

4. The church prays (4:23–31)

What was the apostles' reaction to the Council's ban and threats? *On their release*, Luke tells us, they went straight *to their own people*, their relatives and friends in Christ, *reported* everything the Council had said to them (23), and then immediately turned together *in prayer to God* (24a). Here is the Christian *koinōnia* in action. We have seen the apostles in the Council; now we see them in the church. Having been bold in witness, they were equally bold in prayer. Their first word was *Despotēs, Sovereign Lord* , a term used of a slave owner and of a ruler of unchallengeable power . The Sanhedrin might utter warnings, threats and prohibitions, and try to silence the church, but their authority was subject to a higher authority still , and the edicts of men cannot overturn the decrees of God.

Next we observe that, before the people came to any petition, they filled their minds with thoughts of the divine sovereignty. First, he is the God of creation , who *made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them* (24). Secondly, he is the God of revelation , who *spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of ... David*, and in [Psalm 2](#) (already in the first century BC recognized as Messianic) had foretold the world's opposition to his Christ, with nations raging, peoples plotting, kings standing and rulers assembling against the Lord's Anointed (25–26). Thirdly, he is the God of history , who had caused even his enemies (Herod and Pilate, Gentiles and Jews, united in a conspiracy against Jesus, verse 27) to do what his *power and will had decided beforehand should happen* (28). This, then, was the early church's understanding of God, the God of creation, revelation and history, whose characteristic actions are summarized by the three verbs 'you made' (24), 'you spoke' (25) and 'you decided' (28).

Only now, with their vision of God clarified, and themselves humbled before him, were they ready at last to pray. Luke tells us their three main requests. The first was that God would consider their threats (29a). It was not a prayer that their threats would fall under divine judgment, nor even that they would remain unfulfilled, so that the church would be preserved in peace and safety, but only that God would *consider* them, would bear them in his mind. The second petition was that God would enable them his *servants* (literally, 'slaves') to speak his Word *with great boldness* (29b), undeterred by the Council's prohibition and unafraid of their threats. The third prayer was that God would

stretch out his hand to heal, and to perform miraculous signs and wonders in and through the name of ... Jesus (30). As Alexander pointed out, ‘their demand is not now for miracles of vengeance or destruction, such as fire from heaven,³⁰ but for miracles of mercy’³¹ Moreover, the word and the signs would go together, the signs and wonders confirming the word proclaimed with boldness.

In answer to their united and earnest prayers, (i) *the place ... was shaken*, and as Chrysostom commented, ‘that made them the more unshaken’;³² (ii) *they were all again filled with the Holy Spirit*; and (iii), in response to their specific request (29), they *spoke the word of God boldly* (31). Nothing is said in this context of an answer to their other specific prayer, namely for miracles of healing (30), but it would probably be legitimate to see 5:12 as the answer: ‘The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people.’

³⁰ Lk. 9:54.

³¹ Alexander, I, p. 172.

³² Chrysostom, Homily XI, p. 73.