

Challenging Religious Control.

Acts 4: 1-21

Read the book of Acts and you will discover that the DNA of the Body of Christ abounds! Church built on Testimony (all Christians are to be witnesses not to church but to Jesus), Church is built on His presence and power (the Body of Christ breathes and lives out of the Holy Spirit alone, there's no other way), Church where the Holy Spirit enables us to do with ease what we are called to do and be (no silver or gold just Jesus and the Gospel of Grace which is not only sufficient but uniquely so) & now today, Church for builders following His blueprint not destroyers clinging to their vested interest! Our journey so far through the book of Acts (a huge thank you btw to Chris, Sue, Val, David & Richard) has shown us a dynamic Jesus centred community which sad to say today's church is so often but a poor reflection of! When we stop playing religious trivial pursuits and start being the Body of Christ we will impact our cities and the nations, and the Lord will be glad to add to our number those being saved.

There was a time when God saw our World lying like a crippled beggar on the doorstep of heaven. He had something that he could not keep. That was His own life and love. The crippled beggar asked only for alms and a cooling drink, but God gave him a baby to love, a man to follow, a life to adore, a spirit to dwell in His own wretched body, and make him walk and leap and praise God. The question for us at St Andrews and for the wider Church today is whether we want to remain crippled in the power of the flesh or dynamically embody Jesus in the power of the Spirit? As 3:19 reminds us: times of refreshing come from God alone!

Now there comes a point in every move of God where you hit the religious spirit buffers and for Peter & John our reading tells of that moment, a pivotal one in the Early Church. How they dealt with it instructs us today and displays more of that unique Jesus DNA.

Now I remember being told at College to make sure my preaching was arresting, gripping the hearts of my hearers so they would respond to Jesus. Whether I succeed in that is for you to decide but I doubt they meant literally being arrested which is what happened to Peter and John even while Peter was still preaching! The Religious Elite had heard enough and put them in jail, but the earnest seekers hanging on every word Peter spoke had heard enough too: another two thousand men responded and surrendered their lives to Jesus that day!! What a contrast and one that is still clear today: those seeking Jesus find Him, those seeking mere religion for the sake of it find they become the exact opposite of Jesus: judgemental, full of pride, self-centred and fleshly. Sadly you will find them still seeking power and influence in the Church today: and they should be opposed at every turn.

The next day the religious mafia gathered: they weren't all bad as Nicodemus earlier and Gamaliel later proved but in general they were concerned more about their own vested interests and protecting them: They did not believe in any form of bodily resurrection or in the coming of a Messiah. They believed that the Messianic age was already present and needed to be preserved and they alone were the 'preservers of a pure tradition': untouchable, perfect, yet all the hard words Jesus had for the Pharisees still applied. Spiritually a Spirit other than the Holy Spirit had captured them: a religious spirit and it turned them into the syrupy kind of

description given to the Laodecian Church 'neither hot nor cold' and worthy only making you sick! However this was the most powerful religious gathering in the known world at that time: the Church of England Lambert Conference of its day! But they play into Peter's hand by their naive question: By what power or by what name have you done this? I suppose when you are acting only out of the flesh it's a reasonable question but it shows their absolute poverty in a spiritual sense.

You can imagine Peter breathing deeply at this point: taking in a gigantic draft of Holy Spirit wisdom and grace before he responds. Why do we think that we don't need to do that every time that we speak for Jesus?

I love the way he starts: Rulers & Elders of the people (I don't think so!): if we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, (act of kindness: what a great description, such kindness is a fruit of the Spirit and breaks the hardest of hearts) then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed!!! Well don't mince your words Peter! Similar boldness a few months later would result in Stephen being stoned to death. Then Peter makes a statement to them, which would be seen as the ultimate heresy. Quoting their Scriptures (Psalm 118:22) he affirms that Jesus is 'the stone the builders (the Sanhedrin) had rejected which had become the capstone' and if that wasn't enough he then declares to them that 'Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved': Jesus has already said as much in John 14:6, now the Early Church nails its colours to the mast of Jesus, only

Jesus. It's when Churches have watered down that pure truth, indeed Him who is truth, and the religious spirit has taken hold that we have go into terminal decline: I wonder why?!!!

Peter's speech seems quite short: perhaps it's a summary or perhaps he said all he needed and sat down, a lesson we could well learn. Whichever, it was the Sanhedrin were left stunned: no one had stood up to them like this before. They were the religious experts (part of the problem) and highly qualified rabbinic types but I can imagine a stunned silence. Some would have arrogantly dismissed this seeming ignorance, others would have admired their courage and realised that both were mere Galilean Fishermen, unschooled, ordinary, still others noted that they had been with Jesus and wished they had too. Of course the problem for them all was the Cripple standing in front of them gloriously healed. No one knew what to say: how I wish we would be in awe of God today so much that we were stunned into reverential silence. But this was not reverential: it was religious and scarred: so they sent them out and conferred, Notice their own assessment of what had happened as an 'outstanding miracle' that all in Jerusalem knew about. However arrogance won the day as they thought they could simply instruct Peter & John not to teach or speak at all in the name of Jesus. Peter & John were returned and so commanded but responded with one of the great unchanging principles of the Body of Christ: "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God (the supreme rhetorical question). We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard (called to be witnesses they could do no less)."

How do you confront a religious spirit either individually or in a council of the church: you show them God at work. You can argue doctrine to the Lord returns but you can't explain a

crippled beggar gloriously healed. We become overly religious when we place knowledge of God before experience of God. When we fall in love with a person it's an act of the heart and only then follows a lifetime of getting to know them.

The Mighty Sanhedrin issued some rather hollow threats but could not agree on further punishment so let them go. Again they noted how 'all the people were praising God.' Why? They had seen Him to work!

For forty years a bit like the beggar we have been crippled in most if not all of the traditional denominational Churches: it time to enter the promised land of grace and sadly leave behind all who want to make a golden calf of their religion (like those in the wilderness wanderings) To do this we need to rely only on the unique DNA of the Body of Christ: 3 aspects of it leap out of this page of the Acts of the Holy Spirit.

1. The arresting power of the gospel of grace.

It's a gospel shared in word and power (1 Corinthians 2:4), and it's a gospel that springs from my testimony of the difference Jesus has made in my life. If we were faced with a person saying to us that they wanted to know about Jesus, could we share this gospel in a way that would communicate its transforming power in our life? Hence this second qualification

2. The only qualification that matters: our relationship with God through Jesus.

A number of you have said to me that you long for God to do a new thing here and through St Andrews: I am sure you do but I am less sure that you are prepared for the cost of such a change of emphasis. The first thing that is necessary for that to happen is that we all repent of the poverty of our

relationship with Him and start getting that right again. Don't blame the times we live in, the Elders or the Pastor, don't look in any direction other than deep into your own heart. Then begin afresh that Love relationship with Jesus and see what He does and where He takes you. Everyone who has surrendered their life to Jesus has the potential to change the spiritual future of this city and surrounding area. No qualifications necessary: only being with Jesus. The only BA that matters is Born Again.

3. The unswerving truth that Salvation only comes through Jesus.

The religious believe that they can work their way to heaven: those who live by grace know they can't. Salvation is God's gift to you and me only through and at the cost of His Son, Jesus. To water that down and suggest any other qualification is utter foolishness.

Pastor David
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