

The Early Church Pattern for Evangelism, Part 2

Scripture: Acts 5:17–32

Code: 1718

INTRODUCTION

Acts 5:12-42 discusses the explosive evangelism of the early church. While it does not exhaust the subject, it does present five progressive keys to effective evangelism. Evangelism is the responsibility of every Christian. Jesus said His mission was "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). He commissioned His followers to go "into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). Just before His ascension He said to His followers, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Believers are called to reach the world with the truth of Jesus Christ. Most Christians understand that and genuinely want to win people to Christ. Some believers want so badly to see their friends and loved ones saved, they witness to them about Christ. Others are willing to pray. Still others merely hope it happens. Regardless of its intensity, however, I believe every Christian has that desire.

REVIEW

Acts 5 unveils five keys to effective evangelism.

I. PURITY (vv. 12b-14)

"They were all with one accord in Solomon's porch. And of the rest dared no man join himself to them; but the people magnified them. And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women."

In the beginning of chapter 5 Ananias and Sapphira polluted the fellowship by lying to the Holy Spirit (5:1-2). But God purified the church by intervening supernaturally and taking their lives (vv. 3- 10). Because that sin had been rooted out, the church was in "one accord" (v. 12). Purity is where evangelism begins. The church that deals with sin is an effective church. Verse 13 says, "Of the rest dared no man join himself to them." That's how the church continued to stay pure. People were aware that the church confronted sin, so they knew not to join if they weren't willing to deal with their sin. Genuine believers were added to the church, attracted by its purity.

II. POWER (vv. 12a, 15-16)

"By the hands of the apostles were many signs and wonders wrought among the people. . .insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them. There came also a multitude out of the cities round about unto Jerusalem, bringing sick folks, and them who were vexed with unclean spirits; and they were healed every one."

A pure church has God's power, so its evangelism is effective. God gave the church in Jerusalem the power to work miracles to confirm their preaching. The people of Jerusalem were so convinced those believers had God's power that they put their sick on couches in the streets, hoping that Peter might pass and his shadow heal their diseases. Soon word spread, and people came from all the cities around Jerusalem to be healed--and they all were! The church's power drew people to it; the church's purity allowed them to have that power.

LESSON

III. PERSECUTION (vv. 17-28)

A. A Survey of Persecution

1. Its cause

Isaiah 14 tells us that Lucifer, an angel, wanted to be like God (vv. 12-14). According to Revelation 12 he led one-third of the angels in a rebellion against God (v. 4). He remains God's antagonist. He is called among other things Satan, the Devil, and the Adversary. He and his demons, the angels who rebelled with him, were cast out of heaven (vv. 8-9). After his fall Satan came to earth and tempted Eve (Gen. 3:1-5). She and Adam fell (v. 6), and we all fell with them (Rom. 5:12). So at the present time Satan controls this world. The Bible calls him "the prince [lit. "ruler"] of this world" (John 12:31) and "the prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2). God has temporarily allowed Satan that authority. To some degree every unbeliever is part of Satan's system, which in our society consists primarily of materialism, humanism, and sex. A system run by Satan would naturally be an enemy of God's truth. So Satan, his demons, and evil men continually wage war against God, His angels, and His people. Satan's objective is to salvage his authority and continue in his rebellion. He was defeated in heaven, but now the earth is his domain. He wants to keep as many men as possible in his system and on his side. So when a pure, powerful church wins people to Christ, snatching them out of Satan's control, he becomes irritated and starts persecuting the church.

2. Its certainty

Fortunately whatever Satan tries to do, God uses for His own glory. That's important to know because persecution is inevitable. Second Timothy 3:12 says, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (emphasis added). If you live a pure, godly life, you will run against the evil world system. Persecution of some form will result. You may be avoided or undermined; you may face open hostility or violence. Your integrity may be questioned. Or persecution may take the form of subtle insults. A "friend" may suggest that you not talk so much about your faith, commenting that you wouldn't want to be thought of as a religious freak or an obnoxious person. It is true that a Christian should never irritate intentionally or needlessly. But a godly life will always irritate the world

because unholy people don't like holy company. If you're not suffering persecution, you're not living godly. When a pure, powerful church moves out among the world, there will be a reaction--Satan always reacts to purity.

Peter knew about persecution. From the book of Acts we see that he faced it constantly. In 1 Peter 2:20 he says, "If, when ye do well and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God." First Peter 3:17 says, "It is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well-doing than for evil-doing." First Peter 4:14 says, "If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are you; for the Spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you." In verse 19 of chapter 4 he says, "Let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well-doing, as unto a faithful Creator." So three times Peter said it is God's will for believers to suffer. Scripture clearly teaches what is God's will for our lives. He wants us to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), Spirit-filled (Eph. 5:18), sanctified (1 Thess. 4:3), and suffering (1 Peter 4:19). However, our suffering shouldn't be self-inflicted. God doesn't want us to flagellate ourselves. The suffering Peter described is not like that of the man in the Philippines known for crucifying himself every year in an attempt to please God. It is persecution for righteousness' sake, delivered by an evil world offended by true righteousness.

3. Its consolation

One of the Beatitudes is, "Blessed [happy] are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [Happy] are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad; for great is your reward in heaven" (Matt. 5:10-12). In Romans 8:17 Paul says, "We suffer with him, that we may be also glorified with him." Christians who confront the world with holy, powerful lives, experiencing persecution as a result, will be greatly rewarded in heaven. Scars are the price every godly believer pays for loyalty to Jesus Christ. Second Timothy 3:13 adds that "evil men and seducers shall become worse and worse." Persecution will become more frequent as men become more antagonistic to the gospel.

B. The Situation in Jerusalem

Because so many people were becoming saved and getting healed (Acts 5:14-16), the believers undoubtedly knew that a second wave of persecution was fast approaching. They probably got excited, remembering the first wave of persecution, which brought about answered prayer, the salvation of many, unification of the church, and therefore glory to God (4:23-37).

1. The leaders' indignation (v. 17-18)

a) Its source (v. 17)

"The high priest rose up, and all they that were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees), and were filled with indignation."

When the religious leaders of Israel witnessed the miracles and preaching of the Jerusalem church, they got angry. The Greek word translated "indignation" (zalous) speaks of jealousy. They were angry because they were jealous--a typical response for a religious organization that is at odds with God toward the success of another.

The Sadducees: A Roman Puppet

The Sadducees were a small religious party of wealthy, influential Israelites. The designation "Sadducees" distinguished them from the Pharisees. While the Pharisees were the legalistic conservatives of the New Testament era, the Sadducees were the theological liberals. Politically they collaborated with Rome, serving as her puppet to insure peace in Israel. They were Israel's ruling party.

The religious leaders thought they had destroyed Christ's following when they executed Him, but they had only made it grow more quickly. Now thousands of people were claiming to be His followers, and undeniable miracles were occurring throughout the city of Jerusalem. The religious leaders were understandably shaken. Since the Jewish people hated Roman domination and therefore looked for opportunities to incite unrest, the situation in Palestine was volatile. The Sadducees knew that an insurrection would threaten their political clout. Earlier they had warned the disciples against speaking out or teaching in the name of Jesus (4:18). But Peter and John had refused to obey them, saying, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye" (v. 19). So the religious leaders were filled with a jealous rage.

b
) Its expression (v. 18)

They "laid their hands on the apostles, and put them in the common prison."

Israel's leaders seized them and threw them in jail. How foolish to think that bars could restrict the power of God! They put them in a public ward where all prisoners were put.

2. God's intervention (vv. 19-21a)

a) Illustrated

In Acts 16:12 Paul and Silas arrive in Philippi and begin a fruitful ministry there. A certain girl, who was possessed by a demon, was making her masters wealthy by serving as a medium (v. 16). After she had followed Paul for many days, he said to the demon that possessed her, "I command thee, in the name of Jesus Christ, to come out of her" (v. 18). When the demon left her, her powers did also. The girl's masters were enraged that Paul had destroyed their lucrative business. So they arrested Paul and Silas and accused them of unlawful teaching (vv. 19-22).

Continuing the narrative, Luke says that when the magistrates "had laid many stripes upon them, they cast them into prison, charging the jailer to keep them safely; who, having received such a charge, thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks. And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God; and the prisoners heard them. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed. And the keeper of the prison, awaking out of his sleep and seeing the prison doors open, drew out his sword and would have killed himself, supposing that the prisoners had been fled. But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm; for we are all here. Then he called for a light, and sprang in, and came trembling, and fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out, and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (vv. 23-30).

The men who imprisoned them thought they had stopped their ministry. Instead the jailer and his

entire family was saved. God always overrules Satan's attempts to thwart His work and uses what Satan meant for evil to accomplish His purposes (cf., Gen. 50:20).

b

) Explained (1) He delivered the disciples (v. 19)

"But an angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth."

God sent an angel to free the disciples. It is significant that God didn't use an earthquake, as He did in Acts 16, but an angel instead. Two theological teachings distinguished the Sadducees: they didn't believe in a resurrection--the very thing the disciples were preaching throughout Jerusalem--and they denied the existence of angels (Acts 23:8). So God used a being they denied so the disciples could preach a doctrine they rejected!

(2) He directed the disciples (vv. 20-21a)

The angel said, "Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life. And when they heard that, they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught."

(a) Their mission

To the human mind the angel's command does not appear to be the intelligent choice. But God never says we have to understand what He commands--we are simply to obey. Perhaps if we were in that situation we would have preferred leaving Jerusalem for a few weeks until the tension died down. But God said, "Go, stand, and speak." He wants His people to have the courage to tell the truth. The Sadducees were desperately trying to submerge the disciples, but like a volleyball in a swimming pool, they kept surfacing. I remember one of our kid's birthday parties when the candles wouldn't blow out. The candles were made to go out and ignite again seconds later. The religious leaders kept trying to extinguish the disciples' influence, but doing so was futile. Satan's attempt to extinguish God's work added fuel to the fire.

(b) Their message

The phrase "all the words of this life" refers to the gospel. Paul told the Philippians to present "the word of life" (2:16). Jesus entered this world to give life to spiritually dead men. To be spiritually dead is to be unable to sense God, to be unaware of His presence. Regardless of the stimulus, men can't respond to God because they are dead. They grope to find reality when what they really need is life. And Jesus Christ is the only one who can give life. He said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). In his first epistle John said, "He that hath the Son hath life" (5:12). When a person is saved, he begins to sense God, to be alive to His world, and becomes a part of what He is and what He's doing. That is life. And Christianity is not just a part of life; it is life. I heard a man say that Christ was the center of his life. I know what he was trying to say, but that's not the best way to say it. Christ shouldn't be in the middle of everything; everything should be in Him. He is our life.

So the apostles' message was how to have life, and the key to life is the resurrection. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). In John 14:19 He tells His disciples, "Because I live, ye shall live also."

The disciples obeyed the angel's command and went into the temple the next morning and taught.

3. The high priest's investigation (vv. 21b-28)

a) The assembly of the leaders (v. 21b)

"The high priest came, and they that were with him, and called the council together, and all the senate of the children of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought."

You can almost picture the austerity of the occasion. Israel's leaders have gathered to deal with these religious upstarts. The "council" refers to the Sanhedrin, the ruling elders of Israel. The "senate" (Gk., gerousia) probably refers to the wise, older men who previously had held positions of leadership. It may have consisted primarily of Pharisees, who had previously been in power. The braintrust of Israel had met to judge those early Christians. They sent to the prison to have the disciples brought before them.

b

) The absence of the apostles (vv. 22-26) (1) Freed from prison (vv. 22-24)

"But when the officers came, and found them not in the prison, they returned, and told, saying, The prison truly found we shut with all safety, and the keeper standing outside before the doors; but when we had opened, we found no man within. Now when the high priest and the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these things, they were perplexed concerning them, how this would grow."

Witnessing another miracle didn't make the leaders any more ready to believe. Rather it hardened them in their state of unbelief. They were so indifferent that rather than believe the miracle, they dismissed it from their minds, as they had the hundreds of other miracles occurring throughout the city. Verse 24 says that when they heard the apostles were not in the prison, "they were perplexed." The Greek word translated "perplexed" (diapore[ma]o) implies they were at their wits' end. Consider how the religious leaders saw the events of the previous weeks: Israelites who called themselves Christians were disregarding their authority, preaching what they believed to be heresy. Every effort they made to stop the growth of Christianity had failed. Indeed more people were believing every day. They just learned that their last attempt--imprisoning the troublemakers-- failed. The apostles had disappeared from a locked and guarded cell. It's no surprise that these leaders were on the edge of panic. So they turned their energies toward recapturing the prisoners.

(2) Found in the temple (vv. 25-26)

"Then came one and told them, saying, Behold, the men whom ye put in prison are standing in the temple, and teaching the people. Then went the captain with the officers, and brought them without violence; for they feared the people, lest they should have been stoned."

They found the disciples in the Temple teaching the people. Rather than hiding in the hills, they were doing what they had been told not to do--and people were listening and believing in Christ. Verse 26 says the captain and his officers "brought them without violence." Apparently cooler heads prevailed among the soldiers for the moment, but violence was in them. They restrained it because "they feared the people, lest they should have been stoned" (v. 26). The disciples were content to go with them because they knew that regardless of where they were taken or what happened, God was in charge.

How to React to Persecution from the Government

In Acts 5:26 the disciples respond commendably to persecution--with non-resistance. Later in the book of Acts Paul was on trial before Festus, the Roman governor (ch. 25). The Jews had accused him of "many and grievous complaints. . .which they could not prove" (v. 7). In verse 11 Paul says "If I . . . am a wrongdoer, and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die" (NASB). If obeying the Lord meant disobeying the government, Paul would do so, willingly accepting the consequences--even if it meant death! That's the right response to persecution. Christians are to obey the government, unless it contradicts a command of God. Then we must obey the Lord and accept the penalty for that decision, even if it be death. Paul was bold in the face of death because he knew that "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). Death is only a promotion. He continues in verses 22-23, "I am in a strait between two, having a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless, to abide in the flesh is more needful for you." Christian service gives meaning to our lives on earth.

Because of his appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:11), Paul was sent to Rome. During the journey, there was a shipwreck, but in answer to Paul's prayer no one drowned, giving him the opportunity to declare

God's power (27:21-44). Eventually he arrived in Rome (28:15-16), where "he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading [the Jewish leaders] concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening" (v. 23). Verses 30- 31 say, "Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house (a prisoner in his own house) . . . preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ." The fruit of his ministry is evident in the letter he wrote from Rome to the Philippians. He said, "All the saints greet you, chiefly they that are of Caesar's household (4:22). People were constantly being saved because Paul graciously accepted the consequences of choosing to obey the Lord. He displayed the right attitude when facing persecution. That's why when the end was near he was able to say, "I am now ready to be offered" (2 Tim. 4:6).

c) The accusations against the disciples (vv. 27-28)

(1) That they disobeyed the rulers (v. 28a)

"Did not we strictly command you that ye should not teach in this name?"

That's the first accusation. And it was true. But the disciples already told them they would disobey that command. After the religious leaders commanded them not "to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus," Peter said, "Whether it is right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (4:18-20).

(2) That they were incriminating the authorities (v. 28c)

You "intend to bring this man's blood upon us."

The high priest's second charge was that the disciples had accused Israel of Christ's death, which was an accurate charge. Peter made that indictment repeatedly. In Acts 2:23 he says, "Ye [men of Israel] have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain [Jesus]." In Acts 2:36 he says, "Let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." In Acts 3:15 Peter accuses the Israelites of killing the Prince of life. In Acts 4:10-11 he says, "Be it known unto you all [the Sanhedrin], and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified. . . ." The apostles pronounced them guilty of shedding Christ's blood. Perhaps the Israelites forgot what they had shouted a few weeks before in Matthew 27:25. They were so intent on crucifying Christ that when Pilate refused to take responsibility for His death, the people said, "His blood be on us, and on our children." Peter wasn't accusing them of something they didn't request.

(3) That they were spreading the gospel (v. 28b)

"Behold, ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine."

They had accomplished their mission--saturating Jerusalem with the gospel. What a commendation from the Jewish leaders! Notice the leaders didn't ask about the disciples' miraculous escape. They didn't want to hear about it. Perhaps they were too confused to hear about another miracle.

IV. PERSISTENCE (vv. 29-32)

A. In Obeying God (v. 29)

"Then Peter and the other apostles answered, and said, We ought to obey God rather than men."

The apostles never quit. Even though the high priest had just fired stinging accusations at them, they refused to apologize for the truth. They were tenacious. By saying "we ought to obey God rather than

men" Peter was implying the leaders were opposing God! That is boldness.

B. In Confronting Sin (v. 30)

"The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree."

A few moments before, the high priest rebuked Peter and the other disciples for saying Israel's leadership was guilty of Christ's death. Too often after one little skirmish we, as Christ's soldiers, ask for an honorable discharge. But Peter was persistent in his evangelism. He pressed on the sensitive spot, telling the Sanhedrin that they crucified their Messiah. The Greek word translated "slew" (diacheiriz[ma]o) is used only one other time in the New Testament. It means "to murder with one's own hands." Instead of recanting Peter became more aggressive. He could have said they crucified Christ, but he used the phrase "hanged on a tree." The Old Testament declared that anyone hanged on a tree was cursed (Deut. 21:22-23). Peter was pointing out that the leaders of Israel chose the most shameful, despicable death a man could die for the Son of God--the Messiah of Israel.

C. In Exalting Christ (v. 31)

"Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Savior, to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins."

"Right hand" speaks of power. By His power God snatched Christ out of the grave and exalted Him, making Him a prince and a savior. Israel's leaders thought He was insignificant. But God lifted Him up and made Him better than a prince. The Greek word translated "prince" (arch[ma]legos) speaks of a king or pioneer. Christ offered repentance and forgiveness. Those are inseparable terms because there's no forgiveness apart from repentance. Often people talk about salvation but leave out repentance. No one is ever saved until he turns from his sin. That doesn't mean he becomes sinless; it means he is sorry for his sin and willing to change. When someone comes to God with a repentant heart, God forgives him.

D. In Upholding Divine Revelation (v. 32)

"We are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Spirit, whom God hath given to them that obey him."

1. Summarized

The apostles gave witness to what they personally saw and knew, but they also were relating what the Spirit of God was saying through them. In John 14:26 Jesus says to His disciples, "The Comforter, who is the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatever I have said unto you." He also said, "When they deliver you up, be not anxious how or what ye shall speak; for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak" (Matt. 10:19). The apostles weren't sharing their own opinions but what the Holy Spirit was telling them. As long as they yielded to the Spirit, they were victorious.

CONCLUSION

The early church was powerful because it ministered in the energy of the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 6:10 says, "Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might." To reach this world for Jesus Christ we must depend on the Spirit of God so His power flows through us. We can do that only if we're pure.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What was Jesus' mission (Luke 19:10)? Why are believers here?
2. Why were only genuine believers added to the Jerusalem church?
3. Who is Lucifer? Why was he cast out of heaven?
4. Who presently controls the earth and its system? Support your answer with Scripture.
5. What does the evil world system primarily consist of in our society?
6. What does 2 Timothy 3:12 teach about persecution?
7. Explain the consolation of persecution.
8. Why were Israel's leaders angry at the disciples?
9. Who were the Sadducees?
10. Why is it significant that God used an angel to free the disciples?
11. Explain the meaning of the phrase "the words of this life".
12. Explain what the Bible means when it refers to men as spiritually dead.
13. How should a Christian react to persecution?
14. What accusations did the high priest make against the disciples (Acts 5:27-28)?
15. Why did Peter say Jesus was "hanged on a tree" (Acts 5:30)?
16. Whom did the apostles say empowered their witness (Acts 5:32)?

Pondering the Principles

1. Second Timothy 3:12 tells us that godly living always causes persecution. Perhaps you are suffering persecution now from a co- worker, family member, or friend. First consider if you are being persecuted because of your righteousness or some less noble reason (cf., 1 Peter 2:19-20; 4:14-16). Have you been proud and condescending toward that unbeliever? Have you been harsh and uncaring? Have you done something to him he sees as dishonest? If that individual or group is persecuting you for something other than righteousness, immediately seek them out and ask their forgiveness, and if necessary make restitution. Seek to build a bridge of friendship to that person or group. If instead you discover godliness is the sole reason you are being persecuted, read the book of 1 Peter, giving careful attention to how he says you should respond.

2. The early church was persistent in its evangelism. The believers didn't allow setbacks to extinguish their fervor. After the religious leaders had persecuted the apostles, Peter again told them the gospel of Christ (Acts 5:30-32). Have you given up on someone you want to be saved? Did you allow many months of seemingly unanswered prayer to discourage you? Did that person's negative response cause you not to talk about Christ with him anymore? Ask God to rekindle your desire to see others saved and to give you persistence not to quit. Make a list of lost friends and loved ones whom you used to pray for and witness to but whom you gave up on. Pray for them to be saved and for someone to share the gospel with them. Write or visit them and renew your efforts to reach them.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2026 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<https://www.gty.org/about#copyright>).