

The Irony of Church Growth

Acts 4:32-5:42

Studies in Acts #8

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How does Jesus build his church? We've seen so far that he builds his church by the outpouring of his Holy Spirit and *through* the means of the preaching of the Word. Note those prepositions *by* and *through*. Let me add another. With chapter 4 we've begun to see that this growth happens *in* the occasion of the external pressure of persecution. It's not quite the stuff of church growth gurus but it will have to do! I want you to turn with me to a few passages to see this:

(After Peter's Pentecost sermon) So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls...And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (2:41; 2:47)

(After Peter and John's preaching and arrest) But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand. (4:4)

(After Satan's infiltration of Ananias and Saphira) And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women. (5:14)

(After the tensions between widows) And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem. (6:7)

(After Paul began to preach in Jerusalem) And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. (9:31)

(After James' death and Peter's release from prison) But the word of God increased and multiplied. (12:24)

(When Timothy joined Paul and Silas) So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily. (16:5)

(When Paul preached and exorcised) So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. (19:20)

(At Paul's imprisonment in Rome) He...welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. (28:30-31)

And so we learn of the irony of church growth is that the more we are threatened the more we will teach; the more we are pressured the more we will be released into the world; the more we are persecuted the more we will proclaim Jesus!

1. ***Satan Has Multiple Schemes***
2. ***God Turns Evil for Good***
3. ***Learning How to Respond***

Satan Has Multiple Schemes

The first thing we learn here is that *Satan has multiple schemes*. We see here in story form what Paul speaks of in Ephesians 6 as “the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). Two such schemes are mentioned in this narrative. As I mentioned this morning, just like in sports we need to know our opponent.

The first scheme is *moral corruption in the church* (4:32–5:16). In contrast to the summary statement in 4:32–37 in which **the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul...had everything in common** so that **there was not a needy person among them** because **owners of lands or houses sold them** (4:32, 33, 34) we read about two hearts and souls—**Ananias with his wife Sapphira** who also **sold a piece of property** (5:1). Yet the contrast is found not in that every Christian sold everything they had and these two wouldn’t, but in the fact that they had made a public vow to God to support the church only to be corrupt internally and keeping **back for themselves some of the proceeds** (5:2). Note how Peter’s questions to them show us that this was their private property—**While it remained unsold, did it not remain your**

own?—and that they were free to use it as they desired—**And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?** (5:2) The issue is that they gave the outward appearance of selling and donating only to literally “steal” from the Lord, which this verb communicates.¹

But this was an opportunity for Satan to scheme: “**Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit...You have not lied to man but to God**” (5:3, 4).

While the church in 4:31 was filled with the Holy Spirit here Ananias is filled with Satan!

The second scheme is the *persecution of the church* (5:17–40). We read about **many signs and wonders...by the hands of the apostles** (5:12 cf. 5:15–16) in public places such as **Solomon’s Portico** (5:12). In response **the high priest...and...the party of the Sadducees** were **filled with jealousy** and **arrested the apostles** (5:16, 17, 18). After **an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out** (5:19) they continued preaching **in the temple** (5:20 cf. 5:21). This **greatly perplexed** the Israelite leaders (5:24). And after they had been brought back **before the council** (5:27) and Peter again preached Christ (5:29–32) the leaders **were enraged and wanted to kill them** (5:33). But after Gamaliel’s intercession (5:34–39) they merely **beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus** (5:40).

God Turns Evil for Good

¹ *Nosphizō* is only used elsewhere in the New Testament in Titus 2:10 where it speaks to believing slaves “not pilfering.” It is also used in the LXX of Achan who stole things devoted to the Lord (Josh. 7:1).

The second thing we learn here is that *God turns evil for good*. We see his presence here in the **great power of the apostles who were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (4:33)**, in the **great grace that was upon them all (4:33)**, and in the **many signs and wonders by the hands of the apostles (5:12)**.

The irony of the church's growth is that the more it was persecuted from outside and infiltrated from inside, the more it grew. As the growth summary in 5:14 says, **And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women**. We see it in the boldness of Peter and the apostles: **"We must obey God rather than men"** (5:29). We see that in the church actually **rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name (5:41)** and in their constant teaching: **And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus (5:42)**. As Tertullian said: "kill us, torture us, condemn us, grind us to dust...The more you mow us down, the more we grow, the seed is the blood of Christians."²

Learning How to Respond

What can we learn from *the church's response*? How should you and I respond to the pressures Satan brings to the church?

First, we need to remain committed to each other in love. Right after we read in chapter 4 of Peter and John's arrest we read that the church was **of one heart and soul**

² *Apology*, 50.

and **had everything in common** (4:32). Calvin said of this passage that “we must have hearts that are harder than iron if we are not moved by the reading of this narrative.”³

Second, all of us but especially our elders need to remain committed to church discipline. Of course what happened with Ananias and Sapphira (5:5, 10) was a case of immediate apostolic discipline that we cannot repeat. But the principle of disciplining the sinning member of the congregation applies. As Paul teaches, it literally puts a person outside the church in the realm of Satan so they will come to their senses, repent, and return (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:25–26). Do you believe church discipline is an evidence of Christ’s presence among us as a body of believers? It is. And if we don’t discipline according to Jesus himself in Revelation 2–3 he will remove his lampstand from among us. It’s that important!

Third, the more we are pressured not to speak about Jesus the more we need to boldly speak! The church prayed for continued boldness in 4:29 and then high priest of Israel **strictly charged** the apostles **not to teach in Jesus’** (5:28) but they did it anyway (5:42). Why? As Peter said, “**We must obey God rather than men**” (5:29). And because we have obeyed God he has given us his Holy Spirit, who witnesses to us of the truthfulness of Jesus (5:32; cf. John 15:26–27).

Fourth, we need to count it all joy when we suffer, because when we do, it shows us God’s grace to us that we are **counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name** (5:42; cf. Matt. 5, 1 Peter 4).

³ Calvin, *Acts*, 1:130.