

Text: Ac 4.21-23

Proposition: The consolation of the saints encourages the ministry of the gospel.

After the arrest and trial of Peter and John, the apostles were released with a warning. Returning to the church, they reported on all that had transpired.

For today's message, I want to take these bare facts (which comprise the essence of our text) and build a message that considers how Christians sustain their testimony in a hostile environment.

Like the apostles, we are called to preach the gospel and do good in the world. In spite of the good we may do, the world is hostile to us, especially the more we preach the good news.

If we were to do good without preaching, the hostility level might be low, or might even vanish altogether. But when Christians only do good in the world with no preaching, they have well-nigh lost their Christianity.

- We may not have personally experienced the pressure of the world against Christianity, but I think we all sense it.
- We are never going to see this hostility end until the Lord returns to establish his kingdom on the earth.
- We need to know how to live out our mission in spite of the world's hostility to it.

So our message today is not a 'how-to' avoid the hostility, but more an attempt to understand the hostility and prepare to deal with it when it comes. There is something in our text that hints at a key ingredient that enables us to continue fulfilling the commission our Lord gave us.

Read Ac 4.15-23, text 21-23

The first thing we are going to consider is the fact that the apostles would no doubt have been giving a report to the church of all that had befallen them.

Proposition: The consolation of the saints encourages the ministry of the gospel.

I. Content of the report (21-22)

A. Imagine the perspective of the church awaiting the results of the trial

1. We are told that 3,000 believed on Pentecost (2.41)

2. Up to another 5,000 had believed the day before (4.4)

3. Some of this body were no doubt “out-of-towners” who perhaps had returned to their out-of-town homes
4. Nonetheless, we have a fairly large body of believers in Jerusalem, now with two of its leaders in prison for the “crime” of healing a cripple and preaching the gospel
5. How would they react?
 - a. There would undoubtedly be some uncertainty
 - b. They no doubt resorted to prayer meetings
 - c. The other apostles would no doubt be counseling them to have faith in God

B. Our passage implies the content of their report on their release

1. Forbidding to speak (they would report what was said)
 - a. The sermon of chapter 3
 - b. The sermon to the Sanhedrin of chapter 4
2. Perplexing public relations (for the Sanhedrin, as the miracle was publicly approved)
 - a. They would report (and introduce) the man they had healed
 - b. They would tell the story of the man’s life
3. “Stop preaching” order of the council: would also have been reported (but with no sense of compulsion)

II. Consequence of the demands (21)

- #### A. For the first time, the implications of the exclusive gospel and its public perception becomes apparent
1. The exclusive gospel stated by Peter (4.12)
 2. The exclusive gospel taught by Jesus (John 14.6)

All religions claim to be the way to God, but true Christianity is adamant: there is **NO OTHER WAY**.

“There is an exclusiveness to Jesus’s work that is not popular today. ... It is seen in our culture as a blow against religious diversity as well as the cause of great religious and political strife

throughout history, especially in European history up to the Enlightenment. ..."¹

- B. The answer of the state to Christian exclusivity is repression of its free expression
1. When the world says, "You may not speak in this name," it has entered into the sphere of religion, making a religious evaluation of truth
 2. A key Baptist doctrine: freedom of religion
 - a. The Baptists (and others) were repressed by authorities with state churches in the post-Reformation era
 - b. This included the English colonies in North America, some of them formed by formerly repressed believers themselves
 3. When the state approves of one religion over others, it completely misunderstands the free offer of the gospel and the rights of men
- C. The demands of the counsel parallel the demands of public opinion today
1. Keep silent! You are against diversity! (Imposes a public belief system)

The Congregationalists came to New England, not for freedom of religion, but freedom for *their* religion.

c. Baptists were prominent proponents of religious freedom, from the founding of Rhode Island onwards

"There is an exclusiveness to Jesus's work that is not popular today. ... It is seen in our culture as a blow against religious diversity as well as the cause of great religious and political strife throughout history, especially in European history up to the Enlightenment. But a key point is often missed. It is when religion is imposed that it does damage. ..."²

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 200.

² *Ibid.*

2. Ignores the free offer of the gospel

“Here we see apostles making an appeal and leaving the decision and consequences to individual response. There is no effort to impose the faith, only to inform about it and to stress the responsibility every creature ultimately has to be responsive to the living God. ...”³

3. Ignores the open door of the church: all who hear may choose to come in of their own free will

“In addition, the offer of Jesus is made to all without discrimination. ...”⁴

4. Christianity is a public faith: it isn't private religion, held behind closed doors

- a. Public opinion *might* be willing to allow Christians to have their own beliefs *if* they keep quiet about it
- b. But Christianity isn't capable of silence: true Christianity speaks

“The church's call is to be loyal to God in sharing the message and doing so in such a way that its impact on believers' lives is evident.”⁵

5. The testimony of the lame man makes the claims of Christianity very public

- a. He was more than forty years old (22)
- b. He had been lame from birth, he had never walked — most likely he had deformed limbs (3.2)
- c. He had been changed (3.7-8)

In the same way, Christian testimonies of changed lives are public evidence of the power of the gospel

The story of William P. Mackay, author of “*Revive Us Again*” in our hymnal:

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

- Raised by a Scottish Presbyterian mother, sent off to college at 17 with a Bible, his name and hers and a verse written in its flyleaf by his mother
- Got in the wrong crowd, pawned his Bible for liquor, dismissed the gospel he had been taught
- Became a doctor in Edinburgh, and the president of an atheist's club in the city
- Severely injured patient came in, knew he was dying. Here is the testimony in the doctor's own words:

One day a seriously injured man was brought into the hospital. His case seemed hopeless, he seemed to realize his condition for he was fully conscious and asked me how much time he had left to live. I gave him my opinion in as cautious a manner as I could.

"Have you any relatives whom we could notify?" I asked.

The patient shook his head. He had only one wish, it was to see his landlady because he owed her a small sum of money and also wished to bid her farewell. He also requested that his landlady send him "The Book..."

I went to see him on my regular visits at least once a day. What struck me most was the quiet, almost happy expression constantly on his face...After the man died, some things about his affairs were to be done in my presence.

"What shall we do with this?" the nurse asked holding a book in her hand.

"What kind of book is it?" I asked.

“The Bible of the poor man...As long as he was able to read it, he did so, and when he was unable to do so anymore, he kept it under his bed cover.”

I took the Bible and — could I trust my eyes? It was my own Bible! The Bible which my mother had given me when I left my parent’s home, and which later, when short of money, I sold for a small amount. My name was still in it, written in my mother’s hand...

Dr. Mackay went to his office, fell to his knees in repentance and turned to Christ. He became a Presbyterian minister and wrote many hymns including *Revive Us Again*.

d. The gospel is public: it is no private religion

With this kind of environment, a public religion and public disapproval, how do we press on with the Christian testimony and the ministry?

III. Comfort of the congregation (23)

A. Look carefully at verse 23, notice the italics

NAU **Acts 4.23** When they had been released, they went to their own *companions* and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

1. The Gk. says, literally, “they went to their own”
2. Who were “their own”
 - a. The other apostles, certainly
 - b. But more, the whole body of the church, the group who were awaiting them outside the trial

“**Their own company.**—Not the apostles merely, but their friends in the faith generally.”⁶

⁶ Whitelaw, *Acts*, 96.

“The expression is not accidental, as it presses the point of how the early church saw itself as a community of mutually supportive friends.”⁷

“The whole community was involved in the proclamation of the word, and the community gathered for prayer when the apostles were in difficulty (cf. 12:12). That is the picture here—the Christians gathered to pray for the deliverance of the two apostles from the Sanhedrin.”⁸

B. The congregation is that means by which God intends for us to strengthen our faith, continue our ministry

NAU Hebrews 10.24-25 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds,²⁵ not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging *one another*; and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

1. KJV uses the word “provoke” here: “provoke one another”
2. The church is the source of spiritual strength by which you are enabled and emboldened for your Christian life

When I was a student, I was very busy. I was working, I had classes to attend, homework to do, weekend ministry in a church an hour away from school, I felt that I didn’t have time for Wednesday services too.

Then I met Debbi. Wednesday was an opportunity to be with her, to take her to church, over to her mom’s afterward for games (and food). Suddenly my priorities changed!

But I discovered something on the way to the matrimonial altar: I had time for Wednesday night church after all. And something else:

- My spiritual life strengthened

When you fellowship with “your own” — you gain spiritual strength in a hostile world.

⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 203.

⁸ Polhill, *Acts*, 148.

Conclusion:

Proposition: The consolation of the saints encourages the ministry of the gospel.

Are you a Christian? You ought to benefit from the body you belong to. You ought to cultivate the relationships of the body.

Are you not a Christian? You are missing much more than you can even imagine! Turn to Christ today.