

Text: Ac 5.11-14

Proposition: A properly functioning church will have an impact on the unbelieving community around it – a properly functioning Christian will have an impact on unbelievers he knows.

After the Ananias and Sapphira event, Luke returns to “summary language” as we close out this section of the book of Acts.

In some ways, this material is relatively simple, not a lot of deep theology or meaning to consider. But I want to think about it today and draw a proposition from it that I consider to be fairly provocative.

Let’s read Ac 5.11-16, text 11-14

I found this comment on this section

“This third summary in Acts treats the relationship of apostles to outsiders whereas the community’s inner life was highlighted in the earlier summaries.”¹

In keeping with this thought and the content of our text, I’ve given our message this title:

The Public Perception of the Early Church

Nobody does anything in isolation. Somebody, somewhere is watching.

In 1984 (note that year) some pop singer released a song called “Somebody’s Watching Me.” Its lyrics make about as much sense as most pop songs, which is to say that pop songs make opera plots seem sane.

Reading on the internet about this song, it seems that though the singer is relatively unknown, his lyrics continue to be remembered for its paranoia.

A recent article (Mar 10, 2017) came out commenting on “Snooping Gadgets” that we all carry around with us. It mentioned a Wikileaks exposure of classified CIA documents that claim “U.S. and British spy agencies were hacking into consumers’ smartphones and televisions.”²

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 229.

² Bobbi Booker, “Snooping Gadgets May Mean Somebody’s Watching You,” *The Philadelphia Tribune*, accessed May 13, 2017, http://www.phillytrib.com/lifestyle/snooping-gadgets-may-mean-somebody-s-watching-you/article_be23c63f-f427-58e5-aae0-2188c57b9968.html.

The article goes on to advise:

“To ensure a connected device can’t spy on you, unplug it from WiFi or internet grid and remove the batteries, if that’s possible. Or perhaps don’t buy it, especially if you don’t require the networking features or you have doubts about the manufacturer.”

Also be sure to close your blinds and turn off all your lights. Lock your doors. Stay inside. Don’t let anyone see you!

Well, who can live like that? Who would want to? And what do you have to hide anyway?

But let me ask you a more serious question:

If someone was eavesdropping on our church would they find us to be a Christian church?

If someone was eavesdropping on you, would they find you to have a Christian testimony?

The church described in the early chapters of Acts is one that was noticed by the public for its singularly Christian testimony.

Proposition: A properly functioning church will have an impact on the unbelieving community around it – a properly functioning Christian will have an impact on unbelievers he knows.

I. Three public responses to the early church

A. Fear (11)

1. We touched on this verse last week: it refers to the reaction to the Ananias and Sapphira story
 - a. The story motivated the fear of God in those who heard
 - b. In fact, the term is “great fear” φόβος μέγας
2. Today, what fear does the life of the church stir up in the community?
 - a. Fear of having to give up favorite lifestyle choices, perhaps
 - b. Fear of irrational thinking, perhaps

I am not saying that these are rational fears, by the way.

3. Note this, however: the life of the church in our communities today doesn't produce the fear of God in any noticeable way

If it did, we would no doubt be on the verge of revival.

B. Caution (13)

This verse requires some explanation: Who are "the rest"? Who are "them"? And, in v. 12, who are "the all"?

1. Understanding the verse

- a. At first glance, it seems that this is a public reaction to the church

- 1) But the objection is made: if the public is holding off
- 2) Why does Luke say in the next verse that "multitudes" are being added to the church?

- b. An alternate explanation

- 1) V. 12: "all" refers to the apostles as a group, meeting in the regular meeting place
- 2) V. 13: "the rest" refers to the rest of the church who are cautious about getting too close to the apostles lest they get "zapped" like Sapphira
- 3) V. 13: "the people" refers to the outsiders holding the whole church in esteem

This explanation has been known for some time; mentioned by Matthew Henry (c. 1700), for example

Has the advantage of solving the apparent contradiction of v. 14.

- 4) However:

- a) Were the other Christians really so afraid of the apostles that they wouldn't go near them?
- b) What does this view suggest about the "one accord" and other passages concerning the spirit of the church?

c. NIV interprets v. 12 for us [best view, in my opinion]

The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade.

2. The caution displayed by the public

- a. Is it wise to be a “cultural Christian” – one who adopts a Christian culture without conversion?
- b. Is it wise to join a church for marketing purposes? (Advice of sales professionals)
- c. Is it wise to be anything but whole hearted in a Christian profession?

The answer, whether you get the Sapphira effect or not, is, “No!” – God knows the hearts, there is such a thing as the judgement seat of Christ, as well as the other judgements.

Caution is in order until full commitment is made.

3. Nevertheless, the esteem also held by the public

- a. The public, though cautious, explicitly holds the church in “high esteem”

- 1) The power of the miracles attracts
- 2) The power of discipline demands commitment
- 3) The combination inspires respect

- b. Is cautious respect the attitude of the world to the church today?

Why not?

D. L. Moody famously is supposed to have responded to this comment: “*The world has yet to see what God can do with and for and through and in a man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him.*” with the prayer, “God, help me be that man.”

Does your testimony inspire cautious respect of unbelievers?

C. Conversion (14)

1. The bulk of the population held off, but still *multitudes* were converted
2. Both men and women (first mention of women as converts in Acts)

Conversions depend on the work of the Holy Spirit – lack of conversions isn't directly your fault or my fault.

However, can your testimony hinder the work of the Holy Spirit?

Can the testimony of a church be weak and ineffective in a given community?

The answer, I think, is yes. What was the testimony of the early church?

II. Early public testimony of the church

A. Power (12a)

1. They had prayed for this (Ac 4.29-30)
2. Now the apostles were manifesting this (contributes to public perception)

I will talk more about this point next week, Lord willing – there is a sense in which God's miraculous power still can impress observers, but *at will* miracles are not God's plan for this age.

B. Unanimity (12b, cf. 2.42) ὁμοθυμαδὸν

"A unique Greek word, used 10 of its 12 New Testament occurrences in the Book of Acts, helps us understand the uniqueness of the Christian community."

- Homothumadon is a compound of two words meaning to 'rush along' and 'in unison'.
- The image is almost musical; a number of notes are sounded which, while different, harmonise in pitch and tone. As the instruments of a great concert under the direction of a concert master, so the Holy Spirit blends

together the lives of members of Christ's church. [source for the above comments is Strong's Lexicon, I think]

- “The sense *unanimiter*, and not merely ‘together’ to which Hatch (*Essays*, p. 63f.) would limit this word in the NT.”³

The focus or contents of Christian unanimity as per Ac 2.42:

1. Apostolic doctrine
2. Fellowship
3. Breaking of bread [communion]
4. Prayer

III. Present public perception of the church

A. In general

1. They think we are disconnected from reality

“I believe in reality and science, not in myths like religious people.”

2. They think the church is all about money and power
3. They think the church wants to control people
4. They think the church is corrupt

It certainly hasn't helped *our* testimony that these last three have been true of *some* churches, at least, and of large segments of the professing church as well.

- All the more reason for us to be committed to apostolic doctrine and fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer.

³ J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 448.

B. Personally (*i.e.* what do the lost perceive of the church because of me?)

I want you to think about your own testimony. What do the lost think of the church because of your life?

Do they respect or disrespect?

Do they see spiritual power or spiritual weakness?

Conclusion:

Proposition: A properly functioning church will have an impact on the unbelieving community around it – a properly functioning Christian will have an impact on unbelievers he knows.

If you are here and not a believer, I hope that you consider that what is most important is what God is doing.

- God took fallen people and shaped world history by the church for two thousand years. That impact continues, even though western culture is doing its best to ignore it.

If you are a believer, which is most of us, our message is a call once again to a more earnest and zealous Christian walk.