

LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS ABOUT CIVIL GOVERNMENT (#1):
“CLASHES WITH THE APOSTLES”

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The covid pandemic has been the scene of conflict this past year between civil government and churches. Both sides of this conflict have sought to determine the appropriate boundaries for state rules which relate to public health and religious freedom. We have noted these conflicts between church and civil government, and I have sought to suggest some Biblical guidelines in determining the appropriate boundaries.

There is a much longer and broader conflict which has gone on in our country involving the intersection of church and state. That scene of conflict involves public education. In recent decades school systems have too often tried to stifle Christian students in their desire to pray and speak up about their faith.

Several years ago columnist Cal Thomas described three incidents which illustrate this problem: **“In Millcreek, PA, Ashley Pollack, a fourth-grader, gave two of her classmates lunch boxes she had purchased with her own money. Attached to each was a note saying ‘God Loves You. In Christ, Ashley Pollack.’ Ashley’s teacher saw the note and told her she must not write or even speak about religion in school.**

“In St. Louis (a city that no doubt is suspect because it was named after a saint), the principal of Waring School placed one of his students in detention for a week for bowing his head over lunch. Three times Raymond Raines attempted to say a private and voluntary prayer over his lunch in the cafeteria. Each time, according to attorneys representing him in a suit against the school, Raines was removed from his seat, in full view of other students, and sent to the principal’s office, where he was told he must stop praying over his lunch.

“In Chesapeake, VA, school officials refused to allow a student at a recent pageant to read a poem that mentioned Jesus. In order to keep the multiculturalists happy, eleven-year-old Andrew Hannas threw in some stuff about the necessity of instilling values in children to protect them from drugs and violence. But it wasn’t enough. That name apparently is too powerful--- the one that so frightened King Herod 2,000 years ago.” (*Connecticut Post*, 12/94)

Our study has moved from the Old Testament to the New Testament in an effort to determine the proper role of civil government. We have looked at Jesus’ interaction with government in His day. He asserted that even in a society with pagan rulers, government has a legitimate sphere of operation. Last week we looked at Philippians #3 where we saw that the Apostle Paul tells Christians that as citizens of a heavenly

kingdom our first allegiance must always be to that divine ruler. Then we saw from Romans #13 that our default position toward civil government should be obedience. That should be our normal attitude toward government. Today we will look at the Book of Acts to see what the early Christians have to teach us about when Jesus' followers should disobey the orders of political rulers.

I.

First, we will notice that CLASH WITH GOVERNMENT COMES FROM DOING GOOD WORKS. (PROJECTOR ON---- I. CLASH WITH GOVERNMENT COMES ...) This is not always the case. Perhaps it is not usually the case. But occasionally, as here, the good deeds of Christians produce a negative reaction from government.

A.

In Acts #3 we find that PETER AND JOHN PERFORM A MIRACLE. (I. CLASH WITH... A. PETER AND JOHN PERFORM A MIRACLE.) So we are going to look at Acts #3 in the New Testament (p. 911). According to vv. 1 & 2, **“Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple.”**

(TEMPLE 2) This incident happens soon after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The first Christians, who are all Jewish, are still worshipping at the temple. The apostles Peter and John are going into the inner courtyard at 3 PM for the evening sacrifice and time of prayers.

They encounter a man lame since birth at the gate leading to this inner courtyard. (BEAUTIFUL GATE) Jews were taught that it was a good thing to give alms to the poor and the disabled. The rabbis taught that such good deeds earned favor with God.

Verses 3-7 describe what happened next (PROJECTOR OFF): **“Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked to receive alms. And Peter directed his gaze at him, as did John, and said, ‘Look at us.’ And he fixed his attention on them, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, ‘I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!’ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up, and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong.”**

Obviously Peter and John did not know how to conduct a proper healing service. They didn't take up an offering. They did not explain a formula for healing that could have led to a book deal, or a CD series, or a speaking tour. They did not explain the importance of faith in the recipient of healing, which could have given the apostles an out if the healing did not take place. Then also they did not try to slay the poor man in the Spirit to knock him down to the ground. Instead, Peter just grabbed him by the hand and lifted him up from the ground. The guy was healed before he had a clue about what was happening to him. His legs and ankles were instantly strengthened.

Verse 8: **“And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.”** This guy had never walked in his life. Walking is a learned activity. So this is a double miracle, in the sense that he not only has strengthened legs, but also he has instant ability to use his legs and feet and master the ability to walk and jump.

There was no record in Jewish history of a man who was born lame who was healed of this disability. This was the kind of miracle which was associated with the coming of Israel's Messiah. In Isaiah #35 vv. 4-6 (ISAIAH 35:4-6) the prophet declared, **“Behold, your God will come with vengeance... Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer...”** Jesus was physically absent. But His work was now being continued through His apostles with the aid of the Holy Spirit.

Notice vv. 9 & 10: **“And all the people saw him walking and praising God, and recognized him as the one who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, asking for alms. And they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.”** This was going to be a tough one for the religious leaders to try to explain away.

Verse 11: **“While he clung to Peter and John, all the people, utterly astounded, ran together to them in the portico called Solomon's.”** (SOLOMON'S PORTICO) This was an enclosed area in the eastern wall of the outer temple courtyard. Several references are made in the Book of Acts to the meeting of the early Christians in this place.

So in the remainder of #3 Peter preaches a sermon to this crowd of Jews that want an explanation for this miracle. Peter reaches back into the Hebrew Bible to describe passages which speak about the coming Messiah. He mentions how Moses spoke of a unique prophet who would come after him. He refers to the promise of God made to Abraham about a descendant who would be a blessing to all of the nations of the world. He describes Jesus as being the fulfillment of these promises.

B.

In #4 the apostles get a strong, negative reaction to their preaching. In the midst of this conflict with the governing authorities PETER AND JOHN ESTABLISH A BOUNDARY. (I. A. B. PETER AND JOHN ESTABLISH A BOUNDARY.) Verses 1-4 describe the reaction of the religious leaders to this situation: **“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. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.”**

There were two main religious groups among the Jewish leaders--- the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Most of the rabbis were Pharisees, and most of the priests were

Sadducees. The priests controlled the temple compound. The captain of the temple guard was second only to the chief priest in authority.

The Romans let local councils have most of the governing authority over their respective towns. The council governing Jerusalem was called the Sanhedrin. Because it had authority over Jerusalem, it had great influence beyond the city. The Sadducees and priests comprised the majority of the 71 member Sanhedrin. The Sadducees were not very popular because they were known for controlling the sale of animal sacrifices in the temple and charging high prices. The rabbis and Pharisees had more popular influence.

The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection from the dead. They had a leading role in the execution of Jesus. So they were ticked when they heard that these Christians were preaching about Jesus and claiming that He had risen from the dead. The apostles were doing this preaching in their temple, and a lot of people in their congregation were believing them. So into the slammer Peter and John went. The Sanhedrin was not supposed to hold meetings at night. So a hearing had to wait until the next day.

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.”** In 30 AD (409 SOUTH TEMPLE WALL) the Sanhedrin began having its meetings in the colonaded area in the south wall of the temple compound. Annas was the high priest from 6-15 AD. For much of the next fifty years other relatives served in that capacity, including Caiaphas, who was his son-in-law and the official high priest at this time. (428 SANHEDRIN)

Verses 7-12: **“And when they had set them in the midst, they inquired, ‘By what power or by what name did you do this?’ Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers of the people and elders, if we are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man, by what means this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by him this man is standing before you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. 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.’”** This charge that the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin killed Jesus and that He rose from the dead and that there is salvation in no one else is not going to be received well by this group. Such absolute claims are not received well today.

Verse 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.”** Superficially this does not appear to be a fair fight. This is fishermen going against the professors at Harvard. But Peter and John have the truth and the Holy Spirit on their side.

The story continues in vv. 14-17: **“But seeing the man who was healed standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. But when they had commanded them to leave the council, they conferred with one another, saying, ‘What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is evident to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.’”** It is tough to deny that a miracle has taken place. The easiest refutation would be to produce the body of Jesus. But the body of Jesus is not to be found. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verses 19 & 20: **“But Peter and John answered them, ‘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.’”** The Sanhedrin lets Peter and John off with a warning. But here is the boundary line. When government says, “Stop talking about Jesus,” then we ought to disobey. Peter and John were straightforward about their position. They did not deny the authority of civil rulers. They did not proceed to organize a rebellion. They just continued with their work of evangelism.

David Adeney was a missionary in China for many years. When he returned to China for a visit in the 1980s, he heard this story which he later wrote described: **“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. I 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 myself. 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 thirty groups in the countryside.”

It was a good deed, a miraculous deed, which brought this confrontation with the governing authorities in Jerusalem. It still happens today. Compassion International was involved in providing child sponsorships to poor children in India for almost fifty years. Most recently they had 147,000 children whom they were helping. But in 2017 the Indian government kicked them out, along with a number of other charitable organizations. The reason is that the governing party is strongly Hindu, and they don’t

want any outside groups influencing Indians toward Christianity. Clash with government sometimes comes from doing good works.

II.

In Acts #5 we find that FOLLOWING GOD'S BOUNDARY WITH GOVERNMENT MAY INVOLVE A COST. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. FOLLOWING GOD'S BOUNDARY...) We are skipping over the last part of #4 and the first part of #5. Beginning in v. 12 we read, **“Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.”**

Time goes by. The Christians are still meeting in the temple. (SOLOMON'S PORTICO) They are hanging out in Solomon's Portico. The church is growing. Miraculous powers are being displayed by Jesus' apostles. All of the sick and possessed people who come to them are being healed.

According to vv. 17 & 18, **“But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison.”** Doing God's work provides no guarantee of protection from trouble. The Sadducees understandably are upset about this preaching about Jesus, whom they had condemned, and who experienced a resurrection from the dead, which they thought to be impossible. More than that, they are jealous about the popular following which these Jesus people are acquiring. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Verses 19 & 20: **“But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, ‘Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.’”** Is it OK to preach the gospel when civil government says “no?” Here an angel from God gives a direct command to the apostles to go back into the temple and preach. The Lord could have used other means to release these prisoners. But He chose to use an angel. This shows that He has a sense of humor. For the Sadducees did not believe in angels.

Verses 21-25: **“And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach. Now when the high priest came, and those who were with him, they called together the council, all the senate of the people of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the officers came, they did not find them in the prison, so they returned and reported, ‘We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them we found no one inside.’ Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them, wondering what this would**

come to. And someone came and told them, ‘Look! The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people.’”

The Sadducees and their friends send for prisoners who were not supposed to be preaching, but were, who were supposed to be in prison, but were not, who were freed by an angel, who was not supposed to exist, but did. These religious leaders have a homeland defense problem. They had sent guards to watch a tomb, which became empty because of a resurrection which could not happen, and because of the intervention of angels, who were not supposed to exist. The Sadducees were not interested in the truth. They were more concerned about protecting their position and their power.

The story continues in vv. 26-28: **“Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but not by force, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, saying, ‘We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us.’”** The preaching of the apostles has obviously proved to be effective.

The high priest makes two charges against the apostles: First, he says that they have disobeyed their orders, which is true. Second, they say that the apostles have accused the Sanhedrin of killing Jesus, which is also true. Back in Matthew #27 we are told that the religious leaders stirred up the crowd to demand of Pontius Pilate that Jesus be crucified. (MATTHEW 27:25) According to v. 25, **“And all the people answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’”**

In v. 29 of our text we read, **“But Peter and the apostles answered, ‘We must obey God rather than men.’”** (PROJECTOR OFF) The apostles are addressing these words to supposed men of God. Here they are making a somewhat broader statement about the boundary that should be established when the state seeks to restrict the church. In #4 they said that they have to disobey when the government says that Christians cannot evangelize. Here they are saying that disobedience to government is appropriate whenever governing officials tell the people of God to do something that is contrary to God's Word.

Peter continues in vv. 30-32: **“The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”** Notice the direct charge that is being made against the council. “You killed the Messiah.”

Verses 33 & 34: **“When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death. But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put**

outside for a little while.” Gamaliel was a famous rabbi, which means that he was a Pharisee. We find out later that he was also the mentor of the Apostle Paul before Paul became a Christian. The ancient Jewish religious book the Talmud said about Gamaliel: **“...since Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, there has been no more reverence for the law, and purity and abstinence died out at the same time.”** (Sota ix.15) “Rabban” is Aramaic for “our teacher.” Gamaliel had a great reputation among the rabbis and Pharisees.

Verses 35-37: **“Then he [Gamaliel] addressed the Sanhedrin: ‘Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered.’”** We don’t know anything about Theudas, but the Jewish historian Josephus says that Judas led an uprising against the Romans in 6 AD.

Gamaliel continues in vv. 38 & 39, **“Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.”** This sounds like pretty good advice, although Gamaliel should have recognized the evidence that Jesus was truly the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament. Presumably he went along with the Sanhedrin’s decision to have Jesus crucified.

Verse 40: **“His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.”** In my superficial reading of this verse I used to pass over it fairly quickly and just think that the apostles got off pretty easy. But consider what this flogging meant. The typical Jewish flogging meant that a man was stripped of his shirt and tied to a pole. Then he received 39 lashes from a whip. When you ponder that for a moment, it sounds like something that was pretty painful and probably left permanent scars and perhaps other lasting damage.

Finally we come to vv. 41 & 42: **“The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.”**

I find here three additional refinements of the basic boundary which was established in #4. First, the angel of the Lord specifically says that the apostles should disobey civil authorities whenever they tell Christians to do something contrary to the Word of God. Second, there is no guarantee that the followers of Jesus will not suffer as a result of obeying God and disobeying civil government. The apostles were the good guys. But they got a severe whipping. Third, the apostles were open and public about the

boundary which they were drawing against the interference of the governing authorities about their responsibility to preach the gospel.

According to Carl Moeller, the president of Open Doors, USA, seventy percent of the world's seven billion people live in countries with little or no freedom of religion. (5/3/2012 Washington DC press conference) The way that oppressive governments threaten Christians varies. In Communist countries the persecution is often direct. Ivan Moiseyev was a young soldier in Russia who was required to take the oath required of military recruits, swearing loyalty to the motherland and the goals of the Communist party. Every young man in the Soviet Union was expected to take it when he was drafted for two years of compulsory military service at the age of eighteen. Because of his Christian faith, Ivan felt that he could not pledge allegiance to the goals of Communism. He was tortured and killed. But he became a hero to other Christian young men. Hundreds of others refused to take the oath. Some succeeded in resisting, some were killed.

Hong Kong has lost its independent status, and churches and Christians there are threatened with loss of their religious freedom. In at least eight Muslim countries, including Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, apostasy, leaving the Muslim faith, is a capital offense. In the Maldives all citizens are required to be Muslims, and those who convert lose their citizenship. At least it does not involve losing their lives. In Pakistan a number of Christians have been arrested and charged with blasphemy. Most of these cases seem to involve concocted stories. And so it goes around the world. We are still blessed with great freedom in our country. Religious freedom is a constitutional right. But there are threats to that freedom on the horizon. Let's pray that we are able to keep that freedom and that we are bold to spread the gospel in the meantime.