Spirit Empowered Proclamation

I. Introduction

A. <u>The inevitability of opposition, and our response to it.</u>

1. Read: John 15:18-27
2. The mission of Christ advances as the church boldly proclaims the exclusive gospel, faithfully endures opposition, and prayerfully depends on the Spirit.

II. Spirit Empowered Proclamation

A. <u>Gospel Proclamation Declares the Exclusivity of Jesus Christ.</u>

1. The conflict in Acts 4 doesn't begin because Peter and John healed a lame man. It begins because they explained **who** healed him. Luke tells us in verse 2 that they were "*teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead.*" It is while they are in the middle of this teaching that the temple authorities interrupt them and place them under arrest. The miracle itself wasn't the primary problem. The message was.
2. Why such a strong reaction? Because Peter and John weren't simply offering another religious perspective. They were announcing that everything the Temple pointed toward had now found its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. For the chief priests, the Temple was the place where God had promised to dwell with His people and where He would act to rescue them.[1] Yet here were these apostles proclaiming that God's saving work was no longer centered on the Temple, but on the crucified and risen Jesus.
3. Before Peter says a single word, however, Luke gives us an important detail. In verse 8 we read, "*Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them...*" That little phrase reminds us that Peter's boldness wasn't the result of natural courage. It was the fulfillment of a promise Jesus had made years earlier. In Luke 21 Jesus warned His disciples that they would one day be arrested, brought before rulers, and persecuted for His name. But then He added these remarkable words: "This will be your opportunity to bear witness. Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to

[1] N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Acts: Rediscovering What the Church Was and Is* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2024), 31.

answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict." This is exactly what appears to be taking place here. Peter is standing before many of the same leaders who condemned Jesus only weeks earlier, and just as Christ promised, the Holy Spirit gives him wisdom, clarity, and courage. What Jesus promised, Jesus provides.

a) We often worry that we won't know what to say if we're given an opportunity to speak about Christ. We imagine every possible question someone might ask and convince ourselves we're not prepared. Yet Jesus never promised to answer all of our questions ahead of time. He promised to be with us in the moment. God often equips His people not long before the opportunity, but in the opportunity. When Christ calls us to bear witness, He will not leave us stranded.

4. Peter immediately makes it clear that the miracle has never been about him or John. "Let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel," he says, "that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by Him this man is standing before you well." The healed man is standing because Jesus is alive.

a) Notice Peter's boldness. He could have simply said, "God healed this man." Everyone in that room believed in God. That statement probably would have been welcomed. But Peter refuses to settle for vague religious language. He names the One whom the leaders rejected. **Jesus Christ of Nazareth.**

b) Our culture is often comfortable talking about God in general terms. We can speak about faith, spirituality, purpose, or a higher power, and few people object. But mention Jesus—the crucified, risen, exclusive Lord—and suddenly the conversation changes. Like Peter, we must resist the temptation to soften the offense of the gospel by removing the name of Christ. Salvation is not found in generic belief in God. It is found in Jesus.

5. Peter then quotes Psalm 118: "*The stone that was rejected by you, the builders, has become the cornerstone.*" This is a Temple psalm, and Peter

uses it to make an astonishing claim. The leaders thought they were protecting God's house when they rejected Jesus. In reality, they rejected the very cornerstone upon which God was building His new Temple. God's saving presence is no longer centered in a building made with hands. It is centered in the risen Christ. Everything God is doing in the world now is built upon Him.[2]

6. And then Peter reaches the climax of his sermon: "*There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*" These are among the clearest and most exclusive words in all of Scripture. Peter leaves no room for another Savior, another mediator, or another path to God. The Sanhedrin believed salvation came through obedience to the Law and faithful observance of Israel's traditions. Peter says salvation comes through a Person. Not the Temple. Not the Law. Not religious performance. Jesus alone.
7. That claim was offensive in the first century, and it remains offensive today. We live in a culture that celebrates religious pluralism and insists that all sincere paths eventually lead to God. Peter says otherwise. Yet the question is not whether Christianity is exclusive. The question is whether its exclusive claim is true. If Jesus really is the crucified and risen Son of God, then proclaiming Him as the only Savior is not arrogance—it is love.
    a) It is also important to understand what Peter is **not** saying. He is not saying that only certain kinds of people are welcome. The invitation of the gospel is gloriously inclusive. Anyone may come. Every nation, every background, every sinner is invited. But there is only one way to come. **You must come through Christ, but everyone is welcome.** The apostles never sought to impose faith by force. They simply announced what God had done in Jesus and invited people to respond. The

[2] Dean Pinter, Tremper Longman, and Scot McKnight, *Acts*, *The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2019), 113.

exclusivity of the gospel has never been about excluding people. It has always been about proclaiming the only Savior God has provided.[3]

8. Reflection Question
   a) Where am I tempted to speak generally about God while avoiding the name of Jesus?
   b) It may be at work. It may be with your neighbors, your family, or your friends. It is often easier to speak about God in vague terms than to speak specifically about Christ. But faithful gospel proclamation always brings us to the same place. We do not simply proclaim God. We proclaim **Jesus Christ**, because **there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.**

B. Gospel Proclamation Inevitably Encounters Opposition.

1. If the first movement of this passage teaches us **what** the church is called to proclaim, the second teaches us **what we should expect when we proclaim it.** The answer is straightforward: opposition. Luke wants his readers to understand that resistance to the gospel is not an exception to the Christian life—it is part of the normal pattern of faithful witness. In fact, after chapter 3, only three chapters in the book of Acts fail to mention some form of persecution.[4] From this point forward, Luke repeatedly shows that wherever the gospel advances, opposition is never far behind.
2. That pattern begins immediately. Luke tells us, "*And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed...*" (vv. 1–2). Notice what provokes the confrontation. Peter and John are not arrested because they healed a lame man. They are arrested because they were **speaking** to the people, proclaiming that the miracle had taken place through the risen Jesus Christ. The authorities could not deny that a miracle had occurred—the healed man

[3] Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), 200.

[4] Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, *The Niv Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), 154.

was standing right in front of them. They could not discredit the evidence, so they attempted something else. As one commentator observes, **instead of discrediting the witnesses, the leaders tried to silence them.**[5]

3. That strategy becomes unmistakably clear in verse 18: "*So they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.*" Their concern wasn't ultimately the miracle; it was the message. More specifically, it was the name of Jesus. They did not want that name proclaimed any longer.
4. At its heart, this confrontation is about authority. The Sanhedrin was the highest religious authority in Israel. They fully expected Peter and John to submit to their command and remain silent. Yet Peter and John recognized that they answered to an even higher authority. Jesus Himself had commissioned them to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth, and no earthly authority had the right to forbid what Christ had commanded.
5. So Peter and John respond with remarkable courage: "*Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.*" (vv. 19–20). They are not being rebellious. They are being faithful. Scripture consistently calls Christians to respect governing authorities. Paul makes that clear in Romans 13, teaching that civil authorities are established by God and deserve our submission. But Scripture also recognizes one important exception: **when the government commands us to do what God forbids, or forbids us to do what God commands, our highest allegiance belongs to God.** That is precisely the situation Peter and John faced. Christ commanded them to proclaim the gospel. The Sanhedrin commanded them to stop. They could not obey both.
    a) There is an important principle here for the church today. If we are ever going to suffer consequences from governing authorities or from our culture, let it be because we have remained faithful to Christ—not

[5] J. Dwight Pentecost, and John Danilson, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ : A Study of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1981), 79.

because we have been unnecessarily offensive, argumentative, or reckless. If you're going to get in trouble, make it count. Let it be for the sake of the gospel.

6. While most of us will never stand before a Sanhedrin, we know the subtle pressure to remain silent. We live in a culture that often tolerates private faith but grows uncomfortable when Jesus is proclaimed as the only Savior. We fear being misunderstood, labeled intolerant, excluded, or rejected. The temptation is not always to deny Christ outright; more often it is simply to avoid speaking His name.
7. The New Testament consistently prepares us for this reality. Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:12, "*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*" Notice he doesn't say *some* Christians. He says **all** who desire to live faithfully. Opposition may take different forms depending on where we live, but faithful allegiance to Jesus will always bring resistance from a world that does not recognize His lordship.
8. Perhaps we've been asking the wrong question. Instead of asking, **"God, why are You allowing this opposition?"** maybe we should ask, **"Lord, how do You want me to represent You through this opposition?"** What if the resistance you're facing is not an oversight that God forgot to correct, but an opportunity He intends to use? What if the very circumstance you want to escape is the place where Christ desires to make Himself known through your life?
    a) We live in a culture that has become increasingly committed to avoiding discomfort. We instinctively look for the quickest way around pain and suffering. One author describes our society as an **"aspirin generation,"** viewing suffering as a calamity to be avoided at all costs.[6] That mindset can quietly influence the church. If comfort becomes our highest value, then faithfulness eventually becomes negotiable. If avoiding conflict becomes our priority, we will eventually avoid proclaiming the very

[6] Fernando, 159.

message that creates it. But the pattern of Acts teaches us something entirely different. Opposition is not evidence that God has abandoned His people. Often, it is evidence that His people are faithfully bearing witness. Throughout the book of Acts, persecution never stops the advance of the gospel. Instead, it becomes the backdrop against which God's power, faithfulness, and sovereign purposes shine most clearly.

9. Reflection Question
    a) Am I asking God to remove every difficulty, or am I asking Him to make me faithful in the middle of it? Because the question is not whether faithful gospel proclamation will encounter opposition. Scripture has already answered that. The question is whether, when opposition comes, we will still be able to say with Peter and John, **"We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."**

C. <u>Gospel Proclamation Perseveres Through Prayerful Dependence.</u>

1. If opposition is the inevitable result of faithful gospel proclamation, then the obvious question becomes, **How do we continue?** How do ordinary believers remain courageous when the cost of following Jesus continues to rise? Luke's answer is found in one of the most beautiful prayers in the New Testament. Rather than retreating in fear or immediately developing a new strategy, Peter and John return to the church, and together they pray.
2. What strikes me most about this prayer is the remarkable confidence and unity of the early church. They are not panicked. They are not divided. They are not asking, "What should we do next?" Instead, they instinctively turn to God together. Their prayer reveals what they truly believe. It shows us what they affirm, what they cling to, and what they ask for when their faith is tested.
3. The first thing they affirm is the absolute sovereignty of God. They begin, "*Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them...*" (v. 24). The word Luke records here is significant. Instead of the more common word **Kyrios** (Lord), he uses **Despotes**—a title

that speaks of absolute ownership and unrestricted authority.[7] It was the word used of a master whose authority could not be challenged. Before they ever mention their circumstances, they remind themselves who is truly in control.

4. That conviction shapes everything that follows. Their confidence is not rooted in wishful thinking or positive optimism. It is rooted in Scripture. They immediately turn to Psalm 2, recognizing that what they are experiencing is exactly what God had already revealed. The nations rage. The kings of the earth set themselves against the Lord and against His Anointed. Herod, Pilate, the Jewish leaders, and even Rome are simply the latest rulers to oppose God's Messiah. But the church doesn't stop with the opening verses of Psalm 2. They understand the whole psalm. While the nations rage, heaven is not anxious. The Lord laughs—not because suffering is amusing, but because human rebellion can never overturn His purposes. God has already established His King on Zion. The early church understands that Jesus is now that enthroned King, God's beloved Son, reigning over the nations. The rulers of the earth may threaten the apostles, but they cannot threaten the throne of Christ.[8]
    a) That theological perspective completely changes the way they pray. They do not see themselves merely as victims of powerful people. They interpret their circumstances through the lens of Scripture. They recognize that this opposition is not simply a personal attack against them; it is part of the larger story of God's kingdom advancing in a world that resists His rule. They find comfort in knowing that none of this has taken God by surprise. What they are experiencing is not outside His sovereign plan.
5. Because they are convinced that God reigns, notice what they ask for. They do **not** pray, "Lord, remove our enemies." They do **not** pray, "Lord, protect

[7] Fernando, 168.

[8] Wright, 31.

us from suffering.” They do **not** pray, "Lord, make life easier.” Instead they pray, "And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." (vv. 29–30)

6. They ask for divine enablement, not escape. They ask for boldness to keep proclaiming Christ in the very place where opposition has arisen.[9] They had already accepted that persecution was part of following Jesus. Prayer became the pathway by which they entrusted themselves to God's sovereign care and received fresh strength to continue their witness.
    a) I wonder how often our prayers sound different. When difficulty comes, our first instinct is usually to ask God to remove the problem. We pray for the obstacle to disappear, the relationship to improve, the hardship to end, or the conflict to be resolved. None of those prayers are wrong. But Acts 4 challenges us to ask a deeper question. What if this trial is not merely a problem to be fixed, but a test of faith and loyalty? What if God is less interested in removing the opposition than in strengthening our witness through it?
7. The church understood that its greatest need was not fewer obstacles but greater dependence upon God. They knew that courage would never be sustained by determination alone. It would come through prayer and the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit. And God answered immediately. Luke tells us, "When they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness." (v. 31) The church's greatest need today is not better strategies, larger budgets, greater cultural influence, or fewer obstacles. Our greatest need is exactly what the early

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[9] David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.
Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. ;
Apollos, 2009), 197.

church understood two thousand years ago: **greater dependence on God through prayer.**

8. **Reflection Question**
    a) If someone listened to my prayers this week, would they conclude that my greatest desire is comfort—or faithfulness? Because throughout Acts, prayer is not the church's retreat from mission. It is the source of its perseverance in mission. The same sovereign Lord who sustained Peter and John still empowers His church today to proclaim Christ with boldness until every nation has heard His name.

III. Closing Thoughts

A. Acts 4 reminds us that the church has always lived in the tension of faithful witness. We proclaim an exclusive Savior, we should expect opposition, and we persevere through prayerful dependence on God. The question isn't whether our culture will accept the message. The question is whether we will remain faithful to proclaim it. Like the early church, may our first response to opposition not be fear or silence, but prayer. So may this become our prayer as well: **"Lord, grant Your servants to continue to speak Your Word with all boldness."** And may we trust that the same sovereign God who empowered the early church will empower us to faithfully bear witness to Jesus Christ today.

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