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Acts 3 – 5

“Civil Disobedience”

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The book of Acts is a book about firsts. The first time ministry was completely entrusted to men and women after Christ’s ascension is found in chapter one. In chapter two we read about the first time the Holy Spirit poured out on all mankind, the first time the gifts of the Spirit were exercised, the first evangelical message was preached, and the first converts to the early church were received. In chapter three, the first miracle of the early church was the healing of a crippled man. In chapter four, the first opposition to the early church is mentioned. In chapter five, the first time *ekklesia* (Greek word for church meaning “the called out ones”) is mentioned. ([Acts 5:11](#)) And finally, the first recorded sin of the early church is written about in detail. ([Acts 5:1–11](#))

Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, held back a portion of their offering to God, but pretended that they gave the full value of land they sold. They lied to God and so the Holy Spirit killed them! It’s important to be aware of the fact that it was their prerogative to give only what God had put on their heart. They were not required to give all the proceeds from the sale; their sin was lying and hypocrisy. This seems like an extremely harsh judgment for sin! God was not in the habit of slaying people who held back in the offering, so why would he do such a thing? G. Campbell Morgan¹ said, “The church pure is the church powerful.” What we see in this situation was that God was making an unforgettable point that in the church, hypocrisy cannot be tolerated.

The focus of this study, however, is the opposition that the early church faced and how they responded to it, which will help Christians apply this in contemporary culture.

Setting The Scene

1. On the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, Peter was used by God to heal a man ([Acts 3](#)) on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, who had been crippled from birth.

¹ 1863–1945, http://www.theopedia.com/G._Campbell_Morgan

2. Peter used this opportunity to preach the Gospel to the people in the large crowd that gathered.
3. Peter and John were thrown in prison for preaching the Gospel! ([Acts 4:1-4](#))
4. A great number of new believers were added to the church, which at that time numbered about 5,000 men, plus many women and children.
5. The Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling council) convened the next day to question Peter and John about their actions. ([Acts 4:5-12](#))
 - a. Peter's emphatic statement that Jesus was the only way to salvation would have been absolute heresy to any Jew, since Jews believed salvation was found in obeying the Law and sacrificing animals.
6. [Acts 4:18-20](#), in describing describes Peter's reaction to the decision of the Sanhedrin, says: "*Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God.*"
7. Peter and the disciples were "*commanded*" to stop teaching, but they chose to obey God and "*spoke the word of God boldly.*" ([Acts 4:31](#))
8. Their determination to continue in spite of the Sanhedrin's edict, led to many people being healed and many others coming to faith, which resulted in the disciples being thrown in prison again! ([Acts 5:17-29](#))

Civil Disobedience

9. Civil disobedience is allowed whenever man's law conflicts with the higher law of God.
10. Christians not only have the right to peacefully disobey civil authority, but the duty.
11. Christians are to be the best citizens because, out of their love for God, they live in subjection to governing authorities.
 - a. [Romans 13:1-2](#) 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.*"
12. While government is an institution ordained by God, that doesn't mean that God approves of every specific government or every specific law.
13. Several examples in the Bible when people were asked to do something that conflicted with the higher Law of God include:
 - a. Hebrew midwives who refused to kill baby boys – [Exodus 1:15-17, 20-21](#)
 - b. Shadrach, Meshach and Abenego refused to worship the idol set up by Nebuchadnezzar – [Daniel 3:1-6, 12, 16-18](#)
 - c. Daniel refused to obey the command to cease praying – [Daniel 6:7-1](#)

- d. There are a few specific traits with each of these examples.
 - i. A direct and specific conflict between God's law and man's law.
 - ii. A willingness to suffer the punishment imposed for their civil disobedience [they were often miraculously delivered; nevertheless, the willingness was there].

Discussion Questions

1. Review the introduction to the study guide with your group to provide the appropriate background.
2. Read **Acts 4:1–20; 5:17–29** to provide an overview of today's study.
3. Read and discuss the Albert Einstein quote: "Never do anything against conscience, even if the state demands it."
 - a. Spend time talking about well-known incidents of civil disobedience.
 - b. What are you supposed to do when the government tells you to do one thing, but God's Word tells you to do something else?
 - c. When, if ever, is civil disobedience appropriate and acceptable to God?
4. Spend time talking about the statement Peter made in **Acts 4:12**: "*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.*"
 - a. Do you think people consider this to be an incredibly dogmatic and narrow-minded idea?
5. What examples can you think of that illustrate the self-justification some people embrace when it comes to obeying civil authority, such as paying taxes, obeying the speed limit, etc.?
 - a. **Romans 13:6–7** – "*This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes...*"
6. Should Christians respect laws and authorities as a matter of preference or principle, when there is a direct conflict between God's laws and man's laws?
7. What would your reaction be if one day the U.S. Government outlawed witnessing because Christianity has been deemed to be intolerant of other faiths?
 - a. Refer to countries like China, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan, where it is illegal to proselytize.
8. What would your reaction be if your First Amendment free speech rights were restricted when it came to speaking out on matters of morality, including homosexuality?
 - a. Five states have now legalized same-sex marriage: Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut and Iowa, New Hampshire and Maine. The New York State Assembly passed a bill (89-52) on Tuesday, May 12, 2009 that moves to the state Senate for a vote.²
 - b. Other examples for discussion include:

² <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/05/13/new.york.same.sex.marriage/>

- i. H.R. 1913 Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009,³ which passed in Congress⁴ last week, and is now before the U.S. Senate.
 1. Everyone is already protected against violent crimes, however, this legislation would grant special protection for people on the basis of their sexual orientation. The language of the bill doesn't define sexual orientation, which means that there will be provision for protection for the 30+ sexual dysfunctions (including pedophilia) outlined in the American Psychiatric Association (APA).
 - ii. S. 909 Pedophile Protection Act⁵ sponsored by Senator Edward Kennedy (D, MA).
 - iii. An article published May 12, 2009 in WorldNetDaily indicates the White House has removed President Obama's pledge to homosexuals from his official agenda.⁶
9. What would your reaction be if doctors, including Christian doctors, nurses, etc., were forced to perform abortions, trumping their conscience as health-care providers?
 - a. Refer to President Obama's recent pledge to remove the "conscience clause" that has protected doctors for more than 30 years.⁷
 10. Read and discuss Francis Schaeffer's quote from his book *Christian Manifesto*, regarding civil disobedience: "One either confesses that God is the final authority, or one confesses that Caesar is Lord."
 11. Since our freedoms have been and are being whittled away, little by little, what do you think the future holds for our country?
 - a. What are other things do you think Christians will be forced to deal with in coming days?
 - b. What role do you think prayer plays in situations like these?
 12. Close your time by allowing everyone in your group to: make up their mind, no matter what, to obey and follow the commands of God as found in Scripture; purpose in their heart to stand up for biblical truth; live out their faith for the glory of God; purpose in their heart to declare the Good News of the Gospel as directed by the Holy Spirit; and finally, to pray for pastors and churches to rely on the Holy Spirit as they lead, exhort and encourage Christians to stand up for righteousness, godliness and holiness.

³ <http://www.opencongress.org/bill/111-h1913/text>

⁴ <http://www.opencongress.org/bill/111-h1913/show>

⁵ <http://www.worldnetdaily.com/?pageId=97957> and <http://www.opencongress.org/bill/111-s909/text>

⁶ <http://worldnetdaily.com/index.php?fa=PAGE.view&pageId=97937>

⁷ <http://www.lifenews.com/nat4867.html>