

*The Uneasy Relationship between Christians
and their Government*

Acts 5:12-42

October 3, 2010

Pastor Vern Christopherson

Imagine you're the manager of Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis. For years, people have flocked to your concert hall to hear fabulous musicians. During the Christmas season, Lori Line is scheduled to perform for an entire week. The concerts are sold out. Then, out of the blue, a ragtag group of street musicians begins to perform in the skyway. They don't exactly apply for a permit. Furthermore, they're right outside the concert hall. After awhile you realize that more and more people are stopping to listen to this ragtag little group. And some folks aren't even making it into the concert hall.

So, as the manager of Orchestra Hall, what do you do? Do you let them play? Do you try to shut them up? Do you call the police?

Such is the predicament of the Jewish leaders in the book of Acts. It's their job to guard the sacred tradition. But there's a new ragtag band in town. On the way into the temple, people are stopping to listen to them. That's a problem because the band didn't exactly apply for a permit—they're not "authorized." And, quite frankly, they're drawing attention away from the temple.

Acts 5:12 sets the scene: "Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the street, and laid them on cots and mats, in order that Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he came by."

Next I want you to imagine that you're of member of that ragtag band. You've come to the life-changing belief that Jesus of Nazareth is Lord and Messiah. You're playing music about him. Every day the crowds get a little larger. You know the authorities are keeping a watchful eye on things, because you can see them standing in the shadows. Their arms are crossed and their brows furrowed.

One day the authorities decide that enough is enough. They send for the temple police to arrest you. It's a horrifying ordeal. But just about the time you hunker down for a long stay behind bars, an amazing thing happens: an angel shows up in the middle of the night and sets you free. You breathe a huge sigh of relief. But guess what? At Peter's encouragement, you're back at the temple the very next morning playing the same music that got you in trouble in the first place.

When the authorities discover what has happened, they're furious. Not only do they have egg on their faces, they feel as if more and more people are getting duped by your message. So again they send the police to drag you off to jail.

What do you do? Your parents raised you to be a good Jew, to respect those in authority. So do you shut down the band? The problem is, you have this overwhelming conviction about Jesus—that he died for your sins and was raised to life; that he's Lord and Messiah. These feelings are stronger than any you've had in your life. A big part of you wants to keep singing.

Verse 27 spells out the cost of your conviction: "When they had brought [you], they had [you] stand before the council. The high priest questioned [you] saying, 'We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us.'"

Peter, ever the brave one, stands toe-to-toe with the high priest. He says boldly: "We must obey God rather than any human authority." The room is so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Nobody talks to the high priest like that....nobody. The authorities are enraged. They want to kill Peter and the rest of the group right on the spot.

The only thing that saves the day is the intervention of old Gamaliel. Gamaliel encourages his fellow leaders of the Sanhedrin to exercise caution. Verse 38 says: "In the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God."

Because of Gamaliel's wise advice, the authorities let you off with a stern warning and, for good measure, a painful beating. One thing is becoming abundantly clear: they are bound and determined to shut down your band and to stop your music.

Ever since the days of early Christianity, believers have wondered what sort of relationship they should have with their government. The problem is, the New Testament doesn't give us a unified picture. In Romans 13 Paul writes: "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God." That sounds well and good if things are going along smoothly, but what if they're not? Fifty years later, in the book of Revelation, things are far worse. John describes the Roman government as a demonic beast, drunk on the blood of the saints; they're to be resisted at all costs. The book of Acts is somewhere between these two extremes: Christians can respect those in authority, but as the example of the apostles shows, they cannot—and should not—always obey them. That's especially true when government policies go against one's deepest convictions.

This is where it gets tricky. If the Bible doesn't give us a clear picture, what are we supposed to do? Say you're living in America in the 1850s. Your government says that slavery is legal. As a Christian you've come to the conviction that it's inhuman for one person to own another. So, do you obey your government or actively work against it? You're living in America in the 1970s. Your government says that abortion is legal. After much soul searching, you decide that it's wrong. So, do you obey your government or openly oppose the new law? You're living in America in 2002. Your government says that it needs to go to war in Iraq, to uncover weapons of mass destruction and to take down Sadaam Hussein. As a follower of Jesus, you find yourself adamantly opposed to the war. So, do you support your government or take to the streets in protest?

Many of us were raised to respect our governing authorities and to honor them. For the most part, we were following Paul's advice in Romans: *Be subject to your leaders; their authority comes from God.* Then we went through Vietnam and Watergate and Iran Contra and Monica Lewinsky...and our eyes got opened up. And we began to realize that, much like the apostles in Acts, we need to be careful about claiming too much allegiance to anyone in authority.

This brings us to a key point in the book of Acts: *the call of the government and the call of Christ are not one and the same.* This might sound simplistic, but it's not meant to be. In our nation it's easy to blend God and country together. We say things like: *America, it's our manifest destiny to take this land. America, love it or leave it.*

America, you're either for us or against us. God bless America. We have to be careful with this kind of talk, I think, because it is so easy to conclude that God is on our side. If others are not on our side, then they're on the side of—well—evil.

Please hear me: I am profoundly grateful to live in the United States of America. We're a great nation. We enjoy incredible freedoms. People have bled and died for those freedoms and I never want to take them for granted. At the same time, I think it's critical that we not lift up our government—or any government—to such a level that its claims are on par with God's claims. Indeed, sometimes our all-too-human governments do things that are clearly wrong, and unjust, and far removed from God's intention for us.

When that happens, our job as Christians—in the tradition of the early apostles—is to be willing to take a stand. So how do we do this?

We read Scripture.

We pray.

We seek to be informed about issues.

We engage in dialog with other Christians.

We form opinions about God's will and way in the world.

We sing songs that speak to the deepest convictions of our hearts.

We pray some more.

We talk some more.

We read the Bible some more.

And ultimately, we summon the courage to stand up and be counted: We vote.

We write a letter. We send off an email. We carry a sign. We attend a rally. We take to the streets in protest.

Even as we stick out our necks, however, I think we should do it with a certain measure of humility. The advice of Gamaliel reminds us that, this side of heaven, we can't always be 100% sure of what God is up to in the world.

As we seek to discern God's way for us, we do well to keep in mind that the prospective we bring often directly effects the conclusions we reach. That's as true today as it was back in the first century. Back then there were two main schools of thought. One was the School of Shammai. They were the hardliners, the fundamentalists of the day. To them everything was black and white. Scripture was to be read in only one way—their way. The second school of thought was the School of Hillel. They were the moderates, more like ELCA Lutherans. They were good at seeing shades of gray. For them, Scripture was open to interpretation.

As you might imagine, Gamaliel was from the school of Hillel, the moderates. He acknowledged that he didn't have all the answers. He wanted people to keep talking about issues. He encouraged patience and humility. More than anything, he hoped that people would be open to whatever new thing God was doing, and in this case, that new thing turned out to be Jesus.

One of our greatest strengths as Lutherans, I think, is that we come out of this moderate tradition. Like Gamaliel, we're willing to take a wait-and-see approach; we do our best to engage in civil discourse; we're willing to compromise; we strive to be open to whatever new thing we believe God is doing in the world.

On the other hand, one of our greatest weaknesses as Lutherans is that we often take this wait-and-see approach to the extreme. We get stuck in it...to the point where we don't stand for anything.

Friends, whatever the issue we're facing—whether it's the war on terror or immigration reform or the military's *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* policy, I encourage you to study, to pray, to discuss, and finally to follow the convictions of your heart. Keep in mind, though, that any conviction you hold needs to be tested with the overall message of Scripture, and in particular, with the message of Jesus.

One more thing: As you wrestle with these weighty issues, it's important to keep in mind that the early Christians weren't trying to win elections or secure power or beat people over the head with their opinions. No, their goal was much simpler: they wanted to be able to tell the story of Jesus. As long as the authorities allowed them to do that, they were willing to let the authorities take care of the rest.

Ever since the days of the early apostles, Christians have often had an uneasy relationship with their government. That's okay. That's the way it's supposed to be. The call of the government and the call of Christ are not one and the same. At a basic level, our job as Christians is to join the ragtag band and to keep singing our song about Jesus. And we need to keep singing that song whether the powers that be want to hear it or not. For in the end, *we must obey God rather than any human authority*. Amen.