

Eternity Daily Bible Study - No. 364
Series: The Primal Church - Acts Chapters 1-8
Verses: Acts 4:15-22
Topic: Listening to God, not man
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Acts 4:15-22 MKJV And when they had commanded them to go aside out of the Sanhedrin, they conferred among themselves, (16) saying, What shall we do to these men? For that indeed a notable miracle has been done by them is plain to all those dwelling in Jerusalem. And we cannot deny it. (17) But, so that it spread no further among the people, let us strictly threaten them, that they speak to no man in this name from now on. (18) And they called them and commanded them not to speak at all, nor to teach in the name of Jesus. (19) But Peter and John answered and said to them, Whether it is right before God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. (20) For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. (21) So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way as to how they might punish them, because of the people. For all glorified God for that which was done. (22) For the man on whom this miracle of healing occurred was more than forty years old.

There comes a time when the religious authorities obviously speak from themselves and not from God. At such times we are under no obligation to listen to them.

Christianity was not yet a separate religion. Peter and John were still Jews within Judaism and subject to the Sanhedrin at both a religious and a secular level. If submission to authority was a cardinal virtue then they should have meekly obeyed.

However there is a higher law than ecclesiastical authority, or even secular authority, that is obedience to God. If a church leader tells you to reject your family, or forbids you from praying in tongues in private, or says you should not witness to people (and some do), then you should disobey them.

However if we choose to obey God rather than man, there will be consequences – such as excommunication and persecution. If a Muslim or an Israeli Jew converts to Christ, there can be strong consequences even today. Converts can be rejected by their families, subjected to government penalties (Christian Jews cannot be regarded as Jewish nationals) and in Saudi Arabia it can mean prison or even execution.

The matter can be more subtle but quite painful - many missionaries are blocked by their pastors and boards. The pastor says something such as: "Missionary work robs the local church of money and destroys cultures, we do not think anyone should be a missionary and we do not think anyone should support missionaries." (This happens). But the young woman has a missionary call, and has been told missionaries should be sent out by the local church, yet this church will not send her out. In such a case she is to prayerfully, carefully and tactfully obey God in the face of a sinful church.

Sinful church policies prevent much Christian witness, especially to other races, to the poor, and to the downtrodden. Churches do not mind you bringing the rich and famous to church but they often

do object to saving street kids, or those of a different race or class. That is why among the list of great miracles Jesus says “the lame walk, the blind see, and the gospel is preached to the poor”. It takes a miracle for churches to preach the gospel to the poor. One thousand five hundred million people (a quarter of the world) live in urban slums in the developing world, with hardly a preacher per million residents. Who wants people who live in cardboard shacks in their church?

I am sorry to be so blunt but we see the need. We also see the structural sins of the Church. Ecclesiastical authorities are telling people NOT to preach, not to evangelize, not to say Jesus is the only way of salvation – just like the Sanhedrin did to Peter and John. Many an enthusiastic convert is told to “calm down” in the name of social acceptability. Few Christians share Christ boldly after their first two years in the faith. They are squelched!

Because of the anointing Peter and John were not easily squelched: “Whether it is right before God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. (20) For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.” We always have divine permission to share what we have seen and heard of Christ.

The new wine of the Holy Ghost and its miraculous side effects will always be opposed by the rigidity of old ecclesiastical structures – the old wineskins. Soon new structures of grace were needed, which led to the separation of Christianity from Judaism. Mission organizations have had to set themselves up separate from churches, and renewal movements such as Methodism have had to separate from the denominations that gave them birth.

The whole issue of permission is a complex one, and a very powerful one. Some people feel they need permission from their pastor before they change jobs or marry someone or go to a certain college. Others feel no need for any permission from any human being and are supremely confident of God’s leading in all things. I think both positions have their merits and deficiencies. We need input from others and wise counsel, we also need to be able to be adults, standing on our own two feet spiritually. We should not be overly dependent on others for permission or approval. Neither should we be independent to the point of being closed to human input– after all we are part of the Body of Christ. Rather we should be inter-dependent on each other and ultimately dependent on God.

The clear commandments of Jesus cannot be over-ridden by either ecclesiastical or secular authorities. We are to obey God not man. When we do so we well may have to suffer. Such suffering is greatly rewarded.

1 Peter 4:12-16 MKJV Beloved, do not be astonished at the fiery trial which is to try you, as though a strange thing happened to you, (13) but rejoice according as you are partakers of Christ's suffering, so that when His glory shall be revealed, you may be glad also with exceeding joy. (14) If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of God and of glory rests on you. Truly according to them, He is blasphemed, but according to you He is glorified. (15) But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or an evildoer, or a meddler in the affairs of others. (16) But if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God because of this.

Blessings,

John Edmiston

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