

THE IRRESISTIBLE ATTRACTION OF...CHURCH? ACTS 5:12-16

I get asked lots of questions by people who are considering joining our church. Questions about the church's doctrine, government, style of worship, children's programs, and missions' involvement. But I have yet to be asked, "Is your church dangerous?" or "Will we survive if we join your church?"

That's because, as Americans, we don't equate religion with risk. Freedom of religion is one of our constitutional rights. So, for example, if someone decides to become a follower of Jesus, it doesn't occur to him that doing so could be life-threatening. Likewise, when choosing a church, people may be interested in the safety protocols in the children's department, but they don't ask whether by joining a church their *lives* might be in danger.

But that was something people in the first century had to consider when deciding or not to join the very first church—the Jerusalem church. After Ananias and Sapphira died because they lied to the Holy Spirit, we are told, "*no one else dared join them*" (Acts 5:13). That's because word had gotten around about Ananias and Sapphira, and "*great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard...*" (5:11).

Swift and severe judgment has a way of getting people's attention and making them think twice about whether or not they want to get personally involved in something. Thus, one of the questions that people in Jerusalem asked at this time is: "Will I survive if I join the church? Or could what happened to Ananias and Sapphira happen to me or my family?"

But we're going to see that what happened to Ananias and Sapphira and the fear that it produced in the people of Jerusalem, rather than paralyzing the church's progress, actually produced the opposite effect. **Verse 12.** *12 Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico.*

Ananias and Sapphira's deaths did nothing to curb the Spirit's activity. Dramatic demonstrations of His power and grace were displayed regularly among the people. Remember, the Spirit had a specific agenda. He was authenticating Jesus as the living, resurrected Christ, the Son of God. He was validating that this new movement, led by the apostles, was, indeed, from God. And He was ultimately bringing people to a point of decision where they would either be compelled to put their confidence in Jesus as their Savior and King or reject Him as an imposter. Personal encounters with miraculous signs and wonders frequently force that decision.

But notice that Ananias and Sapphira's deaths did nothing to curtail the *fellowship* of the early church either. All the believers, several thousand of them, hung out together at Solomon's Portico, a large, covered porch on the eastern side of the temple. Surrounded by rows of white marble pillars, it was a place where, for many generations, worshipers gathered to have religious discussions.

Apparently, the early church had staked out this portion of the Portico to meet with one another. Which means they did not, at least initially, meet privately behind closed doors in a building; they met in the open air, in *the* most central, public space in the entire city, a place that was visible and accessible to everyone so that everyone could find them, observe them, hear their message, and see what God was doing in their midst.

This was the place where, undoubtedly, many decisions were made to follow Christ. It was the place where many miraculous signs and wonders were performed. In other words, there was a concentration of God's presence and power in this place. Not because of its location—not because it was on the Temple grounds near the Holy of holies where God's presence was thought to dwell—but because the people who comprised this massive assembly were themselves indwelt by the Holy Spirit. There was a concentration of the Spirit's presence and power because there was a concentration of Spirit indwelt people. That made Solomon's Portico holy ground.

People could sense that. And some people didn't know what to make of it, for there was an element of mystery and otherworldliness and danger to this place, just like there had been in the Holy of holies. There was something undeniably divine going on in that Portico, which made some wary.

Look at **verse 13.** *13 None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem.* Luke's comment about the church being held in high esteem suggests that outsiders respected what was going on in this assembly, even if they couldn't quite wrap their minds around it. But they were reluctant to become full-fledged participants because they remembered what happened to Ananias and Sapphira. So, many decided to be bystanders. "I'll watch what God is doing from the other side of the courtyard and keep a safe distance."

Yet the very next verse tells us that many others could not stay away. "*And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women*" (5:14). This verse seems to contradict the previous verse. "*None of the rest dared join them...And more than ever believers were added to the Lord...*"

I think what Luke is trying to say is that despite the dangers, there was a winsomeness about the church that was irresistible. It wasn't just the dramatic demonstrations of the Spirit's power; it was the genuine joy and harmony and peace and mutual care for one another (when you see people selling their lands and houses and giving it all away, it's pretty hard to dismiss it as disingenuous). What was happening in the early church had God's fingerprints all over it. And since God was behind it, many could not help *but* become part of it, especially because they and their loved ones were benefiting so greatly from it.

Verses 15-16. ¹⁵ *...they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them.* ¹⁶ *The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.*

When people can see with their own eyes or experience for themselves the power of God to heal and deliver, they cannot help but spread the word. They naturally invite their friends and neighbors and family members to come and see and hear and experience this power. And if they have loved ones who are afflicted or demonized, they rush to go get them and then hurry back so they can be healed.

We are told that some of these ailing people were so weak and sick that they couldn't walk—they couldn't get to Solomon's Portico. So, their loved ones went into their homes, put them on cots and mats, and carried them out to the courtyard of the Temple where the church was meeting. But there were so many of them that they couldn't fit into the courtyard, so they lined the streets, waiting for Peter to walk by, hoping that Peter would give them his attention or say the word or touch their bodies. But there were so many of them that even this was impossible. So, God determined that all that was necessary for them to be healed and delivered was that Peter's shadow might fall on them.

Think about it. What is a shadow? A shadow is literally...*nothing!* There is no substance to a shadow; there is no energy in a shadow. It's merely an absence of light. And yet God used the shadow of an ordinary, flawed, yet Spirit-filled human being to reveal His glory and display His power. And the effect was that many people were healed of sickness and disease; many people were set free from bondage to sin and Satan; many people were delivered from spiritual oppression and poverty and despair; many people were able to enter into and experience the abundant life that Jesus offered.

This is a description of the first church—the first century Jerusalem church—for a period of time after its inception. There was a concentration of the Holy Spirit's power and grace that was the talk of the town, that was visible to all, and that impacted the entire city and its surroundings. And it was this concentration of the Spirit's power and grace coupled with the Spirit's work of opening the spiritually blind eyes and deaf ears that irresistibly drew outsiders into what God was doing. These people were not just compelled to find out what was going on in these gatherings at Solomon's Portico; they were compelled to become part of it—to become, themselves, followers of Jesus.

I want to conclude by extracting some principles from this passage that might be helpful as we consider its application to us. First, dramatic demonstrations of the Holy Spirit's power and grace like this are still occurring in various places around the world. This was not a one-and-done phenomenon that was peculiar solely to the Jerusalem Church. This has happened at various in various places among various peoples throughout the history of the church, and it is happening today.

Many of you have heard of a recent outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the campus of Asbury University in Kentucky where a spontaneous student-led gathering on February 8 continued non-stop in the school's chapel and several overflow buildings for nearly two weeks. University President, Kevin Brown, confessing that what was occurring was unlike anything he had ever seen in his life, described what he witnessed as "radical humility, compassion, honesty, confession, and life-altering commitments." Others reported seeing numerous incidents of salvation, forgiveness, reconciliation, and spiritual and physical healing. Tens of thousands of people of all ages, ethnicities, and denominations traveled great distances to the campus and waited for hours in long lines just to be where the Spirit of God was reported to be at work.

A pastor in South Carolina who is an alumnus of Asbury made the seven-hour drive to the campus with his wife, and reported, "God was in the house, and people were worshiping Him. This is not about a speaker, a music group or a showman. Jesus is center stage. Three hours there seemed like just a little bit of time. They are not just inviting people to find forgiveness of sins. The clear emphasis is on submitting to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In the time we were in the auditorium, we heard a clear exhortation on 'dying to self' and living the Spirit-filled life."

This is an example of a dramatic outpouring of the Spirit of God in our day, but may I submit to you that God does this all the time in places where it is not publicized and will never be publicized. I have had the privilege of witnessing such phenomena in some of the remotest places on earth among people that most have never even heard about.

I saw it occur on a tiny island off the coast of Panama in April 2008, where several hundred Kuna Indians had assembled from nearby islands. All 49 of their chiefs had convened for their annual congress, and where evangelist Mike Silva had been invited to preach the gospel. It's a long and wonderful story that I cannot fully recount right now, but what the Spirit of God did during the three days we were there and what He continued to do for months afterward, was just as dramatic a demonstration of His power and grace as what is written in Acts 5.

That first night, with all 49 chiefs in attendance, Mike preached the gospel to the hundreds who had gathered. It was a clear presentation, but the atmosphere was strained, the crowd was subdued, and the response was muted. Most of the chiefs sat frowning with their arms crossed.

But when we met with the chiefs the next afternoon and shared the gospel with just them, you could practically see the scales fall off their spiritual eyes. When Mike invited them to open their hearts to Jesus and receive God's provision for forgiveness, peace with God, and eternal life, forty-seven of the forty-nine chiefs stood and prayed, out loud and in unison, to receive Christ. As we placed our hands on each one, we saw, for the first time since we had been there, wide grins on their faces. Many were wiping tears from their eyes.

That night, we had another assembly with all the chiefs and islanders in the center of the village. This time, there was unrestrained joy and uninhibited expressions of delight even before we began to worship Jesus. These hundreds of Kuna Indians had already received word that their chiefs had given their lives to Jesus, and they were anticipating what was going to happen to them, too. When the gospel was preached, the vast majority of them responded, and we learned in the months following that this spiritual awakening spread not only throughout the islands, but to other Kuna communities on the mainland, where in some villages 90% of the people became Christ followers.

I saw the same thing in a remote village in the heart of South Sudan where there was no pavement, no automobiles, and no building big enough to hold the people who had walked for hours to hear the word of God. People sat under a couple of baobab trees in blistering heat on a Sunday afternoon, and as the Word was preached people began to come under such conviction of sin that some began to uncontrollably weep, others were compelled to stand and confess their sin publicly, others began to wash the feet of those with whom they had been estranged, and husbands and wives were reconciled publicly, something that was unprecedented in this region.

A woman who had been demonized for four years and had wandered into the meeting was delivered, and immediately sat down in her right mind next to her daughter, a pastor's wife, with whom she had not spoken in four years. There were numerous other demonstrations of the Spirit's power and grace, including the sound of a mighty rushing wind that blew through the baobab trees scattering leaves all over us. The sound of the wind lasted about 30 seconds, and then was gone.

If I had not seen these things with my own eyes I would never have known that the Spirit of God was demonstrating His power and grace in dramatic ways in these places, and I can only assume that He is doing this all over the world. It just never gets reported or publicized.

That brings me to the second principle. Dramatic demonstrations of the Holy Spirit's power and grace are purely a sovereign act of God. That means that He will do these things when and where and among whom He wants to do them. It is not something we can coerce Him to do if we pull the right strings or push the right buttons. There's no formula for activating the Spirit's dramatic work. It doesn't happen as a reward for having all our theological ducks in a row. It is not initiated through our earnestness or sincerity. It cannot be orchestrated, contrived, or manipulated. With reference to the Holy Spirit, Jesus said to Nicodemus, *"The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (John 3:8).*

If we get to see it and be a part of it, it is solely because the Spirit has been pleased to allow it. But if we do not get to see or experience it, it doesn't mean that we are deprived or that we haven't "arrived". These outpourings of the Holy Spirit, in my view, are a taste of heaven on earth. But if you don't get to taste it on earth, you *will* get to enjoy it for eternity in heaven.

You might be wondering, "Can we pray for it? Can we ask God to visit us here at EBC in the same way?" By all means, pray! I do! But don't forget what Jesus said to His disciples when, after being sent out by Jesus to preach the kingdom, they returned rejoicing after seeing manifestations of the Spirit's power and grace to heal, deliver, and restore through them. He said, *"Don't rejoice that demons submit to you; rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20).*

The third principle I would like to submit to you is: Dramatic, concentrated demonstrations of the Holy Spirit's power and grace typically last a few days, weeks, months, or years, though the impact is eternal. The

Jerusalem church did not meet at Solomon's Portico forever. We're going to see that persecution eventually forced them to move into homes, and then to flee Jerusalem and settle in other communities. By the way, the scattering and resettlement of followers of Christ was just as much a work of the Holy Spirit as the dramatic demonstrations of His power. The dramatic outpouring of His power and grace when Christ followers were assembled was wonderful, but it was not permanent. It lasted precisely the amount of time that the Spirit determined it would.

Remember, the Spirit has an agenda. That agenda is *not* that we gather in one place so that we can see Him work in wonderful ways; it is that we go into all the world and be used by Him to win others to Christ.

Irresistible Attraction Acts 5:11-16

Main Idea: Despite the dangers, dramatic demonstrations of the Spirit's power and grace compelled more and more people to believe in Jesus and join the Christian community.

An Inspiring Fear (v.11)

More Signs and Wonders (v.12a)

A Very Public Sanctuary (v.12b)

To Join or Not to Join? (vv.13-14)
On the Outside Looking In (13)

Can't Help but Believe

Miraculous Manifestations (vv.15-16)
One Powerful Shadow

Word Spreads

What Makes the Church Irresistible?