

Acts 5:12–42

Again Healing and, Again, Official Opposition

After the rather grim story of the death of two deceivers (5:1–11), the lights are turned up again at center stage and Luke shows us the life-giving power of the gospel at work. The growing swell of signs and wonders, of new converts becomes a cresting wave sweeping aside every impediment. People kept their distance from the apostles, not out of fear of them but from great awe and wonder. But the masses of miserable, helpless, sick, and afflicted people press upon them. Even Peter’s shadow is able to heal! Paul may have difficulties with magician-like super apostles (2 Cor. 12:11) but not Luke, who unlike Paul has a good deal more interest in the power of the apostle than in the apostle’s humble witness to the cross, where “power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). As Luke sees it, good news which is powerless to change some of the world’s misery is hardly good news.

When John the Baptist sent messengers to inquire whether Jesus was indeed the one whose advent was promised (Luke 7:20), Jesus responded:

“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me” (Luke 7:22–23).

We are justified if in reading this account of healing we think of the earlier story of the healing of the crippled man in 3:1–10 and the official response in 3:11–26. That controversy-provoking act of compassion and proclamation has now been repeated ten, a hundred times over; so we should not be surprised that the religious establishment, represented by the Sadducees, reappears, this time with renewed determination to put an end to this Jesus commotion. The last time, the council let the apostles have their say and then, after being dumbfounded by Peter, released them. This time they take no chances and arrest them outright.

Yet something about the gospel renders prisons ineffective. With the comic speed of an old “Keystone Cops” movie, an angel sets the apostles free, and by daybreak they are back making trouble at the temple. Then follows an even more comic shuttling back and forth from council to jail, back to council, with the discovery of the apostles busy at the temple, teaching (5:21–25). Luke, who may not have been clear about the exact struc-

ture of the temple hierarchy, calls Israel's council of elders the "senate of Israel" (5:21). Not to worry. There is a sense in which when one has observed the behavior of one threatened politician—gentile or Jew—one has seen them all.

Once again, Luke makes clear that at this point any problems of the apostles are with the authorities, not with the people as a whole. The same fearful, inept, conniving officialdom who conspired with the Romans to send [Jesus](#) to the cross is up to its old tricks again. Once again, it must take account of the success of this new movement among the common people who hear gladly that which the authorities have tried vainly to keep quiet.

Peter again counters the authorities' charges with, "We must obey God rather than men" (5:29). How does it sound in the ears of these religious officials to be reminded by this commoner that *they* are supposed to be obeying God also, rather than collaborating to keep a lid on the status quo in Jerusalem? These religious leaders whose lives are supposed to epitomize complete obedience to the will of God have exchanged that sacred duty for the role of official power brokers and Roman quislings, whose job it is to keep their own people from causing too much trouble for the Roman occupation forces. Peter's speech has touched a nerve in their compromised hearts, for "When they heard this they were enraged and wanted to kill them" (5:33).

Lest we think that membership in the academic and religious establishment automatically disqualifies one from any shred of righteousness, we note that Luke has the apostles saved from almost certain death by the intervention of rabbi Gamaliel, one of the most widely known and revered rabbis of his day. Gamaliel's speech uses much the same scriptural argument we have encountered elsewhere in Acts—if this movement is a human, sociological phenomenon alone, it will collapse in its own time and amount to nothing. But who is foolish enough to try to stop the movements of God? The other members of the council do not bother with Scripture or reason. Their anger and official indignation are their only sources of thought. At the crucifixion Luke described Joseph of Arimathea as "a member of the council, a good and righteous man, who had not consented to their purpose and deed; and he was looking for the kingdom of God" ([Luke 23:50–51](#)). Simply by being a member of the establishment an official is not thereby made deaf to the gospel. The key qualification is that one be "looking for the kingdom of God."

By having Gamaliel present a reasoned, intelligent argument, Luke implies that others who made the effort to think through the case of the church would come to a similarly favorable conclusion. Faced with innovation and possible new revelation, the traditional faith community should not resort to force against innovators (5:33) but should wait and see (5:34–39) and let truth make its own way. The noble Gamaliel’s advice to leave the Christians alone in order that the world might see what will become of all this represents Luke’s own appeal to the foes of the church, an appeal summed up in the very last word of Acts: *unhindered*.

The apostles leave with their lives but not without suffering—thirty-nine lashes killed many a prisoner. Yet, in the topsy-turvy value system of the apostles even terrible torture elicits “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (5:41) in emulation of their Leader (5:31)—an unusual christological title found only in Acts, which possibly signifies the close relationship between Christ and his band of followers. The ones who continued with Jesus through his trials (Luke 22:28) are now led through their trials by their now-exalted Leader.

Jesus’ promise is fulfilled: “... When they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious how or what you are to answer or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (Luke 12:11–12).