

Great Boldness

“Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” Acts 4:29-30

Luke’s simple narrative description of the response of the early church to opposition provides an important guide for focusing believers and emboldening the church through fellowship, prayer and witness. The early church prayed for strength to speak the word of God boldly. They were not disappointed with God, but dependent upon God; they were not embittered against the opposition, but empowered to witness courageously in the face of opposition.

Spirit-inspired Boldness

The Church of Acts prayed for a boldness inspired by the Holy Spirit that is a boldness in keeping with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Boldness means different things to different people, so it is important to emphasize that the apostles sought to be brave-hearted, not brash, courageous, not audacious, daring, not presumptuous, and fearless, not intimidating. Against threats and intimidations they prayed for the ability to present the Gospel clearly and compellingly. This is not a boldness inspired by fear or testosterone. It is neither reactionary nor macho.

The early church practiced a beatitude-based boldness: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Mt 5:11-12). Jesus did not promise the church peace and prosperity; he promised peace in the midst of persecution and suffering. In fact he said, “Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets” (Lk 6:26). Believers who live for Christ in countries hostile to the Christian Faith understand their dependence upon the Lord in ways many Western believers find difficult to comprehend.

Boldness may be born of setbacks and persecution. Dr. Helen Roseveare might have been tempted to feel discouraged and disappointed with God. Over the course of a twenty-year ministry in the Congo, she left Africa three times. Each time she felt like a failure. Just out of medical school she arrived in the Congo in 1953. She recalls, “The ink was hardly dry on my medical diploma and overnight I became the Senior Chief Consultant of everything from pediatrics to geriatrics and everything in between.” In her first five years she set up a hospital, trained nurses, saw thousands of patients, and became fluent in Swahili. But by the time she returned to England for surgical training in 1958, she felt deeply inadequate medically and spiritually. She confesses that her strong will, impatience, pride and dictatorial nature robbed her of any sense of joy, in spite of her many accomplishments.

During her two years in England she reflected on her work in Africa and God gave her sufficient peace to return to the Congo in mid-1960. Three weeks after her arrival civil war broke out. Helen refused to leave. Over the next four nightmarish years she was attacked, beaten, raped, and finally arrested by rebel Simba soldiers. In 1964 she was liberated and flew out of Africa to England on New Year's Day (1965), vowing never to return to the Congo. But a little over a year later, at the request of an African doctor whom she had trained, Helen returned to the Congo to help rebuild the hospital and minister in what had become a destitute and desperate situation. She worked tirelessly to establish the Evangelical Medical Center with a hospital, training college, an airstrip for a flying doctor service, and four bush clinics.

In 1971 she turned the leadership of the center over to nationals, but then in 1973 a student strike at the medical college caused her to resign as director of the college. Helen left the Congo for the last time, broken instead of rejoicing. Three times she left the Congo utterly dejected, her hopes and dreams dashed, and despondency overshadowed her great accomplishments. But each time her faith in Christ weathered the setback and emboldened her to press on. In subsequent years she has challenged many people to serve Christ in difficult places around the world. "I tell Christians, wherever they are, that they must 'refall' in love with Jesus," says Helen. They must fall out of love with materialism and into love with missions. "Once Christians fall out of love with [materialism] and in love with Jesus, I won't need to talk mission; they will become missionaries because they love Him" (Lin Johnson, *Ambassadors for Christ*, Moody, 1994, 228).

Together in Prayer

We cannot overlook the life situation that prompted the early church to pray for boldness. Opposition provided a powerful incentive, not only for Peter and John, but for the whole church, to pray for boldness. And there is nothing quite like your own people to provide the fellowship you need to be emboldened. Middle class whites joke about pseudo important business types saying, "I'll have my people call your people to set up an appointment," but when a black person refers to "my people" he or she means it. There is a solidarity of experience, culture and expression that helps to unite and encourage. I envy that kind of solidarity for the church. Peter and John return to their own people. They are not individualists, doing their own thing, they are in solidarity with the Christian community. John Chrysostom called attention to their character, when he wrote, "See the unostentatious conduct of the Apostles, and their largeness of mind. They did not go about boasting" or bragging or bullying, but with all "mildness and gentleness" they return to their people and pray (Chrysostom, *Homily XI*, 72).

Setbacks need to be talked through and processed and that is exactly what Peter and John did. They "reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them." In response, the entire community of believers "raised their voices together in prayer to God." There are always alternatives to prayer, such as depressing recitals of previous hard times or useless speculation on the action of authorities. People are tempted in such situations to prognosticate, pontificate, and commiserate; to do everything, that is, but to pray. That is why it is instructive that they raised their voices together in prayer to God, and even then, their prayer was not a lament but a bold

declaration of the power and promise of God.

Through prayer they left a world of their own worrying and achieving and entered into the world of God's making and saving. Eugene Peterson writes, "In prayer we intend to leave the world of anxieties and enter a world of wonder. We decide to leave an ego-centered world and enter a God-centered world. We will leave a world of problems and enter a world of mystery. But it is not easy. We are used to anxieties, egos, problems; we're not used to wonder, God, and mystery" (Eugene Peterson, *Answering God*, p.23).

Their attitude was well expressed in Hebrews, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb 4:16). They prayed like King Hezekiah when the people of God were under threat of annihilation by Sennacherib, king of Assyria: "O Lord of hosts, God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim, you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth" (Isa 37:16). They prayed the way Peter encouraged believers to pray, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Pet 5:7). They raised their voices together in prayer to God and acknowledged the Lord's sovereignty, saying, "You made. . . .You spokeYou decided" (Acts 4:24, 25, 28).

If Margaret Clarkson's hymn had been available, they would have sung it:

O Father, you are sovereign
In all affairs of man;
No powers of death or darkness
Can thwart your perfect plan.
All chance and change transcending,
Supreme in time and space,
You hold your trusting children
Secure in your embrace.

The psalms teach us that we cannot separate religion and politics. They are "terrifically personal" and "ardently political" (Peterson *Earth and Altar*, 15-16). **Psalm 2 was the right psalm for the situation. It was a messianic psalm frequently quoted in the New Testament, because of "its high claim for the Person of God's Anointed and for its vision of His universal kingdom."** "At Christ's baptism and transfiguration the Father proclaimed Him both Son and Servant in words drawn from this verse and from Isaiah 42:1 (Mt 3:17; 17:5; 2 Pet 1:17)." "It is unsurpassed for its buoyant, fierce delight in God's dominion and His promise to His King" (Kidner, 50).

One reason we love Psalm 1 and ignore Psalm 2 is because we have a fatal habit of separating self and society. We can grasp, "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked" more easily than we can answer the question, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?" We resonate with the positive, "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night," and avoid the negative, "The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One." We can picture "a tree planted by streams of living water, more readily than we can comprehend the One enthroned in heaven laughing and rebuking. We agree with the psalmist, "The wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous," but the judgment scene is more than we bargained for, "You will rule them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like

pottery.”

“Psalm 1 is a laser concentration on the person; Psalm 2 is a wide-angled lens on politics. God deals with us personally, but at the same time he has public ways that intersect the lives of nations, rulers, kings and governments. The two psalms are together by design, a binocular introduction to the life of prayer, an initiation into the responses that we make to the word of God personally (‘blessed is the man,’ 1:1) and politically (‘blessed are all,’ 2:11). Psalm 1 presents the person who delights in meditating on the law of God; Psalm 2 presents the government that God uses to deal with the conspiratorial plots of peoples against his rule” (19).

Luke’s quote from Psalm 2 emphasizes God’s sovereign control over human rejection. “*Why* sets the tone of its approach, one of astonishment at the senseless rejection of God’s rule and ruler” (Kidner, 50). It is interesting to note that the word used for “plot” in Psalm 2:1 is the same word translated “meditates” in Psalm 1:2. The early church saw “Calvary itself predicted here, with the roles of kings and rulers fulfilled by, respectively, Herod and Pilate, and those of nations and peoples by ‘the Gentiles and the peoples’ ‘of Israel,’ united against the Lord’s anointed or in Greek, His Christ (Acts 4:25-28; Kidner, 50).

We would never know from the boldness of their prayer that they were a small minority, without position or power. They had devised no strategic plan, nor initiated a funding campaign, nor established anything faintly resembling a power base. But how they prayed was in keeping with Paul’s description of the church: “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world” (2 Cor 10:3-4). From the start, the church held to the conviction expressed so powerfully by the apostle Paul, “But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!” (Phil 3:20-21).

They did not pray for vengeance against their enemies. This attitude shows marked improvement over the earlier days, when James and John, nick named the sons of thunder, wanted to call fire down from heaven to destroy the opposition (Lk 9:54). “Did they ask him to perform great miracles of vengeance upon their enemies? Did they ask him to step in and with one sweep of his mighty hand overpower them? No! They asked God to continue to do miracles of mercy such as he had done in the healing of the lame man at the temple. Amazing! Not miracles to hurt their enemies, but miracles to heal them. They were not concerned about their own fate, but consumed with a desire to communicate the gospel of the love of God” (Leroy Eims, *Disciples in Action*, NavPress, 1981, 59).

They did not pray for deliverance but for boldness. Instead of calling down wrath they called up courage. The boldness sought was not to aggravate the opposition. They did not ask to speak boldly because they “knew that the wicked could abide nothing worse than the free course of the gospel.” On the contrary, they believed in the Gospel of life which God compelled them to proclaim (Calvin, 188). The great hope in witnessing boldly was not to issue an ultimatum but to deliver an invitation, just as Psalm 2 ends with “an invitation rather than an ultimatum” (Kidner,

52).

“After they prayed,” reports Luke, “the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.” Luke’s emphasis appears to be on Spirit empowered boldness rather than on miraculous signs and wonders. It is not certain that signs and wonders are the main secret of church growth. “Luke seems rather to attribute the growth to the power of Peter’s preaching. In this sense all true evangelism is ‘power evangelism,’ for conversion and new birth, and so church growth, can take place only by the power of God through his Word and Spirit” (Stott, 102, see 1 Cor 2:1-5; 1 Thess 1:5). John Chrysostom wrote, “‘The place was shaken,’ and that made them all the more unshaken” (73).

Speaking the word of God boldly

If we want to speak boldly of Jesus Christ, we must begin by eliminating abusive language, all slander, all gossip, all flattery, all mockery, all manipulative speech. Starting in the summer of the year 400 AD John Chrysostom preached 55 messages on the book of Acts in Constantinople. John used this passage in Acts 4 to admonish his congregation on their language. Praise and cursing should not come out of the same mouth (James 3:10). True evangelism begins with this God-honoring virtue, but if we are indifferent to this *easy precept* how will we face the greater challenges. As a child learns the alphabet in order to eventually learn to read, so the Christian learns to watch his tongue in order to speak boldly above all of God (Homily XI, 75). John exhorted believers to learn from the apostle Paul who said, “When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly” (1 Cor 3:12-13). If we give in on such simple things as speech, Chrysostom argued nothing good can be accomplished. In an earlier sermon he addressed the same theme, saying, “Better one person that does the will of the Lord, than ten thousand transgressors. In fact, hereby is everything subverted, everything turned upside down, I mean, because after the fashion of the theater we desire numbers, not a select number. For what indeed will a multitude be able to profit? Would you learn that it is the saints, not the numbers, which make the multitude?” (Chrysostom, Homily IX, 54).

If we want to speak boldly of Jesus Christ, we want to learn to embrace the truth with our head and our heart. “The heart never takes the place of the head: but it can, and should, obey it” (Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, Men Without Chests, 30). We can neither bypass the mind and focus only on feelings nor ignore the heart and instruct only the intellect. Speaking the word of God boldly is both intellectual and emotional, because it engages the mind and expresses the heart. The truth of Christ demands everything we have. This is why Paul felt compelled to preach (1 Cor 9:16) and why he did everything in his power to persuade people (2 Cor 5:11). “We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me” (Col 1:28-29).

Certain social circles virtually require a person to be seriously unserious. In such circles, “boldness” is perceived more as a turn-off than a turn-on. Serious discourse is dismissed with either flippancy or cynicism. Picture yourself trying to speak about the crucified Lord Jesus Christ with David Letterman. If, as Neil Postman argues, “entertainment is the metaphor for all

discourse,” we are left without an effective medium through which we can communicate the gospel. How can we bring the message of Jesus to a lost and hurting culture in a light-hearted, entertaining, upbeat way? I don’t think we can. But we can pray for courage and sensitivity, to commend the word of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. No matter how cynical or flippant our culture might be, we know that every person has been made in God’s image and longs for the reality of transcendence, significance, and community in a way that only Christ can fill. No amount of money or entertainment can satisfy this longing or resolve the sin problem that frustrates it. There was only one time I saw Letterman truly in awe of his guest. It was when he was interviewing Aron Ralston, the 27-year-old wilderness hiker who became trapped in a remote Utah canyon when an 800 lb. boulder rolled onto his arm. On the fifth day, Ralston broke his arm, applied a tourniquet, and then with a dull pocketknife, cut off his arm to free himself from the boulder. He crawled through a narrow, winding canyon, rappelled down a 60-foot cliff and walked some six miles down the canyon before encountering rescuers. If Letterman could be moved by the courage of a man who sacrificed his arm to save his life, there is hope that he might be moved by the courage of Jesus who sacrificed his life to save Letterman’s life?

If we want to speak boldly of Jesus Christ, we must be willing to assert the truth. Luther, in his response to Erasmus, argues for a clear, unambiguous assertion of biblical truth.

"To take no pleasure in assertions is not the mark of a Christian heart; indeed, one must delight in assertions to be a Christian at all. . . . By 'assertion' I mean staunchly holding your ground, stating your position, confessing it, defending it and persevering in it unvanquished. . . . I am talking about the assertion of what has been delivered to us from above in the Sacred Scriptures. . . .

Take away assertions, and you take away Christianity. Why, the Holy Spirit is given to Christians from heaven in order that He may glorify Christ and in them confess Him even unto death. . . . The Holy Spirit is no Skeptic, and the things He has written in our hearts are not doubts or opinions, but assertions—surer and more certain than sense and life itself." (The Bondage of the Will, 1957, 66-70).

Luke emphasizes that boldness is a fruit of the Spirit that comes through prayer (4:31). It provokes astonishment (4:13), division (14:3) and persecution (9:27). It is not something that we have under our control and it becomes obvious only when the Holy Spirit has control of us. There is a difference between being discreet in our witness and feeling defeated, just as there is a difference between being sensitive to the people we are witnessing to and feeling stymied.

If we want to speak boldly of Jesus Christ, we must pray for boldness. But is there a danger in praying for boldness when we have grown used to *not* speaking the word of God *publicly*? In 21st Century America it is almost mandatory, out of respect for everyone else, to keep your passion for Christ to yourself. Today’s axiom is spelled out everywhere, from the classroom to the courtroom, “Religion is something between an individual and his God.”

Stephen Carter of Yale refers to religion in America as “God as a hobby”. People have “no problem with religion as long as it is as marginal and private as woodworking or birdwatching”

(John Leo, "More dancing in the dark," U. S. News & World Report, 6/28/04, 8). The apostles would never have imagined the privatized recreational religion practiced today when they prayed for boldness. We should not confuse boldness in our living room with boldness in the board room. Nor is boldness in the sanctuary on Sunday morning the same as boldness in the office on Monday morning. I shared this perspective with a friend, Jim Meals, who wrote back:

I disagree with what is being implied here. I don't believe that Christians are bold in the living room. Most Christians, even those who are active in their church, do not give their children spiritual direction outside of Sunday School attendance. Start by being bold in the living room! For people with older kids this will be really hard. Their kids will hate them, but they should do it anyway. And, for that matter, instead of complaining about the media, Christians should control the media in the one place where they absolutely can,--the home. If Christians can't control the media inside their homes they certainly can't exert a positive influence on the culture anywhere else.

It seems to me that many Christians today equate boldness with defending the last vestiges of American Christendom. They lament the erosion of our Christian heritage in the face of a militant ideological pluralism that seeks to wipe out any reference to God in public life. Today's clash between religion and culture comes over *symbolic* issues such as the "under God" phrase in the Pledge of Allegiance or the monument to the Ten Commandments in the lobby of an Alabama State Court House. Today's religion and culture controversies rage largely over *symptomatic* issues, such as abortion and gay marriage, with Christians trying to hold a culture without Jesus to the ethic of Jesus. The problem is that the confessing church in America has compromised on abortion and homosexual practice and has a divorce rate equal to the culture.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ was never meant to be imposed on people. The doctrines of religious freedom and tolerance are based on the Gospel of Grace. Christians should not seek to intimidate or indoctrinate or impose the truth of God on others. We often fail to understand the difference between *Christianizing* America and *living for Christ* in America. The former agenda requires worldly power the latter agenda involves taking up a cross and following Jesus. It involves acts of kindness and miracles of healing, rather than angry rhetoric.

Do we have a context in which to speak the word of God boldly like the early church had? They were thrust into the public arena by the Holy Spirit to deliver a powerful, penetrating message about the risen Lord Jesus Christ. The kind of boldness they prayed for may not be experienced today in stadium evangelism or in a Christian men's rally. It may not be found in defending the Ten Commandments or in opposing abortion or the gay lifestyle. It will certainly not be found in wrapping Christianity with the American flag.