

## **The Early Church Pattern for Evangelism, Part 3**

Scripture: Acts 5:33–42

Code: 1719

### **INTRODUCTION**

Everyone has influence: either for good or bad, for life or death. Webster defines influence as "power exerted over the minds or behavior of others" (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary [Springfield, Mass. : G. & C. Merriam, 1981]). No one exists in isolation. Because we all affect those around us, we need to evaluate our influence.

The infant church had astonishing influence. Acts 2:41 says, "They that gladly received his word were baptized; and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls." Verse 43 says that "fear came upon every soul." Verse 47 says the church was "having favor with all the people." Acts 3:10 says that after the people saw the lame man healed, "they were filled with wonder and amazement." Verse 11 adds, "As the lame man who was healed held Peter and John, all the people ran together unto them in the porch that is called Solomon's, greatly wondering." Acts 4:4 says, "Many of them who heard the word believed." Acts 4:31-32 says, "When they had prayed, the place was shaken where they were assembled together; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness. And the multitude of those that believed were of one heart and of one soul." Verse 11 of chapter 5 says that after the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, "Great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things." Verses 13-14 note that "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."

The early church affected its world. Too much of our Christianity stays inside the walls of a building, and there's no influence. But the early church had influence. Their enemies described them as those who had "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6). As Christians we all want to have influence--to impact the world for Christ. Acts 5 assists us toward that goal by demonstrating five progressive keys to effective evangelism.

### **REVIEW**

**I. PURITY (vv. 12**b**-14)**

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

**III. PERSECUTION (vv. 17-28)**

**IV. PERSISTENCE (vv. 29-32)**

Proverbs 28:1 says, "The righteous are bold as a lion." Lions have no natural enemies; no animal attacks them, so they are bold. They are called the king of beasts because no animal can conquer them. Proverbs 28:1 says believers have the same boldness.

#### A. In Obeying God (v. 29)

#### B. In Confronting Sin (v. 30)

#### C. In Exalting Christ (v. 31)

#### D. In Upholding Divine Revelation (v. 32)

##### 1. Summarized

### LESSON

##### 2. Specified

##### a) As witnesses of Christ (v. 32a)

"We are his witnesses of these things."

A witness declares what he has experienced. In Acts 1:8 the disciples receive their commission from the Lord: "Ye shall receive power after the Holy Spirit is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me." They heartily accepted that commission. In Acts 2:32 Peter says, "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses." In 10:39 Peter tells Cornelius and those gathered with him, "We are witnesses of all things which [Jesus] did" (cf., 13:31). In verse 41 he describes himself and the other disciples as "witnesses chosen before by God." The apostles knew their task and were obedient to it. Resistance didn't deter them. They used it as an opportunity for more witnessing. Their clear, precise witness reinforced Israel's guilt. Second Corinthians 13:1 says, "In the mouth of two or three witnesses shall every word be established." Under Old Testament law Israel had to hear the truth from only two or three witnesses. They were responsible to act on that testimony. The Israelites had heard the gospel of Christ from thousands of witnesses. Thus, they were responsible. Addressing the Jewish community, the writer of Hebrews says, "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him" (2:3). The Jewish people had heard the truth about Christ from a multitude of witnesses, and it had been confirmed by signs and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Rejecting such overwhelming evidence invited God's judgment. Because the witness is clear, precise, and factual, men are held responsible.

b

) As messengers of the Holy Spirit (v. 32b) "So is also the Holy Spirit, whom God hath given to them that obey him."

The disciples were not only witnesses but also messengers, speaking what the Spirit wanted to disclose. When Peter was "filled with the Holy Spirit," he preached (Acts 4:8). Acts 4:31 says, "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness." The Spirit of God gave the apostles the words to say. You may think, If the Holy Spirit gave me the words to say, I

could witness too. You have to read and learn them, but you do have the words of the Holy Spirit--the Bible. Paul told Timothy, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15, NASB).

## V. PRODUCTIVITY (vv. 33-42)

A church that is pure, powerful, persecuted, and persistent will produce results.

### A. The Conviction of the Holy Spirit (v. 33a)

"When they heard that, they were cut to the heart."

#### 1. Illustrated

The persistence of the apostles was driving the Jewish leaders into a frenzy. They could not shut them up. The Sanhedrin rebuked them and commanded them to stop preaching. But the disciples refused to obey, vowing to continue being witnesses because God told them to do so. In fact, they kept preaching the very message that cut the religious leaders to the quick-- that Israel crucified her own Messiah. The Greek word translated "cut to the heart" (diapri[ma]o) refers to sawing something in half or being violently agitated. They were gripped both by panic and by the terrible conviction of crucifying their own Messiah. The Word of God always convicts men. Hebrews 4:12 says, "The word of God is living, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." It's a sword that rips men open with conviction.

The persistent preaching of those early Christians brought about such conviction. They were indicted for the heresy of preaching the resurrection. After their release they continued preaching it, defying the Sadducees' doctrine. They were jailed for preaching, but when an angel released them, they went back to the Temple and preached, defying the Sadducees' authority. They were indicted for accusing the leaders of executing the Messiah, but they reiterated that accusation before the Sanhedrin, defying the Sadducees' spirituality. They were winning converts all over Jerusalem, defying the Sadducees' domination. These religious upstarts had defied the ruling religious party in every possible way. So Israel's leaders were violently agitated.

#### 2. Illuminated

a

) The characteristics of conviction

The English word conviction speaks of proving someone guilty. The Greek word translated "to convict" (elegch[ma]o) occurs 17 times in the New Testament. It refers to a mental process whereby a person reaches different conclusions or views than he once held. Ultimately that change in thinking affects how he lives. It is essential to understand that true conviction works in the mind, not the emotions. Much of what we refer to as convicting preaching is purely emotional with little genuine, biblical conviction. Biblical conviction is not spiritual depression or merely feeling sorry that you sinned. True conviction is an awareness that before God you are judicially guilty. Peter's sermons weren't stories designed to manipulate the emotions of the Sanhedrin. He convicted them of rejecting and executing their Messiah and rebelling against the God of Israel. That's what they needed to

know. If conviction is real, it will reach the emotions, but that's not its aim. Preaching must have strong doctrinal content to convict men and women of their sin.

In John 16:7-8 Jesus says, "It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you. And when he is come, he will reprove [Gk., elegch[ma]o] the world." Conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit. He uses the facts of God's Word to produce a change in a man's mind. That change of mind penetrates the emotions and eventually results in a changed life.

b

) The goals of conviction

The Holy Spirit convicts men of three things: sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8).

(1) To convict us of sin

In John 16:9 Jesus says the Holy Spirit will convict the world "of sin, because they believe not on me." That verse doesn't say the Spirit would convict the world of its sins. You can't convince a man of the seriousness of his sin by talking about his lying, cheating, or adultery. The Holy Spirit convicts a man of the sin of not believing in Jesus Christ. Man needs to be confronted with the fact that having rejected Jesus Christ, he is a rebel and has no reason to expect anything from God but punishment. That's why Peter told the Israelites that although they killed Christ, God raised him. He was showing that they were in opposition to God. Even though they claimed to be the people of God, they weren't even near Him, because they had not acknowledged Jesus as Messiah. True conviction makes a man conscious of the damning sin of rejecting Christ.

(2) To convict us of righteousness

In verse 10 Jesus says the Spirit also will convict "of righteousness, because I go to my Father, and ye see me no more." Only righteous people are allowed to enter the presence of the Father. However, the world has a totally confused sense of righteousness. For example, the Israelites killed Jesus in the name of righteousness although He was the only truly righteous one. They judged Him to be an unrighteous criminal, worthy of death. But God exalted Him, thereby declaring Christ's righteousness to the world, regardless of their verdict. Man needs to be convinced that Jesus is righteous, the proof of which is His resurrection and ascension. That's why Jesus said, "I go to my Father, and ye see me no more"--that He entered God's presence proves His righteousness.

(3) To convict us of judgment

In verse 11 Jesus says the Spirit will also convict "of judgment, because the prince of this world is judged." Man must understand that if he doesn't come to Christ and lives in constant rebellion against him, he will be judged. The guarantee that everyone who denies Christ will be judged is the judgment of Satan. Satan can be thought of as a kind of first-fruits of judgment. If someone as powerful as Satan was judged, how can any lesser rebel escape punishment? Satan's judgment came at the cross, even though he was thrown out of heaven long before. If God judged the second most powerful being in the universe, condemning him to dwell forever in the Lake of Fire, no other rebel can elude judgment.

Men need to be convicted of the serious sin of not believing in Christ. They need to realize they have a reverse system of righteousness and know that judgment is inevitable for anyone who rejects Christ. So we see that true conviction is based on theology, which is exactly what you find in Peter's messages.

## **B. The Varying Reactions of Men (vv. 33b-42)**

Whenever preaching produces conviction, men react primarily in one of three ways: violent hostility,

tolerant indecision, or saving acceptance.

## 1. Violent hostility (v. 33b)

"[They] took counsel to slay them."

The Sadducees saw only one thing to do: kill the disciples. How could they conclude that in the face of all the evidence? Verse 16 indicates that every sick and demon-possessed person that came into Jerusalem seeking healing was made well. Yet the Sadducees blinded themselves to reality because of their hard-hearted unbelief and decided to kill those who were doing so much good. That's a ridiculous but common reaction. Instead of yielding to truth, they would have compounded their sin by killing those who were sharing the good news of God's forgiveness.

In Acts 9 Paul went to Damascus to arrest Christians but was saved on the road outside the city. Acts 9:22-23 says he "increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ. And after many days were fulfilled, the Jews took council to kill him." The righteousness of those who know God offends wicked men. In Matthew 10:21-22 Jesus says, "The brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child; and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men, for my name's sake, but he that endureth to the end shall be saved."

In Matthew 23:34-38 Christ, speaking to the leaders of Israel, says, "Behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes; and some of them ye shall kill and crucify, and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city, that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zechariah, son of Barachiah, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation [This was fulfilled in [SC] A.D. 70 in the destruction of Jerusalem]. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them who are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate."

The religious leaders tried to kill Jesus throughout His public ministry. John 5:16, 7:32, 8:59, 10:31, and 11:57 underscore their desire to extinguish His ministry at all costs. Finally they nailed Him to a cross. Jesus told His disciples that they could expect the same treatment because they were His representatives (John 15:20-21). Some men are still violently opposed to Christianity, and that's as it should be. We ought to have influence. What we say and how we live should be so clear that the world has to notice, whether they like it or not. If our gospel message is convicting enough to anger men, it's also convicting enough to get men saved.

## 2. Tolerant indecision (vv. 34-40)

a

) Gamaliel's counsel (vv. 34-39)

(1) The man (v. 34)

"Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, held in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space."

(a) A member of the Pharisees

There were Pharisees within the Sanhedrin, the seventy member council that led Israel, but the Sadducees controlled it. The Sadducees could maintain that control because they were wealthy and

had allied themselves with Rome. They had two primary concerns: Greek customs and peaceful relations with the Romans. They were theological liberals, rejecting the concepts of resurrection and angelic beings.

The Pharisees were political traditionalists, purists regarding the law, and very nationalistic. They believed so strongly that Israel should exist apart from Rome's authority they were willing to participate in rebellion. They strongly denounced the Sadducees for collaborating with Rome for political and economic advantage. Much like the dichotomy between evangelicals and liberals today, those two groups were poles apart.

The Sadducees were influential with the Sanhedrin and with Rome but exercised little influence on the populace. The Pharisees swayed the people. Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, said that the Sadducees would often acquiesce to the demands of the Pharisees because of their popularity (Antiquities 18.1.4). That's what happening here in Acts 5. The people were open to Christianity because their friends and family members were being healed. The Pharisees knew if they were to persecute the Christians, they would lose favor with the people so they were determined not to do that. The Sadducees knew the people respected the Pharisees, so they frequently capitulated to them, wanting the people's favor. Rabbi Gamaliel, knowing all this, stood to speak. Since he was a Pharisee, he had the people on his side, so the Sadducees had to listen. He didn't want the Christians to die. His reason was probably political even though it is heavily disguised in theological garb.

(b) A teacher of the law

Verse 34 says he was "a teacher of the law." The Talmud, the rabbinical writings of Judaism, calls him "Rabban Gamaliel the Elder." Rabban was reserved for the most eminent teachers of Israel (cf., John 20:16). Tradition states he was the grandson of Hillel, one of Israel's greatest teachers. Speaking of his death in [SC] A.D. 52 the Talmud says, "When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, regard for the Torah [the study of the Law] ceased, and purity and piety died" (Sotah). The apostle Paul once studied under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), one of the greatest teachers of Judaism who ever lived. Because of Gamaliel's personal reputation and his being a Pharisee, his views would be heard.

(2) The message (vv. 35-39)

(a) His exhortation (v. 35)

"[He] said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men."

Gamaliel advised his colleagues to be cautious. The Pharisees believed strongly that God Himself would deal with problems and that He didn't need man's help. That was the theological supposition behind Gamaliel's advice.

(b) His illustrations (vv. 36-37)

"Before these days rose up Theudas, boasting himself to be somebody, to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves; who was slain, and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to nothing. After this man rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the registration, and drew away many people after him; he also perished, and all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed."

Gamaliel gave his associates two illustrations of how God deals with those who oppose Him. Scholars aren't certain who Theudas was. Josephus mentions a Theudas involved with rebellion, but his was different from what is described here and occurred many years later. Gamaliel's point is Theudas rose to popularity and faded into obscurity without Israel's leaders doing anything.

After the death of Herod the Great in 4 [SC] B.C., thousands of robbers marauded Palestine. Some of those robbers formed groups, crowned their leaders king, and started a revolution. Such was the case of Judas of Galilee. He led a rebellion in [SC] A.D. 6 during the census and taxation under Quirinius. Judas argued that because God is king, paying taxes to Rome was blaspheming God. The Roman government was intolerant of such rebellion and successfully ended Judas' revolt. Gamaliel

says that "all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed" (v. 37). That wasn't entirely accurate, however, because Judas' rebellion spawned a group that later became known as the zealots. The zealots were an extremely nationalistic group of Israelites whose influence was still felt in Israel during Gamaliel's lifetime. So Judas wasn't as ineffective as Gamaliel said. (In fact, Josephus implied that the spirit of rebellion against taxation fostered by Judas is what led to the downfall of Jerusalem in [SC] A.D. 70 [Antiquities 18.1.1, 6; 20.5.2].)

(c) His point (vv. 38-39)

"Now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone; for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nothing; but if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it, lest perhaps ye be found even to fight against God."

This is the conclusion he's making from those illustrations: whatever succeeds is of God; whatever fails is not, a fallacious principle in a fallen world. God allows evil to exist. Gamaliel's principle will come true only when Christ returns to establish His Kingdom on earth, thus reversing the curse. Gamaliel's principle can't be used to evaluate what's happening now. Many things God hates are successful. For example, the Sanhedrin was still an active religious force in Israel although it was instrumental in Christ's death. Today there are tremendously successful movements that God has nothing to do with. Gamaliel's idea was to wait and see. He witnessed the healings and miracles. He knew of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and His empty grave. What was he waiting to see? What more did he need to see?

The only way to judge something accurately is by comparing it with Scripture. If Gamaliel were a true teacher of Israel, he should have recommended that the council study the Old Testament text to see if this new teaching was biblical. But he was a pseudo-scholar. Jesus said, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken" (Luke 24:25)! A master of Scripture would have known that Jesus fulfilled every Messianic prophecy. Instead Gamaliel made a weak application of poor theology.

"If it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it" (v. 39) is his only valid conclusion. Many men have tried to overthrow that which is of God but instead have been crushed by it. In Matthew 12:30 Jesus says, "He that is not with me is against me." Men fight God. They oppose His gospel, His Word, His providence, and His Spirit's conviction.

## **Today Is the Day of Salvation**

Many people today hide the same way Gamaliel did--waiting to see. They aren't quite ready to follow Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul knew more than his teacher. He said, "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2, emphasis added). That is Paul's way of saying, "Don't wait and see." On the night of October 8, 1871 Dwight L. Moody was preaching in Chicago and told his audience to go home and think about what he had said. That was the night the Great Chicago Fire broke out. Half his congregation died. Moody never told anyone else to wait again.

b

) The Sanhedrin's consent (v. 40)

"To him they agreed; and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go."

After listening to Gamaliel, the council agreed with him and decided to follow his advice. But there was so much animosity in their hearts, they beat each of the apostles with 39 stripes (cf., Deut. 25:1-3; 2 Cor. 11:24). Early Jewish tradition tells us that the hands of the victim would be strapped to two posts, one on either side of him. His shirt would be removed. The man wielding the whip was required to swing as hard as he could. He used two wide, thick pieces of leather about four feet long. One-third of the stripes were given on the front of the victim and two-thirds on his back. Each of the apostles was beaten in that fashion.

### 3. Saving acceptance (vv. 41-42)

"They departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ."

The disciples rejoiced that they had been considered worthy to suffer for Christ, who had suffered for them. Like Paul, they bore in their bodies "the marks of the Lord Jesus" (Gal. 6:17) --blows had been meant for Him. When the world persecutes a believer, they're after Christ, so that believer is filling up in his body "the afflictions of Christ" (Col. 1:24). But the disciples didn't stop preaching Jesus Christ. And the results were amazing. Acts 6:1 says that "in those days . . . the number of the disciples was multiplied."

## CONCLUSION

We tire and quit. We become exhausted just putting on our armor. As veterans of a few skirmishes, we seek an honorable discharge--but the early church didn't. They kept at their task and turned their world upside down. The principles of effective evangelism are all here in Acts 5: purity, power, persecution, persistence, and productivity.

### Focusing on the Facts

1. What did the disciples' clear, factual witness do to Israel? Explain (Acts 5:33).
2. Explain how the Holy Spirit gives us His words today.
3. Define diapri[ma]o. Why were Israel's leaders in that condition?
4. What are the characteristics of conviction?
5. What does the Holy Spirit convict men of? Explain each (John 16:9).
6. True conviction makes a man conscious of the damning sin of \_\_\_\_\_ .

7. What is the ultimate proof of Christ's righteousness?
8. What is the guarantee that all who reject Christ will be judged?
9. Did Christ predict that the disciples would face violent hostility? Support your answer with Scripture.
10. Explain the differences between the Sadducees and the Pharisees.
11. Explain the power struggle between those two parties in Acts 5.
12. Describe Gamaliel.
13. What theological supposition was behind Gamaliel's advice?
14. Who were the zealots? How did they arise?
15. What principle did Gamaliel draw from his illustrations? Is it valid? Explain.
16. Describe the beating the apostles received.
17. Explain how Galatians 6:17 and Colossians 1:24 apply to suffering Christians.

### **Pondering the Principles**

1. Gamaliel was obviously knowledgeable about Scripture. But when he should have relied on it as the judge of truth, he arrived at his own conclusions, which proved to be fallacious. As a teacher of the law, he should have compared the apostles teaching to the Old Testament text, and then come to a conclusion. Have you allowed tradition or pet systems of interpreting the Bible to have precedence over clear biblical teaching? Do you automatically assume a teaching is wrong if it is contrary to what you've always been taught? Determine to let the Bible say what it says, and not read your own interpretations into the text. Ask God to teach you the truth of His Word by His Spirit.

2. If Christians are not aware of the different reactions men have to the gospel, they can easily become discouraged about witnessing for Christ. Review the ways the men in Acts 5 responded to the gospel (see pp. 5-11). Think of incidents where someone responded to your witness in each of those ways. To gain further insight into man's reaction to the gospel, read the parable of the soils in Luke 8:4-15. Notice that only one response out of four to Christ's ministry was saving acceptance. Our responsibility is to sow the seed, not to make it take root (cf., 1 Cor. 3:5-7). When you witness, be mentally prepared to see one of those reactions. Ask God for the courage to witness for Christ regardless of how people respond.

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