Witnessing to the Truth

Acts 5:27-29, 33-42
SS Lesson for 09/20/2015

Devotional Scripture: 1 Peter 3:8-17

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Overview and Key Verse of the Lesson

The lesson tries to get us to understand that Witnessing to the Truth is expected of very believer. The study’s aim is to recognize that speaking to others about Jesus Christ may bring opposition. The study’s application is to share the truth of Jesus Christ graciously and yet without fear of the consequences.

(Adapted from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator Commentary)

Key Verse: Acts 5:29

But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: “We ought to obey God rather than men

Commentary from The Bible Knowledge Commentary

The obedience of the apostles to the angel’s directive (v. 20) is evident. Though their sleep was abbreviated the preceding night, at daybreak they entered the temple courts (cf. v. 20). The facts recorded in Acts 5:21-25 verses are filled with irony: (1) The guards were carefully keeping empty jail cells secured (vv. 21b-23). (2) The highest powers of Israel were gathered to judge prisoners they did not have. (3) While the frenzied leaders were deliberating as to what had happened to the men who had been in their custody, they were told the apostles were preaching in the courts of the temple. The captain of the temple guard and the chief priests (cf. 4:1) were puzzled (diēporoun, lit., “were perplexed,” or “were at a loss”) as to how to explain the locked but empty cells. Perhaps they also wondered what would come of them for losing their prisoners! (Cf. 16:27-28.). The captain and the jail officers carefully recaptured the apostles (without using force, for fear of arousing the anger of the populace) and brought the apostles... before the Sanhedrin for questioning. (see Acts 4:15; cf. 6:12; 22:30.). Use of the pronoun this twice underscores the high priest’s reluctance to pronounce the name of Jesus (cf. “this name,” 4:17). Obviously his hatred of Christ Jesus was great! Here Peter reiterated a basic principle already affirmed in 4:19-20. The converse is also true: Christians are to obey their governments unless it is a sin to do so (cf. Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17). This response by Peter and the apostles about Jesus’ resurrection must have infuriated the Sadducees (cf. 4:1-2; 5:17; 23:8). Yet it was the same message Peter, once again the apostles’ spokesman, had preached before: (a) they had killed Jesus, but God... raised Him from the dead (cf. 2:23-24, 36; 3:15; 4:10); (b) they could have forgiveness of sins (cf. 2:38; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18) by turning to Him in repentance (cf. 2:38; 3:16; 4:12; 8:22). The apostles were well aware of their responsibility for them asserted. We are witnesses of these things (rhêmatōn, “words, sayings,” or “things”). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit was corroborating their testimony by supernaturally enabling them to preach with boldness and to perform miracles. This same Spirit is given to all who believe in Christ (Rom. 8:9).

The fury of the leaders toward the apostles could have been expected. The leaders wanted to put them to death. Their opposition followed the same pattern as their hostility to the Lord a few weeks earlier. Characteristically opposition grows, and so it did here. The venerated Gamaliel, a Pharisee and teacher, influenced the Sanhedrin not to oppose the apostles. He spoke not from sympathy for the church, but from insight into God’s sovereign working on earth (cf. v. 39). Nothing is known of this Theudas with his 400 insurrectionists, whose cause came to naught. Though Josephus, a Jewish historian of the first century, described a rebellion led by a Theudas, that insurrection was later and much larger. Furthermore, that rebellion followed the one led by the Judas described in verse 37. The insurrection led by Judas the Galilean was Gamaliel’s second illustration. Josephus gave a rather full account of this movement which led to the execution of Judas, but also spawned further rebellion. Here is the conclusion and main thrust of Gamaliel’s speech. Seeing what would come of this movement would tell them if it were of human origin or from God. Interestingly this speech was, in one sense, an apologetic for the church of Jesus Christ given by a representative of the church’s enemies: to try to stop God’s work would be like fighting...
against God! Not considering it adequate simply to admonish the apostles, the council had them flogged and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus (on Jesus’ “name” see comments on 3:16). The flogging was evidently punishment for the apostles’ disobedience to their earlier prohibition (cf. 4:18, 21; 5:28). In spite of the bloody beating, the apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing. Here again the theme of joy is evident in the Book of Acts (cf. comments on 2:46-47). A victorious church rejoices in God’s working in spite of persecution—and even on account of it, as here. The apostles were honored to be suffering disgrace for the name (on “the name” see 3:16; cf. 1 Peter 4:14, 16). Later, Peter encouraged Christians to “rejoice” when they would “participate” in sufferings on behalf of Christ (1 Peter 4:13; cf. 1 Peter 2:18-21; 3:8-17). Luke’s object in writing Acts 5:17-42 was to show how Israel as a nation was continuing down its tragic path of rejecting Jesus as its Messiah.

Lesson Introduction and Background

From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

William Wilberforce (1759-1833) became a Christian in 1785. Already a member of the British Parliament, he soon became a vocal opponent of slavery. He saw the need to acknowledge human dignity and decided to speak up for the cause of freedom. He devoted the rest of his life to passing laws that first outlawed the slave trade itself (1807) and then outlawed slavery altogether (1833) throughout most of the British Empire. Many names come readily to mind when we think of those who have spoken up for worthy causes. For Patrick Henry in the American colonies and for Gandhi in India, the cause was national freedom. For Martin Luther King, Jr., the cause was civil rights. When they saw situations that demanded their voices, they knew they had to speak up! For Peter and the other apostles, the cause was even greater: their cause was to liberate people from the shackles of sin, to bring the repentant into the heavenly kingdom. The apostles proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah not just because they felt strongly about the matter but because God himself did. That is why they knew they had to speak up, regardless of the opposition.

The church was born speaking. All the apostles spoke up on the Day of Pentecost, proclaiming the gospel message in many languages. Peter led out as the primary spokesman, convicting the crowd and urging people to repent (Acts 2). Sometime after the Day of Pentecost, Peter and John healed a crippled beggar at the gate of the temple and proclaimed Jesus to the crowd that gathered (Acts 3). When the Sanhedrin seized Peter and John to demand that they stop speaking about Jesus, Peter said, “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (4:20). When Peter and John rejoined the other believers, “the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (4:31; see lesson 1). Official opposition mounted as the apostles continued to speak. They were arrested again and thrown into jail, but an angel from God opened the door and sent them back to the temple courts to preach (Acts 5:18-20). When the Jewish religious authorities sent for the prisoners, the jail was discovered to be empty. Soon someone reported that the apostles were preaching again—right back in the same place where they had been arrested! With considerable frustration, the authorities brought them in yet again. What could be done to make these Christians stop talking?

Major Theme Analysis

(Scriptural Text from the New King James Version; cross-references from the NIV)

Witness Through Steadfastness In Obedience To God (Acts 5:27-29)

27 And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest asked them, 28 saying, “Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? And look, you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine, and intend to bring this Man’s blood on us!” 29 But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: "We ought to obey God rather than men.
Obedience is often tested (27-28)

Tested by fire of trials (1 Peter 1:6-7)
6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Tested through self-examination (Gal 6:4)
4 Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else,

Testing of holding on to good (1 Thess 5:21)
21 Test everything. Hold on to the good.

Tested through perseverance (James 1:12)
12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

Obeying God not man (29)

Obedience through God's power (Philip. 3:20-21)
20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 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. 4:1 Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!

Obedience without fear (Job 11:13-15)
13 "Yet if you devote your heart to him and stretch out your hands to him, 14 if you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent, 15 then you will lift up your face without shame; you will stand firm and without fear.

Obedience is a characteristic of saints (John 8:31)
31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

Obedience is never done in vain (1 Cor. 15:58)
58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Obedience even if God does not rescue (Dan 3:16-18)
16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

Obedience is doing the will of God (Matthew 7:21)
21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.
**Obedience is doing right in the sight of God (Acts 4:19-20)**

19 But Peter and John replied. "Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. 20 For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."


33 When they heard this, they were furious and plotted to kill them.  
34 Then one in the council stood up, a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in respect by all the people, and commanded them to put the apostles outside for a little while.  
35 And he said to them: "Men of Israel, take heed to yourselves what you intend to do regarding these men.  
36 For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing.  
37 After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed.  
38 And now I say to you, keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this work is of men, it will come to nothing;  
39 but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it—lest you even be found to fight against God."

**Holy Spirit works in people to ensure wise council (33-34)**

Because the Holy Spirit controls the circumstances of believers (Acts 10:19-20)  
19 While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. 20 So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

Because the Holy Spirit directs the work of believers (Acts 13:2)  
While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

Because the Holy Spirit chooses the fields of operation (Acts 16:6)  
Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.

**Good Advice (From the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary)**

“Dear Abby” once advised a woman not to have the local newspaper correct the obituary of her recently deceased mother. The obituary had incorrectly added nine years to the mother’s age. Abby’s response was, “Let it alone.” Abby then quoted a series of small-town newspaper ads that continued to compound an error printed in the first ad. A man was selling a sewing machine. Buyers were instructed to call after 7 P.M. and “ask for Mrs. Kelly who lives with him cheap.” The following day the editor published a correction: “ask for Mrs. Kelly who lives with him after 7 P.M.” On the third day came another correction: “ask for Mrs. Kelly who loves with him.” Finally, the seller of the sewing machine placed an ad saying that he no longer had a sewing machine for sale. He had smashed it and disconnected his phone! He added, “I have not been carrying on with Mrs. Kelly. Until yesterday she was my housekeeper, but she quit.” The members of the Sanhedrin were somewhat like that poor editor. The more they tried to address their concerns about the apostles, the more their frustration grew. Gamaliel reminded them of some recent history and then gave some good advice: If God is not in this movement, don’t worry about it; but be careful—lest you find yourselves fighting against God.
History is important to understand the present (35-37)

*History defines the level of our faith (2 Tim 1:5)*

5 I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.

*History teaches us the truths of our faith (1 Tim 4:6)*

6 If you point these things out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed.

*History of family should not be forsaken (Prov 1:8-9)*

8 Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching. 9 They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.

*History can make us wise in our faith (2 Tim 3:14-15)*

14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, 15 and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

No one can fight God (38-39)

*No one can or should fight with God (Isa 45:9)*

"Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'He has no hands'?"

*God's plans will always prevail (Prov 19:21)*

Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.

*There is no wisdom or plan that will succeed against God (Prov 21:30-31)*

30 There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD. 31 The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the LORD.

*Everything God does will endure forever (Eccl 3:14)*

I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him.

**Witnessing During Suffering with Joy (Acts 5:40-42)**

40 And they agreed with him, and when they had called for the apostles and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. 41 So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name. 42 And daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

**Joy because of being counted as worthy (40-41)**

*Worthiness that leads to doing good works (Col 1:10)*

10 And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,
Worthiness that leads to being humble and patient (Eph 4:1-3)

4 As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. 2 Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. 3 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Worthiness that pleases God (Eph 5:10)

10 and find out what pleases the Lord.

Worthiness that comes from the calling of God (2 Tim 1:8-9)

8 So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, 9 who has saved us and called us to a holy life — not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time,

Joy because of the ability to worship God (42)

Ability to worship God with joy, gladness and thanksgiving (Ps 100:2-4)

2 Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. 3 Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. 4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.

Ability to worship God acceptably with reverence and awe (Heb 12:28)

28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe,

Ability to worship during calamities (Job 1:18-20)

18 While he was still speaking, yet another messenger came and said, "Your sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother’s house, 19 when suddenly a mighty wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house. It collapsed on them and they are dead, and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you!" 20 At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship

Ability to worship and bring an offering (Ps 96:8-9)

8 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts. 9 Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.

Ability to worship by rejoicing in God (Phil 4:4)

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Conclusion and Other Thoughts

Commentary Thoughts from Bob Deffinbaugh

Peter Becomes the Prosecutor

Acts 5:29-32

When threatened earlier by this same body of men, Peter had responded,

“Whether it is right before God to obey you rather than God, you decide, for it is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20).
He had given no indication that the threats of the Sanhedrin would change their actions. Indeed, he assured these religious leaders that they would continue to do what they had been doing – bearing witness to what they had seen and heard. Peter’s response on this occasion did not give the members of the Sanhedrin any encouragement either:

29 But Peter and the apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than people. 30 The God of our forefathers raised up Jesus, whom you seized and killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him to his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses of these events, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him” (Acts 5:29-32).

While the religious leaders had an exaggerated idea of their own importance and power, the apostles were not impressed. These were mere men, and the apostles were committed to obeying God. When they must make a choice between the two, they would serve God. They would serve the living Christ, whom the Sanhedrin had condemned and put to death. God had overruled them by raising Jesus from the dead, and by making Him both a Prince and a Savior. It was this Jesus alone who could grant repentance and the forgiveness of sins to Israel. The apostles were witnesses of these things, and the Holy Spirit bore witness with them by His acts of power through their hands.

Gamaliel to the Rescue
Acts 5:33-40

33 Now when they heard this, they became furious and wanted to execute them. 34 But a Pharisee whose name was Gamaliel, a teacher of the law who was respected by all the people, stood up in the council and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. 35 Then he said to the council, “Men of Israel, pay close attention to what you are about to do to these men. 36 For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and nothing came of it. 37 After him Judas the Galilean arose in the days of the census, and incited people to follow him in revolt. He too was killed, and all who followed him were scattered. 38 So in this case I say to you, stay away from these men and leave them alone, because if this plan or this undertaking originates with people, it will come to nothing. 39 but if it is from God, you will not be able to stop them, or you may even be found fighting against God.” He convinced them, 40 and they summoned the apostles and had them beaten. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and released them (Acts 5:33-40).

We need to be very clear in our minds as to what is about to take place according to verse 33. We read, “Now when they heard this, they became furious and wanted to execute them” (Acts 5:33, emphasis mine). This term, rendered “furious” by the NET Bible is found only one other time in the New Testament. Once again, it is Luke who uses it, and in the Book of Acts, just two chapters later: “When they heard these things, they became furious and ground their teeth at him” (Acts 7:54, emphasis mine).

In this latter instance, Luke is describing the reaction of the same body – the Sanhedrin. In this case, their fury is in response to the strong accusations of Stephen:

51 “You stubborn people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are always resisting the Holy Spirit, like your ancestors did! 52 Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold long ago the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become! 53 You received the law by decrees given by angels, but you did not obey it” (Acts 7:51-54).

When we come to Acts 5:33, we are at a point where the members are nearly out of control with rage. They are a heartbeat away from the fate of Stephen, just two chapters later. The members of the Sanhedrin are so enraged they want to kill all of the apostles. Luke leaves no doubt about this. First, he says so in verse 33: They were furious, and they wanted to execute them. Second, we see that they did kill Stephen in chapter 7. Third, Luke tells us that Gamaliel was able to convince them (Acts 5:39). We then read that they proceeded to beat the apostles. If beating the apostles was giving in to the convincing argument of Gamaliel, then being unconvinced truly must mean death for the apostles.
In our text, Luke introduces Gamaliel to us for the first time in the Book of Acts. He is described as a Pharisee, a teacher of the law, and as one who was respected by all the people (Acts 5:34). He is more than this however:

“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated with strictness under Gamaliel according to the law of our ancestors, and was zealous for God just as all of you are today” (Acts 22:3, emphasis mine).

Gamaliel is a Pharisee, while those who want to kill the apostles are primarily Sadducees (see Acts 4:1; 5:17). Gamaliel is also Paul’s mentor and teacher. He is a man of great influence.

Gamaliel’s argument is a very simple one, and it is built upon facts that are well known to his colleagues. Gamaliel first sent the apostles from the Council. He did not want them to overhear his appeal, or the discussion that would follow. He wanted to be able to talk freely, and he certainly did. Now Gamaliel will press forward with his argument, with the goal of persuading his colleagues not to execute the apostles.

Gamaliel reminds the Council of their past history in regard to revolutionary groups. Theudas rose up, claiming some kind of greatness or mission, and about 400 men joined with him. But after he was killed, his followers disbanded, and the movement came to nothing. So, too, Judas the Galilean “arose” in the days of the census and gained a following. But when he was killed, his following, like those who once followed Theudas, quickly scattered, and the movement came to nothing.

Gamaliel now draws a conclusion from these facts and applies it to the apostles of our Lord. The principle he draws might be stated this way: “Movements tend to die with their leaders.” He is not yet finished, however. There is another element in his argument. In cases where the movement does not die with the leader, but flourishes, it is possible that this movement is the work of God. To oppose a movement that is thriving might then be opposing God.

The application of this was obvious to the members of the Sanhedrin. Jesus was the leader, and He had been put to death. Normally, one would expect His followers – the disciples and others – to disband. That had not happened. Indeed, the more time that passed, the greater the boldness of the apostles and the greater the number of new followers. Persecution had done nothing to stop the growth of this movement. Does this not suggest that this movement may be a work of God? If this is the case, better leave it alone, or run the risk of opposing God.

It is interesting that Luke includes the essence of Gamaliel’s argument here for the reader to ponder. A fair amount of space is devoted to it. It must therefore be important in Luke’s mind. What is so important about Gamaliel’s counsel to the Sanhedrin? I think there are several elements.

First, Gamaliel’s counsel prevailed, and the Sanhedrin gave up its intention to execute the apostles on the spot. In other words, from a human perspective, Gamaliel’s counsel saved the lives of the apostles. It is clear that they were so furious with the apostles that they intended to kill them (Acts 5:33). He dissuaded them from doing so, thus sparing the lives of the apostles.

Second, Gamaliel’s counsel not only stops an execution, it supports the gospel. The more I consider the argument of this prominent scholar, the more it makes sense, and the more it supports the gospel as Luke has been proclaiming it and as the early church practiced it. Gamaliel won because he was right. Jesus was the leader who had been killed, but now they were faced with an empty tomb and with followers (apostles) who were performing signs and wonders, who were preaching with great power, so that the church was rapidly growing. All the evidence pointed to the fact that God was in this, and they had better be careful not to oppose God in their zeal to protect their interests. I am reminded of the words of our Lord, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34).

Third, I have to wonder if Luke is not introducing us to Gamaliel in preparation for his later appearance in Acts. You will remember that Gamaliel played a very significant role in the life of Saul, before his conversion:
1 “Brothers and fathers, listen to my defense that I now make to you.” 2 (When they heard that he was addressing them in Aramaic, they became even quieter.) Then Paul said, 3 “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated with strictness under Gamaliel according to the law of our ancestors, and was zealous for God just as all of you are today” (Acts 22:1-3, emphasis mine).

When I ask Christians how they were brought to faith in Jesus, they almost always respond, “That’s a long story.” They realize that God used many things to bring them to faith, and often over a period of time. We will read of Saul’s conversion three times in the Book of Acts. From what we read in Acts, we know that Paul was born in Tarsus and then brought up in Jerusalem, under the tutelage of Gamaliel, the very same renowned Pharisee we meet in Acts 5. Saul was also present at the stoning of Stephen (see Acts 7:58; 8:1; 22:20).

I am inclined to think that Gamaliel’s approach to dealing with Jesus and the apostles must have been conveyed to Saul (soon to be known as Paul). In our text, Gamaliel has said, in effect, “If we cannot silence and scatter the apostles and believers in Jesus, then maybe this is a work of God, and we are fighting against Him.” Saul participates (albeit somewhat passively) in the stoning of Stephen. Then he “advances” to much more direct opposition to Christianity:

9 Of course, I myself was convinced that it was necessary to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus the Nazarene. 10 And that is what I did in Jerusalem: Not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons by the authority I received from the chief priests, but I also cast my vote against them when they were sentenced to death. 11 I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to force them to blaspheme. Because I was so furiously enraged at them, I went to persecute them even in foreign cities (Acts 26:9-11).

But it didn’t work! The church continued to grow. And when Saul was on the road to Damascus, he was encountered by the living Christ:

1 Meanwhile Saul, still breathing out threats to murder the Lord’s disciples, went to the high priest 2 and requested letters from him to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, either men or women, he could bring them as prisoners to Jerusalem. 3 As he was going along, approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. 4 He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” 5 So he said, “Who are you, Lord?” He replied, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting!” (Acts 9:1-5, emphasis mine)

By His line of questioning, our Lord has made it clear to Saul that he is persecuting Him by persecuting His church. As his teacher, Gamaliel, had said to the Sanhedrin, persecuting the followers of Jesus might just be opposing God. Now, when Saul comes face to face with the risen Lord, he learns that this is precisely what he has been doing. It was not the church that collapsed under persecution, but Saul who collapsed, when confronted by the God he mistakenly assumed he was serving by persecuting the church.

I am therefore suggesting that Gamaliel was actually used of God to promote the gospel, while at the same time he was instrumental in preserving the lives of the apostles. I have to wonder if Gamaliel was there when Paul (the converted Saul) was brought before the Council after his arrest:

30 The next day, because the commanding officer wanted to know the true reason Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and the whole council to assemble. He then brought Paul down and had him stand before them. 1 Paul looked directly at the council and said, “Brothers, I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God to this day.” 2 At that the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. 3 Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit there judging me according to the law, and in violation of the law you order me to be struck?” 4 Those standing near him said, “Do you dare insult God’s high priest?” 5 Paul replied, “I did not realize, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, ‘You must not speak evil about a ruler of your people.’” 6 Then when Paul noticed that part of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, he shouted out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead!” 7 When he said this, an argument began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8 (For the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, or
9 There was a great commotion, and some experts in the law from the party of the Pharisees stood up and protested strongly, “We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” (Acts 22:30—23:9, emphasis mine)

In the Gospels, the Pharisees and the Sadducees conspired together to crucify Jesus. In the Book of Acts, the Pharisees seem to withdraw from opposition to the gospel, and it is the Sadducees who are seeking to stamp out Christianity. And when we come to Acts 23, it appears that the Pharisees and the Sadducees part ways, with the Pharisees actually defending Paul and other Christians. Does Gamaliel not play a significant role in all of this? I have to think so. And perhaps Gamaliel is now present in the Council, defending his former student. Let us hope that he came to know the Savior as Saul (Paul) did.

And so, to get back to our text, Luke informs us that Gamaliel’s reason won the day, and that the Sanhedrin was convinced (Acts 5:39). This does not mean that they gave up entirely, for they summoned the apostles to return, and after beating them, they once again ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then they released them (Acts 5:40).

(Adapted from URL: https://bible.org/seriespage/popularity-persecution-and-divine-deliverance-acts-512-42)

Concluding Thoughts from the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary

Throughout history, Christians have been challenged to obey the call of God and do the will of God. They have often been called to stand against popular opinion and speak out against violations of God’s will. They have opposed slavery, tyranny, child labor, substance abuse, the international sex trade, etc. They have worked to shine the light of truth into darkness, to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to lift up the fallen, to care for the downtrodden, to bring peace. Speaking up in the name of Jesus begins with telling the good news of salvation and continues with proclaiming whatever is consistent with the redeemed life. Wherever there is any situation that falls short of what God intends for humanity, Christians must speak up. If someone ought so speak up, who should that someone be? Logically, it should be the same person who sees the problem and knows that it needs to be addressed. It should be the person who prays daily, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). It should be the person who knows that Jesus is the only Savior of the world and that lives are to be lived in his footsteps. Christians seeing a need are not to wait for someone else to do something; they themselves should step up and speak up!

Practical Points from the Bible Expositor and Illuminator

1. The high priest was more concerned about his position and reputation than he was about hearing the truth (Acts 5:27-28)
2. The apostles were more concerned about obeying God than about their own safety (vs. 29)
3. Being a truthful witness for Christ may very well offend and anger people (vs. 33)
4. Sometimes God uses non-believers to help His people (vss. 34-39)
5. God will prove Himself through His plan (vss. 38-39)
6. Enduring persecution is a sign of our faithful commitment to God (vss. 40-42)