

“Truly Civil War”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 7/26/2020
Text: Acts 5:17-42 at FBC of Newport, NH

//17 Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. 18 They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. 19 But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. 20 “Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life.”//

—Acts 5:17-20 (NIV)

I just saw an article on how five Federal agents sent to Portland, OR to quell the city’s violent protesters were seriously wounded in the encounter. “A federal agent’s hand was impaled by planted nails, another federal agent was shot with a pellet gun, leaving a wound deep to the bone, and tragically, three federal officers were likely left permanently blinded by the rioters using lasers pointed directly into their eyes,” (https://nypost.com/2020/07/24/3-fed-agents-likely-blinded-by-lasers-pointed-at-them-in-portland-wh/?fbclid=IwAR3bcJT4rOaFZ8pGT04DMo0jaOzbx-Gqbf8O6_La0turkkpO3vVvYkQBQNHM) This is what is passing for politics this election year. And if that is the new normal, it won’t be long before it is replaced with outright civil war.

On the other side of the world China is waging a kind of war with itself, but without the nails and lasers. It has announced that its town officials must: “... remove crosses, religious symbols and images from the homes of people of faith who receive social welfare payments and replace them with portraits of Chairman Mao and President Xi Jinping,” Bitter Winter reported Tuesday. “The officials were instructed to annul the subsidies to those who protest the order.”

(https://www.dailywire.com/news/china-forces-christians-to-renounce-faith-destroy-christian-symbols-or-be-cut-off-from-welfare-reports-say?utm_campaign=dw_newsletter&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=91806338&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-8FqkFxC89-ty30LsqgZ8et2nAjlO8-ug3ixA3GjDVS3-uimatvktWCZjN6WbsguX3lEn27CrGJhgObn7NQ-CpM3OE0whYn9F48TcmCQ_MDzrDw&utm_content=non_insiders&utm_source=housefile)

Communist China is also gearing up for war against Taiwan China. Both sides agree the island of Taiwan belongs to mainland China. They just don’t agree on which of them is the legitimate government. It’s a bit like if the US and UK were still willing to go to war over the supposedly inconclusive results of the American Revolution.

Maybe when you get down to it, all our wars are civil wars. But not all wars are “civil.” Few are, in fact.

Here in Acts 5, we see the *seeds* of civil war sprouting in Jerusalem. It’s not open war, of course, but the seriousness of the conflict is evident in the death of Jesus. The intention of further killing is confessed by Israel’s leading body of government, the Sanhedrin. This is Jew against Jew, fellow Israelite against fellow Israelite, neighbor against neighbor.

But it never does turn into a civil war. Even though one side, the side supposedly with all the power, is perfectly willing to do violence and kill those with

whom they disagree. The other side, however, the Church, refuses to hold up her side of the conflict. Not because she appeases the Jewish authorities when they prohibit the Gospel, either. She still opposes them strongly, even effectively. But she never engages in the traditional course of action that leads to ordinary “civil war.” She isn’t numerous enough for one thing. All she could possibly do is an armed rebellion. But that just brings out the point all the stronger: the Church, instead of answering the violence with violence or surrender, answers with a third option that doesn’t even appear to be an option. Members’ lives will be turned upside down; they will suffer terribly; some will even die and be killed—but they will endure and overcome their enemy through what could be called a “truly civil war.” A war that is good. A war, even, with love for one’s enemy.

But how does one conduct a truly civil war?

The seeds of this answer are found in our text.

First thing is obvious and fundamental. **One must Be On the Right Side of God.** Or in other words, be on the right side of “His Story.” The Pharisee Gamaliel spells this out to his fellow members of the Sanhedrin when he cautions them to “Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.” (Acts 5:38bff)

It’s not true that life always goes the way he says. We can’t always tell who’s on God’s side just by measuring the duration of their life or movement. We might not have all the facts or our measure of history might be too short. Muhammed lived 62 years and his movement has carried on for over a thousand years. Neither of those things mean he’s on the right side of God’s Story.

But Gamaliel’s point is something of a confession that he at least saw the potential that Peter and John were actually on God’s side. And it is true that that is all-important. It’s not all important because of any guarantee that you therefore will never lose a battle or suffer hardship or die young. It’s all-important because God’s Son, Jesus, is the only One who has taken and transformed loss, suffering and death and truly turned them into victory.

So, the way to be on the right side of God is not by living a long, humanly successful life, or by trying to somehow align properly with all of human history. God himself has focused this down to our being on the right side of Jesus. And Jesus is pleased with those who believe in him for who he truly is, and follow him, even through suffering and death. With that, the followers of Jesus can trust the outcome of their God-directed civility, even when it looks foolish, futile and fatal.

The second thing is less obvious to the world, but more obvious to believers in Christ. **We must Obey the Very Spirit of God.** This is different from obeying the rules and laws of God. Those rules and laws are like a broad fence aiming to keep us in the general area of God’s will. The Spirit of God is personal, so He can call you to go beyond the law, not as in breaking it, but as in exceeding it. God’s Holy Spirit can call one person to give half their money away to the

poor, when only a tenth is required by the law. He can at the same time call another person to give all she has. He can call Peter and John to go to jail for preaching the Good News about Jesus. And he can call them out of that jail, even when the gates are locked, and then send them right back into the temple courtyard to preach the Gospel that put them in jail in the first place.

Obedying the Spirit of God is the specific way in which a member of the body of Christ can engage in a truly civil war. Because no law is going to be strong enough to make us turn the other cheek, go the extra mile or have true love for an enemy. Only the Spirit of such truth and love can empower such a calling.

The third key to waging a truly civil war is for it **To Be Offensive**. I do not mean personally offensive and I do not mean strategically offensive, as in choosing between offense vs defense. I mean for all the non-violence, long-suffering, and love in this civility there will still be a conflict at hand. And this will be important to keep in mind. When Peter and John were hauled before the court for the second time, they were specifically criticized for filling Jerusalem with their teaching about Christ—and for making the officials “guilty of this man’s blood.” As Peter and John stood there and gave an account in reply, what did they say? They said they must obey God rather than man. And then they added that this God raised Jesus from the dead—this Jesus “**whom you killed by hanging him on a cross.**” Spelling this out to them sounds cruel and unnecessary to add, but it was exactly the truth. The exact truth they needed to hear.

When the members of the Sanhedrin heard it, however, they were furious and wanted to kill the bearers of this news. Keep in mind, though, that this was the same exact message Peter preached to the crowd at Pentecost. He told them that they, too, had put Jesus to death and that God raised him to life. Only with them they were cut to the heart by Peter’s words. What did they do? They repented. They were saved and added to the body of believers in Christ.

The same civility that comes in the form of non-violence, suffering and sacrificial love for one’s neighbor, friend or foe, also comes as an offense when it touches us personally on our guilt. There are no two ways about this. There is only the one way of repentant confession. For that is exactly where forgiveness may then be applied. Listen to Peter’s reply to the Sanhedrin in full.

“We must obey God rather than human beings! 30 The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. 31 God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. 32 We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” (Acts 5:29b - 32)

This truly civil war has a goal. It’s not for politics, land or resources, power or retaliation. It is for repentance, for the surrender of one’s soul to God, so we might be forgiven, and no longer be at war with God, one another and ourselves.