

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)

Those Who Obey Him

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Acts 5:27-32

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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 Acts 5:27-32; that’s on page 913 in the pew Bibles. I want to drill down today on something that we didn’t have time to say a great deal about last week. Last week we were looking at the BIG IDEA in the passage, which is that when the state forbids us to do what God commands or commands us to do what God forbids:

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

That was an important discussion.

But this week I want to go back to something else Peter said in his speech. At first glance, it seems almost like a throwaway line, but I assure you it is not. It picks up and develops a theme that is arguably one of, if not the most important themes in the book. So hopefully you have your Bibles open again to Acts 5. Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 27:

And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, ²⁸ saying, “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.” ²⁹ But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must

obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is **the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.**” (Acts 5:17–42 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

The Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.

Did you trip over that phrase when we read it together last week?

I did.

I think in my mind I thought that said “the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who believe in him” – but that’s not what it says. It says something stronger than that – and since I am very eager for us to have MORE of the Holy Spirit, given the challenges we face as a church in the coming years and decades, I felt like it would be worth our time to dig into that.

So let’s do that, and let’s begin by asking the obvious question: what does it mean to “obey God” in this particular context? What is Peter getting at?

What Does It Mean To “Obey God” In This Context?

Well first and foremost, I think it means to respond appropriately to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

1. It means to respond appropriately to the Gospel of Jesus Christ

In his speech Peter doesn’t say anything about keeping the 10 Commandments, rather he talks about:

“Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.³² And we are witnesses to these things” (Acts 5:30–32 ESV)

So, clearly to “obey God” in this context, means to RECEIVE the Gospel Word that is being preached by the Apostles about Jesus. It means to identify him as the one who can grant forgiveness; it means to acknowledge him as your rightful Leader and Lord. If you do that, then you will be saved and you will receive the Holy Spirit.

That’s a BIGGER CATEGORY than just “believing in Jesus” – but it is a more biblical category and it is closer to how Jesus and the Apostles talked. Jesus in Luke 6:46 said:

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46 ESV)

Jesus wanted to be clear that there was no version of saving faith that did include the category of allegiance and obedience. Salvation is not for those who BELIEVE in Jesus – it is not even for those who WORSHIP JESUS, salvation according to the Bible is for those who OBEY HIM.

In Hebrews 5:9 for example, the Apostle says, referring to Jesus:

And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to **all who obey him** (Hebrews 5:9 ESV)

Now – to be clear, we’re not talking about a works based salvation here – as if we can obey all the commands of Jesus and thereby earn our salvation – we’re definitely NOT saying that. What we’re saying is that FAITH in the Bible is a BIGGER CATEGORY than mere belief.

The devil BELIEVES that Jesus is truly God and truly man and that he died on the cross for our sins – but BELIEVING THAT doesn’t make the devil a Christian. Why? Because the devil has not responded to that truth in the right way. His BELIEF falls short of SAVING FAITH.

SAVING FAITH is BELIEF PLUS REPENTENCE, PLUS SUBMISSION, PLUS ALLEGIANCE, PLUS TRUST PLUS LOVE.

It's a bigger category – and so often to express that the Apostles will use the word “OBEY” where we might expect the word “believe”. Paul in Romans 10 for example says:

But they have not all **obeyed** the gospel. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has **believed** what he has heard from us?” (Romans 10:16 ESV)

Paul is citing Isaiah 53 there which uses the word “believed” but just to avoid anything confusion, he BEEFS THAT UP as it were and says, “But they have not all OBEYED the Gospel.”

Peter uses the same kind of language. In 1 Peter 4:17 he asks the question:

“what will be the outcome for those who do not **obey the gospel** of God?” (1 Peter 4:17 ESV)

He's not asking what happens to those who do not BELIEVE THE GOSPEL – because again, the DEVIL believes the GOSPEL so that's not a strong enough category. You can believe something and not respond the way you are supposed to do - so salvation for Peter is for those who have OBEYED the Gospel. Salvation is for those who have heard who Jesus and who have been told what Jesus did and who on that basis embraced him as their Saviour and Lord.

That's who RECEIVES the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts – and in the wider New Testament as a whole.

So it means that, first, foremost and foundationally, but I think we can take it even one step further. I think Peter is saying something “thicker” here than just that. In this context “to obey God” also appears to mean persisting in your calling despite opposition and persecution.

2. It means to persist in your calling despite opposition and persecution

Look again at Acts 5:29 – the verse we drilled down on last Sunday. Peter says:

“We must obey God **rather than men.**” (Acts 5:29 ESV)

So the obedience that Peter is thinking of here SPECIFICALLY is obedience to God UNDER PRESSURE. I. Howard Marshall makes that observation in his commentary, he says:

“Peter adds pointedly that it is those who *obey* God (verse 29!) who receive the Spirit.”¹

Meaning that it is those who obey God in a verse 29 kind of way, in a ‘keep preaching the Gospel no matter what the world throws at you’ kind of way, who receive the Holy Spirit of God!

Are you hearing that church?

There is a BOTH/AND dynamic here.

Peter seems to be saying that when we respond appropriately to Jesus we receive the Holy Spirit in an INITIAL sense, but he also seems to be saying that when we CONTINUE TO RESPOND appropriately to Jesus UNDER PRESSURE we receive the Holy Spirit in a SUBSEQUENT sense.

And of course, Peter had just LEARNED that lesson experientially in Acts 4. In Acts 4 a group of people who had been filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, were arrested and ordered not to preach anymore in the name of Jesus. When they were released they immediately gathered the church together for a time of prayer. Acts 4:31 says:

¹I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/ Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 127.

“And 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.” (Acts 4:31 ESV)

When the church made the decision to PRESS THROUGH their first encounter with persecution and to carry on in the Great Commission they had been given, no matter the difficulty, no matter the cost:

they were all filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:31 ESV)

Even though they had already been filled with the Holy Spirit back in Acts 2!

It almost sounds like EVERY TIME we make a FAITH DECISION to follow Jesus as our Lord and Saviour AGAINST OPPOSITION AND PERSECUTION – God gives the Spirit to those who obey him.

Peter had LIVED that dynamic in Acts 4 such that he was able to boldly declare in Acts 5:

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

Peter understood that every time the world beats us down, if we are faithful to Jesus in that moment, then God is going to fill us up – and that’s a bargain at twice the price!

So what does that look like in practice?

What is the effect of the Holy Spirit on a FILLED and SUBSEQUENTLY FILLED CHURCH?

What Is The Effect Of The Holy Spirit On A Filled And Subsequently Filled Church?

Well, first and foremost, in the Book of Acts, the giving of the Holy Spirit is associating with HELP in fulfilling the Great Commission.

1. Help in fulfilling the Great Commission

That understanding comes from no less an authority than Jesus himself. In Acts 1:8 Jesus says:

“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)

With the help of the Holy Spirit, Jesus says the church is going to take the Gospel to people in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria – and even to the ends of the earth! Thus when the Holy Spirit was initially poured out upon the church on the Day of Pentecost, the Bible says:

“And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (Acts 2:4 ESV)

Now that was a REAL THING but it was also a SYMBOLIC THING. That was God saying: “I will help you do this impossible thing! I will empower you to take this message to people from every tribe, TONGUE and nation on planet earth! I will equip you to do what I am commanding you.”

Praise the Lord!

At our Staff Meeting last Monday Pastor Steve shared a story about Erwin Lutzer – a Canadian Pastor and theologian serving in Chicago. Pastor Lutzer taught a preaching class and it was his habit apparently to take his class, at some point, to a cemetery and to have them preach their sermons to the tombstones. He did that to make a point – and the point is that PREACHING THE GOSPEL TO DEAD PEOPLE IS AN IMPOSSIBLE MISSION - humanly speaking.

But thanks be to God – we serve a Saviour who knows how to raise the dead!

Every time you go into a Gospel conversation you are speaking to a dead person – you understand that right? In Ephesians 2:4-5 Paul said:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (Ephesians 2:4–5 ESV)

According to the Bible, that who we WERE and that's who everyone we are sharing the Gospel with IS – but the Good News is that the same Holy Spirit who did a miracle IN US can do a miracle THROUGH US. He can raise the dead, he can open eyes, he can dig ears so that people can see, hear and believe that the Christ is Jesus!

It takes a MIRACLE for a spiritually blind and dead human being to respond appropriately to the person and work of Christ – do you believe that church?

Peter believed that. He believed that because Jesus told him that. When Peter made his profession of faith Jesus said to him:

“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 16:17 ESV)

It is God who REVEALS! It is God who AWAKENS and QUICKENS the human heart - and he does that through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and therefore, there is NO SUCH THING as a hopeless situation, when it comes to sharing the Gospel. If you have the help of the HOLY SPIRIT then you have the POWER THAT RAISES THE DEAD flowing and working and speaking through you.

So things are going to happen that you cannot explain.

Doors are going to open that you did not kick down.

Defences are going to lower, that you did not overcome.

That kind of stuff is going to happen in a filled and subsequently filled church - thanks be to God!

Then secondly, we see in this story, that in a filled and subsequently filled church we are going to receive help in speaking truth to power.

2. **Help in speaking truth to power**

Jesus had told Peter and the other disciples to expect this. He said in Mark 13:9-11:

For they will deliver you over to councils, and you will be beaten in synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. ¹⁰ And the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations. ¹¹ And when they bring you to trial and deliver you over, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, **but the Holy Spirit**. (Mark 13:9–11 ESV)

Now Jesus is not telling pastors that they don't need to do their homework – he is not addressing the regular ministry of the church - rather he is saying that in these exceptional circumstances, when you are arrested and you don't have your commentaries, your laptop and your Accordance Bible Software – not to worry – because the Holy Spirit himself will give you the words that you need to speak. God has an interest in declaring the Gospel to governors, kings and authorities and so he will occasionally orchestrate a strategic arrest and then empower your witness in that situation.

That's exactly what we see in the Book of Acts. In the previous chapter when Peter was arrested for the first time, the Bible says:

Then Peter, **filled with the Holy Spirit**, said to them, “Rulers of the people and elders...” (Acts 4:8 ESV)

This is the same Peter who denied Jesus when pressured by a little servant girl in Matthew 26 – but now here in Acts 4 he is STARING DOWN the entire JEWISH SENATE – what in the world

is going on here? What's going on here is that Peter has been filled with the Holy Spirit of God and that makes all the difference in the world.

My friends, I believe that the church is going to be called upon to speak truth to power again in the coming years and decades. I think we should prepare for that. I've been reading all kinds of books on the relationship between church and state so that I'm prepared to argue for our continuing place and permission in the culture - I've been reading books about the theological foundations of the western worldview – I've been doing all of that because it seems entirely possible that at some point in the future I will find myself in the exact same position as the Apostle Peter – being arrested and through that arrest being given the opportunity to speak truth to power.

And in that moment, I want to be prepared – but far more important than that – I want to be empowered. I want to be HELPED by the Holy Spirit of God. So I want to OBEY HIM NOW – I want to be crystal clear in my allegiance to Jesus NOW – so as to position myself to receive further grace and filling THEN in my hour of need. And I advise you to do the same because a day may come when you will be summoned to the boss's office to explain why you are not wearing the rainbow shirt.

A day may come when you will be asked to explain to the CEO why you won't sign off on the shady tax deal that could save your company an awful lot of money.

A day may come when you will be asked by the Superintendent of the School System why you won't teach this soul-destroying curriculum that has been assigned to you.

You're going to need help from the Holy Spirit on that day so you want to make your allegiance to Jesus Christ CLEAR NOW, because according to the Bible, the Holy Spirit is given to those who obey him.

And then thirdly, we see here in the Book of Acts that in a filled and subsequently filled church we are going to receive help in making hard decisions.

3. Help in making hard decisions

To say that Jesus' Word is authoritative is not to say that he gave specific instructions addressing absolutely every decision we are going to face in this life. Sometimes you are going to need help to choose between multiple POSSIBLE and morally neutral options. We see that for example in Acts 13. That church had MULTIPLE PREACHING PASTORS but they were aware that there were regions near them that didn't have any Gospel witness at all.

So who should they send?

Jesus didn't say anything about that specifically and so for a situation like that you need the Guidance of the Holy Spirit and the church in Acts – having OBEYED GOD under pressure back in Acts 4 and 5 had that, praise the Lord! So Acts 13:2 says:

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, **the Holy Spirit said**, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” (Acts 13:2 ESV)

I'm guessing that is not the decision the Board of Elders of that church would have come to on its own, apart from the guidance of the Holy Spirit! Paul and Barnabas were their best preachers! They were the A-Team! If they had put that one to a vote, I'm guessing they send the co-op student. But they wanted to do God's will, so they prayed about it and the HOLY SPIRIT SAID: “set apart for me Barnabas and Saul.”

And of course, as we know – that was the right decision. Numerous churches were planted because of the work of that team.

We catch another glimpse of this dynamic a few chapters later. The church was facing its first internal crisis. As more and more Gentiles – like the household of Cornelius – were coming into the church, the more traditional Jewish members started feeling uncomfortable. The Gentiles didn't eat kosher. The Gentiles didn't keep the Old Testament feasts. The Gentiles wore PANTS OF MIXED FIBRES! It was terrible – it was a scandal – and it threatened to pull the early church apart.

So what are you going to do in a situation like that?

You don't want to appear disrespectful toward the Old Testament, but on the other hand, you don't want to undermine the explosive realities of the New Testament either – so what do you do? Getting it wrong here would have MASSIVE CONSEQUENCES – so they sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit – and according to the Apostle James, they received it. In the letter that he sent out to the churches announcing the decision of the council he said:

“For it has seemed good **to the Holy Spirit and to us** to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements...” (Acts 15:28 ESV)

And then he outlined a very reasonable compromise based upon FREEDOM in Christ on the one hand and mutual RESPECT for brothers and sisters on the other hand. It was brilliant! And 100% Holy Spirit INSPIRED.

Praise the Lord!

Friends, listen to me, given the complexity of issues we are going to be facing over the next 10 years as we minister in this rapidly changing culture, we are going to NEED the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit – amen? So let's agree now to OBEY GOD. Let's agree to make our allegiance CLEAR in all the day-to-day challenges that we are face so that we are properly positioned to receive it.

Then fourthly, and lastly, as we see in this story, in a filled and subsequently filled church people are receiving help in finishing well.

4. Help in finishing well

Shortly after Peter says what he says in Acts 5, Stephen comes under the microscope in Acts 6. Like Peter he was given the opportunity to speak truth to power – and like Peter he received the help of the Holy Spirit in so doing. Acts 6 says that some representatives from the synagogue of the Freedmen, as well as from several other synagogues began disputing with Stephen:

“But they could not withstand the wisdom and **the Spirit** with which he was speaking.” (Acts 6:10 ESV)

Stephen was arrested and brought before the council where again he spoke boldly and with great power. Unlike Peter in Acts 5, however, Stephen was forced to pay the ultimate price. Acts 7:54-58 says:

Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, **full of the Holy Spirit**, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. (Acts 7:54–58 ESV)

Sometimes being filled with the Holy Spirit doesn't mean reaping a rich Gospel harvest; sometimes it means being faithful and steadfast in your witness even unto death.

A dear lady in this church once confessed to me that she did not believe that she had the courage to be faithful to the Lord under intense pressure. She was worried that if her grandchildren were ever threatened, for example, she might be tempted to disown the Lord.

I think all honest and self-aware Christians wonder about that sort of thing from time to time.

But I reminded this dear lady that God gives us grace for the challenges at hand. We pray for our daily bread, not our monthly bread. You can't look inside yourself today to find the grace you will need for the challenges of the future, and so the best thing you can do today is to take the message of this text to heart.

Obey God today in whatever circumstances you may find yourself.

Make your allegiance to Jesus clear today under whatever pressures you are currently exposed to.

And with each daily declaration and with each act of faithful following you will better position yourself to be filled and further filled with the Holy Spirit whom the Lord gives to those who obey him; thanks be to God!

Let me pray for us.