

Acts 4:23-37. Commitment to a Switched-On Community

Introduction

Years ago we used a hand mower for mowing the lawns. It was good exercise mowing the lawns with a hand mower especially when the grass got thick. Sometimes I would borrow the next door neighbours' motor-mower. But there was something rather peculiar about their mower. Once started it refused to stop until it had run out of petrol. There was an off switch but it didn't work. You just kept mowing till all the petrol was gone.

The early Christians, as described in Acts 4:23-37 were very much like that lawn mower. They were "switched on" and they refused to be switched off. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious leaders, tried to 'switch off' Peter and John. They commanded them not to speak to others in the name of Jesus. Peter and John refused to be switched off. Peter and John reported back to the early Christians and they too, like Peter and John, refused to be switched off.

Compulsion to Talk

Imagine someone commands you to stop breathing. You think, "This is a very silly person." And you keep breathing. Now imagine a terrorist holds a gun to your head and says, "Stop breathing." For a time you might hold your breath. I believe pearl-divers can hold their breath for up to five minutes. But even a gun at your head can't stop you from breathing. You must breathe. Your body feels an inner compulsion to breathe. The necessity to breathe is so much a part of you that you cannot stop yourself even if you try with all your might. You must breathe.

In a similar way if you are a healthy person you feel a compulsion to eat and drink. A healthy person also feels a compulsion to talk. Some people feel such a compulsion to talk that their mouths are moving all the time. Their mouths move so much you cannot take a still photograph of them with a camera. Because their mouths are always moving you have to use a video camera.

But even though some of us are very quiet and polite people and our mouths do not seem to move much at all, every single one of us has a compulsion to talk. To remain quiet all the time without saying a word would be almost as hard as not breathing, or not eating or drinking. We must talk.

In Acts 4 we read about a people who must talk; a people who will not be silenced. In the first place we see Peter and John being interrogated and threatened by the Jewish religious authorities. In verse 18 we read, "*Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.*" These were the same people who had crucified Jesus. It was a very serious matter not to do what these people demanded. For Peter and John to refuse to obey them was like a person refusing to obey what the Triad demands. But this is precisely how Peter and John respond. Look at verse 19: "But Peter and John replied, '*Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*'" Did you hear those last words: "*we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.*" That is, Peter and John were saying that telling people about Jesus as the risen Lord was something they were compelled to do, something as necessary for them as breathing, or as eating and

drinking. Just as it was the nature of my next door neighbour's lawn mower to remain switched on until the petrol runs out, so it was essential to the very nature of Peter and John to tell others about Jesus until their very lives ran out.

Do you and I feel the same way about communicating the gospel to other people? Is it something we must do? Is your attitude like that of Peter and John: "*we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard*"? Is telling others about Jesus something you must do, no matter what pressures are placed on you to stop you from doing this? Do you refuse to be silenced? Is your life like my next door neighbour's lawn mower? Is your life like a powerful motor which refuses to stop until your life on this earth has run out?

Courage to Talk

It takes courage to tell other people about Jesus, especially when we do this in a hostile environment. Peter and John spoke to the religious authorities with great courage. Peter even openly told the Jewish religious leaders that they were guilty of crucifying Jesus (v10). So in verse 13 we read that when the Jewish religious leaders "*saw the courage of Peter and John are realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.*" Peter and John spoke with great courage. But all of the early Christians had this same courage. When Peter and John told them about the threats made by the religious leaders were they so terrified that they decided to "close the shop", put shutters on the windows and run for cover? No, in verse 31 we read: "*And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly*". In other words all of the early Christians, not just the apostles, had a God-given courage to tell other people about Jesus.

You must not think that God suddenly zapped those early Christians and gave them a sudden and dramatic surge of electric power to enable them to tell others about Jesus. This is not what being filled with the Spirit means. To understand the courage of these early Christians it is most important to read carefully the entire passage. When we do this we see that these Christians never contemplated the possibility of chickening out. They did not discuss among themselves whether they should continue to talk about Jesus or not. They did not think for a moment that they had any option. They took it for granted that they must continue to tell others about Jesus and so in verse 29 we overhear them praying: "*Now, Lord, consider the threats of the religious leaders and enable all of us as your servants to speak your word with great boldness.*" All of the early Christians were committed to communicating God's word, the gospel, to others.

Napoleon I said, "As to moral courage, I have very rarely met with the two o'clock in the morning courage: I mean unprepared courage." If you attack someone at two o'clock in the morning when they are still sleeping, then they wake up in a groggy confused condition and do not know how to respond. Their courage will desert them because they are unprepared. But if you were to attack the same person in the middle of the day you may find that they have the courage of the lion because they are better prepared.

When God gave them the courage for which they asked it was not like scattering wheat seed on an airport runway and expecting an abundant crop of wheat to grow there. The soil was already very well prepared.

The courage of the early Christians to talk about Jesus was especially rooted in the soil of unity. In verse 32 we are told: "*All the believers were one in heart and mind.*" This verse summarises much of what we are told about the early Christians in verses 24-31. The first expression of their unity is that they prayed together, and more specifically that they all responded to a situation of threat by coming together to pray to God. So in verse 23 we see the early Christian community in united prayer: "*When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God.*"

If we are a switched on community then we will react in the same way to the possibility of being switched on. Is it true of your church community that not just some but church members in general evidence a God-given courage which moves them to tell others about Jesus, albeit in their own particular and different ways and also varying somewhat according to gifting and opportunity? Are you a "switched on" community, that is, a witnessing community? Could you guarantee that if people come to your church they will meet those who are prepared to communicate the gospel to them?

If this is not a description of the church of which we are a part then what should our reaction be? Should we not as a church community lift our voices in prayer and ask God to not allow us to be blocked by our fear of what others think and say; to ask him to give us the boldness we need to tell them about our wonderful Lord? Is this essential to our corporate prayers when we come together in church and meet together at other times?

The second expression of the unity of those early Christians is that they believed in God's sovereignty. They knew he had "*made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them*", and that, therefore, he was the "*sovereign Lord*". They knew that God, being the Creator, was in total control of the world he has created and everything that happens in it. The threats issued by the Jewish religious leaders had not put God on the defensive. God was still in perfect control of the situation and all of the early Christians shared this conviction in God's sovereignty.

I do not know if there are any hostile authorities in your life. Perhaps some of you have come to Christ and your parents still do not know the Lord. Perhaps they try to impose their authority on you and put pressure on you to betray your Lord. I come from a non-Christian family. When I was converted at the age of 19 I was studying at university in the South Island of New Zealand. Following this, during the long summer holidays I went home in the North Island. I began to talk openly about Jesus to my brothers and sisters and to my parents. But my stepfather called himself an atheist and hated Christianity. He was very angry with me. He told me: "Don't dare to talk about Jesus in this house."

I remember a godly Iranian I met who as a Muslim had been converted to Christ. When I met him he was heading overseas with his wife as a missionary to tell people about Jesus. In preparation for this he secured a part time job in a factory so as to earn some money. While there he talked to lots of people boldly about Jesus. But the

foreman in the factory told him to stop doing this. But my friend continued to talk to others about Jesus. He was doing this in a natural and non-aggressive manner and there were no complaints from his workmates. But the foreman was a Muslim and you might imagine how angry he was about a converted Muslim talking to people about Christ. Anyway the foreman went to the boss and told him that this Iranian Christian was causing trouble. The result was that my friend was sacked.

Do you feel so compelled to tell others about Jesus that you would be prepared to risk losing your job if it came to that?

The conviction of the early Christians in God's sovereignty was cemented by their realisation that God had anticipated the kind of opposition they were now experiencing. There was nothing surprising or unexpected about this hostility on the part of the religious leaders. It was to be expected. They reminded themselves of what God had once said through the mouth of David, as recorded in Psalm 2:1-2: "*Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One.*"

It will always be this way. You will find all kinds of human authorities opposing you if you boldly speak to others about Christ. You may find your bosses opposing you or even your parents and other relatives and friends you hold dear.

We Christians should be ready to be opposed at any time because of our conviction that God is always in total control of whatever happens to us. The early Christians clearly understood that when their Lord had been put to death by the authorities that God himself had been in perfect control of that situation. Read verses 27-28 very carefully. First they say, "*Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.*" But how did the early Christians understand these terrible events. Look at verse 28: "*They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.*" God himself had determined that the circumstances should unfold in this way. The clear implication of this is that the early Christians were equally convinced that the opposition they were now experiencing was also according to the predetermined will and purpose of God. God is in perfect control.

Called to Talk

The clear implication of verse 29 is that 'speaking God's word', that is, **communicating the gospel, was something essential to the identity of all those early Christians** - an identity which was now being threatened by the Jewish religious authorities. It is not hard to show that this is indeed the case. Notice how in verse 29 the early Christians call themselves God's "*servants*". It is very important not to trivialise this. This is a most important indication of how the early Christians understood themselves.

We often think of a servant as someone who does menial tasks; of someone at the bottom of the social ladder; someone in a lowly position. A servant is someone under obligation, someone made responsible to do what his or her master requires, someone who must fulfil their duty. Is this how the early Christians thought of themselves? As having a duty to tell others about Jesus?

This is not the stress of this passage. This is not what is meant when the early Christians described themselves as God's "servants" in verse 29. In verse 27 they speak of David as God's "servant", and in verse 27 they speak of Jesus as God's "holy servant". In this passage the idea of God's servant goes back to Moses, the great servant of God. When we call Moses God's servant we are thinking of someone who was greatly honoured by God. To be God's servant is to be in a position of great honour and privilege; greater than being the special servant of a great king or queen. The early Christians saw themselves not as lowly servants who had a duty to tell others about Jesus. This was not a heavy burden which lay on their shoulders. No! They saw themselves as those for whom it was a great privilege to serve God by telling others about Jesus. They did not want anyone to take this privilege away from them.

May your church be a switched-on community, filled with Christians who have a compulsion to talk, courage to talk and see themselves as called to talk! May it consistently be the case that outsiders who come into contact with people from your church community are clearly told about who Jesus is and what he has done for them!