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5-1-1982

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Recommended Citation

Vaught, W. O., "When the Sanhedrin Made it Hard for Two Baptist Preachers" (1982). *Vaught Sermon Notes: A Study of the Book of Acts*. 13.

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WHEN THE SANHEDRIN MADE IT HARD FOR TWO BAPTIST PREACHERS

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
NUMBER 20
ACTS 5:30-42

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When there is a clear conflict between a national entity and the Word of God, the Christian has only one alternative--and that is to be true to the Word of God.

ACTS 5:30 "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom ye slew and hanged on a tree." The God of our Fathers refers to God, the Creator, and the divine author of the plan of salvation. Jesus refers to the humanity of Christ. God could not die for the sins of the world. God cannot die. In order for God to die he would have to become a man, a human, and this happened in Jesus. All the essence qualities of God show us that God could not die. So Jesus was born a human being, with a human body and spirit and soul, but minus an old sin nature. This is true because he was born of the seed of the woman but not the seed of the man. Jesus had no human father. Christ was sustained in his life by the Holy Spirit, except for three hours on the cross when he bore our sins alone. He had to become man in order to die for our sins, so Jesus is the word used here for his humanity. Son of man is another phrase used for his humanity.

Notice this--"Whom ye slew". This was a very bold statement for Peter to make. But he didn't stop there. He said, "And hanged on a tree" and this had a sting in it for they didn't have the power to crucify. Only the Roman government had this power. In other words Peter reminds them that in their weakness and hypocrisy, they went to the Roman government for help. So you see, the Sanhedrin was in great danger here. This incident with Peter and John just about destroyed them, and really showed how little authority and power they had. It pointed out also the fact that the Sanhedrin did little to protect the freedoms of men. (We have seen in our time how freedoms have been taken away from individuals and our democracy is being threatened in a very alarming way.) The means does not justify the end when it means the sacrifice of human freedom in order to accomplish someone's purpose. When basic freedoms are violated and minimized, then the only thing that holds a nation together is the moral force from the lives of believing Christians in the nation. It is quite clear that the millions of genuine believers in this nation are now saving the nation from destruction. Even when nations fail and fall, God takes care of his own and the lives of God's own people continue to fulfill the purpose and plan of God. Remember, one nation or many nations may crumble and fall, but God's overall purpose goes right on. Please note--Simon Peter is criticizing his government, but please notice the criterion which he used for the basis of his criticism--the authority of the Word of God. Peter is going to have a very amazing ministry, yet you notice here it started out with a criticism of his government.

ACTS 5:31 "Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins." Him (An emphatic pronoun). It should read, "Him, and only him hath God exalted with his right hand". The only way God's purpose can be carried out in this universe is for Jesus Christ to be glorified. We do not glorify anyone else, and the Spirit filled life is the means whereby we glorify Christ. He speaks of Christ being exalted as a Prince, and this refers to the political aspect. One day the nations of the world will be personally ruled by Jesus Christ. He is a Prince and Saviour, and this refers to the future kingdom he will rule.

"To give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" carried the idea that Christ desires to take his cross, even though they were responsible for it, and turn it around and use it for their salvation. So here Peter is giving the Sanhedrin members a great chance to repent and believe in Christ--and thereby receive pardon for the cruel and unjust thing they did to Christ on the cross.

ACTS 5:32 "And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him." This verse gives the principle of witnessing. Since we know the truth about Christ and the cross, it is our duty and privilege to witness this truth to others. Peter is here explaining to the Sanhedrin members that they are not witnessing to them just to be obstinate and stubborn, but is showing that witnessing to the unsaved is absolutely necessary since it springs in their hearts naturally and compulsively. The Holy Spirit is their close ally in this business of witnessing. The believer is the instrument in witnessing and the Holy Spirit is the power. They must obey this inner voice that speaks within. So what we have here is simply this--Simon Peter stands before the greatest religious body of his day and declared the falacy of their dead religion and preaches the living Christ, his cross, and personal regeneration as the only way of salvation. In fact, what Peter did here and what the early church did here, saved the Jews from destruction and their fall was delayed from this time, which was 30 A.D. to August of 70 A.D. when they were destroyed. In 70 A.D. one million of the Jews were slaughtered, one hundred thousand of them were taken into slavery, and they have been under the discipline of God ever since. So you see from this point of view Peter is being very patriotic, for he knows this is the only way his people can be saved from destruction.

THE REACTION OF THE SANHEDRIN

ACTS 5:33 "When they heard that, they were cut to the heart, and took counsel to slay them." Naturally people resent and resist anything that attacks their authority. The language says literally, "They were cut up" in their minds. They were listening, and thinking, and therefore were cut up in their minds. Every normal person in the human race is sensitive, and these people are super-sensitive. These hardheaded Sanhedrin members were thinking, and they had sense enough to realize that Simon Peter had insulted them by insinuating and intimating that they were responsible for the crucifixion of Christ. Peter was calm and relaxed and in this spirit made a legitimate and unimpassioned appeal to these religious leaders.

Look how this principle applies to us today. When people in a democracy become degenerate, Godless, immoral, and self-centered then that democracy is headed for decline. It takes top quality people in a democracy in order to make that democracy constructive and function for the betterment of the people. Remember, many times the majority is not right. The majority can't be right if the spiritual qualifications of the majority are based on degraded morals. When a democracy becomes filled with degraded people, then that democracy spoils like a spoiled apple, and it is taken over by some dictatorship. If this nation will listen to the Word of God then our deterioration can be checked and our nation can be saved.

"They took counsel to slay them." This is an aorist, active, infinitive and the infinitive expresses the enraged passion of the Sanhedrin. They are the real power and here is someone threatening their power. Immediately they talk about killing and would have done so if it had not been for a very strong and wise man. He is an unbeliever, but he did some constructive thinking in a very strategic moment.

ACTS 5:34 "Then stood there up one in the council, a Pharisee, named Gamaliel, a doctor of the law, had in reputation among all the people, and commanded to put the apostles forth a little space;" Gamaliel was a Pharisee. You know the Pharisees were the super-religionists of their time. They prayed seven times a day, they were over pious and obeyed their own tradition to the letter. But Gamaliel was the most respected man of his time. He was the grandson of the great teacher Hillel, who established the great theological school. This grandson is now going to make a great speech. He put the apostles out of ear shot while he spoke.

ACTS 5:35 "And said unto them, Ye men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what ye intend to do as touching these men." Take a good look at yourselves. Do not go out on a limb and start something you can't finish and something you can't justify. Gamaliel is going to state some cases of the past and show how the Sanhedrin had dealt with these problems.

ACTS 5:36 "For before these days rose up Theudas, boasting himself to be somebody; to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves: who was slain; and all, as many as obeyed him, were scattered, and brought to nought." This is the illustration of Theudas. He passed himself off as a Messiah. He persuaded four hundred people to follow him. He told them he would perform his first miracle by parting the Jordan so they could walk over on dry ground. So all four hundred gathered down on the Jordan to see his miracle. The Roman officials brought the Roman army down and charged them and killed many of them and captured Theudas. They cut his head off and took it back to Jerusalem and threw it on the temple steps just to remind the Jews that the Roman government was still in command of the government. This happened in 44 B.C. The Theudas revolt came to nothing. The Romans handled it. The inference is that if Peter and John get out of hand the Roman government will handle them. Now if what Peter and John are doing is from God, and has nothing to do with the civil government, then if the civil government fights them, they will actually be fighting God. Gamaliel is going to point out that this is not their prerogative to interfere in such matters. Gamaliel tells the Sanhedrin they better tread softly on this matter.

ACT 5:37 "After this man rose up Judas of Galilee in the days of the taxing, and drew away much people after him: he also perished; and all, even as many as obeyed him, were dispersed." Gamaliel uses one other illustration about Judas of Galilee. This happened in 6 A.D. and he was destroyed and his followers dispersed. In both of these incidents the Roman government handled the situation.

ACTS 5:38-39 "And now I say unto you, Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God." Here is Gamaliel's logic under four points.

1. If the movement is the work of man, it will be destroyed by Rome. (Theudas and Judas were illustrations of this.) If it is a revolt against Rome, then let Rome handle it.
2. If this movement is from God, then the Sanhedrin will place themselves in the embarrassing position of fighting against God.
3. The construction of the language here reveals how Gamaliel feels about this matter. In the phrase, "If this counsel be of men" the third class condition is used and it means, "Maybe it is and maybe it isn't". But in the next verse when Gamaliel says, "If it be of God" it is the first class condition and it means, "If it be of God, and it is". So the construction of the language here lets us see exactly what Gamaliel is thinking. He knows this work of Peter and John is from God. Gamaliel also knows that any government that violates the will of God and the Word of God will break itself on God.
4. Gamaliel's conclusion is based on common sense. He is asking for time, realizing that if they think things through, they will see his conclusion is sensible.

ACTS 5:40 "And to him they agreed: and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go." So they let them go. But they can't hold back their bitterness and hatred for they beat Peter and John. This was unjust and unfair. They followed in the main the advice of Gamaliel, but they didn't follow through on the mechanics. They beat them and gave them a reprimand--not to preach any more. It proved the Sanhedrin was operating on jealousy, prejudice, and hatred.

ACTS 5:41 "And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name." These disciples have inner happiness and count themselves fortunate to be able to suffer for Christ.

ACTS 5:42 And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ." They ceased not to teach and preach. The principle involved here was this--When Christians and Christianity suffer persecution, they always thrive and make progress. In forty years this Sanhedrin will cease to exist and in fifty years Christianity will be worldwide.