

Gospel Triumph: God's Work or Man's Work? Acts 5:17-42

We humans tend to always believe that God is on our side. During the Civil War nearly 75% of all sermons published in the Confederacy specifically addressed the topic of the war and were thanksgivings for the war or prayers for victory in the war since the cause of the South was a holy cause. Here's an example of what you might have heard in church on any given Sunday if you lived in Virginia, Georgia, or Tennessee. *"In all contests between nations God espouses the cause of the Righteous and makes it his own....The institution of slavery according to the Bible is right. Therefore in the contest between the North and the South, He will espouse the cause of the South and make it his own."*

This seems patently absurd to us, and it is, but this impulse isn't just something for war time. We simply assume that we are the righteous ones and that of course God is aligned with us in all of our religious, political, and social positions. Then we plow ahead in whatever we are doing because as that great theologian Bob Dylan once said, "You never ask questions with God on your side."

None of us want to give ourselves to something like the tower of Babel, built by men and for men and ultimately destined to fade into the great failures of human history. It's occasionally good to stop for a moment and carefully evaluate if we are truly partnering in God's work or simply pushing forward our own goals and agendas. We return to the book of Acts this morning to do this sort of careful evaluation because that's what the author, Luke, wants us to do. So, Acts 5:17-42 this morning and in this passage we will see **3 Tests to Determine if God is at Work in a Group.**

1. Power (vv. 17-33)

By the word power here I mean authority, sway or supremacy. Who or what has the right to influence and direct.

Now, it's been over a month since we've been in the book of Acts together, so let me remind you where we are. The book of Acts traces the movement of the Gospel as it expands outward from Jerusalem to the end of the earth. Chapter 5 finds us in Jerusalem in a section where the Apostles have begun to experience external and internal threats to the gospels advance.

Chapter 3 began with Peter and John healing a lame man in the Temple. This caused quite a stir and led to Peter preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ to a crowd. Many turned to Christ through this, and this led to their arrest. Listen to 4:1-2. Peter preaches the Gospel to the religious leaders and ultimately the leaders let them go with a stern warning. Listen to 4:21.

Chapter 5 begins with an internal threat to the Gospel with the deception of Ananias and Sapphira. But despite the internal and external threats the Gospel continues to move forward, and God continues to work. Listen to 5:12-16.

This brings us to our passage for this morning and the expanding influence of the Apostles does not go unnoticed. Look at 5:17-18. You can see the primary motivation here is not one of concern for God's Word. They are envious and jealous and want to assert their power and authority. Notice that this official action by the High Priest lands the Apostles in public prison. This is done to make a public point and let everyone know who is really in control. Except, they aren't in control at all. Look at verses 19-20. The Apostles are clearly under the authority of God because of how they respond. Look at the first part of verse 21. They immediately obey and go right back to proclaiming the gospel in a very public place.

This brings about one of the more ironic and humorous circumstances in Acts. Let's read the rest of verse 21-24. It's quite beautiful because they all assemble, ready to confront the prisoners and when they send for them, they just aren't there. Imagine the confusion. And then a random and anonymous individual brings word that the prisoners are back in the Temple, preaching again. Look at verses 25-26. This time they have to be very careful in "arresting" them because of the endorsement of the people.

So, the Apostles are once again brought before the High Priest and the Sanhedrin for questioning. This passage is similar to chapter 4, but the intensity has moved up a notch. Look at verses 27-28. The High Priest won't even say the name of Jesus. Peter, once again, responds and puts the issue of authority and power front and center. Look at verse 29. They must obey God because God has acted in Jesus Christ. Look at verses 30-32.

The Sanhedrin believed they were the representatives of God because they believed they were the rightful heirs of God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob. Peter says, no, you are under the wrong authority, your own. Instead, God has made it quite clear that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of His covenant, and He is the leader, savior, and Lord. He's exalted. He's the way to forgiveness of sins and He must remain the central reality of what the Apostles believe and do.

Let's pull this commitment over to us today. In our church and our own individual lives, it's very easy to assume the centrality of Christ and then functionally exalt something else to be the working authority for us. This is part of the reason I want to be so passionate about keeping our ministry simply focused on the Gospel and Christ. There are thousands of secondary good things we could get involved in and start to work at as a church. We could get politically active or socially engaged. We could begin to define ourselves with certain theological positions. We could start to be the church of a certain schooling choice or has this type of worship music or a certain vibe. Those are all important things, but human nature is such that they very quickly displace the authority of Christ, and they become the central thing.

Let's fight to keep Christ and the work described in verses 30-32 central. That will ensure that we are a group taking part in God's Work and not mans.

2. Persistence (vv. 34-40)

The high priest and the Sanhedrin didn't enjoy Peter's sermon. Look at verse 33. Would they actually have killed them? Maybe. In just a couple of chapters they do end up stoning Stephen to death. But before they can do that here, a man named Gamaliel steps in. Look at verse 34. Most of the Sanhedrin, it appears, are Sadducees, but Gamaliel is a Pharisee and Luke wants to make sure that we pay attention to his words. Of course, later in the book of Acts we will find out that the Apostle Paul studied under Gamaliel. He asks that they remove the Apostles from the gathering and then states his case on how to handle the situation. Look at verses 35-39.

There are many examples from history during this time of those who tried to gain a following for religious or political purposes. Gamaliel lists two here as examples of those who seemed to be important and whose movement had momentum, but who ultimately fizzled out.

His advice to the Sanhedrin is that there is enough smoke here to possibly indicate fire. They should allow this thing to run its course and see what happens. It's not

always the best advice to just let things go and see what happens, but in this case, Luke, the author of Acts, is using Gamaliel's words to make a point in the larger story of Acts.

The Christian movement began in the book of Acts with a lot of buzz and momentum. Would it continue? Would it show itself to be God's work? Luke includes this statement from Gamaliel precisely to cause the reader to ask these questions about the Christian movement and the church. Would it persist? Would it continue? The answer is quite obvious when you reach the final chapter of Acts and the Gospel has landed in Rome.

For the moment, the Sanhedrin take his advice, up to a point. Look at verse 40. Now, they make their position known by beating them. They don't want them to continue to speak in the name of Jesus, but they also give a temporary reprieve to the Apostles.

A movement of God will not be shut down by opposition from outside or inside as we've seen so far in the book of Acts. If God has truly worked and is working, what option can there be but to continue? This is why throughout church history we see the church grow in the hardest places. And this growth despite opposition comes because of the perspective gained from the Spirit and a relationship with Christ.

3. Perspective (vv. 41-42)

Keep in mind here, that the Apostles have just been beaten and this was not a casual thing. They were bloodied and bruised and in incredible pain. And yet, look at verse 41.

The Apostles now view all of life through a new lens. For most people, a beating at the hands of the highest religious authority would be devastating. Not only because of who administered it, but just because of the pain of it. But their response is joyful because of how they interpret the events.

They consider it an incredible honor to be associated with Jesus Christ to the point of suffering for Him. This tells us that Christ is their identity. In other words, the most important aspect of who they are is wrapped up in Jesus. They want Him to be honored and glorified more than anything else. They want His mission to move forward, even if that means their own personal discomfort and suffering. Listen to 1 Peter 4:12-16.

A genuine work of God will bring about this sort of perspective shift in Christ's followers. They will begin to see the world and the events of the world through a biblical lens and not the same lens as everyone else. Often you will most clearly see your attitude and perspective when you face opposition, frustration, and suffering. How do you interpret those things?

So, my question for us this morning is, where does our perspective need to shift to better align with God's?

For the Apostles, this perspective gave them the courage to continue doing what God had called them to do. Look at verse 42. They didn't back down but kept Christ at the center and continued to proclaim Him. They did it publicly and privately. They continued on and this is the bottom line for you and for me. Keep going. If God is truly at work in your life, continue on in the little and the big areas. Keep going despite opposition and discomfort. One author put our response beautifully.

While many of us will never face the kind of stark challenges of a threatening Sanhedrin or an oppressive regime, we all need courage. Most of us need daily courage to tell the truth to people who might respond with anger; to face another difficult day seeking employment in a difficult job market; or to work for a supervisor who takes us for granted or belittles our work. Most of us need courage just to face the daily fears and anxieties that gnaw at the foundation of our lives. All of us need courage for life, and in the end everyone will face death and will need courage then, because despite all the great intentions to avoid death and surround ourselves with friends and family, we will ultimately do so alone. For these and countless other acts of courage, we require the character formation to live and speak with principled courage. So how do we get it? – Dean Pinter

So, how do we get this courage to continue aligning ourselves with God's good work? Hebrews 12:1-2 tell us. Let's pray.

Sermon Reflections Questions – 1/5/24

- Why do you think humans have so often and so universally assumed that God is on their side during conflicts, struggles, and wars?
- Have you heard Christians publicly voicing the belief that God is on their side in any areas? Which ones?
- Describe the story of Acts so far leading up to 5:17-42. Have the Apostles faced opposition before in this books?
- Why did the Sanhedrin believe they were on God's side?
- What are some of the secondary issues that threaten the centrality of Christ in our lives and church?
- Why do you think secondary issues so often become functionally primary in churches and the individual lives of believers?
- What are some practical ways to avoid this decentering of Christ?
- How do verses 41-42 show a perspective centered on Christ?
- What are some ways that you can grow to have your perspective better aligned with God's?

- Do you personally struggle with placing comfort above God? How can we avoid this temptation?
- In what situations in your life do you currently need courage to continue to do what's right? How can you grow in this courage?
- What's one principle from this text that you can use to encourage another believer this week?