

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL



RESOLUTE

PETER AND THE APOSTLES

The pressure to compromise is, and always will be, incumbent upon those who follow Christ Jesus. The Lord warned that the world would hate us because it hated Him first. And Christ's prophecy was, as always, true. We are living through one of those periods now, in which even here in the United States Christians are daily faced with verbal, written, societal, at times physical hatred. This world hates Christ, and so it hates those who follow Him. "You will be hated by all because of My name," He told His disciples.

This world daily invites us to soften, to adapt, to compromise what we believe, but we cannot, we will not—we dare not. No matter how the hate is expressed—even, as with Stephen, to stoning in the public square—we must stand against the call for us, instead of them, to change what we believe.

Peter and the other apostles faced this challenge both within and without the young church. We must let their example—their resolute, unwavering stand for the purity of God's truth—inform how *we* are to live against such hate.

Issue #846, October 2020.

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CORRUPTION WITHIN

THE EARLY CHURCH, springing into existence after the extraordinary events of the day of Pentecost—the permanent giving of the Holy Spirit to the apostles, Peter’s dynamic sermon, the conversion of at least three thousand souls for Christ in one day—all this made the early days of Christ’s kingdom on earth a heady, attractive environment for these brand new Christians. They were—dare we use the word—*intoxicated* by the Spirit, and inspired by the community that formed naturally around this binding tie. Here was created by the supernatural spark of the Spirit, as well as the natural inclination of man to join with those of like kind, the sense of family that pervades in the church to this day.

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Acts 2:42-47

Luke’s narrative makes it sound like a Christian paradise, but just as in Eden, so long as evil exists there can be no paradise on earth. And it was not long before the sickening corruption of duplicity reared its head in the church. A couple in the church, Ananias and his wife Sapphira, gave every appearance of handing over to the church the full return from their sale of a piece of property. The truth, however, was that they “kept back some of the price” themselves.

The apostle Peter, the strong leader of the first church, saw through their facade of righteous generosity.

But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.”

Acts 5:3-4

So he died.

And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.

Acts 5:5-6

Peter knew that Ananias and Sapphira were in cahoots in this. They, together, had introduced this duplicity into the church. To verify this with witnesses Peter received Sapphira three hours later, making sure that no one tipped her off to what had happened to her husband. It is clear from her response that she thought their plan—to appear more generous and righteous than they really were—was still working in their favor.

Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter responded to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.”

Acts 5:7-8



Peter and the apostles—and, not least, God Himself—were resolute to protect the young church from the inherent corruption of this fallen world, and this would be just the beginning of such necessary efforts. All one has to do is read the *First Corinthians* letter Paul wrote to that church to be alarmed at how quickly the standards and practices of this world had seeped into the church. Schisms, an infatuation with pagan scholars, lawsuits against fellow Christians, strange marital ideas, incest taking place and the church winking at the sin, idolatry, and an overall lack of love for the brothers and sisters in the faith—all this was going on in cosmopolitan Corinth less

than thirty years after the inception of the Christian church by the apostles. In just one generation the ideal of Acts 2 had degenerated into the stinking mess that was the Corinth church.

For the time being, however, with the Holy Spirit’s counsel to Peter, the young church was cleansed of its momentary corruption.

Then Peter said to her, “Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who

have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.” And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.

Acts 5:9-11



IT SHOULD NOT SURPRISE ANYONE that more churches today resemble the Corinth church rather than the

Acts 5 church. In far too many corners of Christendom today the church is more interested in fitting into society, rather than being “salt” and “light” to it.

Not too long ago a friend of mine from high school days retired from his long-time pastorate of a church in the eastern portion of our state. The church’s new pastor is a woman. The name and denomination of this church are not important. Today so many denominations and individual churches have

adopted this church’s philosophy—which has been in place for decades—that they, sadly, are no longer unique. The title and heading at this church’s web site seem innocuous, even encouraging:

By the grace of God, [our church] is a *diverse community* of believers and seekers, *united in following and sharing the way of Christ* with all persons through daily practices of devotion, justice, and love.

Things begin to get mushy when one reads portions of this church’s statement of “Beliefs and Practices”:

Bible: [our denomination] considers the Bible to be *the inspired Word of God* and recognizes 66 books in the canon, but *believes vary on the inerrancy of Scripture*. *Individual congregations cover the spectrum from traditional to contemporary*.

Heaven, Hell: *Views on heaven and hell among [those in our denomination] range from belief in literal places, to trust in God to provide eternal justice or universal salvation. The church itself does not engage in “speculative theology” and lets its individual members decide for themselves.*

And then things swerve dramatically left when one reads a portion of what their current pastor (a woman) wrote in a recent church newsletter.

[Our church] has been known for decades as a place that welcomes a wide variety of people. For at least twenty years people

have heard welcome proclaimed whether you are old or young, gay or straight, rich or poor... This welcome has been important in many ways, but has been especially important to our gay and lesbian friends. Meanwhile, many of the conversations around questions of welcome have shifted and we haven’t always kept up. Now instead of talking only about welcome to gay and lesbian people, we use abbreviations such as LGBTQ+ to talk about sexual orientation and gender identity. And while this shift has happened, many of us, especially those who aren’t in the middle of these conversations, are left scratching our heads and trying to figure out what the initials stand for, what definitions are, and what it means to be safe and welcoming. In light of this, [two other women], and I have been working together to adapt for our setting a training used at the University.

The training is called “Safe Zone” and will focus on conversation about where we have been, progress we have made in being welcoming, theological basis for welcome, how the conversations around sexual orientation and gender identity have shifted, what all those letters stand for, and how we can be aware of the needs of the LGBTQ+ community in order to be more welcoming... I hope that whether you are uncertain about what this means, whether you are a committed ally, or whether you identify as LGBTQ+, you will join us for either the Sunday morning or Monday evening session. (emphasis added in all quoted passages)



WE LIVE IN A WORLD in which many if not most of the clearly defined, sharp edges of God’s word have been systematically rounded off smooth. And this errant direction is not just some rebellious insurrection welling up from the masses in the pews,

but is being handed down as prescribed “doctrine” and rules by church leadership. Paramount in this trend is what we see illustrated by the aforementioned church documents.

Many today have co-mingled the concepts of “acceptance” and “love,” rendering down the latter to an insipid and ignorant version of its biblical definition. By their usage, if one does not “accept”—i.e., affirm, celebrate—another’s beliefs and lifestyle, one does not “love.” It is clear from their documents and preaching that these churches are not “welcoming” these “diverse” individuals for the opportunity to teach them the literal truth from God’s word, to teach them a foundational, biblical walk of faith to replace their formerly errant one, but are, instead, “accepting” them as they are with open, affirming arms,

without the slightest intention of leading them toward the truth of Scripture.

As Solomon wrote, however, there is nothing new under the sun. This same thing was going on in the early, first-century church—not least in the city of Corinth—and has been going on ever since. Christ Jesus and the apostles reveal the face of *true* love, biblical love, godly love, for they make clear to believers everywhere that God will not countenance the “welcoming acceptance” of blatant sin.

Peter and the apostles were faithful in immediately identifying and addressing blatant sin in the church. They called it what it is—and the instant penalty executed upon Ananias and Sapphira made unmistakably clear that Father God agreed.

The stronger the church, the more intense will be the efforts against it. The more secure its integrity and effectiveness of its ministry, the more this world will seek to render it impotent.

When faced with such persecution from without—from their own kind: fellow Jews—Peter and the apostles held fast. They did not compromise; they would not soften the sharp edges of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The truth will always win souls, as it did just after Pentecost.

PERSECUTION WITHOUT

TODAY IT IS CALLED “CANCEL CULTURE.” In the first century they just threw you in jail.

At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon’s portico. But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, the people held them in high esteem. And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number, to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and pallets, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. Also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed. But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with jealousy. They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail.

Acts 5:12-18

The Jewish leaders did not approve of what Peter and the apostles were saying in public. More to the point, the high priest and his party, the Sadducees, were afraid that they were losing control of the religious and political climate in Jerusalem. Not only did the Sadducees not believe in the resurrection, as the Jewish historian Josephus tells us they were bloodthirsty, always ready to punish in the most cruel manner. They were materialists; they looked upon man as a mere animated machine, and therefore, like the pagans of the same period, were utterly insensitive

to human sufferings, or of the value of human life. They had determined that all this “Jesus” business was getting out of hand and had to be stopped.

So the apostles were arrested and thrown into jail. Then God, without fanfare, let them out.

But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out, and said, “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this Life.” And when they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and began to teach.

Acts 5:19-21a ESV

The messenger from the Lord made it clear: *No matter what, preach the gospel.* That message of life in Christ had to go forth. God and His angel were not so much releasing the imprisoned apostles as He was releasing the imprisoned message that they carried. Nothing could stop it.

Meanwhile, the breakout of the apostles was so silent, so supernatural, that the Jewish leaders heard nothing about it. Even the jailers were clueless; the prison was still securely locked, with the guards still blithely standing guard when the officers arrived to bring the prisoners back to court. But the prisoners were gone; they had immediately obeyed the angel and were already back at the temple delivering “all the words of

this Life.” When informed of this the priests put their heads together and resolved to try it all again.

Then the captain went along with the officers and proceeded to bring them back without violence (for they were afraid of the people, that they might be stoned). When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them, saying, “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.”

Acts 5:26-28

The power behind the priestly Jewish throne, the former high priest Annas, either had a short memory or a fine-tuned politician’s instinct for selective memory. Only a short while before, at the Roman trial of Jesus, the entire crowd, at the instigation of Annas, Caiaphas, and the rest of the Council, had answered Pilate’s cynical demonstration of the washing of his hands with, “His blood be on us and on our children!” “This man’s blood” was already covering them head to toe. They were guilty.

Peter, speaking for the group that stood before the Council, cut right to the chase. “We must obey God rather than men.”

And Peter’s brave answer is, thank God! the type of what thousands of trembling women and meek men have answered. His tone is severer now than on his former appearance. Now he has

no courteous recognition of the court’s authority. Now he brushes aside all Annas’ attempts to impose on him the sanctity of its decrees, and flatly denies that the Council has any more right to command than any other “men.” They claimed to be depositories of God’s judgments. This revolutionary fisherman sees nothing in them but “men,” whose commands point one way, while God’s point the other. The angel bade them “speak”; the Council had bid them be dumb. To state the opposition was to determine their duty. Formerly Peter had said ‘judge ye’

which command it is right to obey. Now, he wraps his refusal in no folds of courtesy, but thrusts the naked “We must obey God” in the Council’s face. That was a great moment in the history of the world and the Church. How much lay in it, as in a seed, Luther’s “Here I stand, I can do none other. God help me! Amen.”

Alexander MacLaren



If only this were every Christian’s byword; if only this were the manner of living for every last believer in this world. What a force! Just imagine the irreducible power of the gospel message—“all the words of this Life”—if every call from every quarter were met with this same response: *I must obey God rather than man*. Imagine the dramatic change in even the lives and behavior and witness of Christians if every temptation were met with, *I must obey God rather than evil*.

But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

Acts 5:29–32

Say what you will about the impetuous Peter and the personal failings of all the other apostles. Here, by the power and words of the Holy Spirit they were standing resolute upon *the* Rock, and they would remain there even as the Council upped their game. This confrontation was not yet over.



But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them.

Acts 5:33

Gamaliel, however, a teacher of the Law, wisely disabused the Council of such a harsh action. He counseled, “So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.”

Following his advice, the Council inflicted a lesser punishment on the apostles: they were flogged. While this punishment was less than death, it was not by much. Bits of bone and metal in the flail literally tore the flesh off the victim. The Law prescribed no more than thirty-nine lashes, for any more than

that would probably kill. If all the apostles received the maximum number of lashes they left the premises a bloody mess, their backs flayed of flesh. Before they were released, however, Peter and the apostles were sternly admonished “not to speak in the name of Jesus.” And here is the very picture, the living example of the common phrase, “bloodied but unbowed.”

So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

Acts 5:41–42

Look at that! Just imagine their physical pain; imagine too their ingrained respect and awe, as Jews, for the Jewish Council that had ordered them—implied, upon pain of death—to cease and desist their speaking “all the words of this Life.” Yet “they went on their way...rejoicing”! They were honored to be so dishonored for the name of Jesus. They were energized, they were chomping at the bit to get back out onto the field. I would wager that the first group they encountered after leaving the Council received the most enthusiastic, the most eloquent, the most Spirit-filled gospel message ever delivered since its birth in Bethlehem.



NOTHING THIS WORLD CAN CONJURE—no torture, no coercion, no bribery, no intimidation, no threat of death—has ever succeeded in stopping the gospel message. Whenever the

baton is dropped by one, it is picked up by another. Till He returns, the words of Life in Him will ring out in this fallen world.

Though this is true globally, it may not be true locally, in the life of a local church, nor personally, in the life of just one Christian. Tragically, in a time in the Western world when chances of being flogged for the name of Christ are almost nonexistent, too many of us are too quick to retreat from speaking in His name.

Peter and the apostles were resolute in their devotion to and love for Christ Jesus. Nothing, absolutely *nothing*, could stop them from standing for Him and delivering the message of His salvation.

Persecution, even imprisonment, cannot silence the Christian who so loves his Lord.

The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!" And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and after he brought them out, he said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house.

Acts 16:22-32