

## **The Opposition to the Mission: The Churches Attacks<sup>1</sup>**

### **1. Intro**

- Here at C@P we live to be and make disciples of Jesus
- In every culture, and in every age ... wherever a church is seeking to be and make disciples ... it will always face opposition and attack
- For instance ...
  - Two weeks ago, an Islamic extremist opened fire at parishioners leaving an Orthodox church in Russia, leaving five women dead
  - The rise of atheism in our western culture is leading to deliberate efforts to eliminate Christianity from our society ... as seen by the introduction of Ethics in an effort to replace / remove school scripture
  - Last year, a church plant in school like C@P was warned by the school, that their lease would be terminated if they continued to teach a biblical view of gender and marriage
  
- The obvious question is
  - How do you guard against this type of opposition?
  - What do you do in the face of such attacks?
  - If it's inevitable ... that the church will face opposition to its mission ...
    - Then what must the church do to be prepared?
  
- To answer those questions, we're going to look at Act 5-6
- Because what's happening today is nothing new
  - Attacks on the church and opposition to God's mission has been happening right from the beginning
- As we look at Acts 5 ... we'll see these attacks
  - can be internal as well as external
  - cultural, political or spiritual
  
- As we do we'll see
  - The types of attacks the church will face, specifically
    - Hypocrisy
    - Oppression, and
    - Division
  - How do you respond to such opposition if we're to carry on living to be a make disciples of Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> The mission minded church faces internal and external threats to the ongoing spread of the gospel. However, God works through his HS to ensure the church remains focused on the gospel and continues to carry on the mission

## **2. Context**

- Jesus has risen from the grave
  - Given disciples a 40 day crash course in biblical theology
  - Given them a seemingly impossible mission to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth
- What we've seen so far is that what seems impossible to man ... is made possible by Jesus sending his Holy Spirit to dwell in, be with and equip not just the disciples ... but ALL believers in the proclamation of the gospel
- And as a result the disciples have been boldly declaring the good news of Jesus
- And last week in Ch 4 we saw that the number of believers has grown to over 5,000 men
- But now they're facing opposition
- First attack comes in the form of hypocrisy

## **3. Handling Hypocrisy (v1-11)**

- In 5:1-11, Luke contrasts Barnabas, who sold some property and donated the proceeds (4:36) with Ananias and Sapphira, who did the same
- On the face of it, the two actions were the same, yet Barnabas is commended while Ananias and Sapphira are condemned
- Why the difference?
  - At first sight, it would seem that the sin was that "Ananias kept back part of the money for himself"(v2)
  - But Peter says later in v4 that Ananias was under no obligation to either sell the property nor to donate the proceeds
- So, what was the problem?
  - Peter says that it was because Ananias lied and tried to deceive Peter and the Apostles
  - He says
    - v3 - *"Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?"*
  - In other words, they posed as if they were giving the whole price of the land

- Their sin was not greed or a lack of generosity ... it was hypocrisy > a false piety > a lack of integrity
  - They intentionally set out to present themselves as something they were not
  - They posed as spiritual giants, when they were actually struggling with pride and materialism
- If they'd said "Here's the money from our house, and we've kept some of it for ourselves"
  - No issue > joy > gratefulness > generosity!
  - But ... they wanted the credit and the honour in the community of being sacrificial givers — but they didn't want to pay the (literal) cost for it
- Why was this sin seen as so serious?
- Remember Jesus has commissioned his disciples to be 'my witnesses'
  - That means,
    - to not only proclaim the gospel ... but to live a life that reflects the gospel ...
    - to live a life that points to Jesus ... as well as speaking words that point to Jesus
  - Clearly Ananias and Sapphira's actions weren't a witness to Jesus ... they were are a slur on Jesus
- Hypocrisy amongst Christians is one of the most damaging affects on the mission of the church
- And throughout all the centuries nothing has hurt the work and witness of the church more than this
- There's no more common complaint by non-Christians than "there are so many hypocrites in the church"
- G.K.Chesterton was reputed to have said,
  - *"the greatest argument against the truth of Christianity is the lives of Christians."*
- Even the most convinced Christians are often cast into doubt by the thought: "if the gospel is true — how can so many supposed Christians be so dishonest and cruel?"

### **Application**

- There are many ways we show ourselves to be hypocrites
  - We'll expect others to forgive us, but we can be slow to forgive those who've wronged us

- We'll condemn the sexual immorality of sports stars, yet in our hearts and in our heads we've done the same things
- We'll take all the good things in life God gives us ... but hold back in being generous with those things
- We'll point the finger at the failures of others, while conveniently forgetting that we've been guilty of them in the past
  
- There's two ways to handle hypocrisy
- First is individually ...
- It starts with recognising that we all struggle with sin ... and therefore, all of us ... to some degree or another will be hypocrites
  - No-one's able to live a perfect life
  - Perfect obedience to God and his word is impossible this side of heaven
  
- With this being the case, then the second thing we must do is live a life of humble repentance
  - That is, to acknowledge your inability to be perfect before God and with others and
    - to repent of that ...
    - to confess those times you fall
    - to seek forgiveness when you err
  - Because humble repentance will help guard you against hypocrisy
  
- Corporately ... we must hold each accountable
  - There's no room in a church that lives to be and make disciples of Jesus for unrepentant sin
  - Of course, to do that requires you to take the plank out of your own eye before you remove the speck of dust from your brother or sisters eye
  - And it must be done in gentleness and in line with God's word
- But a willingness to let unrepentant sin go unchecked will allow hypocrisy to breed and fester
  
- However, there's something more that needs exploring here
- Because, when you look at the sin beneath the sin ... and the issue under the hypocrisy ... you see that Ananias and Sapphira were guilty of spiritual pride
- Their motive for giving
  - wasn't God's honour ... but their honour
  - wasn't a concern to benefit the poor ... but a concern to benefit themselves

- It was their way to earn their reputation and sense of worth through their religious piety
- Clearly, they hadn't properly understand the gospel
  - Because the gospel says ... your value and worth is not found in your reputation and the approval of others
  - Your real value is found in being loved by your Father in heaven ... who demonstrated that to you in the most emphatic way possible at the cross
- The ultimate way to handle hypocrisy ... is to look to Christ
  - Because when you understand you have the approval of the one who truly matters ...
  - Then it frees you from trying to be something you're not
- It means you don't need to fake it and cover over your failings
  - Because he knows all your failings and was willing to die for them all anyway
- And so the ultimate way to handle hypocrisy ... is to look to Christ and rest in him

#### **4. Overcoming Oppression (5:12-42)**

- The second attack the church was facing was persecution from outside the church
  - See this in vv17-42
- In particular the opposition is coming from the cultural elite of the day - high priests and the Sanhedrin
  - Sanhedrin were the ruling council that consisted of 70 of the leading men of Jerusalem including the high priests, other religious leaders, as well as tribal and family elders
  - They were the cultural elite of the day
- And despite the good the apostles were doing healing the sick ... the religious leaders were jealous of the crowds they were attracting and the influence they were having over the people
- So they tried to shut them down
- And in a re-run of what we saw in Ch 4
  - The apostles were arrested and put in jail
  - After miraculously escaping ... they were summoned to give an account for themselves

- So Peter and the apostles get up, knowing that what they are about to say is going to land them in hot water ... and they boldly state v29 ... "We must obey God rather than men" ... and then they declare the gospel
  - v30-32 *The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead-- whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."*
- And what does the Sanhedrin want to do when they hear this?
  - They were furious and wanted them put them death
- In God's mercy, a Pharisee named Gamaliel persuades the Council to let them go
  - His logic was flawless
    - If these guys are frauds ... don't worry about them, they'll be gone soon enough like all the others
    - But if they are from God as they say they are ... then nothing we do will stop them because it will be like trying to fight God himself
- But none the less ... they still had them flogged and tried to gag them and their message

### Implication

- The world will tolerate a church only when it is the type of church it finds tolerable
- The church the world likes is the one that does good things to help ... but doesn't challenge their worldview
- The world wants a church that's strong on social justice and mercy ministries but weak on gospel proclamation
- When the world gives a thumbs up and says
  - "we like your church and your style of Christianity" ...
  - alarm bells should be going off
- The church in Acts never had that kind of trouble
  - Because ... here is Peter ...
    - a guy who have previously denied Christ before a servant girl of the High Priest ...
    - now proclaims Christ boldly before not just the High Priest ... but the entire Sanhedrin!
- For Peter to do this would've taken great courage
  - Sanhedrin the cultural, political and spiritual leaders of the day

- They set culture, they determined morality, they decided truth
- Yet here is Peter willing to stand against them by preaching what they needed to hear, but didn't want to hear
- Why?
  - v29 – *"We must obey God rather than men!"*<sup>2</sup>

### Application

- The Christian community today who's living to be and make disciples of Jesus ... continues to face opposition and persecution from the cultural, social, political and ethical elite
- In our context, it's not overly hostile and no one is being thrown in gaol ...
  - It's more an attempt to silence Christians and the gospel like the Sanhedrin tried with the apostles
- The conversation tends to be
  - "That gospel / Jesus stuff is fine for you but just don't impose it on me ...
  - "And by the way, don't dare to share your faith or talk about your faith publicly with me or others."

### Apologetic

- Insisting that Christians don't share their faith is at best inconsistent and at worst hypocritical
- Because what you are doing is insisting that it's fine for you to **impose** your worldview ... but it's not okay for Christians to **share** theirs
- You say
  - "You Christians need to keep your faith to yourself and you shouldn't be talking about and wanting to bring it into the public space"
- You can't have it both ways
- You can't say
  - I can speak my opinion into the public space ... but you can't
  - Either both Christian and non-Christian ought to be able to share their worldviews ... or both need to be silenced
  - Given that we [quite rightly] as a culture value the ideal of freedom of speech ... then surely there is only one logical conclusion
- What Acts 5 teaches us is ... despite the opposition and oppression ... Christians must stand firm in the face of cultural elite who seek to silence the gospel

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 4:19 *"Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God."*

- It also teaches us that we reject position taken by some Christians to not proclaim the gospel in light of opposition and persecution ... and just let my life do the talking
  - The HS does not empower people to be silent

### **Illustration – Witness on Train**

- Talking to someone this week who's been challenged through our Acts series to be a bold witness for Jesus and that it's better to obey God than men and not remain silent
- This what they do
  - Get on the train ... walk up to the top deck
  - Stand in the middle of the carriage and say
    - "If anyone is interested in finding out about Jesus ... I'll be standing over there – come and talk to me"
  - Walk through the carriage, stand in the middle section near the doors and wait for people to come and talk to them
- How did it go?
  - One time ... no-one came
  - Another time ... a person came and said you shouldn't be doing this and imposing your view on people
  - Another time ... an old man, came and talked
    - Said he hadn't been to church to many years ... wanted to get re-connected to God
    - They were able to point him to a church close where he lived
- After being rebuked by one commuter ... what do you think they did
  - Didn't stop them
  - Next time got on the train ... did the same thing
- We must obey God rather men
- How do you do that?
- How to overcome opposition and the push to silence you and the gospel
- Two things ...
- Firstly, you remember the importance of the message
- In v20 the angel told Peter ...
  - *"Go, stand in the temple courts," and tell the people the full message of this new life."*
- You're proclaiming the message of new life
  - Gospel ... good news!
  - There's no other name in which salvation is found



- Jesus is the way the truth and the life
- You're holding out for people the way to have eternal life
- Second thing is to remember what Jesus did in the face of opposition
  - Jesus refused to remain silent ...
    - he continued to proclaim the kingdom
    - knowing that he would face suffering and death
  - And he knew he had to obey God, not men
  - In the garden before he was arrested and crucified he prayed
    - "Not my will be done but yours"
  - When he was on the cross and the crowd called out
    - "Come down from the cross and save yourself"
    - He refused to listen to them and instead obey God
- Why?
  - Because he had to give up saving himself ... in order to save us
  - He obeyed God knowing it would cause him to face opposition and death ... so you and I can have the new life he offers

### **5. Demolishing Division (6:1-7)**

- The third attack we see the early church facing was internal division and disunity
- The church is growing ... lots of people converted
- Logistics becoming tricky [we can relate to that!]
- In this case ... the church was trying to doing the right thing
  - Not just proclaiming the gospel
  - Caring for the needy ... in this case it's the widows
- But the system was falling down
  - Greek speaking Jews upset with the Hebrew Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food
- This really had the potential to undermine the mission of the church
- Because nothing will derail the mission mindedness of a church than disunity and division
- When a church is looking inward because its squabbling over internal issues of
  - Doctrine
  - Leadership
  - Relationship fallout
  - Worship styles

- Then it won't be looking outward
- Division and disunity will always sap the emotional energy of a church to be mission minded ... because it's so focused on internal issues that it's got nothing left to reach out
- This is the danger facing the church in Jerusalem
  - Especially when it was split over racial lines – Hebrews vs Greeks
  - Nothing gets people fired up more ... than if they feel their culture or race is being treated unequally
- The Apostles were wise in the way they responded
  - They recognised that both word and deed are important
  - But they insisted the ministry of the word mustn't be neglected because of the need to minister to the widows
  - That is the ... serving the needs of others is important ... but not at the expense of proclaiming the word
- So they delegated!
  - They chose godly and wise men, full of the Spirit to take responsibility for the mercy ministry of the church
  - This enabled the apostles ... the men God had gifted and called ... to focus on the more important ministry of word and prayer

### Application

- Now on the face of it, the way they demolished the disunity and division was by appointing lay leaders to cope with the complexity and scale of a growing church
  - And that's an important principle for any church
  - A healthy church will always be looking to identify, train up and delegate to people who can lead ministries
  - We're doing to that to some degree ... we need to do it more and more
- But at another level ... and probably more profound level ... the way the apostles demolished the division and disunity was by focusing on the gospel
- By making the decision they did ... they made a clear statement that as a community ... the main thing / the most important thing they could be doing was preaching and teaching the gospel
- By doing so they showed the 'main thing is that the main thing remain the main thing'

- Because there is nothing that will break down disunity and division between people faster than the gospel – whether it be ...
  - Racial
  - Cultural
  - Social
  - Financial
  - Political
  
- How?
- Gospel is wonderfully unifying
- What the gospel does is ... it reminds us all ... that before God we all stand before him on the same level
  - Everyone / all of us ... are sinners who are unable to save ourselves
  - The gospel reminds us we are all sinners and therefore we all face the same predicament
- But the gospel also demolishes disunity and division, because it says ... the good news of salvation is freely available to everyone, regardless of race, colour or creed
  - It doesn't matter if you're
    - Private school / university educated north shore investment banker
    - Lebanese plumber from Lakemba
    - Mr and Mrs Working Australian from the burbs
  - All are one in Christ
  
- How can there be division when a community properly understands the gospel?
  - When you know you have nothing to boast in over another person because you know you're just as sinful them
  - And your only means of salvation doesn't depend on anything you can bring the table ... but is based on exactly the same foundation as everyone else ... Jesus Christ and the cross
  - Then you and I must see we are all in the same boat ... and there is absolutely no room for disunity and division

### 6. Conclusion

- And so in the face of the attacks of hypocrisy, opposition and division ...
- What happened?
  - 5:14 - *More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number*

- *6:7 - So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.*
- God continued to equip and sustain his church ... so that despite the attacks ... it continued to grow
- What looked like Mission Impossible ... is in fact Mission Unstoppable
  
- Just as the early church faced multiple attacks that threatened to undermine the spread of the gospel ...
  - As you and I remember that the main thing is the main thing remain the main thing
  - God's church will
    - Handle Hypocrisy
    - Overcome Oppression
    - Demolish division and disunity
- And he will ensure the word will continue to spread

**PRAY**