

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



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Acts 1:6–8, 2:5–12, Gen. 11:1–9, Acts 4:1–30, 7:54, 10:12–29.*

**Memory Text:** “When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus” (*Acts 4:13, NIV*).

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 in with their own ideas of who He should be. Right up to the time of His ascension, the disciples still quizzed Jesus about freeing Israel from the Romans.

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.

Of course, the church still faced many challenges, especially from local religious leaders, some of whom were just as determined to stop the church as they were to stop Jesus.

Thus, in this week's lesson, we will see the great controversy played out in different ways. We will see it manifested openly, as those in power are inspired by Satan to repress the truth. But we will also see it played out in a subtler but more crucial area: the human heart.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 27.

## The Beginning of a New Beginning

After His resurrection, Jesus spent 40 days meeting with the disciples to confirm the resurrection and to help them better understand the kingdom of God (*Acts 1:3, 1 Cor. 15:4–7*). However, even as they assembled, just before Jesus departed into the heavens, the thing uppermost in their minds was whether or not this was the time for Jesus to finally conquer the Romans (*Acts 1:6*).

Their own ideas of what should happen were so strong that they simply did not listen to what Jesus had been saying to them. Even after three and a half years of close instruction (the equivalent of a university degree) from the best Teacher the world has ever known, the disciples still had many wrong notions to unlearn.

**Read Acts 1:6–8.** In the face of such ignorance, how did Jesus answer?

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Jesus focused on the real issue rather than wasting time trying to correct their every misunderstanding. The empowerment of the Holy Spirit was far more important than political discussion.

After watching Jesus ascending into the clouds and disappearing, the disciples noticed two men standing by them. The two men told them that Jesus would return. Just as He was accepted into heaven as a conquering King, so He will come again as the King and Conqueror they dreamed of when they asked Him about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. But that day will surpass even their greatest dreams—for He will come as King of all creation, not just king of a piece of land in the Middle East.

The eleven disciples returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, their heads swimming with memories and their hearts glowing with the truths revealed by Jesus (at least the ones they understood). But they needed something more. Jesus told them to wait for a few days until the Holy Spirit baptized them (*Acts 1:4, 5*), for though the enemy had been defeated, he wasn't done yet, and they would need power from on high in order to do what Jesus had called them to do.

**Read Acts 1:14.** What was the major difference in how the disciples related to each other now, as compared to before, such as seen in Matthew 20:20–24, and what message is there for us in this change of attitude? In what ways can you put aside self in order to prepare for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit?

## Pentecost

For ten days the followers of Jesus prayed, evaluated their experiences with Jesus in the light of Scripture, showed humility and acceptance to each other, and finally allowed the Holy Spirit to impress the truth upon them. Just as the Spirit hovered over the face of the waters at the beginning of the Creation process, so, too, the Spirit of God hovered over each of the disciples, appearing as divided tongues of fire on each of them (*Acts 2:2, 3*). It was a new beginning, a new creation.

**Read Acts 2:5–12.** What is the significance of what happened as revealed in these texts? Compare it with Genesis 11:1–9.

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Sometime after the Flood, the inhabitants of the earth decided to build a tower that reached heaven (*Gen. 11:1–9*). To prevent them from this arrogant and foolish endeavor (as well as the new evils they had been devising, *Gen. 11:5, 6*), God confused their common language and scattered them “over the face of all the earth” (*Gen. 11:7–9, NKJV*).

At Pentecost, God did the opposite. Here He could see a group of people, not building a new tower of Babel, but who were ready to proclaim the good news that evil would one day be forever banished.

People “from every nation under heaven” were in Jerusalem that day (*Acts 2:5, NKJV*; compare the scattering at the tower of Babel), and they gathered together in amazement as they each heard their own language being spoken by the disciples (*Acts 2:6–11*).

Peter uses this as an opportunity to address them. He speaks of an outpouring of the Holy Spirit preparing a people to meet God (*Acts 2:17–21*). He points out the Messiah’s true mission and rebukes them for crucifying Him (*Acts 2:23*). They are “cut to the heart” (*Acts 2:37, NKJV*), and 3,000 are baptized and join the disciples (*Acts 2:41*).

**Some who had, under the inspiration of Satan, consented to the death of Jesus were now, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, converted to Jesus. What does this tell us of the power of God not only to forgive the worst of sins but also to change the hardest of hearts?**

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## Facing the Sadducees

**Read** Acts 4:1–30. How is the great controversy theme being manifested here? In what ways is this just one example of how it has played out all through history? How do we see Satan working here, and how do we see the Lord working, as well?

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“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.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 78.

What got these leaders especially upset was the healing that the Lord did through Peter (*see Acts 3:1–10*). But, when confronted by these leaders, the disciples didn’t waver. The priests were not expecting this from “uneducated and untrained men” (*Acts 4:13, NKJV*). Sending the disciples out of the room, they conferred among themselves, thinking that if they commanded these men not to teach in the name of Jesus, they would meekly comply (*Acts 4:18*). How wrong they were.

Instead, the disciples went back and joined the others, and together they praised God (*Acts 4:24*). They prayed for more boldness and that God would stretch out His hand for more healing (*Acts 4:29, 30*). They did not need to wait long. Because of the disciples’ growing popularity, people brought their sick out onto the streets to allow Peter’s passing shadow to fall on them (*Acts 5:15*). Multitudes came from nearby towns, and their sick were all healed (*Acts 5:16*).

All through here we can see the great controversy unfolding: unscrupulous leaders seeking to suppress truth; faithful people reading the Scriptures and praying for divine power, sickness healed, and souls won. Though things, at least on the surface, don’t always work out as well as they did here, we must never forget how, ultimately, the great controversy will play out, and the final victory that is ours because what Jesus has accomplished for all humanity is certain.

## The Stoning of Stephen

The disciples weren't the only ones to be confronted by the religious establishment during the earliest days of the church. Stephen, who was filled with "faith and power, [and] did great wonders and signs among the people" (*Acts 6:8, NKJV*), was brought before them. His witness was so compelling, in fact, that his opponents manufactured false and incriminating stories against him, for which he was dragged before the council (*Acts 6:9–14*).

**In Acts 7:2–53, Stephen gives a powerful message to those who accused him. Read Acts 7:54, which says they were “cut to the heart”; that is, they were convicted by his words. In Acts 2:37–41, after hearing Peter make a similar accusation, others also were convicted. What was the difference in response to conviction, and what does that tell us about how crucial a surrendered heart before God is?**

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The apostles had so far gotten away with challenging the leaders, but when Stephen tried to do the same, he was killed by an angry mob. Stephen's death marked the beginning of a concerted effort by Satan to wipe out the new movement. Up until this point, the followers of Jesus had been harassed and threatened, but Stephen was the first one to be killed.

But what did they expect? If Satan could inspire some leaders to execute Jesus, His followers certainly should not have expected any less for themselves.

Of course, all through the great controversy the Lord would, time and time again, bring victory out of what often seemed like defeat. It was no different here.

“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, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 102.

**Sometimes we see the good that arises from what's obviously evil. That's great. What do we do, though, when we don't see any good arise from evil but, in fact, only more evil?**

## Changing Attitudes

The disciples not only struggled with preconceived ideas that kept them from understanding what Jesus taught them, but they also shared national prejudices. One example of this is the story of the Samaritan woman from whom Jesus asked a drink of water. The disciples were surprised that He even spoke to the woman (*John 4:27, NKJV*).

National prejudices also came to the fore in the account of Cornelius, a Roman centurion based in Caesarea. Cornelius was “a devout man and one who feared God” (*Acts 10:2, NKJV*) and highly respected by the local people (*Acts 10:22*). An angel instructed him to send for Peter in Joppa (*Acts 10:22, see also Acts 10:3–8*).

Meanwhile, in Joppa, Peter goes up to the rooftop to pray (*Acts 10:9*). With shelter from the sun and the cool sea breezes, he relaxes and begins to feel hungry, and while waiting for his hosts to prepare lunch he sees a strange vision. Heaven opens and something like a huge sheet tied at the four corners is let down. Inside the cloth is an assortment of creatures that he regards as either polluted or “unclean” and from which he is told to kill and eat (*Acts 10:11–14*).

**What** was Peter’s reaction when he was told to eat “unclean” food, and what did the vision mean? *Acts 10:12–29*.

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In this vision God teaches Peter an important lesson. Some people today think that this is the time when God changes the human diet to allow people to eat whatever they like. That is not what Peter receives from the vision. First he wonders what it means; it is not at first obvious (*Acts 10:17*). When Cornelius’s men arrive and explain their mission, Peter feels compelled to return with them (*Acts 10:22, 23*). When Peter meets Cornelius, he is able to tell Cornelius the meaning of the vision. Christ is the Savior of all the world. Gentiles, too, are precious souls for whom Christ died (*Acts 10:34–48*).

Peter was learning a lesson that we all, still, need to learn. In Christ all barriers have been torn down and the distinction between Jew and Gentile, between all people, no longer exists, “but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him” (*Acts 10:35*).

**It’s nice to believe that we are all one in Christ; that’s what the Bible teaches. Unfortunately, even in the church that’s not always how we feel in our hearts, is it? First, how can we recognize the prejudices that we hold, and, second, in the power of God, how can we be purged of those prejudices?**

**Further Thought:** Russian author Fyodor Dostoyevsky 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 than his freedom of conscience, but nothing is a greater cause of suffering.” Despite his audacity and cynicism, the cleric has a point. Look at what humans have done with their freedom. Pain, evil, sin, suffering, death—all have arisen from freedom, or from the abuse of it. But God created us as loving beings, and the only way we could love is if we were created free. So much of how the great controversy plays out in this world is impacted by what people have done and still do with the sacred but very costly gift (the Cross reveals the cost) of freedom. As we saw this week, some, when confronted with the gospel, repented and gave their hearts to Jesus; others, when confronted with it, murdered the messenger. Freedom is a precious gift, but we need to be so careful about what we do with it.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1** No question, the New Testament emphasizes the oneness that we have in Christ. This is a very powerful idea, one that was revolutionary in its time. Unfortunately, even now in the twenty-first century, one of the greatest evils that still exists is ethnic, racial, and national prejudice. Only God knows the full extent of what this evil has wrought. And though we expect this in the world, what about the church, even our own church? How is it manifested? Why is this kind of attitude so contradictory to the most basic and fundamental teaching of the gospel?
- 2** At times we all feel convicted by the Holy Spirit. How do you respond when that conviction comes? It’s in the heart that the great controversy truly rages. How do the choices you make when convicted by the Spirit reveal whose side you might be on?

## “This Is Your Last Opportunity”: Part 2

*The story thus far: Dorandina was a Satanist high priestess. She performed rituals at night and was paid well to channel spirits and to cast spells. Twice she received dreams of a man dressed in white, telling Dorandina that God had a plan for her, but she always dismissed the dream. After becoming very ill, Dorandina ended up at the hospital and fell into a coma.*

When I awoke, I was sure that I had again dreamed about the man dressed in white. He was beautiful: a light shone from his face. He said to me, “This is the last opportunity you will be given. God has a plan for your life.” The angel reached out and took my hand. He beckoned me to follow him. I followed him up some steps.

I asked the man, “What do I need to do?”

The man told me to go to the Marcos Seventh-day Adventist Church. “That is God’s church,” he said, “and the people there follow Him.” His voice was soft and full of love. I kissed the man’s hand, and then he disappeared.

During the two weeks that I stayed in the hospital, I thought a lot about what I had seen in the dream. I decided that as soon as I was strong enough I would find the Marcos Seventh-day Adventist Church. I did not know anything about the church or this denomination, except that it met on Saturday.

I told my husband about my dreams and the man’s command to visit this church. He warned me to stay away from the church, but as soon as I was able, I slipped out of the house very early on Saturday morning and went to the church, but the gate was locked. I waited for two hours by the gate in front of the church. At 8:00 A.M. a man opened the church gate. He invited me in to join the Sabbath School teachers’ class that was starting soon.

Inside the church he introduced me to a woman who made me feel welcome. After the teachers’ class ended, she took me to the auditorium for Sabbath School and introduced me to the Bible worker. She greeted me warmly and offered to come to my home and help me learn more about God. I was delighted to have her come to my home, the home I had purchased with the devil’s money.

*To be continued in next week’s Inside Story.*



## The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Acts 4:13*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Examine the ways in which preconceived ideas profoundly affect how he or she responds to God.

**Feel:** Appreciate the importance of letting the Holy Spirit guide his or her perception of God and of reality, in general.

**Do:** Determine to closely examine his or her heart and mind in order to determine whether or not preconceived ideas hinder obeying the voice of the Holy Spirit.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: The Dangers of Preconceived Ideas**

**A** The disciples no doubt exhibited changes in their attitude following Pentecost. Discuss how their attitude changed in regard to non-Jews, as seen in Acts 10.

**B** What factors determine whether we overcome our prejudices?

**II. Feel: Acknowledging Our Own Prejudices**

**A** What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the work of the early Christian church as seen in Acts?

**B** How do we overcome racial and ethnic bigotry?

**C** Why was boldness important for the early apostles? What is our greatest need today?

**III. Do: Human Exercise of Freedom of Conscience and Choice Matters.**

**A** What should you do when you have to share the gospel in places where there is strong opposition to the gospel?

**B** What preconceived ideas or forms of prejudices are you going to give up today?

► **Summary:** We cannot overcome our own prejudices or withstand the forces of evil except by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## *Learning Cycle*

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### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *Acts 4:13*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** *When we spend time with Jesus, the Holy Spirit impresses our hearts and minds with the truths of the gospel. Then and only then are we able to overcome the forces of evil bent on preventing us from witnessing for Christ.*

**Just for Teachers:** *We all need to examine ourselves in order to see what preconceived ideas color how we look at God, His will for us, and how we view others. The role of the Holy Spirit in helping us to overcome those prejudices cannot be overemphasized.*

**Opening Activity:** Invite members of the class to list examples of different kinds of prejudices: racial, ethnic, national, and religious. Have them share experiences in which they were the victims or perpetrators of prejudices of any kind. Next, ask the members to share their experiences in which they harbored preconceived ideas about others. How do such preconceptions affect the way in which individuals look at the world around them? End by having the class share ways in which these evils can be overcome. Perhaps lead class members in silent, private prayer.

**Consider This:** In what ways are we similar to the disciples who still could not understand the nature of Christ's kingdom after the Resurrection? What dangers lurk at our own doors in regard to harboring preconceived ideas about Christ's kingdom? And how do we overcome them?

### ►STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** *A study of the early church reveals that the perceptions of the apostles concerning Jesus as the risen Messiah, the boldness with which they proclaimed the gospel, and their recognition that God accepts all people, whether Jews or non-Jews, all came into being as a result of the infilling of the Holy Spirit. Even the teachings of Christ, which in our case come from the study of the Bible, cannot be properly understood unless the Holy Spirit convicts us.*

## Bible Commentary

I. Still Expecting an Earthly Kingdom (*Review Acts 1:6–8 with your class.*)

The question posed by the apostles in Acts 1:6, “ ‘Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ ” (*NKJV*) must have disappointed Jesus, though His answer does not show it. Jesus is just about to ascend into heaven. He is urging the disciples to wait for the only power that they need in order to be His witnesses. Yet, all the disciples can ask about is whether He is about to set up an earthly kingdom! As they meet with Jesus for the last time and as Jesus urges them to remain in Jerusalem until the promise of the Holy Spirit has come, dreams about the supposed earthly kingdom are foremost in the minds of the apostles. This misconception stands as a warning to us today.

**Consider This:** We underestimate the power of preconceived ideas at our own peril. What resources were at their disposal to assist the apostles in overcoming their preconceived ideas?

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## II. The Arrival of the Comforter (*Review Acts 2:5–12 with your class.*)

Acts 2 describes the infilling of the Holy Spirit as Jesus had promised (*Acts 1:4, 8; John 16:7, 13*). Ellen G. White writes, “The Holy Spirit, assuming the form of tongues of fire, rested upon those assembled. This was an emblem of the gift then bestowed on the disciples, which enabled them to speak with fluency languages with which they had heretofore been unacquainted. The appearance of fire signified the fervent zeal with which the apostles would labor and the power that would attend their work.”—*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 39.

**Consider This:** What is the danger of presuming to do the work of the gospel without reliance on the Holy Spirit? Discuss how the following statement from Ellen G. White applies today: “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 Acts of the Apostles*, p. 45.

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**III. Proclaiming the Resurrection With Power to All Nations** (*With your class, review Acts 4:1–30; compare with Acts 7:54.*)

The priests and rulers of Israel would stand in the way of the preaching of the gospel (*Acts 4:1–3, 26, 27*). They threatened and coerced in the hope that the apostles would be intimidated to stop preaching in the name of Jesus.

Among the opponents of the gospel were the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection. The apostles rightly saw in the opposition of the leaders an underlying struggle against Christ obviously instigated by Satan and his evil forces (*Acts 4:26, 27*). These forces, largely unbeknownst to their human agents, attempted to arrest the rapid spread of the gospel (*Acts 4:17*). Jesus had declared that the gospel would be proclaimed in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (*Acts 1:8*). Not even the prejudices of the apostles, who regarded non-Jews as unclean, would stop the proclamation of the gospel.

The Spirit broke down the walls of partition (see Acts 8, the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, and Acts 10, the story of Cornelius). On this front, the great controversy raged. But the boldness with which the disciples proclaimed the gospel was directly a function of the infilling of the Holy Spirit (*Acts 4:29, 31*). Such boldness was witnessed in Stephen, who remained steadfast to the point of death (*Acts 7:60*).

**Consider This:** The Holy Spirit gave the apostles boldness to accomplish the mission of the early church. What does this fact teach us about the needs that the Spirit will supply among Christ's followers today in varying circumstances, times, and places?

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► **STEP 3—Apply**

**Just for Teachers:** When God's people are filled with the Holy Spirit, they are emboldened to proclaim the gospel in spite of opposition and other impediments. Prejudices are broken down, and the gospel message has convicting power on the hearers.

**Thought/Application Questions:**

- ① What would you consider to be the most important need(s) of believers today in proclaiming the gospel effectively? Take time, just now, to pray that the Holy Spirit will fill your heart and supply those needs.

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② What prejudices and preconceived ideas are influencing the way we, as Seventh-day Adventists, go about our mission of proclaiming the third angel's message to the whole world?

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③ Considering the variety of cultures and languages represented at Pentecost, what is the role of diversity in the church today? What is your church doing to diversify its outlook?

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**Activity:** List and discuss some of the ways in which you could strive to overcome and give up prejudices in the way you relate to other people.

## ►STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** **Prejudice remains one of the major impediments to the work of proclaiming the gospel. How important is it that even those we evangelize understand that we respect them as people? What must we do to demonstrate that we have repudiated all forms of prejudice?**

**Activity:** If you were to prepare a short skit on the trial of Jesus' disciples at the hands of the rulers, as recorded in the opening chapters of Acts, describe what characters, settings, and exchanges between speakers you would include.

**Optional Activity:** If time permits, prepare such a skit and act it out in class.