

Acts 5:12-42

Of God or Of Men – How Can You Tell?

Christ said during His earthly ministry: *Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword* (Mt. 10:34). I don't believe the Lord Jesus was speaking of a literal sword on that occasion. The closest his disciples came to the use of such weapons came when Peter took a sword and managed to cut off the ear of the high priest's servant at the time that Christ was apprehended by the Jews. On that occasion Jesus told Peter to put up his sword and then he healed the ear of the high priest's servant.

As Christians we have never been called to take up arms as a means for furthering the cause of Christ. The weapons of our warfare, Paul tells us, are not carnal but are spiritual and are mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds. All it takes for the Christian or the church to provoke antagonism is to speak the truth in love.

And it's a good thing for us as Christians to recognize that by speaking the truth in love we will promote antagonism. We don't desire it. We don't seek it. We don't strive to be antagonistic for the sake of antagonism. We simply recognize that by its very nature the gospel confronts men in their sin and we have to have sufficient faith to provoke that antagonism with the hope and aim that salvation will follow.

The portion we've read this evening from Acts 5 shows us that this is all the apostles did. They weren't looking for a fight or a debate. They were simply telling their fellow country men that even though they were responsible for Christ's death – it was according to a Divine plan and Christ was risen and their sins could be forgiven. And as the Spirit of God bore witness to the truth of the gospel we read in v. 14 that *believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women*.

The tide was rising. Souls were being saved. The message of salvation in Christ was being vindicated by apostolic miracles. There wasn't any place in Jerusalem you could go without hearing the gospel discussed. As the Jewish council admitted themselves in v. 28 *ye have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine*.

But even as Jerusalem was being filled with the doctrine of the gospel, and Christians were obviously filled with the Spirit, we read v. 17 that the high priest and all that were with him were filled with something else – **{cf. 5:17 – filled with indignation}**.

The gospel had sparked antagonism – again. And it's not hard to see why. Look at the accusation in v. 28 that is leveled against the apostles by the Jewish council – *You intend to bring this man's blood upon us* – i.e. you intend to impute to us the crime that we committed in nailing an innocent man to a cross!

Peter in effect pleads guilty – *We ought to obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree. Him hath God exalted with*

his right hand to be a Prince and a Savior, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. (5:29,30)

We are obeying God. God is on our side. The Holy Ghost bears witness to the truth. The Holy Ghost is given to those that obey him. By implication they're saying You have missed the Messiah. You are guilty of the crime of killing the Prince of Life. You are not obeying God. You do not have the Holy Ghost.

By their straightforwardness they have intensified the antagonism to the point where the council is ready to slay them. But before this can happen a man by the name of Gamaliel stands up. He's a doctor of the law and had a good reputation among the people. This man reminds me a little bit of Erasmus from the days of the Reformation. Erasmus was a scholar who could see the corruption of Rome. He could see the legitimacy of some of the Reformers complaints about Rome. But he never left Rome. From the comfort and security of his position as a scholar he might criticize Rome, and he might lend credence to the Reformers but he preferred to consider himself something of an outside commentator to the controversy rather than one who was willing to truly dive in to the whole matter.

Now in our text Gamaliel exercises some keen insight and he raises an issue that was important to that council and continues to be an important issue to Christians of all time. The issue is simply this: *Is what we are seeing of God or of men?* {cf. 5:38,39}. The actions of the council would certainly lead us to believe that in their opinion it was of men. But in fact it was of God.

How often this question needs to be asked in Christian circles today. *Is this of God or of men?* When the stadium is packed out by a large audience for a meeting or a concert or a seminar of some kind is it of God or of men? When a church becomes larger than all the others and grows faster than all the others is this of God or of men?

And the question that needs to accompany this question is this: *How do you know? How can you tell?* Is it safe to assume that if it's large and it grows fast it must be of God? Or should we assume that God must not be in it if it's large and has grown fast. Should we assume if it's small and growth is barely detectable that it must be of men? Or is that small size and slow rate of growth an indication that God is in the work?

The Jewish council was in sore need of discernment and unfortunately their minds and hearts were so bent against the gospel that they failed to exercise discernment. And there's the key to the whole matter – discernment. We need discernment to know God's counsel and God's work. And so that's what I want to focus on this evening – discernment to know God's will and God's work.

We Must Discern God's Work

And I want to cover some of the guidelines that this narrative presents to us for discerning God's work. Let's look at the most obvious one first of all:

I. The Guideline of Popularity – {5:14-16}

Whatever was happening in Jerusalem it was certainly becoming widespread. Verse 14 tells us that *believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women*. It began in the city and as v. 16 tells us a multitude out of the cities were drawn to Jerusalem also. The sick were put into the streets that they might be healed. And the success rate in these healings was such that people were hearing about it for miles around and so the sick came from out of the city as well. Isn't it interesting that there are no exceptions listed to the healings that were taking place. If there were any hospitals in Jerusalem in those days they would have been cleaned out.

Now this guideline of popularity is the first thing that is raised by Gamaliel when he stands before the council. For the first thing he does is to cite 2 instances of things that had taken place in the recent past in Jerusalem that seemed to have popular support also {5:36,37}. I don't think it's hard to picture either one of these individuals. Maybe you've met somebody just like them.

They're probably very personable. They're probably the kind of men that you can't meet without instantly liking. And they were probably both passionately involved in whatever causes they represented. I dare say that they both thought they were doing the work of God.

Interesting isn't it that this man mentioned in v. 37 – *Judas of Galilee* rose up during the days of the taxing. He probably led a revolt against paying taxes. There's a cause that has little trouble gaining popular support – especially among Jews who deeply resented their subjection to the Roman government.

And Gamaliel raises a very valid point with regard to both of these men which although he didn't realize it truly served to vindicate the cause of Christ. Do you see what Theudas (v. 36) and Judas of Galilee (v. 37) had in common? They were both dead and once they died so did their causes. Now put that in the context of the message that the apostles were proclaiming. What were they saying? They were saying that Christ was crucified – but that he was alive! If that message isn't true, Gamaliel is indicating, then this cause will go the same way the previous ones have gone. It will die with its founder. It won't matter that it seems to be popular for a moment. It will eventually prove to be a flash in the pan, so to speak, because people aren't going to align themselves with a dead man.

And so popularity should not be the guiding principle to discerning God's work. I would agree with Gamaliel's proposition. If popularity is the guiding factor then we

should convert to Islam. I've been told that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world today – that it has been the fastest growing religion in England for some time.

Or we should all become Mormons. I've also read along the way Mormonism is the fastest growing cult in the world today. It's conservative appearance and emphasis on family values have given it popular appeal. Both of these religions follow dead men. What Gamaliel thought to be ridiculous has actually become widespread in the days following him. Today it is popular to follow religions that have been founded by dead men. I would suggest on the basis of the example of the early church that a more telling guideline for discerning God's work is *who are you following*, not – *how many are following*.

We are here today to worship a living Savior. We're here today because Christ is alive and we believe in Him. If He's alive then it matters not how many or how few attend to Him – He is the Son of God, not by popular acclaim but by His resurrection from the dead.

But let's narrow the scope of our investigation some. One of the things that has become necessary in our day is discerning within the broad scope of all that comes under the umbrella of Christianity what is of God and what is of men. And this leads to our next guideline:

II. The Guideline of Effect

And the primary effect that is revealed in the portion we've read from this morning is perseverance in the matter of making Christ's name known. You couldn't stop the early church. You couldn't shut the mouths of the apostles. They must endeavor to make Christ known.

And even though they would be arrested and put in prison – still they must speak the words of life {5:18-21}. And even though they would eventually be brought before the council and they would be threatened again and there would be many who would want to slay them and they would be beaten – still they must teach and preach Jesus Christ {5:41,42}.

I like what the angel of the Lord says to them in v. 20. This helps us see why they must continue to preach Christ. He says to them *Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life*. Christ was now their life! The gospel had become the driving force of their lives because Christ had given to them life! They had gained life through the forgiveness of their sins. And now the joy of salvation was their strength!

Here, then, is a clear indicator as to whether or not a work is of God – look for life! Is their spiritual life in this house? If there is then God is at work in this place. If there's not then we're wasting our time. We ought to go to where we can find life. And of course it follows that if you want to find life then you have to find Christ. He's the

source of the Christian's life. He's the aim in the Christian's life. He's the reason for the Christian's life. *I am the way, the truth, and the life* – He said in Jn. 14. *For me to live is Christ* Paul said to the Philippians.

You can't imitate spiritual life. It glows in a wonderful simplicity. It effects a person's demeanor. He may not even detect it himself. When Moses came down from the mount of God he didn't know that his face was glowing but everyone else could tell that he'd been in the presence of the Lord. And that's the mark of a person who radiates life. He's been in the presence of the Lord. He loves the worship of the Lord. He doesn't have to put on a plastic smile. He doesn't have to offer an insincere handshake. He doesn't have to force himself to function in a way that's unnatural. If he's been in the Lord's presence then the life of Christ will be evident in him.

And you won't be able to stop him. He must speak of the One who loved him and gave himself for him. He must sing praises to His name. He must give heed to His word. It becomes his chief delight. It becomes his highest priority.

I have a fear that many churches across America are functioning on artificial life support systems. It's amazing what can be done in the field of medicine today. A man's organs can be kept functioning through artificial means. His heart may be kept beating. He may be fed through a tube that keeps his respiratory system functioning. And yet for all that there may still be no life.

I wonder if the same may be true for churches that feel the need to adopt the attractive things of the world to try to supply life where there is little or no life? If Christ is present – If Christ is the attraction – If Christ is lifted up then this life will be detected. Christ was certainly the attraction and the source of life to the early church. And as a result they couldn't be stopped.

So we find a guideline that we shouldn't use in discerning God's work – popularity. I'm not going to become a Muslim or a Mormon – I don't care how popular they are. We have a guideline that we can use – the effect of persevering life. The gospel imparts life. Faith in Christ brings life. If you can find life in it's simplicity and sincerity then you've found a place where God is at work. Men all too often try to imitate life. Or they try to cover up deadness with worldliness and end up with deadness covered over with worldliness.

I don't find that in the book of Acts. We find instead the simplicity of spiritual life. They prayed. They preached. They witnessed. They rejoiced in salvation and they couldn't be stopped. The Jewish council should have been able to discern that this was God's work. Consider one more guideline – not terribly different from the one we've just considered:

III. The Guideline of God's Witness – {5:32}

This point has to be handled carefully because of a tendency to attribute every internal impulse that suits a man or woman's desires to the Holy Ghost. You may remember that when we went through the book of Acts we made the connection between this book and Luke's gospel. We know that Luke is the author of both of these books. Both are written to a man by the name of Theophilus.

And since the book of Acts takes up the narrative where the gospel of Luke leaves off it's fair to say that the clear statement of purpose given in the gospel of Luke can be carried over into the book of Acts also. That purpose statement is found in Lk. 1:3,4:

*It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, **that thou mightest know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed.***

The scriptures provide the objective basis for our certainty. The witness of the Holy Spirit using the scriptures provides the subjective basis for our certainty. The Spirit bears witness to the truth of God's word to the heart of the believer.

Both of these elements working together are illustrated at the end of Luke's gospel in that account of the Emmaus road disciples. You remember how Christ came along beside them and then beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself. And in v. 32 of Lk. 24 we find the objective and subjective witness being referenced when we read – *And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while He talked with us by the way, and while He opened to us the scriptures?*

There's the witness of the Holy Ghost – effecting their hearts – warming, indeed burning their hearts with the truth of Christ revealed from the Word. These same factors come together in Acts 1:3 – *To whom also He shewed Himself alive after His passion by many infallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God.*

What rendered the proofs infallible? Was it the fact that they saw Christ with their own eyes? That was part of it – but eye-witness experiences in and of themselves don't render a proof infallible. It was the fact that what they saw aligned itself with what Christ had taught them and what the Holy Spirit had impressed on their hearts when Christ expounded the Scriptures to them.

So when Peter says to the council that the Holy Ghost is a witness also to Christ's resurrection and exaltation to be a Prince and a Savior – He is saying that he has received the inward witness of the objective truth that Christ has fulfilled the Scriptures in His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension.

This is the knowledge of certainty – The Spirit bearing witness to their hearts of the truth of Christ – which they had seen and which they understood from God's word. And there was the proof that this work was of God. And any work that is of God will operate the same way today. The Holy Spirit bears witness to the truth of Christ to the heart of

the believer. And when the Spirit bears that witness to the truth then you've done more than listened to a sermon. You've done more than merely received instruction. You've been addressed by God Himself.

And what this means is that I don't have to package the gospel myself in a way to make it appealing. I don't have to try to create a dramatic or emotional effect. I must do what the apostles did – I must speak the words of this life. I must teach and preach Jesus Christ and we must pray that the Holy Spirit will do what only He can do and bear witness to our hearts about the truth of Christ.

This is how a work that is of God is meant to function. I hope and pray that as a church this will be the way that we do function at all times. May we never be led into the temptation of thinking we have to add to or embellish the work of God by our own devices. And if we'll function this way then life will be evident. The people of God will be strengthened and edified – there will be a spiritual vitality about our lives that will characterize our lives.

Our walk with the Lord will be real. Our witness for Christ will be effectual because we'll be perceived as real. And nothing will be able to stop us. We may be arrested. We may be dispersed. We may lose all we have – the early church did but they weren't stopped. Neither will we be. May God give us discernment then to recognize what's of God and what's of men – and may we indeed be godly in all our conversation and witness.