

We Have the Power

Luke's stories of the dynamic growth of the early Christian church almost always included elements of political turmoil. The communities in which the Gospel flourished often experienced political hostility. Public stonings, unfair trials, angry mobs, and assassination attempts followed closely on the heels of fruitful evangelism and newly established churches. Despite this antagonism, the ministry thrived, many were saved, and the Gospel continued to expand into new territories. There is indeed in the book of Acts examples of success in ministry in the midst of political (and in spite of) political turmoil. I want to draw our attention to some principles presented in the book of Acts for believers to consider when faced with difficult political climates. In light of Acts, we can be assured that there is hope today for successful ministry even in the turbulence.

Understanding Power

The Book of Acts opens with Jesus preparing to ascend into heaven after his post-resurrection interactions with the disciples. In Acts 1:6 the disciples ask him a very pointed question: "Are you at this time going to restore the Kingdom of Israel?" We may read this today and remark on how dim these disciples were even after three years of teaching. At this late hour, are they still asking the wrong questions? Maybe not. Considering their context it may have been a very appropriate question. These disciples knew that Israel was under occupation and threat by the Roman authorities. Roman soldiers patrolled their streets and Roman law took precedence over their own. These disciples also knew the Old Testament and promises like 2 Chronicles 7:14: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land." (Yes, they were proclaiming this in Israel long before us.) Now the Messiah had come and even experienced victory over death. Surely, this is time for Israel's restoration.

The disciples were not stupid for asking the question, it was a reasonable thing to consider. The question does, however, reveal two things. First, it reveals the tension Christians often feel when they consider how the world is and how the world should be. We are still praying for the fulfillment of 2 Chronicles 7:14. Second, this question reveals (to some extent) from where the disciples were expecting to receive power to change the world. In their minds, they had been faithful to the Messiah before Israel's restoration and now they would become powerful through Israel's restoration. We know this because Jesus uses the conjunction "but." He says that Israel's restoration is not to be their primary concern, "BUT you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The "but" indicates that Jesus was speaking contrary to what they were thinking. They were anticipating their source of power coming from an earthly kingdom. Jesus proclaims that their true source of power will come from a heavenly Kingdom. Thus, their power on the earth is not contingent upon who sits on an earthly but rather who sits on the throne in Eternity. Jesus looked towards the future and knew that Jerusalem would soon be destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. Yet the Kingdom of God would continue to exist.

The fulfillment of Acts 1:8 is not limited to the events in Acts 2. We still have access to a source of power that is beyond any kingdom of this world. Jesus was also tempted to seek after worldly power. When Satan took him to the high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world (Matthew 4:1-11) he offered him the power to possess all those Kingdoms if only he would bow down and worship at Satan's feet. Jesus rejected that offer because he knew there was a source of power available to him eternally more powerful than power of this world. Christians often find themselves in pursuit of worldly power even as they neglect spiritual power. The offer is still tempting: to use the power of the world for Godly ministry. Even some Christian leaders have bowed to Satan in a desperate attempt to gain worldly power. The good news is that we do not have to do that. The book of Acts demonstrates to us that there is a source of power available to the believer today that will never perish, spoil, or fade. There is a source of power available to the believer that is not based on worldly authority but eternal sovereignty. When we lack that power bestowed by the world we can confidently rely on the power given from heaven. That power is the Holy Spirit. He is more than a force or an expression of God's might, he is God and he offers to every believer today a source of power that far exceeds anything this world can offer. Regardless of the political climate we have access to power.

Appreciating Diversity

As soon as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit takes place in Acts 2, there is an immediate move by the Spirit to produce unity among the diverse group of people gathered that day. Luke tells us that there were 14 different language groups hearing the Gospel preached to them by farmers and fishermen from Galilee. Farming and fishing are noble professions but they do not normally produce great linguists. The ability to speak these languages came from the Holy Spirit for the purpose of uniting these people in worship and commitment to God. That becomes the picture of the early church in the book of Acts. A diverse community worshipping together despite their different cultures, languages, or backgrounds. It is the Spirit that compels Peter to enter the Gentile's home with the Gospel (Acts 10). It was by the Spirit that Philip expanded the Samaritan work and reached out in love to the Ethiopian (Acts 8). Even the story of one of the most successful churches in the book of Acts begins with multicultural outreach. Acts 11:19-21 says, "Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord." In the political realm, politicians often emphasize our divisions. In the Kingdom of God, however, disciples work by the Spirit to tear down racial, tribal, and cultural barriers that divide humanity so that we can dwell in unity. It was within these multicultural, Christ-centered communities that the persecuted found relief, worship, and strength.

Politics promotes an "us versus them" mentality where the value of the other is questioned and unity is sacrificed in the quest for power. The Holy Spirit, however, can do what no politician or legislation has been able to do. He can bring about unity in the midst of diversity. Racism, tribalism, and ethnocentrism must crumble where the Holy Spirit is at work in his people. Regardless of the political climate we can have unity in our community.

Maintaining Integrity

The Book of Acts is filled with accounts of God's people working diligently to protect the integrity and credibility of the church. From Ananias and Sapphira, to the feeding of widows, to the attempted purchase of the gifts of the Spirit, the Apostles demonstrates a commitment to deal with threats to the church and the ministry swiftly and decisively. For Peter, there was no potential "benefit" worth compromising his reputation or testimony.

Luke presents two stories in Acts that contrasts the integrity of the believer with the integrity of the world. The first is Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:8-18. Paul and Barnabas have arrived in Lystra and prayed for a lame man to be healed. When the town realized the healing has occurred, they assumed that Paul and Barnabas must be gods in their midst. The people of Lystra prepared to worship Paul and Barnabas and even make sacrifices to them. Rather than receive the praise and gifts of the people, Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes and immediately directed the people towards God. They refused to accept the praise that belonged to their Lord. The benefit of temporary praise was not worth the damage it would do to their witness or the church's credibility in that city.

Now, contrast that with the story of Herod in Acts 12:19-23. Herod, like most politicians, was happy to receive the praise of people. Not long after ordering James' execution and Peter's imprisonment, he traveled to Caesarea to meet with a group of his subjects with whom he has been feuding. They were ready to reconcile so Herod dressed in his finest clothing, sat on his throne, and delivered a royal address. When the crowd, seeking to gain his favor, began to praise him they shouted this: "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." The two believers faced this same issue, they immediately humbled themselves and directed all praise to God. Herod, however, did not have that level of integrity. He received their praise and "because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died." Even though we have not seen such a thing in modern times is no indication that God's attitude has changed. The contrast here demonstrates God's opinion of the incident. Herod may have been magnificently dressed on the outside but inside he was just rotting flesh begin eaten by worms. The Apostles, however, outwardly wore the torn

clothes of humility but inside were alive forevermore. Herod exalted himself and God brought him down low. The Apostles exalted God and God raised them up high.

God can exalt us to places higher than politics ever can as long as we hold on to the integrity of our witness. When we compromise our integrity for a temporary reward, we stand at risk for losing our eternal one. Regardless, however, of the political climate we can find glory ultimately not in the world and its praises but in the integrity of our testimony. When politicians are falling, we can rise up in humble service to God.

Summary

Acts gives us a picture of success in the mist of political hostility. By relying on the power of God, building unity in our community, and protecting our integrity, we can thrive regardless of the political climate that surrounds us. The frustration that politics produces (and the potential power it promises) can often distract us from the realities of God's Kingdom. Don't let political turmoil discourage your heart or diminish your confidence. Operate in the power, unity, and integrity available to you as a believer and do in your community what no politician or legislation could ever accomplish.

Kevin Sneed