

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

The Apostles And The Civil Government

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Acts 21:27 -

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to the Book of Acts; that’s on page 909 in your pew Bibles. We’re going to do a bit of framing today. We’re at Acts 21 in our walk through the Book of Acts and from this point on we are witnessing the march of the Apostle Paul through both the Jewish and Roman legal systems.

In these last 8 chapters Luke is making basically two points. He is showing first of all how Christianity came to be rejected by the very people from which it sprang – the Jews, and then secondly, he is showing how, in the Providence of God, the attempts to arrest and silence Paul actually led to the gospel being preached at the very heart of the Roman Empire. So we’re going to see each of those two points being developed, scene by scene and stage by stage over the next several chapters – but before we do that, I think it might be helpful to ZOOM OUT so as to evaluate the interactions of the Apostles GENERALLY with the civil government throughout the book. If I can make a comparison, this is like reading Genesis 1 before reading Genesis 2.

Genesis 1 tells us the story of creation IN GENERAL and then Genesis 2 ZOOMS IN and puts the focus squarely on the creation of the man and the woman. Sometimes the small picture makes more sense after you’ve seen the big picture – and that’s my rationale here. I think if we zoom out to see the way that the Apostles interacted with the civil government IN GENERAL then we will be better positioned to understand and appreciate the particular interactions of the Apostle Paul that Luke shares with us over the next 8 chapters.

That's the goal; and I'm going to attempt to be BRIEF in this general overview – briefer than I had originally intended – so as to leave time at the end for some pastoral counsel – because this is not just an intellectual issue for us here in Canada is it? All of the sudden we feel like WE'RE ON TRIAL. We feel like the government is out to get US. We feel like Paul that we are surrounded by enemies and adversaries on every side – so we're going to find some counsel here, and I believe, some much needed encouragement.

So let's get started. As we walk through the Book of Acts at the 10,000 foot level today I'm hoping to make 5 observations about how the Apostles related to hostile government.

5 Observations From The Book of Acts:

The first observation I want to draw your attention to comes from a story that we read fairly early on in this series. Turn forward just a few pages now to chapter 4. You will recall that Peter had healed a man who had been lame from birth in Acts 3 and that created an uproar. The Jewish Senate was very concerned about this so they had Peter and John arrested. In verses 18-20 Luke tell us:

“they called them and charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. 19 But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, **you must judge**, 20 for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.”” (Acts 4:18-20 ESV)

The first observation I want to make then is:

1. The Apostles recognized the legitimacy of civil government

Notice what Peter says:

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." (Acts 4:19-20 ESV)

“You must judge”.

Peter doesn't say: "You have no right to judge me" because he knew full well that they did. Peter recognizes that he is under their authority – even though he disagrees with their perspective on this matter. Peter understood that just because he had become a Christian didn't mean that he was no longer living in this world – of course he was, and that meant that he remained subject to civil authorities. Peter lived that truth and Peter taught that truth to his people; he said:

“Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.” (1 Peter 2:13-14 ESV)

The Apostle Paul said the same thing to his people, he said:

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” (Romans 13:1–2 ESV)

Peter and Paul said these things when Nero was Caesar of Rome – arguably the most evil leader EVER in the history of the universe, and certainly the most overtly HOSTILE leader in the history of the Christian church - so even evil, hostile leaders – occupy a position given to them by God. They have an office and a charge that must be respected.

In tension with that would be our second observation which is that:

2. The Apostles understood that their ultimate loyalty was to God

We can see that reality working out in Acts 5. The Apostles were arrested once again for preaching and teaching in the name of Christ – which, of course, they had been told to do BY JESUS.

When they stood before the Senate they were told:

“We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.” (Acts 5:28 ESV)

By the way, I hope that if I am ever arrested it will be for doing this very thing. If I am going to go to jail I want it to be for this and I want to hear the Crown Attorney say to me: “We told you not to preach and teach in Jesus’ name and yet here you are, FILLING THE WORLD with the Gospel message.”

Wouldn’t that be good?

Well, if that happens, I plan to respond exactly the way Peter responded on behalf of the Apostles, by saying:

"We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29 ESV)

So YES Peter taught and modelled submission to proper authority. He was respectful to Caesar and Senate AND YET, he recognized that there was a LIMIT to the authority given to CIVIL AUTHORITY and it did not extend to countermanding the commands that had been clearly given by God.

The government is a FELLOW minister to the church UNDER GOD – Paul said that in Romans 13. Meaning, they have a legitimate charge and WE have a legitimate charge – BOTH under the ultimate Sovereignty of God. So WE NEED TO DO what God told us to do. And they need to do what God told them to do. And we will ALL be judged accordingly.

As so, if the government ever forbids us to do what God commands or commands us to do what God forbids – we have to say NO – and that’s what we see the Apostles doing here.

And they paid a price for that:

In Acts 5:40-42 it says:

“and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. 41 Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. 42 And every day, in the temple and from

house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus.” (Acts 5:40-42 ESV)

That’s what happens when you get in a conflict with the government because God gave them THE SWORD – he didn’t give us the sword. He gave us the Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God – but he gave the government the sword of steel, which is the lawful use of violence, so when the church and the government get into a conflict the SWORD OF JUDICIAL VIOLENCE is inevitably wielded against the cross carrying church.

You need to be prepared for that.

And the Apostles were. They rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer on behalf of the name.

Praise the Lord!

The third observation we can make from the Book of Acts is that:

3. The Apostles made wise and discerning use of their legal rights

A couple of weeks ago in Acts 16 we saw Paul making use of his legal rights as a Roman citizen. When he was in Philippi an angry mob attacked them and the Magistrates, wanting to appease them, had Paul and Silas BEATEN WITH RODS and put in the local prison. When the Magistrates sent a message the next day to release them, Paul questioned the legality of the entire proceeding, he said:

“They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.” 38 The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. 39 So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. 40 So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.” (Acts 16:37-40 ESV)

Paul REMINDS the civil authorities that they do not have UNLIMITED POWER. They also have to respect the law. As a Roman citizen Paul was entitled to a proper TRIAL before being subjected

to any form of punishment. “That didn’t happen”, Paul says. “You skipped the trial process and went right to the punishment stage and that is illegal.”

And he was right.

And they knew it – so they came and apologized to him. And to make a point, Paul lingered in the city for a little bit so as to encourage the local believers. He wanted them to see that the magistrates had been reminded that they can’t just arrest people and beat them to appease the mob. There is such a thing as due process according to the law and it is entirely appropriate for Christians to make use of the LAW to hold their government officials accountable.

That’s not disrespectful.

That’s not seditious.

That is legal, prudent, moral and WISE – so there is nothing unfaithful about making appropriate use of the law to restrain our civil leaders. Remember – the law is there for OUR protection as well.

And so that’s why, I would argue, it is a GOOD thing that some of the arrests and fines that were handed out during COVID are now being reviewed and CHALLENGED in the courts. While we didn’t necessarily adopt the same strategy as some other churches during COVID, we did not agree with Pastors being arrested for acting according to their consciences. So it is GOOD that those charges are being contested and it is GOOD that MANY of those charges are being dropped. If NON-COMPLIANCE is done respectfully and conscientiously then when punishments are excessive and inconsistently applied, those charges should be REVIEWED according to the rule of law.

The law is sometimes a SWORD that strikes us, but, wisely and properly wielded, it can also be a SHIELD that protects us. The Apostles understood that and so must we.

The fourth thing we can say here from our big picture survey of the Book of Acts is that:

4. The Apostles learned that legal proceedings could be used for the glory of God

There is no doubt that Paul wished to be released from his various imprisonments – and equally no doubt that those imprisonments did a great deal to further the cause of Christ throughout the world, and Paul came to understand that. Through the several stages of his journey through the Jewish and Roman legal systems Paul was able to give testimony before many powerful people. In addition, Paul was able to witness to the many guards who watched over him while he was under arrest. He speaks about that in Philippians 1:12-14:

“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.” (Philippians 1:12–14 ESV)

All of this was foretold by Jesus – both the burden and the blessing. In Luke 21:12-13 he said:

“they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. **This will be your opportunity to bear witness.**” (Luke 21:12-13 ESV)

And so, while the Apostles did not seek out imprisonment – neither did they lose faith when they found themselves in chains. They understood that their chains would open doors that would otherwise have remain closed and since they cared more about the mission than they did about their personal freedom they learned to embrace these unique opportunities.

You know we often complain about how little the government in Canada seems to know about us as Christians. They misrepresent our views and they label us as haters and far right extremists – all because we believe what every founding father of this country believed 156 years ago and what the VAST majority of citizens believed 20 minutes ago. It FEELS like we are misunderstood and misrepresented.

But do you know what might change that?

A few high-profile court cases – where good Christian doctors, for example, are fired for refusing to administer medical assistance in dying – and who make wise use of the law in questioning the legality of that proceeding and who are therefore given an opportunity to preach the Gospel before governors, courts and Prime Ministers. As painful as that would be for the doctors, it might be very helpful for the cause of the Christian church in general.

The same benefit might come about as a result of the firing of a Christian High School teacher for refusing to be complicit in the mass mutilation of perfectly healthy adolescent bodies due to our mass dysphoria in this culture around gender. Imagine if a Christian teacher was given the chance to speak before the courts about what the Bible actually says about the dignity of human beings and the beauty and purpose of gender and marriage and family – can you imagine how helpful that might be for the cause of Christ in this country?

Of course it would be painful for them personally - but massively helpful for the cause of the Gospel.

Are you capable of that perspective?

The Apostles had that perspective. Like any human being, they preferred freedom to imprisonment, but they learned to trust in the plan and Providence of God, and so must we.

And then lastly, in the Book of Acts, we can see clearly that:

5. The Apostles experienced the government being wielded as a weapon of the enemy

Paul had to endure punishment from both Jewish and Roman civil authorities over the course of his life and ministry. In 2 Corinthians 11:24-25 he says:

“Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods.” (2 Corinthians 11:24-25 ESV)

And of course he wrote that BEFORE he was arrested in Acts 21. He will remain in custody throughout the remainder of the book. At the end of Acts 28, while Paul is awaiting trial in Rome, Luke tells us:

“He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” (Acts 28:30–31 ESV)

Church historians generally suggest that Paul was released from this particular imprisonment and that he briefly resumed his missionary travels whereupon he was re-arrested around the year AD 64 as part of Nero’s brief but intense assault on the church. As part of that persecution Paul was beheaded just outside Rome on a mile post on the Ostian Way. The Apostle Peter was executed by crucifixion as part of the same purge.

Jesus said this would happen. He told the Apostles plainly:

“some of you they will put to death.” (Luke 21:16 ESV)

Jesus understood that when the devil wants to kill someone he will generally seize the sword of the government. When the devil wanted to kill Jesus, what did he do? Luke tells us:

“Then **Satan entered into Judas** called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve. 4 He went away and conferred with **the chief priests and officers** how he might betray him to them.” (Luke 22:3-4 ESV)

A few demonic agents inside the government puts a sword in Satan’s hand – and when he has it he will inevitably wield it against all those who represent the light.

It has happened before. It will happen again. And it appears to a great many of us that it is happening now, and so, of course, that’s why we’re talking about this, isn’t it? We all feel as though something has changed in this country. The government used to be an ALLY in the cause of the Christian faith. Many of us in this room can remember saying the Lord’s Prayer every morning in the Public Schools. That was half a lifetime ago! An awful lot has changed in 40 years. Now, not only is the government not helping us, it very much feels as though they are actively opposing us.

They are teaching our kids that it is HATEFUL to believe that God made human beings MALE and FEMALE. They are exposing our kids to conversations about sexuality and gender that they're young minds aren't capable of assimilating. It's no wonder our children are struggling with anxiety!!! That's what happens when you EXPOSE children to ADULT LEVEL HYSTERIA and NONSENSE. Their minds are buckling under the pressure of these malevolent influences.

And it's not just our kids – it feels like they're coming for our parents now. “Are you sick, Grandma? Have you considered Medical Assistance In Dying?”

What is happening in this country?

Fundamentally the simple answer is this: the thief has come to steal, kill and destroy. I don't think it is controversial at all to say that some of what is coming out of our government – some of what is being taught in the Public Schools and some of what is being codified into law in this country IS DEMONIC. It has as its intentions to steal, kill and destroy human life and to silence Christian witness.

So what do we do about it?

There are churches and pastors right now calling for us to go to WAR with the government. They are saying it is time to TRAIN OUR GUNS ON THE GOVERNMENT – metaphorically speaking. At least, I hope metaphorically speaking. They're saying we need to SLAY the BEAST. We need to actively oppose the government.

Now, I agree with their analysis but I disagree with their solution, because I don't see anything like that approach in the pages of my New Testament. The Apostles lived, ministered and died under hostile government – and that's where we are right now, in this country – and YET – the Apostles don't take up arms, they don't start a political action committee, they don't set up blockades, they don't give angry speeches on the steps of the Roman senate, and they don't print off vulgar bumper stickers. They don't do any of that.

What do they do?

They preach. They pray. They make disciples. They plant churches. They build communities. They shine the light.

And sometimes they get arrested.

And sometimes they were killed – and always WHILE REJOICING!!

That's the example they set, and so in the few minutes we have left I want to leave you with some pastoral counsel, based on their example, for how to relate, as a Christian to an increasingly hostile government.

How Should We Relate To A Hostile Government?

Everything I'm saying here has already been SHOWN in our survey of the Book of Acts, I'm just turning those EXAMPLES into practical COMMANDS or GUIDELINES, so I'll be very brief here. I think we should endeavour, by the grace that God supplies, to relate to our increasingly hostile government in the following way:

1. With limited obedience

Wherever we can obey the government we should. We don't want to become known as anti-statists. We don't want to be known as anarchists – because do you know what is even worse than hostile government? NO GOVERNMENT! When there is NO GOVERNMENT everyone does what is right in their own eyes and the strong take what they want from the weak. In the Book of Acts, on more than one occasion, it is the GOVERNMENT that protects Paul from the angry mob – so be careful about trying to bring down the government.

Be a good citizen – in so far as you can.

Obeys the government – except when they would force you to disobey God.

Alright, secondly, relate to the government with all appropriate respect.

2. With appropriate respect

Get that angry bumper sticker off your truck. Careful what you repost on Social Media. Careful how you speak about the Prime Minister. Show all appropriate honour and respect.

Thirdly: relate to the government like a prophet, which means, when appropriate, offering prophetic rebuke.

3. With prophetic rebuke

In Acts 2, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter said that we are ALL prophets now, in some sense. And the main job of the prophet, in the OT was speaking truth to power. Nathan came to David and said: YOU ARE THE MAN!! You are the ROBBER! You are the MURDERER! You have used your office to harm and abuse the people and it needs to stop.

The church can say that – and there are times when the church MUST say that.

Fourthly, we relate to a hostile government:

4. With persistence in prayer

In 1 Timothy 2:1-2 Paul says:

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” (1 Timothy 2:1-2 ESV)

Do you know what leads to OPTIMAL conditions in a country for Gospel work and mission? Not PROTEST but PRAYER. Are you praying for the Prime Minister? Are you praying for the Premier? Are you praying for the Mayor and the Chief of Police? According to Paul that is a FIRST ORDER priority for the Christian church.

We need to better with that. All of us. Myself included.

And then lastly, we relate to a hostile government with a:

5. With a recommitment to our core mission and calling AS A CHURCH

When people turn away from the church and toward political activism they reveal a fundamental LACK OF FAITH in the power of the Gospel to transform lives.

Listen, I'm all for voting, I'm all for making our voices heard, but if you want to change the world then you need to be HERE contributing to the work of the CHURCH.

You need to be DOWNSTAIRS teaching little ones to love and follow Jesus.

You need to be in the portable on Tuesday night teaching kids in Jr. High to love their Creator and to be context in the BODIES that God has given them.

You need to be inviting your neighbour to join you in a Going Deeper group going through a book of the Bible.

That's the sort of thing that will PUSH BACK THE DARKNESS; that's the sort of thing that will TURN BACK THE TIDE of evil and wickedness in this country; that's the sort of thing that CAN and HAS and WILL CHANGE THE WORLD and BLESS PEOPLE and BRING GLORY to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – thanks be to God! Let me pray for us.