

Church Under Fire (Acts 4:1-31)



A. The Apostles Arrested (4:1-4)

1. We are living in an evil world. Proof? Anyone going about doing good gets into trouble sooner or later. Jesus got into big trouble with religious leaders within weeks of going about doing good. So, it was with the early church. Doing good and speaking God's word got the apostles into trouble just as quickly. Jesus said, *'If you follow me, the world will hate you as they hated Me.'* (c.f. John 15:18-25; Matt 10:22) *'But when they drag you into the court, do not be troubled and do not premeditate what you will say because the Holy Spirit will give you words to speak which cannot be refuted.'* (Luke 21:12-15) Jesus' words came true very quickly. This was the first time Christians were charged with the crime of following Christ. Today hardly 10 years pass without Christians being persecuted and charged as criminals somewhere in the world. The apostles were arrested and detained like criminals and just as Jesus was.
2. Why did they arrest the apostles? (i) They were thought of as disturber of peace, going from house to house, breaking bread, and sharing faith. Also Galileans were known for resisting governing authorities. The captain of the guard was a high-class Sadducee who was the second person in charge of the temple after the priests. He tried to break up the large gathering where 5000 men turned to Christ. (ii) Priests the 'teachers of the official religion' were particularly threatened since they took part in executing Jesus, these fishermen's leader. (iii) Sadducees the theologians were disturbed, too. They'd collaborated with the Roman authority to execute Jesus. These fishermen were not only teaching in the temple courtyard, the Sadducees' turf, but they were also teaching the resurrection of Jesus. Sadducees were rationalists and against anything supernatural, especially resurrection (C.f. Luke 20:27-40).
3. But the apostles' arrest did not stop the spread of the gospel nor dampen the growth of the early church. 5,000 men were converted besides women and children (v4). Perhaps more people need to be arrested for doing good for the church to grow? *'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.'* (Tertullian, 155-220 AD). The Church does not break from outside pressure. She breaks from within.

B. Peter's Defence (4:5-12)

1. This was the identical court Jesus had stood in just 3 months before. The Sanhedrin with the high priest and 70 elders was like today's Senate and Supreme Court combined. The same judges stood before Peter and John. Annas (high priest 6-15 AD), Caiaphas (Annas' son-in-law, 18AD c.f. Lk 3:2), John (Jonathan, Annas' other son-in-law became high priest in 36-37AD), Alexander and the high priest's family who held official positions. Annas' family held on to the position of the high priest until the temple was destroyed. It was a dramatic repetition of history. The scene Jesus faced was being re-lived by the apostles.

There was no real charge to bring against the accused in either cases. The authorities were once again looking for any excuse to incriminate them. Annas and Caiaphas had condemned Jesus to death, and what they had done to Jesus, they were ready to do all over again to His disciples. Can you imagine the two unlearned fishermen standing accused by the most powerful and wealthiest people in the land with no one to defend them? But they were not alone. They had the best advocate one could ever have, the Holy Spirit. Jesus told them not to premeditate on what to say because the Holy Spirit would give them words no one could refute (Luke 12:11ff; 21:12-15).

2. Peter was taking his life into his own hands. But he did not just defend himself, but he went on to attack. In fact, Peter doesn't even seem worried about himself. His is the most amazing speech. In just 90 Greek words he backed all the judges into the corner:
 - i. *'If we this day are judged for a good deed' (v9)* Are we charged with a crime of healing (save 'sozo') a crippled man? Is it a crime to help the helpless? The first time Jesus got into trouble was when he healed a man with a withered arm on a Sabbath, *'Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil?'* (Luke 6:9) Peter's opening statement alone could have thrown the case out of court, but he went on.
 - ii. *'By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth' (v10)* They asked, 'By what authority and whose name do you teach against our system?' (v7) Peter answered, 'By the name of the man whom you condemned

in this court 3 months ago. He is responsible for healing this man. Not me or John, you have the wrong man here. But if you want to charge Jesus, you need to bring Him to this court again because He is the One who made this crippled man perfectly healthy.' This is an audacious and bold speech.

- iii. *'Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified...'* (v10) I.e. 'If you want the real 'criminal' who did this 'crime' to the crippled man, His name is Jesus. And I accuse you of murdering Him who is the Messiah.' Can you believe this is the same Peter who denied Jesus before a maid 3 months before?
- iv. *'whom God raised from the dead...'* (v10) I.e. 'But you did not succeed in getting rid of Him. If you did, then this crippled man could not have been healed in His name. A dead man has no power to heal.' What a response! Only the Holy Spirit could give him such words.

3. Peter added 2 more points about his faith in Jesus:

- i. He quotes from Ps 118:22 (v11). A man is building a house and is looking for a headstone or capstone to put into the corner of his house to hold up the whole building. If you pull that stone out the whole building will collapse. The builder looked at this very large stone, but rejected it thinking this stone will not fit into his house. But another builder took up the stone with great delight and said, 'I will build my house with this stone.'

'The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD's doing and it is marvellous in our eyes... Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!' (Ps. 118:22-23, 26) You rejected Jesus because you could not fit Him into your religion. Jesus had too many difficult corners to fit into your religious system, so you crucified Him. But God is building a new dwelling place for Himself with Jesus as the chief cornerstone (Luke 20:17 c.f. 1 Peter 2:7).

This is the challenge we face in mission and evangelism. We cannot fit Jesus into any existing religious system including Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, New Age, Shintoism, agnosticism, etc.

- ii. This is the most exclusive verse in the Bible (v12). The Christian faith is totally inclusive - whoever calls upon the name of Jesus shall be saved. But it is also completely exclusive - there is no other name by which we can be saved. Many religious people will not be able to fit Jesus into their existing religious system. It will not work. The only way is to start with Jesus as the headstone and chief cornerstone. You cannot mix the Christian faith with any other religious system.

One world religion is well on its way in the ecumenical movement. But the Christian faith will never fit in. You must start with Jesus for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved ('sozo' - heal, save, make whole) (v12). A religious leader once asked a missionary, 'What can your religion give us that other religions cannot?' He replied, 'Forgiveness of sins.'

C. Religious Leaders' Response (4:13-17)

1. The session ended at this point. There is a surprising 'admission' and a 'lack of admission':

Lack of evidence (No admission): The religious leaders would have presented the dead body of Jesus and end the case if they could. And that would be the end of the story. But they could not. They could only choose complete silence on the subject of Jesus' resurrection.

Positive evidence (Admission): The religious leaders were faced with the changed lives of Christians. It is the only evidence God is giving to the world. (i) They marvelled at the 'boldness of Peter' in the face of very possible death (v13). (ii) 'brilliant answers' – where did this unlearned man get his wisdom? They were 'uneducated' ('illiterate', 'unlearned', Gk. 'idiotes'). They recognised they had been with Jesus. Three months before Peter and John were shaking with fear in the high priest's courtyard. Peter had even denied Jesus three times. Now Peter and John acted and talked just like Jesus (Jn 7:15) because they were filled with the same Holy Spirit Jesus was filled with (v8). (iii) *'Seeing the man who had been healed standing with them...'* (v14) The crippled man whom people in town knew over 40 years was *standing* with Peter and John! They did not know what to do. So, they called for a timeout and got everybody out of court.

2. So what was the religious leaders' response? (v16-17). They could have said, 'Now tell us more about it. We want to find out what is really happening, whether what you are saying is true.' But that is not how

they responded. They discussed among themselves in private, 'We cannot deny the miracle, but we can suppress this from spreading further.'

They could not charge the apostles for breaking the law. So, they made up a new law that would make the apostles lawbreakers if they continued in it, then they could prosecute them. They mentioned nothing about Jesus' resurrection or the healing of the crippled man, but simply decreed, 'We now have a new law that says if you do what you did before, you will be prosecuted. So just stop doing what you are doing.'

How can those who are called to uphold the law and justice be so blind? They refused to examine the evidence because the truth was too inconvenient. So, they outlawed it. This is typical of a totalitarian government.

D. Peter's Response (4:18-22)

How did the uneducated Peter respond? He said, 'I have two things to say to you.'

1. 'I appeal to the higher court of heaven. (Sanhedrin was the highest court in the land they could appeal to.) You will have to answer for your actions in the high court of heaven one day before God.'
2. 'We have decided before God that we will not submit to suppressing the truth for we have been commissioned by the resurrected Christ. We have to answer to God, so we must speak only the truth of what we have seen and heard.'

Christians are to be law-abiding citizens but there are limits (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-17). So, they further threatened the apostles like a bully and let them go because they were afraid of the crowd, among whom were the 3000 + 5000 converted men!

E. The Church's Response (4:23-31)

1. The apostles came back and told them, '*Brothers, now it is against the law for us to preach in Jesus' name and it is against the law to heal the sick in Jesus' name. What do we do?*' They said, 'Let's pray,' and called for a prayer meeting. They came in 'one accord' (unity) and began to pray about what to do next, and called on the 'Sovereign God who controls everything' (lit. Gk. 'despotes'). The Scripture they pray through is Psalm 2, the prophetic psalm concerning the nations raging against God and His anointed Messiah. It is utter foolishness to plot and rage against God. He laughs from heaven in derision and rebukes them in His anger. The church's understanding of their current situation shifts through prayer. God is in complete control and His plan includes the nations. Jews and Gentiles will oppose God's plan to enthrone His Messiah in Zion (v25-28), but God will move in power as prophesied in Ps 2:4-6, 9-12.
2. How would you pray if the government outlaws the gospel? What would you ask for? Safety? Vengeance? The early church prayed for two things: (i) 'Lord, we are your servants. There is no question about what we should do. We will continue to preach. Will you give us boldness to go on preaching without fear, come what may?' (ii) 'Will you go on doing the miracles for they draw the people and produce the conviction for the message that is preached?'

The western church must prepare for persecution. 10 years from now, we may be living in a very different world. Recently a group of London policemen arrested an old street preacher for preaching marriage is between a man and a woman. A church in Canada went underground because of government persecution.

3. The most dramatic answer to prayer is when God joins the prayer meeting. God entered and the building shook (Ex 19:18; Is 6:4). God was saying, 'I am in your midst in power and glory,' just like when Isaiah saw the Lord in His temple, the temple posts shook as God's glory manifested. What happened to the prayer meeting? God's people were all filled with the Holy Spirit and they began to speak God's Word with boldness, just like Peter and John. It was another Pentecost.

The first big wave of persecution hit the infant church. They sailed straight into the wave and sailed on into the deeper ocean. The second wave would hit them soon, and again they would sail straight into that wave and sail into the nations. The true church of God will continue to sail into the nations with the gospel of Christ no matter what the opposition until Christ returns.