



'Acts' - Extra Teaching Points #6

Acts 4:23 – 5:11 (NASB)

Pages 69-82 in *'Acts For Everyone' (Part 1)* by N. T. Wright

Acts 4:23-31 (NASB95)

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.

²⁴ *And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God **with one accord** and said, "O Lord, it is You who MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA, AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM,"* ²⁵ *who by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, 'WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS?'* ²⁶ *'THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST.'* ²⁷ *"For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,"* ²⁸ *to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.*

²⁹ *"And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Your bond-servants may speak Your word with all confidence,"* ³⁰ *while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus."* ³¹ *And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness.*

Q: When Peter and John told the disciples about how the authorities had threatened all of them, their first move was to pray. Why did they start their prayer by quoting [Psalms 146:6](#)?

- "They start their prayer invoking God as the creator of heaven, earth, the sea, and everything else – the God, in other words, of the Old Testament, **the God who can be appealed to for all that takes place within His domains.**" P. 72

Q: Why would starting a prayer this way cause them to pray with confidence?

- "Praying like this is confident praying, not because people necessarily feel more devout than at other times, but because they are rooting themselves firmly in the ancient tradition of scripture." P. 72

- When our prayers are aligned with what God has revealed about Himself through the scripture, we learn to see things from His perspective more than ours.
 - By aligning our prayers with God's perspective, we can have confidence that God will achieve His purposes.
- When we see the threats we are facing from the perspective of wanting God's will to be done, we can relax and cast all our anxieties on Him (1Peter 5:7).
 - God will achieve His purposes!
 - It is when we pray for *our will to be done*, rather than *God's will to be done* ([Matt. 6:10](#)), that we are filled with anxiety and lack of confidence!

Q: Why did the disciples ask God to let them speak His Word with confidence, rather than ask Him to remove the threat?

- They saw themselves as being purchased by God for Him to use as He wills to achieve His purposes.
 - Too often today, Christians see God as working for them, rather than the one they work for!
- **They knew that God was using the opposition they were facing to achieve His purposes... they wanted His help to play their part.**

Acts 4:32-37

*And the congregation of those who believed **were of one heart and soul**; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them.* ³³ *And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.* ³⁴ *For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales ³⁵ and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.* ³⁶ *Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), ³⁷ and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

Q: “Luke has already told us that the first Christians, living in Jerusalem, sold property and distributed it to those who were in need. Why does he repeat the point here? What is he adding?” P. 74

- “They believed that God has established the ‘new covenant’... through Jesus of Nazareth. They therefore **saw themselves as the ‘covenant community’ in whom God’s promises were coming true.** And among these promises we find Deuteronomy, which speaks of what life will be like when God finally establishes His people. And in [Deuteronomy](#) we find [chapter 15](#), which gives commands for how, every seven years, there must be a remission of debts: everyone who is owed money must remit the claim. However, the passage goes on ([verse 4](#)), ‘there will be no needy person among you, because the Lord is sure to bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. And now we can see what Luke is up to. **He is making the striking, controversial claim that the early Christian movement was, in effect, the true covenant community that God had always intended to set up.**” P. 75
- “**What you do with money and possessions declares loudly what sort of community you are,** and the statement made by the early church’s practice was clear and definite. No wonder they were able to give such powerful testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. They were demonstrating that it was a reality in ways that many Christians today, who sadly balk at giving a tithe of their income to the church, can only dream of.” P. 76

Q: Luke has described the early believers as being “in one accord”, or “of one heart and soul” more than once so far in this letter. Why is he emphasizing this?

- “Being of one heart and soul’ in this passage seems to mean not just ‘agreeing on all disputed matters’, but also ‘**ready to regard each other’s needs as one’s own.**” P. 77
- “As in his gospel, so here in Acts, Luke keeps popping people like this into his story, not only making it more vivid, but helping us to get a sense of **what following Jesus looks like in practice.** P. 78

Acts 5:1-11

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property,² and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife’s full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles’ feet.³ But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? ⁴ “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.” ⁵ And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. ⁷ Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter responded to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.” ⁹ Then Peter said to her, “Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.” ¹⁰ And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.

Q: Why is Luke telling us the story of Ananias and Sapphira?

- “Part of what he is trying to tell us, whether we like it or not (and many of course don’t), is that **the early Christian community,** without even trying, was **functioning somewhat like the Temple itself.** It was a place of holiness, a holiness so dramatic and acute that every blemish was magnified. Remember how, when the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem in the first place, carried on an ox-cart, one of its guardians put out his hand to steady it when it wobbled and was at once struck dead, much to King David’s annoyance (2 Samuel 6:6-9). The Temple itself contained warnings against anyone approaching who was unfit to do so. Gentiles were kept out of it (see Acts 21:28-29); Jewish women could only go in as far as a certain point; only the priests could go into the inner court; and only the high priest himself could go into the central shrine, the ‘holy of holies’. And then only once a year, taking all kinds of precautions. This sense of dangerous holiness emanates from some of Israel’s ancient traditions, not just about the Temple but about the behavior of the whole community.” P. 79-80

Q: What should we take from this story?

- "...we may have to face the fact that if you want to be a community which seems to be taking the place of the Temple of the living God, you mustn't be surprised if the living God takes you seriously; seriously enough to make it clear that there is no such thing as cheap grace. If you invoke the power of the holy one, the one who will eventually right all wrongs and sort out all cheating and lying, **he may just decide to do some of that work already, in advance. God is not mocked**, as Paul puts it (Galatians 6:7)." P. 80
- "We either choose to live in the presence of the God who made the world, and who longs passionately for it to be set right, or we lapse back into some variety, or other, of easy-going paganism, even if it has a Christian veneer to it. **Holiness, in other words, is not an optional extra.** How God chooses to make the point is, in the last analysis, up to him, since he is the only one who knows the human heart. But the earliest Christians were quite clear. **To name the name of Jesus, and invoke the Holy Spirit, is to claim to be the Temple of the living God, and that is bound to have consequences.**" P. 81

Q: Why is lying such a big deal?

- "The real, deep-level problem about lying is that it misuses, or abuses, the highest faculty we possess: the gift of expressing in clear speech the reality of who we are, what we think, and how we feel. It is, as it were, the opposite of the gift of tongues. Instead of allowing God's spirit to have free rein through our faculties, so that we praise God in words or sounds which enable us to stand (however briefly) at the intersection of heaven and earth, when we tell lies, we not only hold heaven and earth apart; we twist earth itself, so that it serves our own interests. Lying is, ultimately, a way of declaring that we don't like the world the way it is, and we will pretend that it is somehow more the way we want it to be. **At that level, it is a way of saying that we don't trust God the creator to look after his world and sort it out in his own time and way. And it is precisely the claim of the early church that God the creator has acted in Jesus Christ to sort out the world and set it right. Those who make that claim, and live by that claim, must expect to be judged by that claim.**" P. 81-82

Follow Up Assignment

Q: What threats are you facing?

- Do you pray about them the way the disciples in [Acts 4:23-31](#) did?
- If not, what do you need to do differently?

Q: "What you do with money and possessions declares loudly what sort of community you are." Based on this, what sort of community is your church?

- What does the way you personally use money and possessions say about what community you are a part of?
- Does the way you use money and possessions help you give powerful testimony that the resurrection of Jesus is real? Why... or why not?

Q: "To name the name of Jesus, and invoke the Holy Spirit, is to claim to be the Temple of the living God, and that is bound to have consequences... Holiness is not an optional extra." If Jesus were talking to you in person, what would He tell you to take more seriously?