

If it is of God

- Acts 5:17-42
- I want to look at this lengthy section today under three headings. The Words of Life, the Power to Obey, and The Unstoppable Gospel.
- **The Words of Life**
- The rest of this chapter reads almost like the plot to a movie, doesn't it? There are evil men plotting to stop the works of the good men. The evil men are "filled with jealousy." The good men are filled with the Holy Spirit. But evil often triumphs, at least for a season, and the good men are arrested and thrown into prison. They don't even get to try the free breakfast in the morning, though, because in the middle of the night, God sends an angel to bust them out. Not a shot is fired and not a drop of blood is spilled. The angel just opens the locked doors (they can do that, you know), and leads the 12 men out, presumably while the prison guards are standing right there beside the doors! It reminded me of the story of Brother Andrew smuggling Bibles into communist countries in the 1950's and 60's behind what was called then, the iron curtain. In his book, "God's Smuggler," Andrew says that he would often pray, "Lord, when You were on earth, You made *blind* eyes see. Now, I pray, make seeing eyes *blind*. Do not let the *guards* see what's in front of them." He didn't even try to hide the Bibles. They were in plain sight in his bags, and for 35 years, the guards never saw them! Whether it is locked prison doors or not-so-hidden Bibles, our God reigns! So the next morning, the Sanhedrin gathers, thinking they have their enemies in the jailhouse, and they send for them to be brought over. A prison officer reports that the doors are locked and the guards are posted beside them, but the cells are empty! About that time, this guy exits stage left and another man comes running in stage right and announces that the twelve apostles who are supposed to be in the jailhouse are in the temple. Again. And they are teaching the people. Again! Now, you have to start wondering about the thick-headedness of the Sanhedrin at this point, don't you? They have heard about Pentecost and what happened there, with people speaking in other languages that they had never learned, and three thousand people becoming followers of Jesus of Nazareth that day. They have heard about the lame beggar and see him every day, now very much healed and no longer a beggar, and about the two thousand people who became followers of Jesus of Nazareth that day. They have heard about the other miracles, even the ones about the shadow of Peter falling on people as he walks by, and them being healed, and reports of many others becoming followers of Jesus of Nazareth. Now they hear about a miraculous prison break where the men inside apparently just vaporized and then re-appeared in the temple! WHAT is going on here?! Not with the followers of Jesus, we KNOW what is going on with them—Jesus—what is going on with the Sanhedrin? You would think they would learn. But here's the thing. It has to do with the Words of Life. And whether you believe them and live them...or not.
- The angel told the apostles to go and stand in the temple and "speak to the people all the words of this Life." They disobeyed men who told them not to speak in the name of Jesus in order that they could obey God who told them plainly to speak the words of life.
- Let me offer two illustrations of what happens when we either disregard the words of life or we change them to fit into our own way of thinking. First, Cindy and I were sitting in Westminster Abbey in London on June 28 this summer for their evensong service. The Dean of Westminster, "The Very Reverend Dr. John Hall," gave the message and I sat there with my mouth open at times. And NOT because of his brilliant exposition of the Words of Life. He said, and you can find his message online, that there were necessary changes that must come to the Church of England, with regard to two disputed issues: same-sex marriages, and the ordination of women. And, he said, we must change. In other words, the Very Reverend Dr.

John Hall said, the church must change to accept both of these as right and good. But his “biblical” argument for this was the story of Peter when he was on the rooftop and had a vision, remember?, where God put down the sheet from heaven that was filled with unclean animals, and God said, “Rise, Peter, kill and eat.” Here was the argument: Because Peter changed his view at that time about Gentiles and whether they were eligible for salvation as Gentiles, we need to change our view about God’s design for marriage and God’s design for leadership in the church. Do you see the problem with that interpretation of Scripture and its misapplication? Peter changed his mind to become MORE biblical when God gave him the vision. Peter understood what is clear from Scripture from the very beginning, that God loves the world. The Dean of Westminster is asking the church of England to change its mind and becomes LESS biblical, to cast off the clear teaching of Scripture, to teach AGAINST the words of life.

- Second illustration: some of you may be aware of the podcast from World magazine called The World and Everything in It. Matt mentioned it last week. Several weeks ago they did a two-part story about Americans’ habits with regard to the Bible. Their survey of 80,000 households revealed some shocking things. First, the average household in America has 4 Bibles in it. That’s not shocking. But more than 700 people every day stop reading the Bible. So though it remains the best seller of all time, it has become the least read seller of our times. The Center for Bible Engagement found in their study that most people who identify themselves as Christians don’t read the Bible in an average week. Their only “engagement” with the Bible comes on Sunday morning. The center also found in its study that there is a strong correlation between lack of Bible engagement and daily struggles with worry, gossip, fear, forgiving others, and more. The lives of those who engage the Bible four times or more per week are radically different. But the behavior of those who don’t engage the Bible four or more times per week is almost identical to those who don’t believe in God at all. Cohabitation, failing marriages, pornography. They stop going to church. The #1 reason people gave for not engaging the Bible? “I’m too busy.”
- The difference in the book of Acts between the men and women who had the words of life and lived them, and those who did not have the words of life and rejected them could not be any more dramatic. It is the same today.
- The Sanhedrin have the apostles brought before them and accuse them of the most wonderful thing that we could ever be accused of: “you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching.” (vs. 28) Amen! Where is our Jerusalem? Burlington for most of us. Could we be accused as a church of filling Burlington with our teaching?
- Then the men of the Sanhedrin say something interesting: “You intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.” It’s true! Jesus’ blood was on them. They were guilty. And they have forgotten apparently that that was the very thing the people asked for during Jesus’ trial before Pilate. Matthew 27:25, ***And all the people answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’*** They got what they wanted, but not what they needed. More than anything, the apostles wanted Jesus’ blood to COVER them and all those in Jerusalem. So they would no longer be guilty.
- **The Power to Obey**
- “We must obey God rather than men.” (vs. 28) That statement can be taken out of context, can’t it? Ask the people in this country who think they are justified to not pay their income tax, and would use this as their proof-text. But civil disobedience is only to be played as a trump card when the authorities are commanding what God forbids or forbidding what God commands. Clearly, this was a time for the apostles to disobey their authorities. The real question for us today is, where did the courage come from for Peter and the apostles do that? The answer is supplied by Peter as he makes three powerful truth claims.

- God raised Jesus from the dead. (have we heard this before?). Later he says, “we are witnesses!”
- God exalted Jesus as Leader and Savior to give repentance and forgiveness of sin. (It is only Jesus who can grant repentance. It is only Jesus who can give forgiveness of sin. We preach, we teach, we FILL Jerusalem with His name because He is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by Him. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.)
- God has given us the Holy Spirit, who by the way is ALSO a witness to the things we are preaching, and who also is given to all who obey God.
- **The Unstoppable Gospel**
- At this point, the Sanhedrin is furious and they just want to kill the twelve apostles right there on the spot. (vs. 33) But Gamaliel stood up and asked the apostles to wait outside for a while. He restored calm, told a couple of stories about some half-baked schemes that had been tried and failed. Then he proved once again that God can speak through a donkey, as he did with Balaam’s ride, or through anybody HE chooses. Gamaliel spoke the powerful words of vs. 38b-39 “If this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”
- William Wilburforce fought the British slave trade for 10 years without success. One night, tired and frustrated, he was tempted to quit. He began leafing through his Bible. A small note fell out. It was John Wesley’s last letter, written to Wilberforce shortly before the great evangelist died. (Wilberforce had been converted under Wesley’s ministry.)
On February 24, 1791, Wesley wrote: "Dear Sir: Unless the divine power has raised you up . . . I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing [slavery]. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? O be not weary of well doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of his might."
- That’s what the apostles did. Even though they were all beaten that day by the Sanhedrin. First, they rejoiced that they had been counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus Christ. Backs laid open and bloody, these twelve went back to the church. Can you imagine that scene? But not only that. Second, they went right back to obeying God. Every day. In the temple. In the homes. Preaching and teaching that the Christ, the Messiah, the only Savior...is Jesus.