

### The Ongoing Ministry of the Apostles in the Early Church

#### Acts 5:12-42

Acts 5:12-32: *“And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people. And they were all with one accord in Solomon’s Porch. <sup>13</sup> Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly. <sup>14</sup> And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, <sup>15</sup> so that they brought the sick out into the streets and laid them on beds and couches, that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might fall on some of them. <sup>16</sup> Also a multitude gathered from the surrounding cities to Jerusalem, bringing sick people and those who were tormented by unclean spirits, and they were all healed. <sup>17</sup> Then the high priest rose up, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with indignation, <sup>18</sup> and laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the common prison. <sup>19</sup> But at night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, <sup>20</sup> “Go, stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.” <sup>21</sup> And when they heard that, they entered the temple early in the morning and taught.*

*But the high priest and those with him came and called the council together, with all the elders of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. <sup>22</sup> But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, saying, “Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!” <sup>24</sup> Now when the high priest, the captain of the temple, and the chief priests heard these things, they wondered what the outcome would be. <sup>25</sup> So one came and told them, saying, “Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!”*

*<sup>26</sup> Then the captain went with the officers and brought them without violence, for they feared the people, lest they should be stoned. <sup>27</sup> And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, <sup>28</sup> saying, “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!” <sup>29</sup> But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: “We ought to obey God rather than men. <sup>30</sup> The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. <sup>31</sup> Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. <sup>32</sup> And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him.”*

#### Background Notes

The first few verses of Acts 5 record the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira. They died because they lied to the Holy Spirit. Presumably so they would look good in the eyes of the apostles and other believers, they pretended that they were giving

*all* the money from the sale of a piece of land to the church - when they actually kept some of the money for themselves. It would not have been a sin to sell the land and keep all the money for their own personal use. Their sin was in lying about it, and hypocritically pretending that they were giving it *all* to the Lord. Peter told them they were not just lying to the apostles and their fellow believers – they were lying to God!

Some believers today try to make it appear that they are giving a much larger proportion of their income and investments to the Lord than they really are giving. Many Christians have much more in savings and much more net worth, even though the record of their giving seems to indicate that they are sacrificing to give to the Lord. (Read Mark 12:41-43 to see what the Lord had to say about that kind of giving.)

As a result of the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, great fear came upon the believers - and rightly so! *“So great fear came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things” (v11)*. Through the drastic “discipline of death,” the purity of the early Church was maintained. A clear line was drawn between who was a believer and who was not a believer.

Notice verse 13: *“Yet none of the rest dared join them, but the people esteemed them highly.”* No one was “jumping on the bandwagon” of Christianity at this point. The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira kept the hypocrites and nominal believers away. However, there were many people who truly believed and placed their faith in Jesus, so the Church continued to grow in numbers. *“And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women” (v14)*.

## **Doctrinal Points**

### **1. There was a period of extraordinary miracles in the early Church.**

Did you realize that the miracles recorded in the Bible occurred in clusters? Some Christians have the idea that spectacular miracles took place every day back then. Not so! They happened in clusters. There was an immense cluster of miracles at the time of Creation! There was a cluster of miracles surrounding the Exodus from Egypt and the Conquest of Canaan. There was a cluster of miracles at the time of Elijah and Elisha. There was a cluster of miracles in Daniel’s time. Then we have the great cluster of miracles at the time of our Lord, that extended into the days of the early Church. And there will be a great cluster of miracles in the End Times. One of the clusters of biblical miracles is recorded in the book of Acts, in the early days of the Church,

The reasons why God gave this cluster of miracles was to demonstrate the power of the risen Lord Jesus, to give the stamp of divine authority to the apostles, and to confirm the word of God that they were preaching. Sick people were carried out into the streets so that Peter’s shadow might fall on them (v15-16). It wasn’t Peter’s shadow that healed them - God did the healing. In Acts 19:12, handkerchiefs touched by Paul were carried to the sick, and people were healed -

but God did the healing. Remember that Luke, the author of the book of Acts, was a medical doctor, so he would certainly have recognized the difference between true healings and psychosomatic pseudo-cures. There was a period of extraordinary miracles in the early Church.

## **2. Believers must obey God rather than men.**

After the apostles were thrown into jail for preaching the gospel, an angel of the Lord opened the prison gates! He told them to go back to the Temple and continue preaching the message of life. I find it humorous that the angel must have gone back and locked the gate after the apostles had left, to further confound the authorities! *“But when the officers came and did not find them in the prison, they returned and reported, saying, “Indeed we found the prison shut securely, and the guards standing outside before the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside!” (v22-23).* The angel opened the gates for the apostles, they came out, and then the angel must have gone back and locked the gates again!

When the apostles were brought before the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, they were questioned as to why they had disobeyed orders, and had continued to preach and teach about Jesus. Peter’s response in verse 29 is very significant: *“We ought to obey God rather than men.”* In that case, it was right not to obey the human authorities, because God is the higher authority. As believers, we are to obey God’s commands.

This is true today as well. Normally, we obey the governing authorities. We pay our taxes and obey the speed limit. But if the governing authorities were to command us to do something that God says is wrong, or command us not to do something that God says is right, then we must obey God - and choose not to obey the “lower” authority.

If we feel we must disobey the lower authority in order to obey God, we don’t shoot the police that come to arrest us. And we go to prison if that’s where the governing authorities send us. In other words, we are still subject to the governing authorities, even if, for conscience sake, we must disobey their orders.

Christians don’t all agree on when to practice civil disobedience. If the government says you can’t be a Christian, then obviously we disobey. But what about smuggling Bibles? What about secret meetings, when the government forbids church meetings? What about not paying a tax imposed by a “women’s health” law that specifically funds abortion? It’s not always easy to decide on the right thing to do, but the principle remains: Believers must obey God rather than man.

## **3. Reaction to the gospel ranges from Saul-type to Gamaliel-type responses.**

Verses 33-40: *“When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them.”<sup>34</sup> Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while.<sup>35</sup> And he said to them: “Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do*

regarding these men.<sup>36</sup> For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing.<sup>37</sup> After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed.<sup>38</sup> And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing;<sup>39</sup> but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God.”<sup>40</sup> And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.”

Gamaliel was a well-known and highly respected Rabbi, a teacher of the Law. Before the apostle Paul became a Christian, as Saul of Tarsus he studied under Gamaliel. But the reactions of Saul and Gamaliel to the gospel and Christianity were completely different.

Saul was passionate. He was convinced that Christianity was not of God, and Jews who believed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah were apostate Jews. The only logical thing to do was to kill them - and he did. Gamaliel, on the other hand, was more thoughtful and calm. “Let Christianity run its course,” he said. “If it is not of God, it will die out. That’s what has happened before, in the case of Theudas, and also Judas from Galilee. But if it *is* of God, let’s not fight it - because we’ll be fighting God.”

We can expect to find similar diverse reactions to the gospel today. Some unbelievers are adamantly opposed to the gospel and Christianity. Other unbelievers take a “live, and let live” attitude. Reactions to the gospel today can range from the angry Saul-type reactions to the more dispassionate response of Gamaliel. What do we do in view of such a range of reactions? That takes us to our practical application.

## **Practical Application**

### **Keep right on teaching and preaching**

Verses 41-42: *“So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.”<sup>42</sup> And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”*

In spite of the external persecution and internal problems, and in spite of mixed reactions to the gospel, the apostles kept on teaching and preaching. And so should we. We will face the same problems the apostles faced, and we’ll face them at varying levels of intensity.

So what do we do? We just keep right on teaching and preaching!