**Living Witnesses**

Do you recognize these names?

* Carl and Angel Larsen
* Blaine Adamson
* Barronelle Stutzman
* Jack Phillips

Carl and Angel are Minnesota film makers who specialize in telling the stories of couples celebrating traditional marriage. The State of Minnesota has told them that they must also make such films for same sex couples.

Blaine Adamson owns *Hands On Originals* in Lexington, KY. He makes shirts with special messages, like this shirt with our church name. The KY Human rights Commission ordered him to print T-shirts promoting a gay pride festival.

Barronelle Stutzman owns *Arlene’s Flowers* in Richmond, WA. The Atty. General of WA filed suit against her when she refused to create wedding arrangements for a homosexual couple.

Jack Phillips owns *Masterpiece Cakeshop* in Lakewood, CO. The Colorado Civil Rights Commission and Gov. John Hickenlooper charged him with discrimination first for refusing to make a wedding cake for a homosexual couple.

Now after the US Supreme Court ruled 7-2 that they were unfairly targeting Phillips because of his faith decision, they are after him again for refusing to make a birthday cake celebrating a man who thinks he’s a woman.

Why do I mention these? I’m not making a political statement. This is about Christianity and the law. These are just four of many cases wherein Christians are forced to choose between their Christian faith and an oppressive government.

It’s not new. From the earliest days Christians have been the target of governments who dislike or hate the Christian faith and use their power to silence the voice of Jesus followers. The difference now is that our government seeks to force us, not just to tolerate but to celebrate what goes against the principles of God.

What do we do? The Bible says,

*Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.* Romans 13:1f

A couple of things to remember. First, this doesn’t say that the persons in government are God’s choice. It’s the institution that is of God. People misunderstand this all the time suggesting that God put the individual in office. God did not choose Basher Assad for Syria. God chose the idea of government.

Second, the guy who wrote Romans is the Apostle Paul of whom we’ve been studying for several weeks in the Book of Acts. Today we finish our study looking at chapters 24-28. At this point in Paul’s life and ministry he’s in opposition to the governing authorities.

We’re not going to analyze every verse this morning. Let’s just look at the story. We’ll see that he didn’t start riots to force the government to leave him alone; he didn’t disrespect the legitimate authorities; nor did he rebel against them. He worked within the law to seek justice, trusting God to accomplish His will in Paul’s life.

Last week Ben mentioned that the High Court of the Jewish religion had taken offense at Paul and wanted to kill him, but the fact that he was a Roman citizen stopped them from doing so. It was against Roman law to kill or execute a Roman citizen without a fair trial.

Much of Roman law is recognizable today in our legal system.

* Roman law, iurisprudence was based on the Twelve Tables, the Duodecim Tabulae; written law codes.
* Roman Law separated civil law (ius civile) from divine law (ius divinum)
* An attorney was called iurisconsultus
* Advocati were trial lawyers
* Hearings were adjudicated before a single judge, an assembly of legal experts, the Senate, or the Emperor.

Paul had been arrested by the Jews but according to Law the Roman army to control of him under the authority of Lysias the χιλιαρχος, the commander of a cohort, about 600 soldiers. For his safety Lysias sent Paul to Caesarea where Felix was Governor.

Felix had a connection to Nero. Felix’ brother Pallas worked for Nero. Both were of servile origin. The historian Tacitus recorded that Felix “*exercised the prerogatives of a king with the spirit of a slave*.”

Paul was kept under guard in Herod’s Palace until the arrival of his accusers from Jerusalem, Ananias the High Priest and Tertullus an orator (ρητορος). Felix heard Tertullus’ charges then allowed Paul to respond.

Paul’s testimony was that he did nothing wrong, was faithful to Judaism, and that…*they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me.* Acts 24:13

Felix didn’t render a verdict. He was a greedy social climber. He married and divorced two women specifically to increase his status, then married Drusilla, the daughter of Herod Agrippa. In his greed he hoped… *that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him.* Verse 26 Bribes were illegal but Felix thought he was above the law.

Felix never did act on the case and two years later was recalled by Rome. There had been an outbreak of civil unrest in Caesarea between Jews and Gentiles. Felix intervened with soldiers resulting in many Jews being killed. On his return to Rome he would have been severely punished had not his brother Pallas saved him. He was succeeded as procurator by Porcius Festus.

Festus gave Paul a hearing of the charges brought by the Jews at which Paul reiterated his defense. Festus offered for him to stand trial in Jerusalem. Paul, well acquainted with Roman Law responded,

*I am now standing before Caesar’s court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well. If, however, I am guilty of doing anything deserving death I do not refuse to die.* Acts 25:10

Summary: *I am on trial not because I violated the law but because I believe what all Jews hope for, the Messiah has come. The problem is that He isn’t what they expected so they refuse Him*.

Neither life nor death scared Paul, *To live is Christ to die is gain*. Philippians 1:21

Then Paul made this pivotal statement that sealed his future, *If the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!”* Acts 25:11

*After Festus had conferred with his council, he declared: “You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!”* Verse12

Before he could be sent to Caesar, King Agrippa 2 and his sister Bernice arrived in Caesarea to pay respects to Festus. Festus seized the opportunity to get Agrippa’s take on this whole Jewish controversy. So Paul defended himself once again, this time to Festus and Agrippa putting the onus on them to make a decision.

Festus didn’t buy it declaring, Paul you’re insane, μανια. We get our word maniac form that. Agrippa asked Paul, *Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”* Acts 26:28

Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice discussed the matter and decided, *“This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment.”* He*…could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”* Verses 31f

Paul did everything according to the law. His opponents however tried to circumvent the law. They wanted him silenced and preferably dead.

Very briefly chapters 27 and 28 tell how Paul got to Rome. He travelled under guard on a sailing vessel, Luke was with him although he was not in custody. The journey was treacherous. Paul warned against sailing at one point but was ignored by the centurion in charge and the pilot of the ship.

They got caught in a storm, shipwrecked, and ashore on the island of Malta. That’s where Paul picked up some firewood when a venomous snake latched onto Paul’s hand but he was unaffected by its bite. Everybody expected him to swell up and die. He just shook the snake off and went about helping the other castaways.

Paul healed many sick people on the island before finally completing the trip to Rome where he was placed under house arrest with a soldier to guard him. He was allowed to receive guests and write letters to churches and individuals.

He was arraigned at least twice more, acquitted and released, then after about four years arrested one more time. This time he was tried, convicted, and executed.

There are so many things we could focus on. I choose today to recognize how Paul trusted God while submitting to the governing authorities. Several times the record points out that they couldn’t prove Paul guilty of any legal violations. He faced his accusers, defended himself, and accepted the results.

I don’t know all that is going on in the cases I mentioned, but I think Carl and Angel Larsen, Blaine Adamson, Barronelle Stutzman, and Jack Phillips are doing it right. They’re working within the law, respecting the governing authorities as God has commanded.

It’s unfortunate but I know of one wedding cake artist who choose to stop making wedding cakes rather than face the threat of the governing authorities.

Sometimes that’s our only choice. If we can’t overcome the wrong while submitting to the governing authorities, we need to do something else or accept the punishment.

Sometimes it’s an issue that God is absolutely clear about to which we can say, *Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God.* Acts 4:19

God didn’t necessarily tell Jack Phillips he has to make cakes. If the government won’t allow him to turn down making cakes that celebrate sin, he MUST not violate righteousness. He can either quit making cakes or pay the price.

God told Paul to preach Jesus. The governing authorities told him to stop preaching Jesus. He could not not preach Jesus. He chose to obey God and face the consequences.

The day will come in America when preachers are told that it is illegal to preach certain Biblical truth. We must preach the truth. So like Paul, submitting to governing authorities will mean facing the consequences bravely, trusting God’s care.

We’ve been studying the Book of Acts since the first Sunday in January. Along the way we’ve discovered a lot of great lessons about what it means to be a Jesus follower. I’m sure you remember them all so I won’t review them.

Instead, since our purpose is to see how the Holy Spirit worked in the early church, I’ll mention some general guidelines of how the Holy Spirit can be working in His followers today.

**One.** Followers of Jesus should be bold witnesses of the truth.

The early Christians were people just like us, no different except that the threat they faced was much more severe than anything we face. Still they lived and preached the Gospel in what we would call terrible circumstances. There were people assigned the task of murdering Christians. None of us have had to face anything like that. But it didn’t stop them.

What stops Christians today?

* *It’s inconvenient. It would change my life.*
* *If I do the things God calls me to I won’t have time for all the things I want to do.*
* *I’m afraid I won’t be able to answer the questions people will pose to me and I don’t want to do the work to prepare myself.*
* *I don’t want to impose my faith on other people.*
* *I’m saved. I don’t need to be a fanatic.*

Would you say that the boldness the early Christians showed describes you?

You know, often Christians face the world with little more courage than people who have no faith. Sickness or danger is enough to stop many Christians from really trusting God.

The early Christians were bold in their faith. Not all of them of course but enough that it could be said of them that they were turning the world to Jesus. Does anyone think that would be said of Christians in America today?

When we allow the Holy Spirit to work in us we become bold with Christ-esteem. Self-esteem is often misplaced pride. Christ-esteem makes humble self-esteem possible.

Christ-esteem frees us from self-condemnation. Christ-esteem frees us to say, “*I wish you could be like me. Not because I am righteous but because Christ has made a new person out of me, and He can change you as well*.”

The more Christ-esteem we experience in our lives, the more we are able to boldly witness of the truth. The Holy Spirit in us should make us bold witnesses.

**Two**. Another guideline of the Holy Spirit in our lives is that He leads us to be part of the church in order to provide support for bold witnessing of the truth.

Most of the story of Acts is about Paul, but even in the earlier portions we see the church supporting the characters. None of these guys worked alone. God provided friends to help. There are so many names in Acts of men and women who assisted Peter of Paul. Sometimes we have only one mention of them.

Many are names we know very little about: Aristarchus, Procorus, Parmenas, Lucius of Cyrene, Titius Justus, Gaius. Some we know a little bit more: Ananias, Barnabas, Silas, Priscilla and Aquila. Then there were people like Timothy and Luke of whom we’re quite familiar.

God didn’t send believers out alone to face a hostile world. Part of the purpose of the church is to provide support, encouragement, and strength for one another as we testify of the truth.

We’re not in this alone. Some believers refuse to accept what God has provided. Some even consider His Bride with disdain. I can’t say this absolutely, but in my life I have never known a strong witness of the truth who was isolated from the church. There’re none mentioned in the New Testament and there’re none I know of.

Let me add, there is no one I know apart from the church about whom I would say, *Be like him*.

If the Holy Spirit is working in you, you will be part of the church, and the church will assist you in being a living testimony. Apart from the church I can just about guarantee that you will not be an effective witness of the truth.

**Three**. Finally, because every person, whether you believe in Jesus or not, will experience dark nights of trouble or persecution, times when you feel like the whole world is against you and even God has forsaken you, when all of your prayers seem to go unanswered, the Holy Spirit guides us back to the fundamentals of faith.

We can summarize the fundamentals with these four words:

*Belief*. The message of the Gospel is either true or it’s false. Do you believe the Gospel? Do you believe that God loves you and the Jesus died for you and rose from the dead?

I don’t mean, “Do you like the church?” or “Do you admire certain Christians?’ or “Are you comfortable with Christianity?” I mean do you truly believe the message. Do you truly believe that God is involved in our world, in your life? Do you truly believe He’s involved right now?

Do you believe that your relationship to Christ on this Earth determines your eternal destiny? Do you live like it?

When we affirm true belief in the message, the Holy Spirit releases in us specific faith to be living witnesses of the truth. Whether in times when all is right or when nothing seems to be right, the Holy Spirit strengthens our faith for the specific issues we wrestle with.

*Surrender*. The Bible says,

*If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.* Romans 10:9f

Surrender is humbly giving up trying to save yourself. Surrender is accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior. Surrender is admitting that I can’t save myself; I can’t solve all my problems.

Surrender is turning my life over to God to follow and obey Him no matter what.

*Hope*. Hope is trusting God’s faithfulness and His involvement in the affairs of our lives. He provides people to aid us. He has the power to arrange circumstances. Hope is trusting that He will act to accomplish His perfect will.

*Thanksgiving*. Thanksgiving is acknowledging what He has done for us and in response, obeying Him, praising Him, and honoring Him. Thanksgiving is living in a way that clearly shows we know everything will be alright because God is with us.

Do you think Agape Christian Church could be like those early Christians? Could we be bold witnesses of Jesus Christ?

We can, to the extent that each of us decides that God is God and we will live for Him.