

GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL AS HE EXALTS HIS WORD THROUGH HIS CHURCH

Acts 5:12-26

INTRODUCTION

What would you say is the main thing that distinguishes a local congregation of the church of Jesus from every other religious and secular human association? There are many other associations that care for the poor, that work together in a harmonious fashion to achieve important objectives, that love one another, that proclaim a message, that build buildings, that have organization and governance, that exist in many nations and cultures. So what is it that sets us apart? The one thing that sets the Christian church apart from every other human institution is the content of the message we proclaim. The one thing that makes us unique is this message concerning the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension, present intercession and return of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of all that God said in the OT. It is this message about Christ and all of the benefits that come to us through him that sets every local church apart from every other kind of human organization.

The book of Acts clearly teaches us that this “testimony” regarding Jesus is the main thing in the church. We can see this in our text this morning. In the midst of recounting all the miracles being performed by the apostles Luke tells us again that a multitude of men and women believed in the Lord. Men and women did not trust in the miracle working apostles but were placing their faith in Jesus as he was “testified to” by the apostles. As they recounted the story of his life and death and explained the meaning of Jesus' person and work in light of the OT many people trusted that their sins were forgiven and they belonged to God's people and were heirs of eternal life through Christ. The miracles the apostles performed were not the main thing but the message to which the miracles bore witness was the main thing. More evidence that it is this word of God that is the main thing can be seen in v. 20 after the angel releases the apostles from prison. He doesn't tell them to go feed the poor or perform miracles or love the brothers. He commands them to go and proclaim the “full message of this new life.” God wanted them to go teach and preach that eternal, divine life can only be obtained by trusting in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah.

Two weeks ago we examined the internal characteristics of the church which is formed by God's grace. This week we are going to observe how the surrounding culture responds to the church of Jesus as it faithfully proclaims the truth about Jesus. We will see the external effects of grace. In this text we discover that while the church continues to be the church, formed by and bearing witness to the word of God, the people among whom the church lives respond in four different ways.

MAIN POINT

God exalts his word through his church with the result that...

I. Some fear joining the church (v. 13a)

On the surface vv. 13 and 14 appear to stand in contradiction to one another. In v. 13 we are told that no one else dared to join the gathered church while v. 14 literally says that a multitude of men and women believed and were added to the church. Which is it, no one joined or a multitude did? What Luke is doing is describing the various ways that people responded to the church. Verse 13 literally begins in this way, “Now none of the rest was daring to be joined to them...” The phrase “the rest” is used several times in the NT to refer to non-elect, non-Christians (Luke 8:10, 1 Thess. 5:6). In other words, these are people who are currently rejecting the gospel. These people refuse to be joined to the church. The word translated “join” in the NIV is regularly used in the OT of people being joined to the Lord and of people being joined to the people of God. It is a strong word which connotes relational intimacy and loyalty. It is not the word you would use to say I joined the Janesville Athletic Club but the word you would use to say I was joined to my wife in marriage.

So there is a group of people among the Jews living in Jerusalem who will not dare to become part of the church. Why do they not dare to join the church? They are full of fear. Either they fear the threat of the Sanhedrin against the church or they fear the judgment of God which they have heard about in the case of Ananias and Sapphira. They fear being associated with the church because they know that the Jewish authorities oppose the church and they don't want to get into trouble with those authorities. Or they fear being judged as unfit for God by the church. They do not want to subject themselves to such scrutiny or to such a standard of conduct that is clearly required to be a member of the church. They either fear man or God's disapproval in the church or both.

Many people today fear being joined to the church in an intimate and loyal relationship for the same two reasons. Many of those outside the church fear what others will say if they openly identify themselves with Christ and his church. Prior to my conversion to Christ in my junior year of college this was one of the main things that kept me from trusting Christ. I didn't want to become a "Jesus freak" and so endure the ridicule and disdain of all my buddies. I had been part of mocking the religious students in the dorm and I feared being the object of their scorn. On the other hand, many other people fear the moral standards that they know go along with faith in Christ and being a member of his church. They fear feeling guilty or being condemned by the church or being forced to change things about themselves that they do not want to change. They also know that if they refuse to make these changes there could well be some form of reprimand from the church. When I was in high school I heard the gospel and understood that if I were to place my faith in Christ that I would have to change several ways that I was living. I knew that I would be subject to a higher moral standard of living than I was currently experiencing. I was unwilling to do that and so I refused Christ and turned my back on the church as soon as I moved out of my parent's home.

Whenever we live like the church and bear witness to Christ by faithfully proclaiming his word we can expect to encounter people who will refuse to be joined to us because they fear man's disapproval and God's moral demands. There may be some here this morning who are not truly joined to the church for these same reasons. I can only tell you what the Scriptures say: "If God is for us, who can be against us? And, "The Lord is with me, I will not be afraid, what can man do to me?" When you are loved by God through Christ you might be rejected or persecuted or even killed by humans but you cannot be harmed by them because God is for you. If you fear your inability and even your unwillingness to live according to God's moral standard or if you fear the condemnation of God know this: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." And, "...we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do." What you currently do not want to do, live according to God's moral standards you will delight to do once you repent of sin and trust in Christ. What you fear, condemnation and guilt you will not experience in Christ. I urge you: be joined to Christ and his church for there is no safety outside of him.

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- *Some fear joining the church*
- *And with the result that...*

II. Some admire the church but do not join (v. 13b)

Some of the people who did not dare to join the church still respected and admired the church. In fact, the word translated "were highly regarded" most often is used to describe verbal praise and commendation. So not only are these people who think highly of the church but they also speak highly of the church. So as the church lives like the church and proclaims the gospel there are going to be people who do not join but who think and speak well of the church. I have met lots of these people over the years. I think of some neighbors we had when living in another city. They claimed to be atheists. They were alcoholics. They were not married but living together. We became their friends. We shared the gospel with them numerous times and brought them to church with us a few times. They love our family. They hold us in the highest regard and always speak of us, especially of our children in the most glowing terms. They recognize that it is our relationship to Christ that sets us apart and yet, they refuse to embrace Christ or to join his church.

I think of our own Fred Fisher who, for nine years, came to church every week, who regularly told me how much he respected and admired the people in our church, who considered many of us his best friends, who told others about our church and encouraged his non-believing friends to come here or go to another church. Yet, for those nine years Fred refused to trust Christ and to join himself to the church. But a year and a half ago, God overcame Fred's fears and enabled him to embrace Christ and the church, to the praise of God and to our joy and the joy of his family.

If you know people like this it can be a very disconcerting response to the gospel. At one level these people see something of the glory of Christ and of his church. They do not usually disagree, at least not very strongly. They say nice things about you and/or about your church. They are not in a position of hostility or skepticism and yet they remain unwilling to embrace Jesus and his church. There does not seem to be anything more you can do or say. My encouragement to you is not to lose hope. Keep loving them. Keep preaching the gospel as you have opportunity. Keep inviting them to Sunday worship and other gatherings of the church. If God acts upon them it will be through these means and no others that he will act, which is what we discover in vv. 14-16.

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III. Some believe, join the church and spread the news (vv. 14-16)

The NIV doesn't quite capture the extreme language that is used in v. 14. It literally says, "More than ever, believers in the Lord were added, a multitude of men and also of women." As the church lives like the church and the apostles bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus and perform signs and wonders among the people, in greater numbers than previously seen, a multitude of men and women place their faith in Jesus and are added to the church so that the church of Jerusalem exceeds 10,000 people. This is nothing less than a description of the grace of God overcoming fear and indifference and granting repentance and faith to multitudes of people as they hear the gospel and so believe the promises contained in it. The mention of women here is very significant and hearkens back to the prophecy of Joel quoted in chapter 2 where Peter reminds the Jewish people that the promise of the HS being poured out in the last day was upon both men and women, young and old. So God continues to fulfill his promise to save his people without regard to gender or age. He adds to his church by his Spirit those who have believed the promise in Christ.

In v. 15 we are told that the result of this influx of men and women into the church is that people are bringing the sick into the streets during the day in the hope that even Peter's shadow might pass over them and thus they be healed. In addition crowds of people from the countryside surrounding Jerusalem stream to the temple to bring their sick and those harassed by unclean spirits and all of them are healed. How is it that the result of a multitude of men and women being joined to the church is that crowds of people flock to be healed by the apostles? As these people trust in Christ and join the church they talk about their church and invite their friends and neighbors to come and see and hear. Those who are converted are so delighted with the glory of Christ made known in and through the gospel as preached by the apostles that they urge everyone they know to come and see. Out of love for God and neighbor, they invite their non-Christian friends and families to come.

The word of life is accompanied by signs of life. The word of God's grace is accompanied by acts of God's grace. In this church, at this time the acts of God's grace are the signs and wonders performed by the apostles. (NOTE: in our ongoing discussion regarding the place of signs and wonders in the church, it is still only the apostles who are performing these signs and wonders.) The church which is the place where God curses and kills hypocrites as we saw in vv. 1-11 is also the place where God exercises his gracious power to heal the ravages of his curse upon sin. Disease and demons are the effects of God's curse upon the world for sin. Verses

15-16 make a very strong connection between the earthly ministry of Jesus and the ongoing ministry of the apostles and the church. These abundant healings and exorcisms prove that Jesus is alive and working through his church. They clearly demonstrate that this word that is being preached truly is the key to eternal, divine life. These miracles also continue to demonstrate that the promises of the prophets that God's Messiah will rule in and from Jerusalem are coming true. Here in the city of Jerusalem, in the shadow of the temple God demonstrates that all of his promises to bless his people with his life are coming true through Jesus in his church. These "signs and wonders" prove that salvation is found in no one else, not Abraham, not Moses, not David, not Israel, but only in the name of Jesus. The presence of these signs and wonders through the apostles demonstrate that the church is the temple, we are God's priests, we are the New Jerusalem, we are the people of God and not national, ethnic Israel.

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IV. Some hate the church (vv. 17-26)

It is at this point, while multitudes are being added to the church and astonishing miracles are being performed by the apostles while they teach the gospel that the jealousy of the chief priest and his compatriots, the Sadducees is aroused. Just as in the case of Jesus the miracles do not bring the Jewish leaders to repentance and faith but inflame their hatred. Their hatred for the apostles and the church of Jesus arises from their theological convictions and from their lust for power. They believe in the words of Moses only and thus they reject the claim of the church that Jesus is the one about whom Moses wrote. They view these apostles as heretics, false teachers who are perverting the teaching of Moses. Second, they resent and fear the authority of the apostles. They, by God's appointment are in charge of the temple and of God's people and this collection of fishermen, tax collectors and other "laymen" have no God-given authority. How do you think the chief priest felt when he heard that Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead for lying to the apostles? In addition, the apostles are flouting their clear command to not preach in the name of Jesus. So in jealous fury the chief priest has the commander of the temple guard publicly arrest the apostles and throw them into jail.

Notice how God responds to this act of aggression against his church. He sends an angel to release them from prison. The angel commands the apostles to return to the temple and to continue proclaiming the "full message of this life." So, at dawn, as soon as the temple doors are opened the twelve return and preach the gospel to the people. Meanwhile the chief priest and his Sadducee conspirators call together the entire ruling council of the Jews. They aim to put an end to these troublesome apostles and are convinced they have the legal grounds to do so. They send to the prison for the apostles. Those they send return in a panic to report that while the doors are locked and the guards are on duty there is no one in the jail. They are flummoxed and perplexed and do not know what this means. Can't you just imagine the confused conversations taking place among these powerful men as they seek an explanation? At that moment another person arrives and informs them that the apostles are back in the temple teaching the people. So the commander of the temple guard returns and gently invites the apostles to come back to the assembled Sanhedrin to stand trial for their "crime".

What would have happened if the apostles would have refused to go with the commander and his men? There would have been a riot and an insurrection would have begun. There would have been massive bloodshed between the Christians and the Jews and then the Roman army would have intervened. If you want to know what that would have looked like you need look no further than the current situation in Iraq where Moslem sects seek to kill each other and the occupying U.S. forces seek to quell the violence. It is highly instructive that the apostles did not resist but went quietly with the commander back to the hostile and unjust court. They are following in the footsteps of their Lord and master who had the right and the authority to call down legions of

angels to destroy those who unjustly arrested, condemned and killed him but who did not. They follow the one who meekly permitted himself to be taken and judged by those whom he was to judge. So these men, who one day will judge angels, also submit themselves to the governing authorities.

The ironies in this story abound. The chief priest, the one who is supposed to speak for God to the people throws the apostles who are speaking for God into prison. God overrules these rulers by releasing the apostles from prison. While the chief priest and his cohorts plot in secret to do away with the apostles, God in secret delivers them. God commands the apostles to do what the chief priest has forbidden them to do, preach the gospel. The Sadducees who do not believe in angels were the main instigators in getting the apostles thrown into prison and it is an angel that God sends to release them. While the commander, the person in charge and who had a significant police force backing him up feared the people the apostles did not fear the Sanhedrin.

This miracle ought to have stopped them in their tracks. It ought to have convinced them that they were fighting against God, but it did not. So blind and hard and full of hatred are these self-righteous men that they foolishly pursue their vain objective. They set themselves against the God who has said, "No one can deliver from my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?" So it has always been, throughout the history of the church, that some men foolishly rage against us and hate us and seek to destroy us. Yet the fact remains that while the enemies of the church have perished and been buried in the rubble of history, yet the church persists and spreads throughout the nations this glorious gospel. Local churches sprout up among the peoples of the world, created and sustained by this word of life, while those who opposed the church turn to dust in their graves. As we are going to see in the book of Acts, God does not always deliver particular Christians from prison or even from death. He sovereignly, according to his own wisdom and power, delivers his people or gives them over to their enemies. Yet, regardless of what may happen to individual Christians and churches, the gospel of Jesus continues to be exalted by God through his churches towards that final glorious day when the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth.

Martin Luther, the great reformer got it right in his great hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is our God," when he wrote: "And though this world, with devils filled, should threaten to undo us, we will not fear, for God has willed his truth to triumph through us. The Prince of Darkness grim, we tremble not for him; his rage we can endure, for lo, his doom is sure; one little word shall fell him. That word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them, abideth; the Spirit and the gifts are ours, thru him who with us sideth. Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill; God's truth abideth still; his kingdom is forever."

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