every one who receives Christ as a personal Saviour is privileged to possess these attributes.**—Ellen G. White, *COL* 330.2; *ML* 271.2. [Bold type is added.]

34. Try to imagine the diversity that there was among the disciples. Did Jesus intentionally want that much diversity? What should we learn from that?

The apostles differed widely in habits and disposition. There were the publican, Levi-Matthew, and the fiery zealot Simon, the uncompromising hater of the authority of Rome; the generous, impulsive Peter, and the mean-spirited Judas; Thomas, truehearted, yet timid and fearful, Philip, slow of heart, and inclined to doubt, and the ambitious, outspoken sons of Zebedee, with their brethren. **These were brought together, with their different faults, all with inherited and cultivated tendencies to evil; but in and through Christ they were to dwell in the family of God, learning to become one in faith, in doctrine, in spirit.** They would have their tests, their grievances, their differences of opinion; but while Christ was abiding in the heart, there could be no dissension. His love would lead to love for one another; the lessons of the Master would lead to the harmonizing of all differences, bringing the disciples into unity, till they would be of one mind and one judgment. Christ is the great center, and they would approach one another just in proportion as they approached the center.—Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* 296.2.

In describing to His disciples the office work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus sought to inspire them with the joy and hope that inspired His own heart. He rejoiced because of the abundant help He had provided for His church. The Holy Spirit was the highest of all gifts that He could solicit from His Father for the exaltation of His people. **The Spirit was to be given as a regenerating agent, and without this the sacrifice of Christ would have been of no avail. The power of evil had been strengthening for centuries, and the submission of men to this satanic captivity was amazing. Sin could be resisted and overcome only through the mighty agency of the Third Person of the Godhead, who would come with no modified energy, but in the fullness of divine power.** It is the Spirit that makes effectual what has been wrought out by the world's Redeemer. It is by the Spirit that the heart is made pure. Through the Spirit the believer becomes a partaker of the divine nature. Christ has given His Spirit as a divine power to overcome all hereditary and cultivated tendencies to evil, and to impress His own character upon His church.—Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* 671.2. [Bold type is added.]

35. What is the biggest barrier preventing us from spreading the gospel to the world? Do you think God may one day soon give some of us the gift of tongues like the gift that He gave to the disciples on Pentecost? How do you think that would affect our church?

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Last Modified: January 2, 2016

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