

MAY 19, 1974

BOLD WITNESS CAUSES CONTROVERSY

Do you suppose Christians who have died know what is happening on earth today? We won't know the answer to that (for sure) until we get to Heaven ourselves. Nevertheless, let us just assume they can know what is happening on earth. What do you think might be the reaction of the First-Century Christians to today's conditions and to what today's Christians are doing with the opportunities and challenge we have? Comparing our conditions with those in the Roman Empire of the First Century, we find many contrasts. For example, our government was founded on Christian principles and the notion of human dignity. The Roman Empire was founded on military power and "might makes right." Today Christianity and its claims are well known, but in their situation, the claims of Christianity were unheard and misunderstood. Now Christianity is somewhat socially acceptable (but it is becoming ever less acceptable) while then it was not generally accepted. We have pleasant meeting places for large gatherings and they met mostly in homes. We can worship openly, but they did so behind closed doors.

The First-Century Christians would think we had ideal conditions for the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They would likely wonder why Christians do not witness more openly since conditions are so ideal. If they were bold in their witness, they stirred up quite a controversy. Sometimes they were beaten and killed or put in prison. They were willing to accept the consequences because there were some who accepted Jesus as Lord when they witnessed.

Are things really any different today in our country when people witness for Jesus? It is definitely a different set of circumstances. In this country, do you think anyone would be put in jail for witnessing for Jesus? Not usually! Paul got into trouble in Ephesus because he was hurting the business of the idol makers. Do you think we would get into trouble if we went to the local liquor store and witnessed to people about the saving power of Jesus or if we talked to women going to an abortion clinic? They would likely arrest us. They would accuse us of interfering with normal business activities. The same thing might happen if we took a group to the local theater showing X-rated movies and witnessed to the people patronizing that establishment. Some may think such actions are too drastic. After all, people would think we were crazy! Many thought Paul was crazy.

Most non-Christians (and, for that matter, many Christians) see such evidences of problems in the fabric of our society and their reaction is "Ho Hum." This apathy is expressed by "So what!" There is almost no opposition from the non-Christians because they really don't care that evil influences in our society are ruining lives. They have no appreciation that the "lost" will spend eternity apart from God or they themselves would turn to God.

If we are pro-active and bold in our witness, we are likely to also experience opposition from other Christians. We magnify the subtle differences in our beliefs and oppose each other more than we oppose what the devil is doing. Paul experienced some of this type opposition. Those in the Church opposed him who had not "gotten over" being Jewish. These wanted to require that certain traditional rituals from Jewish practices be requirements in the Church. They criticized Paul and deliberately took his teachings out of context in their accusations against him.

ACTS 21:17-24 Was there any justification for the accusations brought against Paul? Remember, the accusers were Christians and they were probably well meaning people. I doubt they just made up the story to cause Paul trouble. I can see how they could misinterpret what Paul taught if, for example, they obtained a copy of the letter Paul wrote to the Galatians. Look briefly at Galatians 5:2-4.

Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you

at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

If you lift that right out of the Bible and ignore the rest of the letter, then you could say that Paul was teaching Christians (Gentiles and Jews) they should **not** be circumcised. We should be very careful about building a theology or doctrine around just a few verses. Do you remember what Jesus told Satan when He was tempted to turn the stones into bread? “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.” The reason the body of Christ is divided today is that one group chooses to emphasize or de-emphasize one part of God’s word over another.

In Paul’s situation, James and the elders at Jerusalem suggested that Paul go through the Nazerite ritual of purification to prove to the Christian Jews that he really did respect the Mosaic traditions. While he was doing this, some Jews tried to kill Paul. They didn’t succeed because the Roman officials stepped in and arrested Paul and bound him in chains.

Paul should not have been surprised when this happened. He was told this very thing would

happen in a prophetic message (See Acts 21:10-14). His arrest was confirmation of what Paul had already been told.

ACTS 20:22-23 We see here a principle in the way God deals with His people: God always lets His people know what He is going to do and what things are going to happen. Even today, God is revealing to His church predictions of a coming persecution for true believers. The Bible also confirms this. Paul wrote to Timothy, “All who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” That statement was true then and it is true now. The time is approaching when middle-of-the-road Christianity will be no more. Things will happen such that we will be forced to take a stand for or against Jesus Christ. There is going to be a polarization of good and evil. Those who are true believers will be quite obvious in their belief and those who are not will be obvious in their non-belief.

The stage is being set for Christ’s return. When persecution comes we cannot afford to back away from Christ. The stakes are too high and we are “playing for keeps.” This is the real thing. There WILL be tribulation and persecution for a bold witness for Jesus. There is NO way to avoid it.

It is time for Christians to stop “playing Church” and to start taking Christianity seriously. All of eternity for men and women is at stake. Let others see Jesus in you. In other words, be a bold witness for Christ.