

C. The Escalation of Jewish Opposition (5:12-42)

The Church's petition for boldness and success in its ministration of the gospel was met with the Lord's abundant provision. From the outset, He knew what they would only learn by experience: Opposition to the word of the gospel was to come from inside as well as outside the believing community. Jesus had warned His disciples that their witness of Him was going to meet with hostility and fierce resistance, first from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles (Matthew 10:16ff; cf. Luke 9:1ff, 10:1-16). The orientation of His warning led them to largely expect opposition from those outside the faith, and so they sought divine intervention for it. The disciples weren't so much expecting the gospel to be threatened from within, but God knew it was coming, and He understood that this threat was far more serious than the one they were concerned about.

- The hostility of the outside world posed no real threat to the Church and its witness; such opposition would only serve to strengthen the community and heighten its testimony. As the saints would learn in time, the blood of the martyrs is the seedbed of the Church. The more the world persecutes Christ's own, the more they recognize and draw strength from their authentic participation in Him (cf. John 15:18-25 with Acts 5:40-42).
- The true threat to the Church would come from within. While the believers were seeking divine help to withstand the enemy at the gates, the enemy within its own ranks was going largely unnoticed. But the great adversary masquerades as an angel of light, and it has always been his strategy to destroy the work of the gospel by subterfuge within the believing community. There had been false prophets in Israel, and there would be false apostles and teachers in Christ's Church, undermining Him and His gospel and leading His people astray by means of subtle deception (2 Corinthians 11:12-15; 2 Peter 2:1-3).

But God discerned what the early saints didn't, and He acted decisively to cut off the threat at the outset. God recognized that, left unchecked, corruption in the Church would devastate it from within and strip its witness of credibility and power. By taking the lives of Ananias and Sapphira, the Lord was opening the eyes of His people and showing them both the severity of the threat among them and the severe way they must deal with it.

1. Luke closed that context by emphasizing again that God's retribution struck fear in the hearts of the saints as well as those outside the Church who heard of it (5:11, cf. 5:5). It wasn't that the believing community became afraid of God, but that they were brought to a heightened sense of awe and reverence for Him. Beyond that, they realized just how seriously the sovereign Lord takes His Church and its role in the world; *He is jealous for His Church as His holy sanctuary and the fullness of His beloved Son, and the "living stones" that comprise it need to perceive and honor it in the same way He does.*

The subsequent passage indicates that the Ananias and Sapphira episode had just that effect upon the body of believers (5:12-16). This context reiterates the key themes of Luke's ongoing description of the Church (2:41ff, 4:32ff), showing that neither the opposition from the Jews nor corruption within the Church had managed to derail God's work among them or through them to the world. Quite the opposite, the threats they had already faced had served to strengthen the Church and enlarge its fruitful witness.

This is evident in the fact that Luke's description in this passage of the Church's life and witness shows a marked development from his prior ones.

- Peter had previously healed one man by the power of the Spirit, and the Church had prayed that the Spirit's supernatural attendance would continue (4:29-30). Now, in answer to that prayer, *multitudes* were being healed, and not just people with physical infirmity or disease, but those afflicted with unclean spirits (5:16).
- And as the healing reach of the apostles was expanding, so also were the numbers of witnesses to that work: Multitudes in Jerusalem and its environs were witnessing or hearing of these "signs and wonders," and the accompanying gospel proclamation was bringing many of them to faith in Christ (5:14). Some believed, but the Church's witness provoked the respect and esteem of all the people.
- In turn, those coming to faith were themselves expanding the Church's witness and work by bringing their own relatives and friends to the apostles to be healed (5:15). (At first glance it may be tempting to conclude that these believers wanted only to see their loved ones' physical health restored, but the fact that they bore this burden as Christians indicates that their ultimate goal was spiritual healing – the true restoration that is newness of life.)

This development serves at least three important purposes in Luke's narrative:

- 1) First, it highlights God's continued faithfulness to His Church and His own intention to build Himself an everlasting sanctuary composed of a numberless multitude. God had addressed – and would continue to deal with – all threats arising against His Church, not by vanquishing or merely neutralizing them, but by using them to further the Church's well-being and fruitfulness.
- 2) But secondly, it also suggests and anticipates another dimension of development, namely the intensification of persecution at the hands of Israel's rulers: The proclamation of Christ in the context of spiritual power had provoked the authorities' jealous opposition in the first place; the expansion of that witness could only reasonably be expected to intensify their antagonism and "push back." In fact, that's exactly what happened (5:12ff).
- 3) Finally, the expansion of gospel witness and "signs and wonders" resulted in a widening chasm among the Jewish populace. While many were coming to faith in Christ, others were coming under the conviction that they needed to keep themselves back from any public association with this emerging Christian community. Being aware of the ruling authorities' growing animosity, the people were becoming increasingly concerned about the personal consequences of any public alignment with those who professed Christ. Notably, this dissociation itself testified to the Church as Christ's "new creation": Unbelievers pulled back from it out of fear, not disdain. *The same authenticity that made people realize the cost of following Christ also caused them to hold His saints in high esteem* (5:13).

2. Notably, Luke’s description of the dynamic between the Church, the people of Israel, and its rulers has a direct counterpart in Jesus Himself. *What His witnesses were encountering was a divinely ordained recapitulation of His own experience.*
- a. Jesus’ ministry, too, was marked by miraculous works of the Spirit by which multitudes in Israel were healed of diseases and demonic affliction (cf. 5:16 with Luke 6:13-19; cf. also Matthew 4:23-24; Mark 1:30-34).
 - b. As well, Jesus’ miraculous works and proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom provoked hatred in Israel’s rulers and fueled their commitment to exterminate Him and eradicate His message, just as was now occurring with those acting in His name (Matthew 12:9-14, 21:12-17, 23-46, 26:1-5; cf. John 5:1-18, 8:31-59, 10:22-40, 15:18-16:4).
 - c. So His ministry had also had a winnowing effect among the sons of Israel. Early on, excitement over the things He was doing caused multitudes to follow Him, to the point that He and His disciples couldn’t even take a meal without being pressed upon (Mark 3:7-20; cf. Matthew 14:13; Mark 2:1-4). Jesus remained immensely popular as long as He appeared to be a provider, healer, and national deliverer (Matthew 4:23-25, 19:1-2; John 6:1-27), but once the people began to understand His message and His true mission, the large crowds began to dwindle (John 6:27-66). Like the rich young ruler, multitudes could not abide the cost of discipleship; the One once followed by thousands was left with only eleven. So also the word and power of the gospel under the apostolic ministry gathered multitudes of marveling spectators, only some of whom became true disciples.

This recapitulation is important to note because it punctuates Luke’s thesis that the Church’s ministry represents the continuation of “*the things that Jesus began to do and teach*” (Acts 1:1). He had promised that He wouldn’t leave His own as orphans, but would come to them in the person of His Spirit (John 14:1-29). Through them, by the power and leading of His indwelling Spirit, Jesus would carry on His work of proclaiming and building His kingdom (John 15:26-27; cf. Matthew 28:18-20).

3. Another consideration raised by this context is the role of miracles in the early Church, especially their relation to the proclamation of the gospel. To this point in his account, Luke has everywhere associated “signs and wonders” with the apostles’ verbal witness to Christ. This partnership began with Pentecost, and Luke’s subsequent treatment seems to suggest that it was the pattern of the Church’s witness from that time forward (2:42-47, 3:1-26, 4:23-31, 5:12-16, 6:8-7:60, 8:1-13, 26-40, 9:36-43, 13:1-12, 14:1-5, 8-20, 15:12, 16:16ff, 19:11-12, etc.; cf. also Romans 15:15-21; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:1-4).

The New Testament everywhere indicates that signs and wonders attended the apostolic preaching of the gospel, and the present context (along with a few others in the book of Acts) goes so far as to suggest that such miracles occasionally occurred – and even provoked faith – in the absence of any gospel proclamation whatsoever (at least so far as the text records in those particular instances) (ref. 9:32-42, 28:1-10).

The apparent implication is that “signs and wonders” are able to bring people to faith in Christ by the mere demonstration of divine power. At the very least, the New Testament seems to imply that the manifestation of the Spirit’s power is a crucial component of a truly biblical witness to Christ.

This perception is the basis for the notion of “power evangelism” associated with John Wimber of the Vineyard Movement. In his book by that title, Wimber argued that the Church’s meager success in seeing people come to faith is tied (at least in part) to the absence of the Spirit’s supernatural witness. If the Church wishes to reproduce the astounding evangelistic success of its first-century counterpart, it must embrace the early Church’s approach to evangelism: It must embrace the Spirit and His ways of reaching people; it must embrace “power evangelism.” Wimber defined this term as follows: *“Power evangelism is a presentation of the gospel that is rational but that also transcends the rational... a spontaneous, Spirit-inspired, empowered presentation of the gospel [that is] preceded and undergirded by demonstrations of God’s presence.”*

Wimber argued his position from the New Testament, but also from personal and historical experience, citing numerous examples in his book of how revival in the Church – marked by large numbers of converts and a general revitalizing of believers – is always associated with the Spirit’s manifest power in “signs and wonders.” Wimber’s convictions have had a broad impact in the Christian community and are reflected in the outreach approaches of numerous individuals and organizations. But the questions remain: Are “signs and wonders” an essential part of gospel proclamation? And if not, how are we to understand their operation and role in the early Church?

- a. As a starting point, the notion that miracles can lead to faith apart from the clear proclamation of the gospel must be roundly rejected. The first reason is that saving faith is directed toward the person of Christ as revealed in His gospel, and miraculous signs don’t, in themselves, provide that gospel testimony. They may reveal something about divine existence and power, but they say nothing about Jesus Christ and God’s work and purpose in Him. Standing alone, “signs and wonders” bear no gospel witness; worse yet, they can lead people away from Christ (or to a false faith) when they’re connected to a false gospel.

As to the text itself, while certain passages in Acts may appear to indicate faith coming through miracles alone, those contexts actually provide only an argument from silence; Luke never explicitly ascribes saving faith to miraculous signs. This being the case, these few passages must be interpreted in terms of Luke’s overall testimony in Acts (consistent with the entire New Testament) which directly associates saving faith with the proclamation of the gospel (ref. 2:22-41, 6:7, 8:1-5, 14-15, 26-37, 10:1-48, 13:1-13, 14-49, 8-20, 15:1-7, 16:11-14, 25-34, 17:1-34, 18:1-9; cf. Romans 1:16-17, 10:12-14; 1 Corinthians 1:18-24; Galatians 3:1-3).

- b. Miracles alone cannot bring men to faith, yet the New Testament – and the book of Acts in particular – repeatedly links them with the effectual proclamation of the gospel. The consistency of this pattern is compelling and calls for an explanation.

The first thing to consider is whether this coupling implies that “signs and wonders” work *synergistically* with the preached word to bring people to faith. In that regard, the Scripture is clear that saving faith depends upon the regenerating work of the Spirit – the Spirit has to open the heart of the hearer to receive the word in faith (Acts 16:14; cf. Philipians 1:29). That being the case, what need does He have for miraculous works? Whether or not they are present, saving faith still depends upon the Spirit’s power wielded in the human mind and heart. If, then, miraculous signs make no *necessary* contribution to faith in Christ (Luke records many instances of people coming to faith in the absence of miracles), why would the Spirit combine them with the preached word in the early Church? Two considerations are helpful in answering that question: the biblical significance of “signs and wonders” and their association with the apostolic ministry.

First, the phrase *signs and wonders*, though designating a broad sphere of supernatural phenomena, has a very definite use and significance in the Scripture. In a word, *signs and wonders are miraculous events intended by God to authenticate someone or something and establish a point of remembrance.*

- 1) These phenomena come to the forefront in the Pentateuch in reference to the Exodus and Moses’ role in it. Moses performed numerous “signs and wonders” when he arrived in Egypt as God’s appointed deliverer. Those miracles were authenticating signs to the sons of Israel as well as to Pharaoh and Egypt, attesting Moses’ claim to have come at the command of the God of the patriarchs to liberate their covenant sons from their bondage (Exodus 3:16-4:31; cf. Genesis 15:12-16). In that way they bore witness to Moses and God alike (Deuteronomy 34:9-12; cf. Acts 7:35-37).

Moreover, the fact that this phrase occurs most often in the Old Testament in the book of Deuteronomy highlights that such signs were vehicles of remembrance. Israel was to recall forever Yahweh’s mighty works of deliverance, protection and provision – works which authenticated His person, His word and His covenant faithfulness (ref. 4:32-39, 6:20-25, 7:6-19, 10:20-11:9, 26:1-11, 29:1-15). Conversely, His punishing “signs and wonders” were also points of recollection for Israel – a stinging reminder of their unfaithfulness in contrast to His enduring *hesed* (28:45-48). The authenticating function of such miracles also explains the concept of *lying signs and wonders*. These are works by which deceivers lead men away from God (Deuteronomy 13:1ff; Matthew 24:23-24; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12; Revelation 13:11-14; cf. Exodus 7:7-11; Acts 13:1-8).

- 2) “Signs and wonders” served the same purposes of authentication and remembrance in the ministries of Elijah and Elisha. Elijah’s supernatural provision for the widow of Zarephath attested that he was indeed a “man of God” (1 Kings 17:1ff). So the miraculous counterparts involving Elisha (2 Kings 4:1ff) testified that he now carried Elijah’s prophetic mantle; he was Yahweh’s prophet in Israel (2 Kings 2:1ff).

Similarly, the miraculous signs manifested in the confrontation on Mount Carmel distinguished Elijah from Ahab's false prophets, even as they authenticated Yahweh as the true and living God (1 Kings 18:1-40). This episode was to be Israel's point of decision – an event that, together with the tragic historical context it reflected, would serve as a reminder to the Jews of their apostasy and the dire consequences of it (cf. Luke 4:16-30).

- 3) These twin functions of “signs and wonders” were epitomized in Jesus of Nazareth, Yahweh's quintessential prophet (Acts 2:22). All of Jesus' works in the power of the Spirit were intended to draw the minds of the people of Israel back to their scriptures and testify to them that this One standing among them was indeed the prophesied and long-awaited Christ (cf. John 5:31-36, 10:22-38, 14:1-11, 15:22-25, 20:30-21).

Given their role in the salvation history culminating with the Christ event, one would expect supernatural signs to serve the same purpose in the apostolic ministry, and this is exactly the case. The apostles were Christ's witnesses – His representatives, appointed to carry on His witness to Israel and the Gentile world (John 5:26-27, 17:18). The Father had attested His Son through “signs and wonders,” and so it would be with those chosen to continue His work. By authenticating the messengers, God authenticated their message – the word of the gospel by which men were to be saved (ref. again Hebrews 2:1-4).

The reason the apostles needed such authentication is that they were proclaiming the fulfillment of the Scriptures in Jesus of Nazareth; they were the designated interpreters of the Christ event, first to Israel, and then to the world, and their witness demanded divine attestation. The apostles were, in effect, the living New Testament in the period before their oral witness was committed to a written account. *If the New Testament writings are the inspired record and interpretation of the fulfillment of the Scriptures in Jesus Christ, the apostolic witness first fulfilled that role; the apostles' testimony was inspired and authenticated by the leading of the Spirit and the manifestation of His power in supernatural works (2 Peter 1:15-21).*

4. These things raise the obvious question of “signs and wonders” in the Church today, and their continued existence must be answered biblically – not with a few proof-texts, but by means of a *canonical* inquiry. At issue isn't God's power or constancy, but the purpose for miraculous signs and their relation to the gospel. *Again, such miracles were attestations, ultimately bearing witness to God Himself and authenticating His message in the mouth of His servants.* This means first that all miraculous signs in the Church not attached to the true gospel of Jesus Christ are disqualified as “lying wonders.” But it also shows that the salvation-historical purpose for “signs and wonders” no longer exists (which doesn't at all deny that God still works miracles): Such signs served to authenticate God's spokesmen and thereby certify their words as being His word. Those human mouthpieces have now become *inscripturated*; the New Testament writings have taken over the work first assigned to Christ's witnesses. As the Spirit authenticated them and their words by “signs and wonders,” so He now authenticates the same words by means of His inspired text and His internal witness of illumination, conviction and faith.