

**Acts 5:17-42, No. 14**  
**“How the Gospel Spreads”**  
**November 22, 2015**  
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In the short section we read last Lord’s Day morning we read that “more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.” Some of the reason for that, no doubt, was the miracles that were being performed by Peter and the other apostles. But the fact that the number of believers continued to grow is a recurring theme in the early chapters of Acts. This entire section of the book, which concludes at 6:7 ends with another such summary of the church’s growth. The verses we are about to read give us some insight into why the number of Christians continued to multiply and, since Luke in these early chapters of Acts is concerned to give us representative facts, to describe the progress of the Gospel according to principles that are timeless and unchangeable, we have here also a prescription for the gospel’s advance at any time and in any place.

**Text Comment**

- v.17 Some of the apostles, Peter and John, had been arrested before, as we read in chapter 3, and they had been threatened with punishment should they continue to preach Christ and his resurrection, which threat they had promptly ignored. The state has a purpose and Christians are commanded in the Bible to be obedient citizens, but not if their loyalty to the state conflicts with their loyalty to God. The state has a limited claim on the obedience of people. There is nothing like modern patriotism in the Bible. The apostles had simply ignored the Sanhedrin and gone about their calling to call others to Christ.
- v.24 Only the apostles knew about the angel. Like a miracle, the seeing of an angel is a very rare thing in the Bible – it happens but a few times – but when it does it is a privilege accorded to believers only. The apostles make no mention of the angel at their interrogation. To the Sanhedrin it must have seemed that the influence of the new sect extended further than they had supposed – even into the temple guard.
- v.26 Some indication of what a stir the apostles had caused in the city and the level of excitement they had generated among the people.
- v.32 The confidence of the apostles together with their repetition of the charge that they had murdered Jesus must have been particularly galling.
- v.34 Gamaliel was a leading member of the party of the Pharisees with a number of outstanding disciples, Saul of Tarsus being one of them, the man we will eventually come to know as the Apostle Paul. He belonged to the more moderate party founded by Rabbi Hillel and was renowned for his piety. As we would put it today, he made a motion, which was then seconded and carried, to move into executive session. How do we know, then, what went on behind closed doors. There are two very likely explanations. The first is found in 6:7 where we read that a large number of priests became Christians, some of whom may very well have been in the meeting. But it is also

very possible that Paul himself was present and could have given Luke a blow by blow description of the debate. He would particularly have remembered Gamaliel's advice, being his disciple and admiring the man as he did.

- v.36 Who this Theudas was we cannot say, but there were many messianic pretenders in the days before the appearance of Jesus.
- v.37 This Judas is known from other sources. He led a rebellion in A.D. 6 when the Romans took over the direct rule of Judea. It was promptly put down and came to nothing.

These examples, by the way, provide an important, if indirect argument for the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. History shows us what happens to messianic pretenders who cannot deliver on their promises and what happens is nothing like what happened in the aftermath of Christ's resurrection! We don't even know who Theudas was; the whole world knows who Jesus Christ is!

- v.39 What Gamaliel provides is good Pharisaic advice. Remember, these were Jews with a high view of God and his sovereignty. Gamaliel was no convert, though the Pharisees' teaching was much closer to that of the Christians than the teaching of the Sadducees. Gamaliel was and continued to be, so far as we know, a devout Jew, but learned as he was in Holy Scripture and in the history of God's dealings with his people he knew there would be no way to prevent God's plan and purpose from coming to pass. There was much wisdom in what he had to say. He was wrong at two points, galactically wrong. First, like most of the other Pharisees, he had not grasped the full seriousness of human sin or the absolute dependence of human beings on the free grace of God. That is the typical failure of even very religious people. That error, in turn, led to the second, which was his failure to recognize Jesus as the Messiah because Jesus was not the Messiah he was expecting; he was looking for a political deliverer not a savior from sin and death. In most other respects his theology would have been the same as the Christians. Unfortunately, those mistakes were fatal, as they must always be, leaving intact his pride, the pride that must be forsaken if anyone is ever to be saved. Even Christians can disagree about many teachings of the Bible, but they cannot disagree about this: that we are sinners, unable to save ourselves, and that only the sacrifice of Jesus Christ can put us right with God. That is the irreducible minimum of Christian conviction.

By the way, Gamaliel's advice is *not* the advice God himself gives regarding the rising up of some unbelieving movement among God's people, as if we are simply to let matters take their course and see what comes of it. Both in the OT and the New, false teaching is to be rooted out. But, then, Gamaliel must have known that miracles were being performed by these men and he knew what remarkable claims they were making about Jesus. This was hardly a typical case.

It is not hard to imagine the Christian faith being stamped out in those earliest days, never to be heard of again. There weren't that many Christians, they were concentrated in one place, and their leadership was at this point quite a small group of men. Executing the dozen apostles and perhaps some others, Barnabas, the men who would become the first deacons mentioned by

name in chapter 6, perhaps a few others would have dealt the new movement a near fatal blow. Executions on that scale were commonplace in that world. Then some savage persecution of the company of Christian believers would have shut up the rest. And that would have been that, or so we think. It had happened before, many times before. Someone gathered a following for this reason or that, claimed to be God's spokesman or warrior or law-giver, whatever, and gathered a following. There will always be people ready to join a high-sounding cause and follow a charismatic leader. But then the government responded, often savagely, the ringleaders were killed, the rest were scattered and the movement that seemed so promising for a short time was soon forgotten, lost forever in the receding mists of time.

But that is not what happened to the fledgling Christian church; *far from it!* And why was that? Why did the church continue to grow, even in the teeth of what would become savage persecution, when it had no army, no political power, no influential friends within either the local or the imperial government, had little money, and had no interest in using force or amassing the kind of power that might have frightened off its enemies? It was a chicken to be plucked, but no one was able to pluck it. Why?

Well it is certainly interesting that the apostles themselves figure as largely as they do in this narrative. Luke pulls no punches in describing their fortitude, their defiance of the Sanhedrin's orders, and their relentless devotion to their calling as preachers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They could be found in the temple courts, they could be found in the streets, they could be found in Jerusalem's houses, explaining to ever larger numbers of people who Jesus is and what he had done for the salvation of sinners, and calling upon people to believe in him and follow him. This is bravery and heroism and loyalty of the first order. There is a reason why the book has always been called the Acts of the Apostles.

And no one can read this narrative and not appreciate how admirable was the conduct of the apostles. No one can read this history and fail to see how much their work was the overflow of their own faith in Jesus Christ, their own joy in the triumph of his saving work, their own confidence that he would be faithful to all his promises and would be with them wherever they were to help them in whatever they were doing. When we read at the end of the chapter that their response to their arrest, their interrogation, their beating, and the warning of the Sanhedrin was to rejoice that they had been counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Lord's name, we learn that the Sanhedrin was no match for these men. The Sanhedrin was in thrall to the crowds that they were afraid to offend. The apostles were afraid of no one and of nothing.

This passage reminds me of G.K. Chesterton's beautiful account of why Francis of Assisi was impervious to threats or to actual physical punishment which, as you may remember, he suffered on a number of occasions.

“It was the whole calculation...of that innocent cunning that the world was to be outflanked and outwitted by him, and be embarrassed about what to do with him. You could not threaten to starve a man who was ever striving to fast. You could not ruin him and reduce him to beggary, for he was already a beggar. There was a very lukewarm satisfaction in beating him with a stick, when he only indulged in little leaps and cries of

joy because indignity was his only dignity. You could not put his head in a halter without the risk of putting it in a halo.” [*Saint Francis*, 103-104]

Well, in a way, the apostles were just like that. You couldn't put them in prison without increasing their joy. You couldn't warn them to stop preaching without giving them opportunity to demonstrate both their unqualified loyalty to Jesus and their utter unconcern for the forces arrayed against them, a loyalty and an unconcern that must have been very impressive to the people. These men knew what was what; they knew that what they were preaching was the glorious truth; and they knew that God would vindicate their message. To some degree it was this *certainty* on the part of the apostles, this utter indifference to danger that must have given their preaching a wonderful power. The people could tell in an instant that these men had a message that was utterly different from the Sanhedrin's, that they were proclaiming it because they had been transformed by it themselves, and wanted others to believe it for the same happy reasons they believed it: it was the truth that sets men free!

We are going to get this throughout the book of Acts: the bravery, the heroism, the selflessness, and the commitment to the salvation of others that made heroes of the apostles and the many others who spread the gospel in its earliest days of missionary advance. And so it will continue throughout the history of the church. We belong, you and I, brothers and sisters, to a great company of heroes, men and women of great exploits, daring, courage, personal sacrifice and remarkable accomplishment always on behalf of others. We know the names of many such people, but I guarantee you, when the story of the progress of the Christian faith over just the past several generations is finally written – a time of unprecedented, even explosive growth of the church – we will learn the names of a great many more men and women who counted it joy to suffer for the name of Jesus Christ if only they could bring others to know him as they did.

So, let's not miss the obvious. The Christian faith spread as it did and has always spread as it has because faithful men and women carried it to others unmindful of the risk or the danger to themselves. As C.T. Studd, the great 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary once put it:

“If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then there is no sacrifice too great for me to make for him.”

But, obvious as is the bravery and the determination of the apostles in this narrative, there is something more obvious still. The fact is the apostles were carried along by the power of God. They couldn't be stopped because God himself was on their side and working behind the scenes to protect them and to make their ministry powerful and effective.

That point is made repeatedly in the narrative we have read. In the previous paragraph, the one we read last Lord's Day morning, we read of the miracles the apostles performed in Jesus' name. The final verse of that paragraph, verse 16, reads very like Mark 1:32-34. In other words, the early ministry of Jesus was very like the early ministry of the apostles in the electric response it produced in ever greater numbers of people to miracles of healing. People were coming from everywhere because they had heard, first that Jesus then that the apostles were able to heal the sick and when they came for themselves or for their loved ones and received healing the excitement only grew greater.

But that is only the beginning of the Lord's "investment" in the ministry of the apostles. They had been thrown into prison before and their arrest on that occasion had come to nothing. In chapter 3 we read that the Sanhedrin was afraid to act against them because the city was crowded with their friends and admirers, people in large numbers who now believed that what was happening was nothing less than a visitation of God.

Now they were thrown into prison once again, and, I suppose, they thought that the same thing would happen again. They would be threatened and released. But this time, in the middle of the night, an angel let them out of their cell and told them to catch a few winks because when the gates to the temple opened in the morning they were to be there preaching the words of this life, a beautiful way of summarizing the Christian message: a message about Life, life with a capital "L," life that never ends and becomes what human life was always meant to be.

Now *that* changes things, doesn't it? Your enemies throw you in jail and an angel lets you out! I suspect the apostles went back to the temple the next morning with a smile on their faces and a spring in their steps. If God is for us, who can be against us! And it certainly gave them confidence when speaking to the Sanhedrin later that same day. The fact is they had the proof many times over that when the Lord told them that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (1:8) no mere men were going to prevent that from happening! They would suffer a beating on this occasion, but given all that had happened, for the apostles the beating was more a privilege than a set-back, and certainly proved no impediment to their continuing ministry. The Lord had suffered far greater things for them!

And, as you know if you have read the book of Acts, the same sort of divine intervention on behalf of the apostles and the gospel will occur again, indeed a number of times. Miracles will advance the cause in various places, Paul and Silas will be delivered from jail by an earthquake, and so on.

What is more, the apostles' mention of the Holy Spirit in v. 32, reminds us that, since their phenomenal experience of the Spirit's coming on the Day of Pentecost - the miracle of languages, the 3,000 who were converted in a single moment - Christ himself in the presence of the Holy Spirit was with them to empower their ministry *and the apostles were conscious of his presence and his power*. They had seen many times now the light of understanding dawn in a person's eyes as they explained who Jesus is and what he had done to save sinners. They had seen many times people who had been utterly opposed to Jesus or indifferent to him, realize that he was their only hope of eternal life and joyfully begin to follow him. They knew very well that this was the work of the Holy Spirit and so they were acutely conscious of the fact that Jesus was with them by the Holy Spirit, as he had promised he would be. A man can face any opposition if he knows *that*!

But, once again, what we see here are *representative facts*. True enough, as the apostolic age ended and the church made its way, as it were, into the next generations of evangelism and missionary work, no angels appeared to deliver persecuted Christians from jail. But the church never doubted that Christ was still with her by the Holy Spirit to empower her gospel work. No

miracles, to be sure, but the same Spirit, the same power over the hearts of human beings. And so it has been to the present day.

When the missionaries were expelled from China in 1948 by the Chinese communist government, because so much of the Western church's effort, energy, money, heart and prayer had been invested in the evangelization of China it was universally regarded as high tragedy in the worldwide Christian church. There were, it was thought, less than a million Chinese Christians and those believers, now on their own, would now have to face an aggressively hostile government, intent on rooting out Christian belief wherever it was found and willing to do almost anything, however brutal, to destroy the Christian church. The Sanhedrin was a bunch of schoolboys compared to the Chinese Communists. Pastors were executed or jailed. People who were identified as Christians found it difficult or impossible to get work, to rent an apartment, to get their children into school, or to move to another part of the country. Church buildings were destroyed or seized for other uses. Humanly speaking, the church should have disappeared. Instead, as you know, the opposite has happened. It is one of the greatest stories of gospel advance in the history of the world. From less than a million, in little more than half a century the church has grown to well over a hundred million and counting, and all of that in the teeth of brutal efforts to suppress and destroy it. More than a hundred million in fifty years translates to some 5,500 new Christians every day!

*That* is how the gospel spread and the Christian church grew in Jerusalem in those days following Pentecost and that is how the gospel has spread and the church has grown ever since. I could regale you with unending illustrations of the same things that happened in Acts 5 *only without the angel!* One of my favorite illustrations of this reality, the more useful for its being so homely, is that of the ministry of William M'Culloch in Cambuslang, near Glasgow, a ministry that began without fanfare and without any obvious result in the 1730s.

We have no idea, of course, about how naturally talented Peter or John or the other apostles were as public speakers. Peter and John were fishermen by trade and probably spoke quite simply. They certainly didn't have the intellectual polish that the Apostle Paul would have. But their sermons were electrifying because the Holy Spirit was empowering their words to strike directly into the hearts of so many men and women, because the Spirit was using them, however simply their message was put, to *persuade* multitudes of men and women of the truth of what they preached.

Well, if we don't know how naturally gifted a preacher Peter was, or John, we know that William M'Culloch was a poor preacher. He was a learned man and a godly man but he was a boring preacher. There have been many such men through the ages. He did his best, but his best wasn't very good. I've listened to some boring preachers in my time and know how hard it is to pay attention. M'Culloch's own son admits that his father was not an eloquent speaker or even a "ready speaker," by which was meant that it didn't come naturally to him. He had a retiring sort of personality anyway, he spoke slowly, didn't have much of a gift for illustration or humor, and so he simply wasn't able to arrest the attention of his audience. In fact, the state church being what it was in those days, and people's church manners being what they were, he got the nickname of "the Ale-minister," because when he went up to the pulpit to begin his sermon,

many of the men left the church to quench their thirsts in the local pub. [A. Fawcett, *The Cambuslang Revival*, 39]

But it was upon that man's sermons, poorly delivered as they might have been, that the Holy Spirit fell in 1742, bringing hundreds to Christ in a few months' time, and electrifying the Christian world. No angel appeared in this case, no miracles of healing or exorcisms of demons took place, but the bottom line was the same: an ever increasing number of people being added to the church of God, their lives being transformed by their new found experience of God's grace and their faith in Jesus Christ. In Cambuslang, as in Jerusalem, when people heard what was happening they came from miles around, and the congregation became so large the church could not hold them and the services had to be held out of doors, sometimes in the pouring rain, until there would sometimes be thousands of people in a town of a few hundred. Think of Peter in the temple courts and going from house to house because the number of believers in Jerusalem was now so large they could not be gathered in a single place!

The time of the Spirit's great power lasted about six months in Cambuslang, which, for all we know, may have been about as long as the rapid advance of the gospel lasted in Jerusalem after Pentecost, but in those six months the numbers of Christians increased many-fold. And, as you may know, this was the time of the Great Awakening, and what happened in Cambuslang, Scotland, happened in many places in England, Scotland, and Wales, as well as in North America, hundreds more Christians here, thousands more there.

M'Culloch and his congregation had its Sanhedrin as well, groups in the church that condemned the spiritual enthusiasms of the new converts and so on. A local nobleman made as much trouble as he could, taking the minister and some of the elders to court, but they shouldered on and the gospel continued to spread. And what was the result of that? Well M'Culloch wrote it all down so that people would remember after it was all over or at least after the great rush of new believers had settled down to the ordinary trickle. Some years later he could say without fear of contradiction that men who were drunks and indolent before now lived sober, hard-working lives; men who were careless of their families before now led them in worship every day; husbands and wives who couldn't stand one another before now were happily married; brotherly love prevailed in the town, the poor were being cared for by a church full of generous people, and the town was chock full of people deeply interested in seeing others saved as they had been saved. [Fawcett, 173, 178-179] That's *life* is it not; life as it ought to be?

And many individuals, as must have been true in Jerusalem, gave their own testimony to what the Lord had done for them. One young woman of 32, who found new life in Christ, told a friend:

“My heart was like a bird that had been long in prison in the cage, when it was first let loose... Next morning...everything I looked at, filled me with wonder...the Birds on the trees, I thought, were singing their Creator's praise.” [Fawcett, 176]

That's how the gospel spreads: faithful Christians who will not be prevented from sharing their faith whose witness is empowered by the Spirit of God. So it was then; so it is now. And the

result is that multitudes in Jerusalem would have, could have said exactly what housewife Marion Baille, a Cambuslang convert, said of herself.

“Christ is now become all in all to me. I know not how to live without him...” [180]