

The Problem of Today's American Church

Acts Chapters 3 and 4

Dr. Paul M. Elliott
President, TeachingTheWord Ministries
www.teachingtheword.org

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Introduction

Thank you, Dr. McKnight, for your kind words of introduction. The American Council of Christian Churches is an organization that has long been of the greatest interest to me. I was saved back in 1960 in a church that was part of a member body of the American Council, and I can remember attending ACCC rallies with my parents when I was quite young.

I very much appreciate the name of the American Council's website –ACCC4TRUTH. And as I was thinking about that name, and as I was thinking about the stand which that name describes – a stand for truth – it led me to the topic that I would like to discuss with you this evening. That topic is what I believe we can most accurately describe as The Problem of the American Church today. The Problem of the American Church. More specifically, the problem of what is generally considered to be the conservative American church today.

Let me begin by putting before you what I believe that problem is, on the authority of the Word of God. What is generally purported to be the conservative American church today **is** the problem in America today.

The fact is that much of what the news media and many Christians themselves would call the conservative American church today, has entered into an unholy alliance with those who are in fact not for the truth – not for the truth as it is found in the Word of God alone.

In fact, it is not an exaggeration or in any way a falsehood to say that most of what is commonly called the conservative American church today has entered into an alliance that is not for the truth but is in fact against the truth as it is to be found in the Word of God and in Jesus Christ alone.

It is my intention this evening to state that case to you and point out to us the response that the Word of God commands of us. This is a situation that we must face honestly – for the spiritual welfare of our souls and for the spiritual welfare of our churches.

I think the best way to state the case is to remind ourselves that the situation that we confront in America today is not new in the history of the church. It is, in fact, a recurring pattern through the history of the true church of Jesus Christ. It is a recurring pattern in organized religion of every description. And in the wisdom and providence of God we find this pattern presented to us in the very earliest days of the New Testament church era.

The Passage

I want to call your attention this evening to one of the earliest events of church history that we find recorded for us in the third and fourth chapters of the book of Acts. Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Acts, chapter 3, beginning at verse one. Act chapter 3, beginning at verse one. Luke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit records this historic event for us:

Now Peter and John went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being the ninth hour.

And a certain man lame from his mother's womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms of them that entered into the temple; who seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple asked an alms.

And Peter, fastening his eyes upon him with John, said, Look on us. And he gave heed unto them, expecting to receive something of them.

Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have I give thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.

And he took him by the right hand, and lifted him up; and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. And he leaping up stood, and walked, and entered with them into the temple, walking, and leaping, and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God..

And we find in the subsequent verses of this chapter that the people marveled at what it happened. There was quite a commotion. And the people wondered what had happened and why it had happened.

Peter explained to them, in verse 12, that it was not by the power or holiness of Peter and John that this man had been made to walk. It was not by their efforts that this man had been freed from his bondage. No, he said, this has been done through the name and by the power of the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 16:

And his name through faith in his name has made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by him [by Jesus] has given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all.

And then Peter came to the great point of it all in verse 19:

Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; and he shall send Jesus

Christ which before was preached unto you: whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.

Peter, on this occasion, as he had on the day of Pentecost a short time previously, preached the truth of Jesus Christ. The name of Jesus Christ. But what was the reaction of the religious leaders of the day? What was the reaction of the prominent preachers and theologians of the day? What was the reaction of both the reputed conservatives and the reputed liberals of the day?

Their reaction was to form an alliance to suppress the name and the truth of Jesus Christ. Let me call your attention to Acts chapter 4 verse one:

And as they spake unto the people [even as Peter was saying the Words], the priests and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees, came upon them, being grieved [in the original language, being extremely annoyed] that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead.

And they laid hands on them, and put them in hold [that is, put them in prison] unto the next day: for it was now eventide.

And the indication is that they put not only Peter and John but also the man who had been healed in prison.

Howbeit [chapter 4, verse 4] many of them which heard believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand.

And it came to pass on the morrow, that their rulers, and elders, and scribes, and Annas the high priest, and Caiaphas, and John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the kindred of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem.

And when they had set them [Peter and John and the man who had been healed] in the midst, they asked, by what power, or by what name, have ye done this?

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, said unto them, Ye rulers of the people, and elders of Israel, If we this day be examined of the good deed done to the impotent man, by what means he is made whole;

Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole.

This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marveled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus. And beholding the man which was healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it.

But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, saying, What shall we do to these men? For that indeed a notable miracle hath been done by them is manifest to all them that dwell in Jerusalem; and we cannot deny it.

But that it spread no further among the people, let us straitly [or severely] threatened them, that they speak henceforth to no man in this name.

And they called them, and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.

An Unholy Alliance Against the Truth

Now we could say many things about the events of which we have just read. But the particular reason that I have placed this passage of Scripture before you this evening is, as I said at the beginning, because it gives us such a strong parallel to the problem of the American church today.

The core problem of America today is not a political problem. The core problem of America today is not an economic problem. It is not a social problem. In fact it is not even a moral problem, at its core. The core problem of America today is a spiritual problem.

And the fountainhead of that problem today is to be found not in Washington, not in the courts, not in the public schools, not in the colleges and universities, not in Hollywood. The Fountainhead of the spiritual problem of America today is to be found in the pulpits of most of what are called and purported to be conservative American churches. As the church goes, so goes the nation.

Let me give you the parallel as we find it here in Acts chapter 3 and 4. First of all, let me call your attention once again to the opening verses of chapter 4.

We find, named for us in chapter 4, verse one, and in verses five and six, the members of an unholy alliance against the truth. It was an alliance that is composed of the religious conservatives of the day, as well as the religious liberals of the day. It was an alliance that extended into, and was supported, by the power of the civil government of the day.

The Priests

Who are the members of this alliance against the truth? First of all, we have the priests. The ordinary priests who did their daily duty in the temple, according to the order and the rotation that had been established under King David 1000 years before. And in the same way, we have many of what we might call the ordinary clergy, the ordinary preachers, entering into an unholy alliance against the truth today.

The Captain of the Temple

Secondly, chapter 4 verse one tells us that this unholy alliance included the captain of the temple. The captain of the temple was the head of a special group of Levites who acted effectively as policeman to keep order within the courts of the temple. And the outer court of the temple in this day was a large area covering a number of acres.

And adjacent to this outer court was what was called the Antonia Fortress. The Antonia Fortress was the barracks of the Roman army of occupation in Jerusalem. The captain of the temple who is mentioned in Acts chapter 4 verse one, had the power and authority to call upon these Roman soldiers to come, even into the court of the Gentiles of the temple, to help to maintain order and to prevent insurrection, and to take those who cause disturbances off to prison. They were the enforcers.

Now you may be wondering, how does this relate to the situation in our own day? What is the parallel? Let me submit this to you: I believe that the situation that is developing within the American church scene, and even within the purportedly conservative American church scene, could well lead to this kind of an alliance.

Coming Persecution

How could that happen? Here is how I believe it could well happen. We are entering into a time, in fact we have already entered into a time, when sodomy is becoming a civil right. Discrimination against sodomites is rapidly being placed in the same category as discrimination against individuals because of the color of their skin.

Dear friends, that kind of discrimination, discrimination against an individual because of the color of his skin or his ethnic origin within the church of Jesus Christ, is sinful. But

discrimination within the church of Jesus Christ against an individual because he or she is an unrepentant homosexual is the duty of the true church of Jesus Christ. Such people have no place within the true church of Jesus Christ, unless they repent and are converted and abandon that abominable way of living.

First Corinthians chapter 6 verse nine tells us this, and I'm reading from the New King James translation because the Wording that is given there is much more direct than the Wording of the Authorized Version. First Corinthians chapter 6 beginning at verse nine says this:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived, neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor idolaters, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.

And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

We find the same thing stated for us unequivocally in many other passages of Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments. And at the end of the book of Revelation, in chapter 21, versus seven and eight, we are told that "he that overcome shall inherit all things" but those who persist in sexual immorality are named in verse eight among those who "shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone: which is the second death."

Dear friends, this is rapidly becoming an exceedingly unpopular and unacceptable position even within many reputedly conservative churches today. And as time goes on, unless God mercifully intervenes, this is going to become, I believe, a severe and critical testing point for the true people of Christ and the true churches of Jesus Christ.

The day is coming, I believe, when it will not matter what your church constitution or your church statement of faith may say about these issues. To call this gross immorality by the name that God calls it – an abomination – that will be called discrimination.

It will be illegal, and an unholy religious alliance that is opposed to the truth will join with civil authority in persecuting God's faithful remnant that stands firm on this particular issue – God's faithful remnant who will say to the religious and civil authorities as Peter and John said in Acts chapter 4 verse 19, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye."

I believe God's faithful remnant is entering a period of what may become severe testing on this issue. Will we say, as Peter and the other Apostles said to the same unholy alliance

of religious leaders in Acts chapter 5 verse 29, "We ought to obey God rather than men" – or will we give in? Will we capitulate? And in the original language, that statement is much more forceful. It reads like this: "It is an absolute necessity for us to obey God as magistrate rather than corrupt men."

And so, in Acts chapter 4, we have what we might call in our present-day terms the common clergy entering into an unholy alliance against the truth. And we have religious leaders in partnership with civil authority entering into an unholy alliance against the truth.

The Sadducees

And then in Acts chapter 4 verse one we also see that the Sadducees were involved in this unholy alliance against the truth. We find in the gospel records and also in Jewish historical writings that the Sadducees were the anti-supernaturalists of the day. In a book called *Courageous Christianity*, Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones describes the Sadducees this way:

The Sadducees may be described as the priestly aristocracy. They were primarily and essentially politicians, the people who were concerned about positions and government and order and the relationships between their country and other countries. They were schemers and plotters. Even politicians do not change from century to century! The authorities tell us that when it paid the Sadducees to be religious – and it did, of course, in those days – they were interested in religion. But they were not interested in it personally.

And of course we have the parallel than our own time. So much of the so-called conservative church in America has become deeply and tragically involved with politics. And many politicians have taken on the false mantle of religious conservatism in order to win votes.

But what is the best that politics can ever do? It never touches the real problem of man. All of the talk of the politicians and the pundits deals with symptoms. But the problems of the nation are a symptom of something far deeper. The slaughter of the unborn is a symptom of a far greater life-and-death struggle. The problems of the global economy are a symptom of something far more serious. The wars that are being fought in various parts of the globe tonight are symptom of a far more eternally significant warfare.

The natural disasters and environmental catastrophes that the world is experiencing are symptoms of a far worse catastrophe that happened long, long ago, in a realm outside of this world when Satan fell because of pride and then came into this world and tempted

man to fall into sin and brought a curse upon this world under which it stands to this very moment.

A Church Guilty of Criminal Malpractice

Many in what is called conservative American Christianity today are caught up in trying to make this world a better place, trying to make this life a better life, rather than recognizing that this world is passing away, that it is dying – and that Jesus Christ himself has commanded us to focus our efforts on the things that matter for the life to come and for the world to come – the salvation of lost sinners, and the nurturing of the saints.

If a doctor were to spend all of his time only treating the symptoms of a patient who has a deadly disease, but he never tried to deal with the root cause, the disease itself – then the patient would die, and that doctor would be guilty of a criminal act of malpractice.

The American church that enters into such endeavors, the purportedly conservative American church that is increasingly focusing on what is called social justice – which is, in fact, nothing but Marxist liberation theology wrapped in religious language – the purportedly conservative American church that is increasingly focused on these things is guilty in the eyes of God of a criminal act of spiritual malpractice.

They are allying themselves with people who have never understood the true cause of mankind's problem, they have never understood that the cause is sin and that the only cure is salvation through Jesus Christ.

Caiaphas and Annas

And also in the list of the members of the unholy alliance against the truth that we find in Acts chapter 4 we find a man named Caiaphas, a Sadducee of the Sadducees, whose job it was to preside over this alliance. We also find Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas. Annas had been the high priest but he had been deposed by the Roman government. But he was still part of the unholy alliance against the truth. And then we find that in this unholy alliance were many who were the kindred of the high priest.

The Scribes

And then there were the scribes. They were the teachers of the law, the experts in the oral tradition, they were the ones who were responsible for the great and tragic and voluminous additions that had been made to God's Holy Word.

And in contrast to the Sadducees, these men mostly belong to the party of the Pharisees. Unlike the Sadducees, they believed in the resurrection. They believed in angels. They believed in judgment and in rewards and punishments.

They were an absolute contrast to the Sadducees and yet they were altogether in this unholy alliance against the truth, even though they hated each other. But they hated the truth more.

The Parallel Today

And dear friends, this is the kind of a situation that we are facing today. Greater and greater antagonism, even among those who would be described as "conservative American Christians" – antagonism toward the truth as it is found in the Word of God alone and in Jesus Christ alone.

Where do we see it? We see it all over radio and television. We saw it in the Evangelicals and Catholics Together documents. We saw it in the Manhattan Declaration. We see it in neo-fundamentalism. We see it in the mass so-called evangelistic crusades or festivals in which Roman Catholic officials and other religious liberals stand alongside so-called religious conservatives.

We saw it in the Glenn Beck rally at the Lincoln Memorial a couple of years ago where so-called conservative Protestants stood alongside Mormon cultists and Roman Catholic priests and even Muslim imams in an unholy alliance that is actually opposed to Christ, no matter how many times they may name His name.

We see it in the so-called celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation that is called Refo500, in which the Jesuits, who now for the first time in history have their man on the papal throne at the Vatican, the Jesuits are taking a leading role in the celebration of the Protestant Reformation, co-opting the celebration for their purposes.

And here is the fact that we must face, dear friends. And we must never be afraid to face it: We, of God's faithful remnant; We, who do in fact stand for the unadulterated truth of God's word; We, in fact, extremely annoy these people just as Peter and John annoyed the unholy religious alliance of their day.

We stand in the way of their agenda, and they will not tolerate us, no matter how much they may talk about tolerance. This growing unholy alliance against the truth, of purported conservatives, open liberals, political authority, civil authority, all of them deeply offended by the truth of God as it is found in His Word.

What Offends Them?

What is it that offends them? Well, if you listen to them, you will hear many things that have their parallels to the Words of the unholy alliance of Acts chapters 3 and 4. These men didn't go to our schools. They don't have our degrees. They haven't had the laying on of the hands of our bishops. They haven't learned and been educated according to our standards. And they are not willing to submit to our authority.

Those were the objections in those earliest days of the New Testament church, and those same objections are increasingly raised in the 21st century church scene, not only in America, but around the world.

Who Offends Them?

But there is a more vital question. It is not simply a matter of what offends them. It is a matter of Who offends them. It is the truth as is embodied in the name and person of Jesus Christ that offends them.

The first **question** that this unholy alliance asked Peter and John was this: By what power and by what name have you done this? And the first **response** of this unholy alliance against the truth was to severely threaten them that they speak henceforth to no man in this name.

Now let me be clear on this. Yes indeed, there are many today who are part of this growing unholy alliance against the truth who are using the name of Jesus. But they are, as the Apostle Paul warned in Second Corinthians chapter 11, verse four, coming preaching another Jesus and not the authentic Jesus. They are coming in and coming under the authority of another spirit that is not the spirit of Christ, but the spirit of Antichrist. And they are coming not with the one true Gospel of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, apart from any works or wisdom of man, but they are coming with another gospel.

And make no mistake, dear friends, they are coming in opposition to us because we stand for the true Christ, the true Spirit, and the true Gospel. Even though they may try to win us, to co-opt us, to their side. They want to bring us into this unholy alliance, and more to the point, Satan wants to bring us into this unholy alliance, just as so many others have joined it to their spiritual destruction.

Our Challenge

Dear friends, our challenge is to recognize continually that we are in a warfare not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the world rulers of

this darkness, as we are told in Ephesians 6. We must put on the whole armor of God in order that we may stand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

I believe that we are entering into a period of time in America that may be much like those early days of the church, when the church suffered severe persecution for the name of Christ. But what was the response of the early Christians as we find it later on in Acts chapter 4? We read in Acts chapter 4 verse 24 that when the believers heard what had happened to Peter and John,

they lifted up their voice to God with one accord, and said, Lord thou art God, which hast made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is: Who by the mouth of thy servant David hast said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ.

For of the truth against thy holy Child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done. And now, Lord, behold their threatenings: and grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word...

And God granted them the grace to do just that. And we find over and over again in the book of Acts the repeated phrase that the Word of God grew, the Word of God prospered, the Word of God was powerful, the Word, the Word, the Word.

Dear friends we must have the faithful exposition of the Word from our pulpits. That is what will make the difference. That is what God will honor.

We must recognize continually, as we are told in Jude verse four, that there are those who are creeping into the church unnoticed. And they are coming in, and they are perverting the grace of God, and they are denying the true Lordship of Christ.

And dear friends, I am concerned that as I look around at the ministers in the American Council of Christian Churches, and in other bodies of the faithful remnant of our day – I'm concerned that I see a group of men who not are getting any younger.

And I often wonder: Where is the next generation of Bible expositors who are going to uphold the truth in the face of this greatly gathering strength of opposition? That concerns me. I know it concerns many of you men. And I know it concerns many of the members of our churches. So many churches today are being led away from the truth when young men who were not grounded in the truth come in and take over the pulpit. May God help us.

In the ministry that I am involved in, we are being asked to help people deal with those kinds of situations all the time. So many once-faithful churches are being destroyed today. May God provide, if the Lord should tarry, another generation of men who will take up the banner of the truth of Christ.

In past generations sometimes God has raised up those men not from the colleges and seminaries that have, in fact, become part of the problem and not part of the solution. He has raised them up from unexpected places and from unexpected walks of life.

As I look at the situation in many of our purportedly conservative schools that are part of the present downgrade, I can't help wondering if God may do the same thing again, to raise up another Charles Spurgeon, or another G. Campbell Morgan, or another Martyn Lloyd-Jones – men who never darkened the door of a Bible college or seminary, but God used them mightily. Perhaps God may do it again. In fact I pray that God may do so.

An Exhortation and Benediction

Let me close this evening with the exhortation and the benediction that Peter gave to the first century church as it faced the unholy alliance of its time. First Peter chapter 5 verse, beginning at verse 8:

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world.

But the God of all grace, who had called us unto to his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect [or mature], establish, strengthen, settle you. To him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.