

Message #11  
Acts

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TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES:  
THE PREACHING OF PETER'S GOSPEL  
ACTS 4:1-31

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

There is a battle for truth going on in our world. There are many battlefields in this conflict. When truth goes counter to ideology, to preconceptions, to world views, to historical claims, to scientific theories, there is push back.

The transgender issue has been back in the news this week, with a federal judge blocking the president's effort to ban transgender people from the military. As Christians we should have compassion for those who struggle with gender identity. At the same time we need to deal with truth. Our Owner's Manual says that we were made male and female. Science says that we were given Xx or Xy chromosomes. Common sense says that when an effort is made to make a person with one set of chromosomes to become a person with another set of chromosomes, there will be negative physical consequences.

Texas State Attorney General Ken Paxton in February of 2022 declared that gender-affirming care for minors constitutes child abuse. Texas Children's Hospital in Houston in March said that it would stop its gender-affirming care of minors. Dr. Ethan Haim (PROJECTOR ON--- DR. ETHAN HAIM) did a residency rotation at Texas Children's Hospital in 2022. He discovered that Texas Children's Hospital was lying to the public. It was continuing to provide gender-affirming care to minors.

Ethan Haim claimed whistle blower status and made officials aware of what was going on. The Texas legislature quickly passed a law specifically forbidding this treatment, and the governor signed the bill into law. The US Department of Justice proceeded to charge Dr. Haim with four criminal counts of violating the federal HIPAA laws. He faced a potential fine of \$250,000 and ten years in jail. His lawyer declared, "**Our client is a mandatory reporter of child abuse who reported as a whistleblower to the state of Texas what he had seen in his hospital.**" (*Christian Post*, 2/26/2025) After two years of legal dealings and threats from the judge about a gag order for Dr. Haim, the new Department of Justice dropped the charges in January. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Years ago historian Arthur Schlesinger told us in the *New York Times*, "**It is this belief in absolutes, I would hazard, that is the great enemy today of the life of the mind.**" A statement like this always makes me smile, because it is in itself a claim to absolute truth. The absolute truth claim is that absolutes are the enemy of the life of the mind. It is a contradictory statement.

Today we are going to look at how the followers of Jesus responded when their proclamation of absolute truth was rejected by the leaders of their society and what

results that had--- with the hope that we might learn something about how we should behave in a society that does not want to hear about claims to absolute truth.

We have been studying the history of the early church as recorded in the Book of Acts by Luke. We have considered Luke's statement at the beginning that his book describes the continuing work of Jesus Christ through the apostles by means of the Holy Spirit. I suggested that #1 v. 8 describes the theme and outline of the book: **“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”**

We saw this Holy Spirit come upon the Christians in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. Peter preached to the crowds that gathered to find out how these followers of Jesus could be speaking in their native languages. Thousands responded by believing in Jesus. Luke went on to say that there were great signs and wonders that occurred at the hands of the apostles that assisted the growth of this early church. Last time in Acts #3 we saw an example of this as Peter healed a man born lame. Crowds gathered again, and Peter again preached about Jesus.

I.

So we pick up the story in vv. 1-4 as we look at THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF A TRUTHFUL GOSPEL. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF A TRUTHFUL GOSPEL) The proclamation of absolute truth always has a positive impact. Sometimes it will attract people who object to that claim. But there is benefit in just getting a hearing, and some will recognize the truth.

Here in the first two verses we are told, **“And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.”** (TEMPLE 002)

This is a view of the temple compound from the southeast. Peter and John had healed the lame man near the first gate providing entrance into the inner temple courtyard from the east. They had then moved to Solomon's portico, which was along the near wall on the bottom right.

The Sadducees were members of a religious group. (PROJECTOR OFF) Most of the priests were Sadducees. The captain of the temple guard was a priest. His position was second in importance only to the high priest. He was also a Sadducee. So the party of the Sadducees was dominating the situation.

Although they controlled the priesthood and the temple and were in the majority in the Sanhedrin, the high council of Judaism, the Sadducees weren't very popular with most of the Jewish people. The Pharisees were the other major religious party. Most of the rabbis were Pharisees. Because of the position of the rabbis, they had more influence among the common people.

The Sadducees accepted only the first five books of the Bible as being authoritative. So they didn't buy the traditions of the Pharisees and didn't acknowledge the authority of the rest of the Hebrew Bible. They didn't believe in angels or demons. They liked the Maccabeans who had forced the Greeks out of their country in 165 BC. The Romans had helped keep the Greeks out of Israel, and the Romans had kept the Sadducees in power in Israel. So the Sadducees also got along with the Romans.

The Sadducees had doubts about whether there was any Messiah coming. For they didn't accept most of the Hebrew Bible that talked about a coming Messiah. They did not believe in resurrection from the dead, which meant that their belief system would not allow the possibility that the Messiah could rise from the dead. So truth was clashing with a wrong belief system.

The Sadducees also did not believe that there would be a future judgment of rewards and punishments. In fact they seemed not to believe in the immortality of the human soul. That would be similar to the thinking of many of the cultural leaders of our day. Why worry about morality if there is no future day of reckoning?

So these Sadducees were not happy to hear about the Jesus people talking about resurrection from the dead. They were not happy to hear them talking about Jesus, because the Sadducees had been involved in arranging his death. They were also unhappy to hear about them teaching in the temple because they did not have permission from the Sadducees, and they were not priests, and they were not rabbis.

So verse 3 tells us, **“And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening.”** Peter and John had gone to the Temple for the late afternoon sacrifice and prayer time at 3 PM. They had healed the lame man and gotten involved in speaking to the people. Now evening had come, and the Jewish law said that the Sanhedrin could not meet at night--- a rule that they had conveniently overlooked in the hearing they conducted against Jesus. It would have taken some time to get all of the members together anyway. So they put Peter and John in jail until the next day.

Verse 4 tells us, **“But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.”** At the end of #2 we learned that there were about three thousand Christians in all. As a result of this evangelistic meeting we find out that more have become followers of Jesus. There are now about five thousand men alone who are part of this fledgeling church. Whether this is in addition to the 3000 people baptized on Pentecost or the ones specifically added here is a bit unclear.

So the preaching of a message which staked a claim to absolute spiritual and historical truth had a positive impact. The challenge today is to proclaim this message among a people who deny the existence of absolute truth. One of the hallmarks of the philosophy of postmodernism today is that there is no absolute truth. In a survey which George

Barna conducted in 2022 he asked a nationwide sample of adults, **“Are there moral absolutes that are unchanging, or is moral truth relative to circumstance?”** Sixty-four percent of the adults surveyed said that there are no moral absolutes and truth is relative to the situation. (*Christian Post*, 11/3/2022)

According to John 14:6 (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 14:6) Jesus said, **“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”** The Bible and the gospel are built on claims to absolute truth. It is only a truthful gospel that transforms the lives of people who trust in Christ. Though people around us may claim not to believe in absolute truth, they must live in a real world which operates on principles of absolute truth. They are created in the image of a God who operates on the basis of absolute truth. So even though people around us are hearing a lot of messages that everything is relative, we have an opportunity to make an impact because the gospel is true. When we preach the true gospel, some will respond positively.

II.

But not only does the gospel produce a positive result, it also produces a negative response. Thus in vv. 5-22 we are going to deal with THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF THE PRESENTATION OF A TRUTHFUL GOSPEL. (II. THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF THE...) According to vv. 5 & 6, **“On the next day their rulers and elders and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest and Caiaphas and John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family.”**

(BEAUTIFUL GATE) This is a view of the temple complex from the northeast. This area was large enough to contain 12 soccer fields. The healing of the lame man happened near the Beautiful Gate. Then Peter and John spoke to the crowds that gathered somewhere in Solomon’s Portico, which was along the near wall on the left. It was there that they were also arrested.

In the year 30 AD, which was probably when Jesus began his public ministry, the Sanhedrin began meeting in the Temple itself. They met in the far end of the temple compound along the southern wall.

(TEMPLE 005) The hallway along this southern wall was known as the Royal Stoa. It contained 162 pillars in four rows. Each pillar was 50 feet tall. It took three men with their arms outstretched to reach around one of the pillars. Probably the area was enclosed.

(TEMPLE 006) The members of the Sanhedrin sat on two rows of semicircular benches. There were actually 71 members of this high council. The man sitting on the throne was the high priest. This slide shows visitors sitting in on the session. I don’t know that all of their sessions would have been public, such as the one that took place in our story. It is also likely that there were petitions or walls that enclosed their meeting space.

The Sanhedrin was comprised of priests, who are referred to in v. 5 as “rulers,” and leading laymen of the country, who are here called “elders.” The elders were usually

wealthy people who favored preservation of the status quo and thus tended to be Sadducees. The third group in the Sanhedrin was the rabbis, who are here called "scribes." These were mostly Pharisees. They did not like the Romans, and they objected to a lot of the views and policies of the Sadducees.

We don't know who John and Alexander are in v. 6. But Annas was high priest from 6-15 AD. By virtue of that position he is called high priest here, much as we continue to refer to ex-presidents as "President." Annas had five sons and a son-in-law who served as high priest in the first century. So his family dominated the position, and it seems that Annas may have wielded much of the power behind the scenes. Caiaphas was the son-in-law of Annas. He was the current high priest. He would serve in this position from 18-36 AD. Archaeologists believe that they have found the family grave site south of Jerusalem.

So when Peter and John were placed in the center, they were asked by what power this miracle had been done. (PROJECTOR OFF) With so many witnesses it was difficult to deny the truth that this man born lame had been miraculously healed. So they wanted to know how Peter and John did it. The Sadducees were in a tough position, because they did not believe in spirits or demons. The Pharisees accused Jesus of getting His power from Satan and his forces. But the Sadducees could not make that accusation.

So in v. 8 Peter begins to speak. Keep in mind that Peter and John were fishermen. They were now being questioned by the top theological experts in the country. They were going to be called upon to make a theological defense of their behavior and beliefs. This would be a little bit like having one of us go to Yale or Harvard and be examined by a panel of philosophy or religion professors about our spiritual beliefs. It was on one hand a seemingly unfair confrontation.

But notice in v. 8 it says that Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit. These members of the Sanhedrin wanted to know where Peter and John got their power. Luke tells us that he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Remember also that Jesus had promised that they would encounter these situations and that they would have power to handle them. Our author Luke records in #21 of his gospel beginning in v. 12 (PROJECTOR ON--- LUKE 21:12) these words of Jesus: **"But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. (LUKE 21:13-14) This will be your opportunity to bear witness. 14 Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer, (LUKE 21:15) for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict."**

So Peter proceeds to experience just what Jesus promised. He gives a sustained and effective theological defense of his actions and of the claims of Christ. (PROJECTOR OFF) He begins by saying that if they have a problem with him because he healed a sick man, they can know that he did it in the name of, and in the power of, Jesus, whom they crucified, but whom God raised from the dead. So he gives these members of the

Sanhedrin the straight truth. He doesn't mince words. The effect of his words, however, is to put its members on the defensive.

In v. 11 he quotes from Psalm 118 to show that their rejection of Jesus is consistent with the Hebrew Scriptures. In v. 12 he utters a profound statement that lays claim to the exclusive possession of a spiritual truth. Peter says, **“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”** Are there many paths to God and to heaven? Many religions say “yes.” Christianity says “no.” If you want to get to God; if you want to go to heaven, you must go through Christ.

Even many Christians do not grasp this. Last fall Pope Francis was on a three day visit to Singapore. In extemporaneous remarks he said that **“all religions are a path to God.”** He added that different religions are **“different languages”** to God. (*Christian Post*, 9/15/2024) Peter, claimed by some to be the first pope, declared, **“...there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”**

Peter's claim went over with the Sanhedrin about as well as it goes over in our politically correct society. A few years ago a Christian coed at Stanford University was involved with a Bible study in her dorm that attracted a lot of students. The leaders of the dorm expressed concern to these Christians about the divisive effect this was having in the dorm. So one of the dorm leaders told this Christian girl, **“So what you're trying to tell us is that you think 18-year-olds have found truth.”** And she responded, **“Yeah, you know, we believe that there is truth to what Jesus said.”** The dorm leader commented, **“That's really sad, that 18-year-olds claim to know truth.”** It's fine to pursue truth, you see, as long as you don't find it.

While the Sanhedrin didn't buy Peter's argument, they were impressed with his presentation. According to v. 13, **“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.”** In other words, they saw that these guys had not been to college. They had not received rabbinic or priestly training. They were mere commoners, who were thought to be incapable of sustained theological argument. The only explanation was that they had been with Jesus.

But being with Jesus provides a better education in truth than attending Yale or Harvard or any other university. Bible study and personal devotions and Christian fellowship make a positive difference. Unfortunately objective evidence and even miracles do not necessarily lead educated people to the truth. According to v. 14 these religious leaders did not have anything to say. So they sent Peter and John out so that they could decide what to do. They could not deny the miracle, because there were too many witnesses. So they decided simply to tell Peter and John to stop speaking about Jesus. The most effective thing, of course, to put this Jesus sect to rest was to bring out the body of the leader of the movement. But that was not possible. There was no body to be found.

There was another reason for the Sanhedrin's action, which is not explicitly stated here. It seems that Jewish law required that in cases involving a crime in which the death penalty is not involved people untrained in Jewish law must first be verbally warned of their wrongdoing and its consequences before they can be punished.

So now Peter and John get the warning. But in vv. 19 & 20 they respond, **“Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”** Later on when Peter writes his first epistle, he makes it clear that Christians have a responsibility to obey the governing authorities. But by his example here we see clearly that when the government tells us to do something that is a violation of a direct command from God, we need to disobey. We must go with the higher authority. This Book of Acts is centered upon the command of Jesus to his followers to be witnesses for Him wherever they go.

Former missionary to China David Adeney writes about a story he learned from a visit to China in the 1980s. He says, **“Four years ago, a young school teacher came to know Christ. After two years of Christian life, he was called by a local official from the Education Department, who asked him, ‘Are you a preacher? Are you a Bible school graduate?’ The teacher answered, “no” to both questions and the official said, ‘Then why are you preaching? What is your main work?’**

**“The Christian replied, ‘Teaching mathematics.’ The director of the Bureau of Education then said to him, ‘If you are a teacher, you should not be preaching the gospel. .... I give you three days in which you are to think through this matter and tell me if you are prepared to give up your preaching. Either you must give up your preaching or lose your position as a teacher.’**

**“The Christian teacher replied, ‘I don’t need three days. I have a very clear mind. I know and understand the actual situation. can tell you now that I want to preach. I am also happy to continue my teaching. If I don’t teach, it is not that I want to give it up my self. It will be you who force me to give up my teaching. I preach only in my free time.’ As a result, this teacher was discharged. Now he is shepherding about 30 groups in the countryside.”** Clearly this Christian understood the principle of higher loyalties that Peter expressed in our passage.

So the Sanhedrin was in a bit of a fix. If they tried to do anything right now to stifle Peter and John, they would lose whatever popularity they might have with the people of Jerusalem. Yet they felt a need to quash this Jesus movement. They decided simply to warn them to stop preaching about Jesus.

The preaching of the gospel produces a positive impact on some. It produces a negative reaction from others. In the twentieth century we saw in Communist countries and in Nazi Germany that when absolute truth which appeals for ultimate loyalties is proclaimed apart from the approval of the state, it is regarded as a threat, and persecution occurs. In the West where cultural leaders deny that there are any absolutes, especially moral and philosophical absolutes, persecution takes a more

subtle form. We may be criticized for our narrow-mindedness. Our defense of traditional marriage and our opposition to abortion will be criticized. We may get pressure at work to go along with questionable ethics. We may be socially ostracized. We may have family difficulties that relate to our acceptance of the gospel. Subtle though it may be, the Bible says we will get some negative response to proclamation of spiritual truth. Paul (PROJECTOR ON--- 2 TIMOTHY 3:12) writes in 2 Timothy #3 v. 12, **“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...”**

But if we look at the experience of the early church, at the history of the church as a whole, and at the persecution that Christians have in some parts of the world today, we ought to see that the negative responses we get in our society are pretty minor. In this climate of relative freedom we ought to take maximum advantage of the opportunity to spread the truth about Christ.

III.

In vv. 23-31 then we come to the subject of THE PROPER RESPONSE TO PERSECUTION. (III. THE PROPER RESPONSE...) When Peter and John were released, they went to their fellow Christians and reported what happened. The first thing that we need when we face a trial of any sort is fellowship. We need the support of fellow Christians. Verse 23 suggests that this is what the apostles got from their friends now.

The second thing that they did was pray. Notice that their prayer first focuses on the sovereign nature of God. When we face trials and persecution, we need to remember ourselves that God is sovereign, and we need to pray accordingly.

Then according to vv. 25-27 they quoted Psalm 2 in their prayer. Just before the time of Jesus some Jewish groups had come to interpret this psalm as having application to the coming Messiah. The disciples also saw messianic significance to it. Here they compare the Gentiles mentioned in the psalm to the Romans, the peoples to the Jews, the kings to Herod Antipas, and the rulers to Pontius Pilate.

In v. 28 whoever is taking the lead in praying this prayer in behalf of the gathered Christians again acknowledges the sovereignty of God. The prayer goes further by ascribing Jesus' death, and, by implication, their initial opposition from the Sanhedrin, to the predetermined plan of God.

Finally we get to their request. For what do they ask? Lord, get us out of this situation? Lord, get rid of our persecutors? Lord, help us to be more tactful so that people won't be offended? Lord, show us your will--- with the opposition we are getting, we must be missing your plan for our lives? Nope. God had revealed His will to them. They were to be witnesses--- first of all right there in Jerusalem.

According to vv. 29 & 30 they prayed, **“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through**



**the name of your holy servant Jesus.”** They prayed for boldness and further evidence of God’s power. The proper response to persecution is to seek fellowship and to pray, especially to pray for boldness.

We Christians have what the world needs. The greatest problems in our society are not fundamentally economic or political or social. They are moral and spiritual. The real answers lie in the gospel of Jesus Christ. They involve the truth about sin, about a Savior, about salvation, and about spiritual change. We need to have confidence and boldness in sharing these answers with a messed up world.

As we present this message of absolute truth, we will encounter opposition. But historically the greater the opposition the church has faced, the faster it has grown. This has been called the law of spiritual thermodynamics--- the greater the heat, the greater the expansion. From the perspective of church history the amount of persecution that we will receive in this country at present is not that great. When we do encounter some flack, we need to cultivate the attitude that Thomas a Kempis had in the Middle Ages. He wrote in *The Imitation of Christ*, **“It is good that we at times endure opposition, and that we are evilly and untruly judged, when our actions and intentions are good. Often such experiences promote humility, and protect us from vainglory. For then we seek God’s witness in the heart.”**

There are only two things in this world that will last for eternity. One is the Word of God and the other is people. If we will choose to invest our lives in bringing God’s Word to people, we will encounter some opposition. But we will have all eternity to recognize that we made the best possible investment.