

ON BEING A GREAT CHURCH: A BIBLICAL MODEL

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By the Book™ A Chapter by
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Let's Begin

In chapter three, we discovered the making of a great church. Not only did we learn the makeup of a great church, but we also learned the marks of a great church. We learned what to look for in examining our own church. In fact, we discovered the marks for which God looks in gauging whether or not we are a great church. After all, it's His church!

Today we're going to go a step farther in understanding a great church. In doing so, we're fortunate to have an exceptional model church to assist us. Chapter four describes our model and it has four walls. The four walls of the model church make the outline below:

- I. The First Wall: They Were Tested by Worldly Persecution (vv. 1-12)**
- II. The Second Wall: They Were Transformed by Spiritual Power (vv. 13-22)**
- III. The Third Wall: They Were Trained by Fervent Prayer (vv. 23-31)**
- IV. The Fourth Wall: They Were Tied Together by Singular Purpose (vv. 32-37)**

I. The First Wall: They Were Tested by Worldly Persecution (vv. 1-12)

It was inevitable that there should be opposition to the Christian faith. Satan is very real and he will not allow the progress of Christianity to go unchallenged. When God is working, we can be sure Satan will do all in his power to interfere.

Here is the first recorded instance of the church's opposition. Sadly it would not be the last. A three-fold pattern emerges in Acts: the gospel was shared; souls were saved; persecution started. Chapter four focuses on the third part of the pattern.

First, let's note the *outbreak of persecution* (vv. 1-4). We should not be surprised that the disciples of Jesus were persecuted. After all, Jesus Himself was persecuted. Moreover, Jesus predicted his disciples would be persecuted as well (John 15:18-20; Luke 6:22).

As we examine the outbreak of persecution against the church, we find Luke to be very thorough in his testimony. He gives us the *reason* for the persecution. Sadly, the persecution stemmed from religious leaders, "Being grieved that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead" (v. 2). New Testament Christianity was a rebuke to their dead religion. Thus, in order to keep control the temple police set out to maintain the *status quo*. For them, preserving their order meant persecuting the church.

The reality of the persecution, therefore, could not be denied. Note Luke's way of making this clear: "And they laid hands on them, and put them in hold unto the next day: for it was now eventide" (v. 4). The significance of the leaders who "put them in hold" cannot be over-estimated. This does not mean they were housed for the night at the Jerusalem Hilton; instead, they were securely padlocked in their sleazy prison. One must ask why they were there, standing on the street corner preaching Jesus! Persecution comes whenever the church lives rightly, believes rightly, and preaches rightly. Nonetheless, we must observe the courage the apostles possessed. All that mattered to them was Jesus' exaltation and people's transformation.

The *result* of the persecution was clear. They simply put the preachers in jail thinking it would stop the march of the gospel. They went to jail all right. But the progress of the gospel kept right on marching forward!

Therefore, what we find is that the *outbreak of persecution* became an *opportunity for proclamation* (vv. 5-12). When persecution exists, we can be sure God uses

Reflection Connection

When was the last time you felt persecuted? Take a few moments to think it through. Be prepared to share your experience with the entire group. Allow time for others to join in.



it as an opportunity to lift up the name of Jesus with new force and added blessing.

Interestingly, the place of proclamation was Jerusalem itself, the religious home of the Jewish Sanhedrin (vv. 5-7). This ruling body was the highest court in the land, a court consisting of 70 members presided over by the High Priest. Their power was phenomenal and their resolve was immovable. One need only remember this same group oversaw the trial of Jesus (Matt. 26:64ff).

In short, persecution gave the apostles an opportunity to witness in a place they could never have gone otherwise. Only as prisoners could they have been positioned in this place. Sometimes the persecutions we endure for Jesus will give us unusual opportunities to witness for Him.

Reflection Connection

What ways do you think offer you the most promise in sharing Christ? What level of risk is involved? Explain. Is the risk worth the effort? Why or why not?

Peter and John's courage simmer. They boldly and unapologetically proclaim Jesus—the One whom the Jewish leaders crucified—as the exclusive way to come to God, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (v. 12). The Jewish leaders marveled in shocked awe, being unable to deny the apostles possessed a strange reminder of the powerful Man from Galilee (v. 13). Consequently, their actions can only be explained by a miracle itself—they let them go (v. 23). The apostles' boldness brought them freedom, not bondage. No believer who obeys the Lord Jesus will ever lack blessing.

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II. The Second Wall: They Were Transformed by Spiritual Power (vv. 13-22)

We move now to the second wall of our model church. The community of faith the apostles built in the name of Jesus was a community transformed by spiritual power. Observe carefully the description the religious leaders gave to the poor fishermen who stood before them, “Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marveled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus” (v. 13). Their perception focused on the apostles' life in Christ. And, from this description, we gain *three distinctive qualities* about their life.

First, we observe the *simplicity* of our life in Christ. Peter and John were “unlearned and ignorant.” This means they were unversed in learning from the Jewish schools. In today's language, we might say they had never been to seminary. Also, they had no professional status; they weren't a part of the religious hierarchy.



Reflection Connection

How important is a learned clergy? Do you think there is too much emphasis today on pastors being educated? Why or why not? Be prepared to discuss this with the entire group. Invite your Pastor or another staff member to join you during this time in your class. Their testimony would be priceless.

Second, note the *straightforwardness* of our life in Christ. Peter and John's boldness is impossible to miss. Their openness, their clear language and their aggressive witness containing moral charges against the Sanhedrin is noteworthy. Sometimes when Christians are accosted for their faith in Christ, it demands they mince no words. Company with Jesus inevitably gives us a holy boldness. If we are in fellowship with Him, there is both an openness and sincerity about our life.

Third, we see in this description the *similarity* of our life in Christ. As they were "beholding the man" who stood before them healed, they could say nothing against it. The apostles were doing the same kinds of miracles Jesus did! In other words, they were once again reminded of Jesus. Does your life remind people of Jesus? Such examination must be at the forefront of our spiritual lives. If our lives do not reflect Christ to a broken world, we will never be perceived as a transformed community. Nor will our church. Spiritual power remains absent.

Furthermore, they not only perceived the apostles' *transformed life*, they also perceived their *tenacious loyalty*. They simply would not turn from their trust in Christ: "But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be 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" (vv. 19-20). They refused to pay merely lip service to Jesus.

III. The Third Wall: They Were Trained by Fervent Prayer (vv. 23-31)

When the Sanhedrin released Peter and John they returned to a different atmosphere altogether. They went from a meeting of peril to a meeting of prayer. They left a court of punishment and entered a community of praise. The Sanhedrin didn't refuse their scorn and intimidation; but neither did the church refuse their support and inspiration.

Luke records upon receiving the warning not to preach Jesus anymore, the apostles went back "to their own company" (v. 23). This was the *natural* thing to do. They headed to where believers were gathered and support could be secured.

In addition, not only was going back to the assembled church the *natural* thing to do, it was also the *needful* thing to do. All of us need the fellowship of other Christians. This is why God put Christians in churches. In fact, Scripture teaches, "God setteth the solitary in families" (Ps. 68:6). Every time you come to the assembly of God's people you're blessed because you're being obedient (Ps. 122:1; Heb. 10:25).

Now let's take a moment to consider the prayer the people prayed upon the apostles' return (vv. 24-30). As we examine this prayer, immediately we are impressed with the *blessing* it brings: "And when they heard that, they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord, thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is" (v. 24). What a privilege is ours! Just think. The God of the universe has invited us to talk to Him. In a moment of despair, at an hour of pain, the apostles knew to whom to turn—the Lord God.

Reflection Connection

Where do you go when you've been "let go"? Explain. Think of a time after which you have been spiritually assaulted that you received needed support from your community of friends and family. Be prepared to share with the entire group.



The *basis* of prayer is revealed (vv. 25-28). As one reads through this prayer it's amazing how God-centered it was. How often are our prayers filled with requests? The bottom line of prayer is based upon what we think of God. There is no confusion about what the early church thought about God. This prayer reveals Who God is, What God says, and What God does.

Such identity brings us to the *burden* of prayer (vv. 29-30). These humble believers bowed their knees and got to the business at hand—praying specifically for the need at hand. What do you normally pray about? A personal problem? Trouble in your home? Your job? Whatever need faces you this hour, you can take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.

The result was overwhelming. It was as if a second Pentecost had come. The place where they were shook and “they were all filled with the Holy Ghost.” When a church prays like that you can expect big things to happen. Here is a way to stay on fire for God—stay before God in prayer. The power of prayer did something to them and through them.

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IV. The Fourth Wall: They Were Tied Together by Singular Purpose (vv. 32-37)

Let's consider briefly the fourth wall of the model church. No passage reveals the solidarity of the early church more than the verses we now consider. Luke says “the multitude” that was assembled together was “of one heart and of one soul.” They were united in purpose; a singular togetherness ruled their assembly.

They were one in *experience*. That is, all of them “believed” (v. 32). Their belief was their common identity. They were also one in *evangelism* (v. 33). This is the natural outflow of a real experience with Jesus. Failure to witness raises questions about your experience of faith.

Third, they were one in *expression* (vv. 32, 34-35). The buzzword for this in the book of Acts is Luke's phrase “all things common.” In other words, when one had a need they all felt it. They didn't think in terms of me, but we! Today, we quibble about giving the tithe. They gave whatever it took to meet the need.

Fourth, they were one in *excellence* (vv. 36-37). The church's purpose is to produce people who are like Jesus. It is not to entertain emotionally, stimulate intellectually, or uplift culturally. As worthy as those things may be, the church's singular goal is to produce Christ-likeness. At this juncture, Luke introduces a personal example from the model church: “And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus” (v. 36). Barnabas portrayed the moral excellence God desired for the church well.

When it gets down to it, it's about character. The model church is a church rich in moral excellence, in moral character. To be around Barnabas was like a cold drink of water on a hot summer day.

Reflection Connection

How active is your life in witnessing your faith? Is it easy for you to keep quiet about Christ? Why or why not?



Reflection Connection

Name one individual you feel represents moral excellence in the church. Without necessarily identifying the individual, be prepared to explore and discuss the traits you find in this person which makes him or her an honorable example.

The particular example pointed out about Barnabas is his conduct in handling his personal wealth (v. 37). Wealth is the downfall of many people. Some whom God has blessed magnificently with temporal blessings are grossly immature and do not serve the Lord Jesus well with the blessings he has bestowed. Barnabas is the ideal steward and thus he's the ideal model of moral excellence.

Golden Greek Nugget

The Sanhedrin described Peter and John as “unlearned” men (v. 13). The term translated “unlearned” literally means “unlettered.” Commonly, it referred to lacking mastery of the Jewish schools of thought. Thus, when the religious leaders described the apostles as being “unlearned” it was not only meant as an insult, it also possessed a measure of truth. However, while the apostles were not steeped in Jewish legal tradition outside the Old Testament itself, what could not be dismissed was their powerful, persuasive testimony of being with Jesus. His presence trumped everything else!

Wrap Up

The model church is revealed for every church today to mimic. The four walls of the model church are not coincidence. As a result of the outbreak of persecution, God transformed the church into a powerful spiritual catalyst for changing lives and turning people to the Lord Jesus Christ. And, even when they were threatened with their lives, they stood boldly for the gospel and prayed faithfully to God for more power. No wonder the early church community produced refreshing figures of moral excellence. Can the same happen today? The same must happen today!

