

The Acts 2 experience of the apostles' new life, rich teaching and satisfying fellowship (koinonia), and joyful worship was expansive and expulsive—a rocket thrust that propelled them into a needy world. Acts 2 demanded Acts 3.

Likewise, the healing power of Acts 3 led the early church toward another inevitable step in her growth. Having been infused with the power of the Holy Spirit, moving out into the world with regenerative power, the church now experienced opposition—her first persecution (Acts 4).

Persecution is an inevitable element of genuine Christian faith. In John 15:18-20 Jesus told his disciples:

“If the world hates you, keep in mind the world hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: “No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obey my teaching, they will obey yours also.”

Jesus used a *fortiori* logic: what is true of the greater (namely, Christ) will also be true of the lesser (us). Jesus' Beatitudes conclude with predictions of persecution. As Christlike virtue is built upon Christlike virtue in his followers' lives, the reward is not fame of adulation but persecution! Paul, writing to Timothy to strengthen him in the ministry, said, “Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

The martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his Flossenberg cell in 1937:

Suffering... is the badge of the true Christian. The disciple is not above his master... Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true church, and one of the memoranda drawn up in preparations for the Augsburg Confession similarly defines the church as the community of those “who are persecuted and martyred for the gospel's sake.” ... Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer.

This is not all bad. As the late Bishop Sheen once said, “One advantage of being thrown on your back is that you face heaven.” When the Spirit reigns in our lives, there will be persecution and a heavenly focus!

How did the early church respond to opposition?

When the healed beggar entered Solomon's Porch (NIV, “Solomon's Colonnade”), the white columns reaching up sixty feet to the cedar roof illustrated his joy as his voice reverberated throughout the great hall. Peter's sermon was equally dramatic as a large crowd gathered around them. And the presence of Exhibit A doing jumping jacks brought great credibility to what the apostle said.

The priest and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were

teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day. But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand. (4:1-4)

Certainly few in the temple could have missed the commotion. Soon “priests” (Levites who were giving their annual service in the temple), “the captain of the temple guard” (the temple police chief), and “the Sadducees” came together and terminated the meeting. Those who believed now came to 5,000, but the leaders made the arrest anyway. There were undoubtedly some unhappy words between the crowd and the authorities.

Note the Sadducees’ leading role in the incarceration. Little good can be said about this bunch. The Pharisees opposed Jesus for religious reasons (misguided conviction). The Sadducees’ opposition, however, came largely from political motivations. This is why the Sadducees were not as involved in early persecutions against Christ. But as they saw the incipient threat to their political structure, they became implacable enemies. In the book of Acts persecution was largely Sadducean. They were the materialistic rationalists of their day—denying the supernatural, denying evil spirits, denying angels (see Acts 23:8). Above all, they denied the Resurrection (see Mark 12:18), which the apostles boldly preached. To the Sadducees, the Messiah was simply an ideal and the messianic age a process.

These men gained special ascendancy during the intertestamental Maccabean period. During subsequent political regimes, they created a priestly nobility. They were the educated, wealthy elite. But they were also unprincipled collaborationists, political sycophants who would sell their mothers to stay in power. Though a minority, they controlled both the religious and political set of their day. They were control freaks, and did not want anyone rocking their boat.

As it was evidently too late in the day to hold a legal hearing. The Jewish leaders tossed Peter and John into jail. Possibly the healed beggar too, because he was with them in the following events (see 4:14). The story continues in verses 5-7:

The next day the rulers, elders and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. Annas the high priest was there, and so were Caiaphas, John, Alexander and the other men of the high priest’s family. They had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them:
“By what power or what name did you do this?”

The court assembled in concentric semicircles before Peter, John, and the ex-cripple, with the high priest seated in the middle. It would be difficult to imagine a more priggish, malevolent assembly of men than this group dominated by the Sadducees—highly sophisticated, twity bluebloods who had come to take care of these Galilean hayseeds. Annas is called “high priest” here, but at this point in time this was more of an honorary title for him. Caiaphas, his son-in-law, was the actual high priest. Nevertheless, Annas was the ecclesiastical boss of Palestine.

Do you get the picture? Peter, John, and the healed beggar are in their coveralls; while Annas and the Sadducee dominated Sanhedrin are assembled for judgement. “By what power or what name did you do this?” The question was a subtle, deadly trap, because if the apostles’ accusers

could get them to attribute the healing to any power other than Jehovah, even though it was a bona fide miracle they could sentence them to death (see Deuteronomy 13:1-5).

This was the same mob that tried and condemned Christ. Most of us would be absolutely paralyzed. But what did Peter do? One thing is for sure-he did not run.

How the Early Church Responded to Opposition (vv. 8-13, 19-20)

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” (vv.8-12)

Verse 13 says that the Sanhedrin noticed Peter and John’s bravery-amazing in view of circumstances. The apostles ministered beyond their natural abilities. The Sanhedrin observed that they were not educated or trained and yet gained ascendancy over the Palestinian elite in verbal combat. Christ’s men responded to their persecutors with daring and aggressiveness.

Peter was unflinchingly personal:

“Then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified...He is ‘the stone you builders rejected.’”

Though most of the Sanhedrin were Sadducees and did not want to hear of the Resurrection, Peter hurled it at them like a flaming spear: “whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead.” Then came his stupendous claim in verse 12: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” It is Christ or nothing! Christ or judgement! Christ or Hell! What a marvelous, gracious aggression! And Peter had just begun!

What was the Sanhedrin’s reaction? There was probably coughing and clearing of throats, uneasy shifting of position and straightening of robes, and certainly some exchanged glances and pounding hearts.

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. (vv. 13-14)

Incredible! They could think of nothing to say. Even the cynical, witty, Caiaphas, who had so sardonically sealed Christ’s death, stating, “It is better...that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish” (John 11:50), now had nothing to say. Overwhelmed by the embarrassing silence, they dismissed the offending apostles of Christ.

So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in his name.” Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. (vv. 15-18)

These incredibly hard-hearted men were so intent on protecting their own interests that a bona fide, undeniable miracle did not get through to them. They had no understanding of what was going on with this new resurrection sect.

Note Peter and John’s supreme reply:

“Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” (vv. 19-20)

You probably could have heard a pin drop in that hall of hewn stone. Peter and John again responded with confidence and powerful freedom of speech, ministering beyond their human abilities. They responded daringly and aggressively with integrity. No compromise.

Fredrick the Great once called all his generals together. One of them, Hans Von Zieten, had duties to perform at his church that night and a Communion to participate in, so he refused to come. Later he was again invited to dine with all the generals and Frederick the Great. On that occasion they all made light of him and joked about his religious duties and, about the Lord’s Supper. Von Zieten stood and said to his intimidating ruler, “My lord, there is a greater king than you, a king to whom I have sworn allegiance, even unto death. I am a Christian man, and I cannot sit quietly as the Lord’s name is dishonored, his character belittled, and his cause subjected to ridicule. With your permission I shall withdraw.”

There was silence because the generals knew such a daring act could mean death. But Frederick the Great was so struck by Von Zieten’s courage that he begged him to stay and promised him he would never again demean those sacred things.

Peter Cartwright was a great circuit-riding Methodist preacher in Illinois. An uncompromising man, he had come north from Tennessee because of his opposition to slavery. One Sunday morning when he was scheduled to preach, his deacons told him that President Andrew Jackson was in the congregation. Knowing Cartwright was used to saying whatever he felt God wanted him to say, regardless of how people might react, they warned him not to say anything that would offend the chief executive. He stood up to preach and said, “I understand President Andrew Jackson is here. I have been requested to be guarded in my remarks. Andrew Jackson will go to hell if he does not repent.” The audience was shocked. They wondered how the President would respond to this, but after service he told Cartwright, “Sir, if I had a regiment of men like you, I could whip the world.”

This is how the early church too responded to opposition- with beautiful integrity. The Sanhedrin could do nothing but release them as verses 21-22 reveal:

After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened. For the man who was miraculously healed was over forty years old.

Why the Early Church Responded as she did (vv. 13,8)

The answer is wonderfully clear in verse 13:

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.

The fatal interrogation of Jesus on the eve of the crucifixion had made an unforgettable impression on the Sanhedrin. Though they would have liked to forget it, they simply could not. And now as the two apostles interacted with them, they could not help but be reminded of Jesus. The apostles were “unlearned” (KJV; that is, unlettered), and they were “ignorant” (KJV; the same root word for idiots, unschooled”). But when they talked, they were so much like Jesus that the presence of Christ right then and there could not be denied. Peter’s and John’s companionship with Jesus had transformed them.

What the Sanhedrin did not perhaps understand was that the apostles were still companions of Jesus. They were indwelt with the Holy Spirit (The Spirit of Jesus) and with Christ (Romans 8:9-10). Their Lord was saturating their emotions, compelling their wills, energizing their bodies, so that the Sanhedrin was seeing not only them, but Christ. Not only that, but Peter and John, filled with the Holy Spirit, were in constant communication with their Lord. So when the Jews saw Peter and John, they also saw Jesus.

The apostles were able to respond to opposition as they did because they were walking with Christ. And as a result, “they [the members of the Sanhedrin] were astonished.” This priggish, pompous, self-consciously superior, gospel-hardened group experienced wonder, awe. Perhaps some of them even came to Christ.

The lives of all who know the reign of the Spirit resound with a display of God’s healing power that brings opposition and even persecution but also incredible joy. The Beatitudes describe this same process of persecution and spiritual bliss. “Blessed [happy,blissful] are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 5:10).

Later in Acts, when the Apostles had been flogged at the orders of the same Sanhedrin, “The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:41) When confronted by their enemies, they responded with amazing confidence, daring aggressiveness, and no compromise! Why? Because they had been with Jesus.

What does this mean for us? When we are filled with the Holy Spirit, Christ is the focus of our lives. The holy Spirit does not promote himself. He promotes Christ.

Also, we cannot rest on the fact that we prayed for the Spirit's fullness five years ago or even last week. But as we engage in constant prayer for his fullness, the Spirit of Christ will consistently flow through us.

We must spend time in God's word. The Bible is like a mirror set before us. The light of Christ reflects off the Word and into our faces, so that we shine forth Christ. We must remain in the Word-constantly learning, constantly being taught-not relying on what we have learned in the past, but interacting with it anew, so that Christ is projected throughout our entire lives.

We must spend time with God's people. We become like the people with whom we spend time, and the light of Christ flows out of His people and into those around them.

We must spend time prayer, because as we fellowship with the Lord, the perfume of his life makes is the very "fragrance of [Christ]" (see 2 Corinthians 2:14).