

With Boldness and Humility: A Model for our Work

Acts 4:23–31

The Believers Pray for Boldness

²³ When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, ²⁵ who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit,

“ ‘Why did the Gentiles rage,
and the peoples plot in vain?

²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers were gathered together,
against the Lord and against his Anointed’—

²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. ²⁹ And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all **boldness**, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with **boldness**.¹

Background to the story

The apostles, Peter and John, had healed a lame beggar, and Peter had preached a powerful sermon in the temple itself (see Acts chapter 3). This had come to the attention of the religious authorities, who arrested them and warned them to “speak no more to anyone in this name” (Acts 4:17).

Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19–20). After the leaders threatened the apostles, they released them.

Immediately the two reported to the rest of the church, who began to pray, and this prayer is recorded above in Acts 4:24–30. One of the appeals to the Lord was to “grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness” (v. 29).

Boldness, not fearlessness, was the focus; and being normal people they would be, as we are, impacted by threats and bullying. The threats of the religious leaders amounted to bullying, since they could easily deal harshly, even murderously, with any who disobeyed.

¹ My emphasis.

Boldness in the face of bullying

Bullying is something we hear a great deal of these days. It is almost universal, that powerful exerting of one's will upon the weaker. I experienced bullying in high school from the very first day I began attending Verdugo Hills High School in Los Angeles. The gangs were a fact of life and very unlike the Portland, Oregon, school system I had come from in 1954 at age 13. In my mind's eye I can still see them that day out on the football field during physical education period: several of them beating up on a scared and skinny kid. That was only the first of many such incidents, and so my high school days were not filled with delightful memories. I lacked boldness for sure.

After my conversion to Christ I faced bullying of another type, but similar in many ways. As a medic in the Air Force, I pulled duty from 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. and ate a meal around 12:00 a.m., called mid-night chow, with the others in the basement dining hall. For two years I was one of the guys, but then I became a Christian. The result was that I was rejected, not allowed to sit with the "gang" anymore, and I did not understand why, at first. I thought I was still one of the regulars, and I was certainly no flaming evangelist (yet). But in a way I did not recognize and that the others likely didn't either, I was bullied into eating by myself. And that was the way it was for the final two years of my enlistment. I took it as best I could and over time won a few of the guys back as friends.

Back to the story

The point of this essay is simply that those who do not know Jesus as Savior and Lord will often reject the Christian witness, sometimes vehemently, and it will feel like bullying. Not that we identify it as bullying, but the emotional and mental reactions in us can make us back down and even retreat in much the same way as a reaction to being bullied.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, and notably in the southern part of Marin County where I am a pastor, Christians are a definite minority. Atheists, Wiccans, Buddhists, shamanists, and other neo-pagans far outnumber all the branches of Christianity in our area combined. The culture is blatantly non-Christian; so much so that many of those identified as Christian have run for cover and blended with the culture—a process called syncretization.

This has impacted me as well; I have some repenting to do and some changing, and this is why Acts 4 and the story of Peter and John appeals to me. Peter and John spoke boldly, even when it could have cost them dearly. The church in Jerusalem would not be cowed but prayed for boldness. They did not ask for power, revenge, fairness, or protection and security. And as they went on with their mission to evangelize the world beginning from Jerusalem, they maintained bold evangelical preaching. They remained humble, did not become arrogant, kept loving the lost sheep of Israel, and quietly and faithfully bore witness to the Good News of Jesus.

It must also be noted that the early witnesses to Jesus were patient and gracious in their defense of the Gospel. We do not read of angry tirades against their opponents. With a loving yet spirited manner they made their stand. There was nothing in their behavior that tarnished their witness.

The second Jerusalem Pentecost

The first outpouring of the Holy Spirit took place on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, and three thousand were converted. The story of this is in Acts chapter two. The opening passage tells of a second pentecost or outpouring of the Holy Spirit: “And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31). They asked for boldness because they felt they needed it. They could have felt overwhelmed, alone, and fearful, yet their response was to pray for boldness. And the prayer was answered.

Notice that bold preaching followed the filling with the Holy Spirit, just like what happened at the first pentecost. First the empowering of the Holy Spirit then the bold preaching. It is usually this way, to which I can attest, having lived through the entirety of the Jesus People Movement from 1967 to 1972.

Praying for boldness

There are so many promises in Scripture that clearly tell us that if we ask anything in His name, anything that is clearly His will and for His glory (this brings together a number of passages on prayer), that prayer will be answered. Such was the prayer of Acts 4. Luke, the author of Acts, has more to say that bears on the subject in his Gospel: ““If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”” (Luke 11:13).

The church in Acts 4 prayed for boldness and they received it. Jesus, in Acts 1:8 made it abundantly evident what the work of His Church was: “And you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

What then can we say? To do the work we are called to do requires boldness, and this comes from the anointing and empowering of the Holy Spirit. I don't care if you are Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, fundamentalist, Methodist, Episcopalian, Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and any of the rest of the denominations, large or small, in the broad Christian community. This applies to anyone who claims to be a follower of Jesus.

God does not give us a job to do without giving us the tools to do it. We need courage and boldness in this world that is heavily influenced by the wicked forces of Satan. What do we do? Ask for the empowering of the Holy Spirit of God to boldly, humbly, and lovingly tell the story of Jesus and Him crucified.

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Originally, November, 2013 but put forward again in January, 2019