

## 7. Power, persecution, and prayer

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Many people, believers and unbelievers alike, would be impressed with modern mega church facilities, coffee shops, cafeteria, the sizes of their congregation, buildings, staff, and of course, their pastors' impressive credentials – doctor of divinity, doctor of theology, etc. They even have satellite campuses through gigantic screens to watch their pastor preaching from another location.

Nowadays satellite campuses are very much 'in' among mega church pastors. Instead of sending out next generation pastors to spread the Good News of Jesus, they send out their televised image. As you can tell, I don't buy the concept of satellite church campuses. I don't want to build my kingdom by showing my ugly face all over the screens, but rather the Kingdom of God.

But the first century church had none of these advantages. They didn't have big budgets, staff, buildings, and forget satellite campuses. But because they were filled with the Holy Spirit, they were able to do more than any of our modern-day mega churches could do.

### A. 5,000 NEW CONVERTS

*Acts 4:1-4 Now as they spoke to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came upon them, 2 being greatly disturbed that they taught the people and preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. 3 And they laid hands on them, and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. 4 However, many of those who heard the word believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand.*

Peter's second preaching brought another large group of new converts to the Lord. This time 5,000 people were saved.

Some Calvinism theologians insist that there is no example of altar call in the NT, they say that pastors should not do it. But according to my Bible, in Acts chapter 2 through 4, we find Peter making two separate altar calls and 8,000 people came to know Jesus as their Savior and Lord. I say that they were very good altar calls that beat Billy Graham's or Greg Laurie's crusade record any day. Even Jesus Himself made altar calls in several occasions during His teachings. Since altar call is recorded in the Bible, Jesus did and the apostles did, I will continue to make altar calls every time the Lord prompts me to do so.

### B. INTIMIDATION vs. SPIRITUAL DOMINATION

*Acts 4:5-12 And it came to pass, on the next day, that their rulers, elders, and scribes, 6 as well as Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the family of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem. 7 And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, "By what power or by what name have you done this?" 8 Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: 9 If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, 10 let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. 11 This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders, which has become the chief cornerstone.' 12 Nor is there salvation in any other, for there*

*is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."*

I don't know why, but I have this silly impression that whenever I read the Jewish religious court by the high priest in the Gospels, I think of the movie poster 'Godfather' that I've seen.

Because this court was essentially composed of the high priest's family. The Jewish religious system had become so corrupt that the offices were passed from one relative to another without regard for the Word of God. When Annas, the former high priest, was deposed from the priesthood, Caiaphas his son-in-law was appointed. In fact, five of Annas' sons held the office at one time or another. That is serious nepotism.

Don't think that this kind of blind nepotism doesn't happen in Christian churches in America. Actually it happens more often than we care for. Some pastors choose to appoint their unqualified sons as next senior pastors even though these young people were not called to be pastors by God.

But was it wrong for these Jewish religious rulers, the Sanhedrin to call for an official meeting to find out what kind of teaching apostle Peter and John were doing? No, as a matter of fact, the Sanhedrin was charged with the responsibility of protecting the Jewish faith, and this meant that they had to examine every new teacher and teaching that appeared in the land according to Deuteronomy 13.

They certainly had the right to investigate what the church was doing, but they did not have the right to arrest innocent men and then refuse to honestly examine the evidence. Their question was legal, but they did everything they could to avoid admitting that a miracle had taken place by God. They were evasive and merely referred to the miracle as "this."

We find that Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit again. In other words, the Holy Spirit was putting words in this man's mouth so that he could speak the truth with boldness. Whenever we encounter unbeliever's challenges or questions, we need to make a quick prayer to the Lord that we may be filled with the Holy Spirit to answer them with the truth in boldness and love. Unless the Lord puts His words in man's mouth, there is nothing worth hearing.

In v11, Peter was quoting from Psalm 118:22 which is a Messianic psalm. Jesus was rejected by men, especially by these leaders, but He was exalted by God the Father.

V12 is one of my favorite, favorite verses in the Bible. Peter didn't merely proclaim Jesus as a way of salvation, but as the only way of salvation. Oh, how the world hates such statements! If you want to be laughed at, scorned, hated, and even persecuted, testify to the exclusiveness of salvation through Jesus Christ.

### **C. TRYING TO STOP GOD?**

*Acts 4:13-18 Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. 14 And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. 15 But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, 16 saying, "What shall we do to these men? For, indeed,*

*that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. 17 But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name.” 18 And they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.*

V13 gives me a lot of comfort. Sometimes I wish that I had an opportunity to go to a Bible college and seminary to learn more about the Bible more methodically and systematically. Yes, I don't have one of those fancy degrees from a seminary. This is a great time for you to leave this church if you are offended that I don't have a seminary degree. You wouldn't be the first one who has taunted me for not having that degree.

You might be surprised that great servants of God, such as Charles Spurgeon, D.L. Moody, William Carey, G. Campbell Morgan, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Hudson Taylor, A.W. Tozer, C. S. Lewis, and all the apostles with the exception of apostle Paul didn't have a seminary degree. Come to think of it, Jesus didn't have that, either.

I am not against a degree from a seminary. If you are called by the Lord and if you can get it, good for you. But don't measure God's servant by the level of education he has. The most important part is, "Is that person with Jesus or not?"

Now when these high and mighty religious rulers saw the boldness of Peter and John, and they could tell that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled at their boldness and the insight for the Scriptures. It was unmistakable.

Even their enemies could see that Jesus Christ had profoundly impacted these men. Could a statement like that be said of you? Could it be said of you and of me that we have been with Jesus? I hope so.

Somehow the Jewish religious rulers thought that their threats to these apostles would stop the move of God. It is like trying to stop the biggest and baddest hurricane of mankind with an 8"x10" piece of paper.

#### **D. RIGHTEOUS CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE**

*Acts 4:19-22 But Peter and John answered and said to them, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. 20 For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard." 21 So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done. 22 For the man was over forty years old on whom this miracle of healing had been performed.*

This was evident when Peter and John refused to be intimidated by their threats. All of us need to follow their example and make our decisions on the basis of "Is it right?", not "Is it popular?" or "Is it safe?"

However, we must be sure that we have the clear teaching of the Word of God, not taking Scripture out of context, on our side before we take a stand against the authority of the government. This is what we call "Civil Disobedience." Peter knew what the Lord had commanded the believers to do, and he was going to obey Him at any cost.

I've heard that some Christians thought that collecting tax is unlawful and unbiblical so that they exercised 'Civil Disobedience' against IRS. Later, they found themselves for their trouble up the creek without a paddle. Guess what, Jesus taught us to pay taxes.

*Matthew 22:21 They said to Him, "Caesar 's." And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar 's, and to God the things that are God's."*

Speaking of 'Civil Disobedience', Obama's current administration is doing everything they can against Christianity, especially in the military. Here are a few examples:

- In May, 2013, a U.S. Army email listed many prominent Christian ministries as "domestic hate groups."
- A war games scenario at Fort Leavenworth identified Christian groups and Evangelical groups as being potential threats.
- A training manual for an Army Reserve unit identified evangelical Christians, Catholics, and Islamophobes as on a par with al Qaeda and similar Shariah-adherent terrorist organizations in terms of readiness to engage in such extremism.
- A West Point study released by the U.S. Military Academy's Combating Terrorism Center linked pro-lifers to terrorism.

Wow, we have a roomful of terrorists in here according to Obama 's federal government standard.

## **E. THE PRAYER THAT BROUGHT THE BOLDNESS**

*Acts 4:23-31 And being let go, they went to their own companions and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. 24 So when they heard that, they raised their voice to God with one accord and said: "Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, 25 who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: 'Why did the nations rage, And the people plot vain things? 26 The kings of the earth took their stand, And the rulers were gathered together Against the Lord and against His Christ.' 27 "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together 28 to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. 29 Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, 30 by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus." 31 And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.*

This is one of the truly great prayers recorded in the Bible, and it is a good example for us to follow.

To begin with, Peter and John had just come from the enemy stronghold and the church met to pray in order to defeat the enemy. Too often today, believers gather for prayer as though attending a concert or a party. There is very little sense of urgency and danger because most of us are comfortable in our Christian walk due to our complacency and laziness. If more of God's people were witnessing for Christ in daily life, there would be more urgency and blessing when the church meets for prayer.

It was a united prayer meeting as they lifted up their voice to God with one accord. Division in the church always hinders prayer and robs the church of spiritual power .

The prayer of these apostles and the rest of believers of Christ was based solidly on the Word of God. The Word of God and prayer must always go together. In His Word, God speaks to us and tells us what He wants to do. In prayer, we speak to Him and make ourselves available to accomplish His will. True prayer is not telling God what to do, but asking God to do His will in us and through us. It means getting God's will done on earth, not man's will done in heaven.

As the opening of their prayer, they acknowledged who their God was. By doing so, they put their situation in the right perspective. Nothing is a problem to our God. Then, they made their petition – not for protection from their enemies or elimination of them, rather power, strength, and boldness to speak God's Word. It is no wonder God answered with a resounding 'Yes' that shook the building they were in.

Prayer is both the thermometer and the thermostat of the local church; because the "spiritual temperature" either goes up or down, depending on how God's people pray. John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, said, "Prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge to Satan."

### ***F. APPLICATIONS***

- 1) God's qualifications for His servant has nothing to do with men's ideal choice.
- 2) All of us need to follow the apostles' example and make our decisions on the basis of "Is it right in the sight of God?", not "Is it popular?" or "Is it safe?"
- 3) Nothing lies beyond the reach of prayer except that which lies outside the will of God.