

WORTHY

Acts 5:29-42

After Peter and John healed the lame man at the Temple gate, the Jewish leaders became convinced they needed to do something “to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people.” They concluded, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name. Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.” (Acts 4:17-18) In other words, mentioning the name of Jesus was not politically nor religiously correct.

The early church noted the threats of the religious leaders to silence references to Jesus but these threats did not change what they did. The church continued to grow and the apostles would teach in the Temple area called Solomon’s Porch. The Spirit of God was at work and miracles were evident. People would bring others who were sick into the street on the chance that the shadow of Peter might touch them and they would be healed. Evil spirits were cast out of people and many were healed.

As the church grew stronger, the Jewish religious leaders took additional action to silence the leaders of the church. The Sadducees seemed to be most concerned about what was happening since they did not believe in angels, miracles, or anything supernatural. Things happening in the church were in direct contradiction to what they believed. Miracles and evil spirits being cast out were evidentiary contradictions of their doctrine. It is not surprising they were indignant and filled with jealousy. They used their influence to have the apostles arrested and put into prison as was recorded by Luke in Acts 5:18.

God had a different idea. He sent an angel and simply overruled what the Sadducees had done. The angel instructed the apostles to go back to the temple and resume what they had been doing. The next morning, they were back in the Temple teaching the full message regarding a new life in Jesus Christ.

Meanwhile, the high priest called the Sanhedrin into session and then sent guards to the prison to bring the apostles to the chamber. They were not aware of what God had done. This is the basic problem with those who oppose the Kingdom of God today. They are not aware of what God is doing. Since they are spiritually dead, they cannot discern spiritual things.

It was only after the guards got to the prison did any of them realize something unusual had happened. The unusual thing was that in spite of the fact the doors were still locked and the prison guards were at their posts, the apostles were not in the prison. When the report reached the captain of the guard and the chief priests, they were perplexed and confused. It is not surprising that these people who did not believe in the supernatural were confused by what was reported. However, they realized that when a message is proclaimed and mighty acts and miracles confirm the truth of that message, then many people will believe. Just how extensive such a movement might become was of great concern to these religious leaders.

They didn’t have to wonder very long of where the apostles were. They were not in hiding but were doing what the Lord had instructed them to do through the angel who was sent to free them from the prison cell.

The council was determined to have a hearing and to call the apostles to account for disobeying the instruction to not teach in the name of Jesus. The reason given in verse 17 for the arrest the day before was that the high priest and his associates (mainly Sadducees) were filled with indignation or jealousy because of what the apostles were doing. We might wonder why they would care since beneficial things were being done for the people.

In the case of the Sanhedrin, they apparently had no concern about the ordinary, common people who were being helped. Apparently, they thought that these commoners were not important like the Jewish leaders who were educated and really mattered because they were in control. This attitude of the leaders explains why they were jealous or indignant. They were not jealous in that they wanted to be the ones helping the poor. They were jealous because their position as rulers was being challenged by the apostles who ignored their warning about teaching and doing things in the name of Jesus.

They sent the guards to the Temple area to escort the apostles to the council chamber. They were cautious and did not use force in the public arena because the common people would have come to the defense of the apostles.

It became evident from the statement of the high priest that their main concerns were for their own positions and security. They already stood condemned before God for having sentenced Jesus to death on the cross and yet they were seemingly unconcerned about that. Their real concern was what people thought about them. They did not want the people of Jerusalem to know the truth that they had sentenced an innocent person to death. If most of the people became convinced that Jesus was the Messiah and realized that their leaders had been responsible for His death, then the people might have attacked and killed them.

It seems ironic that the leaders held the masses of the people in disdain and yet they feared them and what they might do if they were really stirred up and became focused on making a change. Even though they hated the Romans, they were also careful about what they did with regard to the Romans and to some extent they observed certain protocols in dealing with each other. While paying attention to these three areas, they showed little or no concern about how their actions would be viewed by God. As it turned out, that was the one and only relationship that really mattered.

What would have been your first question to the apostles if you had been a member of the Sanhedrin? Why did they not ask “How did you get out of the prison?” Was this a case of being in total denial regarding acknowledging that God had performed a miracle on behalf of the church? It seems that they were afraid to ask the question about how they were set free because the potential answer that they feared would have required them to seriously question what they were doing as well as what they had already done. Instead, their question was one about failing to follow their orders and then to falsely accuse the apostles of trying to undermine their authority by accusing them of murder. Notice also the reluctance of the religious leaders of refusing to even mention the name of Jesus, but kept referring to Him as “this man.”

Angry Response – 5:29-33

²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰ “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. ³¹ “He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. ³² “And we are witnesses of these things; and *so is* the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.” ³³ But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them. Acts 5:29-32 (NASB95)

Peter and the others were not concerned about the concerns of the Sanhedrin. They were not trying to incite the people to rise up against the rulers. Peter’s message to the Jews was that ALL of them were guilty and participants in the death of the Messiah. Why should they be concerned that the apostles were trying to “bring the blood of Jesus upon their heads” when they had already accepted it the morning of the crucifixion? It is hard to believe that they did not remember saying to Pilate, “His blood be on us and on our children.”

The Sanhedrin had already accomplished undermining their authority by their actions and

failing to do what God requires of leaders. We can see in Romans 13 that leaders appointed by God “hold no terror for those who do right, they bring terror to those who do wrong, they commend those who do right, and they punish wrongdoers.” The apostles’ responsibility was to God and not to man. The truth of the matter was that the Jewish leaders did have Jesus crucified and God had overruled them by raising Jesus from death. It did not end there.

The traditional translations tell us that after Jesus was resurrected, He was then raised up to God’s right hand and recognized as Prince (the chief leader) and Savior so that Israel would have a means of repentance and be forgiven of their sins. Young’s Literal Translation has the words “Prince and Savior” being descriptions of God Who by His right hand (a description of God’s power and not a position) had exalted (lifted up) Jesus to provide reformation and forgiveness to Israel. In this context, the “lifting up” could be seen to be a reference to the cross upon which Jesus died.

The apostles had seen the crucifixion, they had watched Jesus die and then they experienced the resurrected Lord. They had been there when Jesus ascended into the heavens and they were there on the Day of Pentecost and experienced the indwelling presence and power of the Holy Spirit. They could not deny the truth of what they knew and they would not be silenced. They did live up to the words of Jesus when He said, “You shall be My witnesses.”

When all else fails in their arguments and if those in power don’t get agreement, then the only alternative to admitting that they were wrong and losing control is to destroy the opposition. This is the way of all totalitarian governments. All those who validly oppose and do not just give up and go away are thrown into prison or killed. It is estimated that more than twenty million Russians were killed when the Communists took over in that country. Many more than that were killed in China. In some parts of the world where Islam is the “approved religion,” we see similar persecutions happening today in that those who don’t agree with a particular philosophy or religion are murdered.

Wise Counsel – 5:34-39

³⁴ But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time. ³⁵ And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. ³⁶ “For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ “After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away *some* people after him; he too perished, and all those who followed him were scattered. ³⁸ “So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.” Acts 5:33-39 (NASB95)

In times of turmoil and heated emotions driven by fear and pride, a voice of calmness and opposition to violence is often unheard. However, if you are the president of the group, then you can usually get a hearing. Gamaliel was a Pharisee which would have made him an unlikely candidate to be the leader of a group made up mainly of Sadducees. However, he was recognized as a highly respected Rabbi or teacher. He had experience on his side and his appeal was probably motivated by a desire to not do anything that would precipitate Roman intervention if killing the apostles would lead to riots and civil unrest from the thousands of Jews who were part of the church.

It would be a mistake to think that Gamaliel was a friend of the church. He had little or no appreciation of the spiritual significance of what was happening as he compared it to some political uprisings against Rome that had occurred several years ago. Admittedly, as a Pharisee, he enjoyed the fact that this group of those he considered to be heretics was advancing the idea

of resurrection of the dead. He hid his unbelief (regarding Christ) behind a facade of “honest doubt.” There is no evidence that Gamaliel submitted his alleged doubt to an examination of the “facts” surrounding Jesus and His followers. Honest doubt calls for us to go far enough to come to either belief or rejection. The central truth of Christianity is either to be received or rejected. In the political jargon of today, we might say that because of Gamaliel, the Sanhedrin “kicked the can down the road” and fail to address the issues that had been raised. They wanted to avoid debating the issues on their merit because they suspected that “where they stood” was in error and, therefore, they did not want to seriously examine it.

Some view Gamaliel’s counsel as unwise and dangerous. What he said was based on several errors and we know that if the assumptions we make are not right, then the solutions we develop will fail to address the problem. One assumption was that this phenomenon of the followers of Jesus was like any other of several revolts in the past and that history repeats itself. He failed to see that the events related to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus were singular and that nothing like this had ever happened before and nothing like it would ever happen again.

A second error was in assuming that “success is a criterion for determining truth.” Gamaliel assumed that “if something is not of God, then it will fail.” While that argument is correct in the ultimate end of all things, there have been many things that were not of God that had a season of success for decades and even centuries. If Gamaliel had lived long enough (until A.D. 70) he would have had to conclude that his position with regard to the ways of Judaism was wrong because both Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed.

Grateful Suffering – 5:40-42

⁴⁰ They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and *then* released them. ⁴¹ So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for *His* name. ⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus *as* the Christ. Acts 5:40-42 (NASB95)

Alexander MacLaren noted that “Gamaliel had a strange notion of what constituted ‘refraining from these men and letting them alone,’ and he betrayed his real position and opposition by his final counsel to scourge them, before letting them go. That is what the world’s neutrality comes to.”

We see evidence of growing restrictions all around us regarding the expression of our faith. Public events used to be opened with prayer. Years ago, children were exposed to a time of prayer in public schools. Teachers could read the Bible during their “break time.” High school choral groups could sing the classics though many of these were songs of praise to God. But now, many of these practices are not allowed.

Today, in our nation, we don’t hear about anyone being flogged for public expression of their Christian faith, but we do see that people are subjected to fines and law suits, boycotts of businesses, and some people have lost their jobs. Now we are hearing threats being made against various states that federal funding will be cut off if a state takes a stand for Christian principles. Despite such “rules,” many do what they believe God would have them to do. Some students will meet at school for a time of prayer before classes begin. Some student athletes will observe a prayer time when the game is over. These have boldness to obey. We should also be bold in our neighborhoods, in our organizations and everywhere we go. The essence of being faithful cannot be separated from the statement that the apostles made when they were asked “Why are you doing these things?” “We must obey God rather than men.”