

**November 3, 2019**

**Acts 4:1-31**

**The Countercultural Gospel**

Intro: Revolutionary. Renegade. Subversive. Those are a few words that we use to describe people who go against the grain of the norm. Some people, by nature, are not conforming and like to rock the boat. Yet for almost all of church history, followers of Jesus Christ have had to live this way because they won't fit in a culture that is Christ-less. It's part of the DNA of the church going back to the beginning.

But let me note that this is different from the world's idea of being revolutionary or subversive. This is not just because Christians like to rock the boat. It's the gospel. It's the Word of God. It's the truth of Jesus Christ that calls us to countercultural living.

Main Point: The Gospel we believe calls us to live counter-culturally, and as we do, we will live out Christ's mission on earth.

There are at least 4 distinct countercultural aspects in this text.

**1. Salvation through Christ alone (1-12)**

Context: Peter is preaching his sermon in the temple (Acts 3)—a crowd had gathered and also a hostile group made up of Israel's religious priestly leaders and Sadducees. They were the upper crust of the Jewish religious and political life. They also formed the Jewish court called Sanhedrin.

There are two waves of persecution from Sadducees. Here and again in Ch. 5.

The Sadducees denied the resurrection and held a conviction that only priests should teach. So, two strikes against Peter and John, who they saw and they were unqualified (v13)

- Before we get to the trial, look at the contrast in vs 3 & 4. Persecution has begun—but look at the encouragement: The Word of God is not bound.

If you keep up with Christian news you will note the trend of increasing global persecution of Christians. I've heard it said that the twentieth century was the bloodiest as far as Christians martyrs go. But on the flip side, the Word of God has exploded in circulation.

It's estimated that there are around 5 billion Bibles in print in the world right now. It's by far the best-selling book of all time. All the Harry Potter books combined come in at 400 million. The Koran at 800 million. The 5 billion Bibles are just what is in print. It does not account for apps and digital access.

<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2015/07/21/thread-books-bcst-best-selling-books>

In 2000 years of church history, the gospel of the Word has not gone away. And it will not. Persecution usually just leads to more pervasive spread of the Word!

(2 Tim 2:8-9)

"<sup>8</sup> Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, <sup>9</sup> for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!"

Spend your life in the Word, spreading the Word, and trust that God will use it!

- This situation Peter and John face fulfills what Jesus had told them back in Lk 21:12-12

"<sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> *This will be your opportunity to bear witness.*"

Peter seizes his opportunity in Spirit-filled courage and points to Christ as the only hope.

- The way that Peter describes Christ is suffering yet victorious.
- In v11, Peter makes this point by drawing from Ps 118:22.
- The picture is a stone mason building a wall, and throwing a stone aside thinking there is no purpose. But another comes along, picks it up and sees the unrecognized potential.
- We can see the symbolism play out:
  - Israel's leaders are "builders": they rejected Christ.
  - Jesus holds the highest place: seated at God's right hand.

*In this quote, precious to the early church, we find gospel paradoxes. Jesus, once rejected, now glorified. He is infinitely humble, yet highly exalted. He is rejected, yet precious. He suffers the worst injustice but brings about God's perfect justice.*

The point is simply that Christ alone is the only way of salvation. This is countercultural in much of the world, and even our culture. Note the word "must"—this is what makes this countercultural.

This small Greek word (dei) is a favorite for Luke. It's called the "divine necessity" —used over 40 times when something has to happen because God has chosen it.

*\*\*God has chosen only one way for salvation—through Jesus Christ alone.*

We are living in a day of more radical autonomy. No one wants to be told what they must do. People want to be authentic, and that means self-rule.

Saying to someone: "you must have Jesus", doesn't always go over well.

But that *must* is a *must* if we are to be faithful to Christ's mission.

The lies of pluralism is that there are many paths to God.

The lies of postmodernism is that all truth is relative.

The lies of authenticity is that the self is king.

The truth of the Gospel (v12).

Friends, if you are here and have yet to come to Christ for salvation—it's necessary, it's a must.

## **2. Fearing God above all others (13-22)**

- First, let me draw your attention to v13.
- A few things stood out about the disciples. 1) They were uneducated "ordinary" — we would say layman or blue-collar. \*In the eyes of this crowd, not worthy to teach. 2) "And they recognized that they had been with Jesus".

*Being with Jesus goes a really, long way in mission.*

Now we can't physically spend time with the Lord Jesus like the apostles did. But we can still "be with Jesus" in his presence multiple ways: in prayer, his Word, his praise, *with his people*. Those are all the means of "being with Jesus".

Missional living is the overflow of being with Jesus. Outsiders should recognize we are the Jesus people.

There is also something going on here regarding the leadership:

God so often works in surprises, paradoxes, ironies.

—The true leaders, Peter and John: ordinary, unassuming, lacking credentials, but Christ-centered.

—The false leaders, the priests: have the titles, the pomp...but are Christ-less.

- Now a formal decision was made and handed down (17-18).
- In the strongest language possible, the Sanhedrin verdict is that one word: *silence*

The MO of the enemy has been the same for 2000 years. When Christians get too vocal about Jesus and his gospel, oppose it by creating laws that will *silence witness*. Some of you can get fired from your job if you say too much about your faith. Some of the countries that most need gospel witness and church planting take creative ways to gain access, because the government does not want Christians telling others about their faith.

- But the response is non-compliance. It's actually quite clever. They tell the court to be the judge, but remember whose verdicts actually matters.

"Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him?" (4:19 NIV)

In a man-centered culture, people's verdicts will rule our lives. But the gospel tells us to put our eyes in a different direction, be concerned with an eternally weighted verdict. Do you find yourself making decisions based on how you will look in the eyes of others? Which is right in God's eyes? That's the overriding question we need to ask.

### **3. Confidence in God's Sovereign Plans (23-28)**

- We can imagine how this final scene went down.
- Peter and John regroup with the rest of the disciples, and they ask, “How did it go?” Peter and John reply: “Well, pretty good, overall—I boldly preached the gospel at the temple, thousands are getting saved...oh, and we got thrown in jail.”

Now their immediate action is not like ours—we may call an attorney, do some google searches, but the example here is the church lifting their voices together and praying.

God’s Word shapes how we ought to respond.

- What also stands out about this prayer is how it begins — “Sovereign Lord who made the heavens”.
- The title “Sovereign Lord” refers to a ruler with *unchallengeable power* —the opposite of the Sanhedrin.
- The quotation from Ps 2 (v25-26) is also rich with Sovereignty.

Any ruler who tries to make an attack or gain independence from the Lord’s anointed is only attempting a vain thing, doomed for failure.

Also, truly grasping God’s sovereignty means that we see things like rejection as part of God’s purpose. So, if Christ is rejected under God’s sovereignty, we can make sense and not get discouraged if people rejected, or worse, persecute us for our faithfulness.

*Even if we stand alone, God has a purpose...just like Christ.*

When we pray, especially the things that are big, it’s best to fill our hearts and minds with thoughts on divine sovereignty. To pray well, we need a vision of God, not a God of our imagination, but a God who “made heaven, and earth, and everything and rules with unchallengeable power!

#### **4. Prayers for boldly speaking the Word (29-31)**

- Now, I’ve been taught that what we spend time praying about, actually reflects our *highest priorities*.
- Whatever we believe is important enough to bring to the most important person in the universe is a big deal.
- We can learn from the example here—it’s actually quite countercultural, especially in church culture.

- First, they acknowledge these threats are real (29).

Instead of praying for protection and further safety, what they pray for is boldness (v29; and v13 & 31). When our greatest concern is not personal safety but to proclaim Christ and advance his gospel, I'd say we are living counter-culturally.

I've traveled a half dozen times on mission trips around the world like many of you. Sometimes to places that have a higher risk of safety.

The majority of well meaning, godly people who pray for me will tell me: "I'll pray for your safety." The funny thing is, I was not even threatened like Peter and John. But our culture is obsessed with safety. So, we have seatbelts and insurance policies for everything.

Personal safety is important. God cares about sparrows; he cares about our lives. But the church, from the beginning, has put the main priority on boldly declaring the Word in the power of the Spirit.

*When our greatest concern is not personal safety but to proclaim Christ and advance his gospel, I'd say we are living counter-culturally.*

### Conclusion

We've seen some key ways that we are called to live counter-culturally. Proclaiming Jesus alone for salvation. Fearing God above all. Unshakable confidence in God's complete sovereignty and praying for boldness to speak God's Word.

Yet if that's too much to take in—there is one way to boil it all down and live counter-culturally: *Put Christ first, above all things.*

Living counter-culturally is when, like the example of Peter and John, *we live to put our name in the background, so the name of Jesus Christ will have preeminence.*

If you do that, you are doing well.