

Responding to Persecution

Acts 4:1-22

Rev. Brian Bill

November 16-17, 2019

Imagine a church that lives on mission by gathering with God's people, by growing in their faith, by giving what God has given to them and by going with the gospel, all for the glory of God. This church is known as a place of grace for those who are out of place. This body of believers is making a difference by partnering with local ministries and by sending out missionaries all around the world.

They enjoyed the favor of their community until October, when the pastor of this gospel-centered, grace-giving, God-glorifying church preached a message on Genesis 1:27: ***“So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”***

Listen to what Erwin Lutzer writes about this in an article called, “Coming Soon to a Church Near You.” *“Overnight your gospel-preaching church could change from being a ‘cool place to worship’ to being branded as a church of bigotry and hate...it could happen anywhere.”* We posted this on Sermon Extras if you'd like to read it.

When Pastor Keith Simon of the Crossing Church in Colombia, Missouri preached a thoughtful, welcoming and non-judgmental sermon on what God says about gender, his tone was respectful and compassionate. I watched the sermon and could see myself tackling this topic in a very similar way. The day after the sermon, a social media firestorm ensued, and the surrounding community was thrown into a polarizing debate. Within days, an online petition was signed by 1,000 citizens urging a community festival to cut ties to the church. Personal attacks ensued, including calling the pastor the “Anti-Christ.” After widespread coverage in local media, the story also gained traction nationally.

In reflecting on this, Lutzer writes:

“They crossed a trip wire...It won't be long until other convictions elicit the same response. We already know that to be pro-life means you hate women; to believe that Jesus is the only way to God is religious bigotry...this is the reality that many churches will likely be facing in the coming years. As this issue begins to divide families, communities, and churches, some will begin

to separate themselves from organized religion and reject Christianity as a whole. Congregations may begin to thin out. It seems that the church is in a process of being pruned, and while some will remain, others will walk away... It has been aptly stated that 'a Christianity without courage is cultural atheism.' Let us resolve as a church that silence is not an option."

On this Dedication Weekend when we celebrate God's faithfulness and worthiness, I want to call us to persevere even when persecution comes, and it will. When Christianity collides with culture, there will always be fallout. Here's a personal question, "*Will you fall away or remain faithful?*" Hebrews 6:12 says, "***So that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.***"

One year ago, we gathered right here for a time of prayer and praise. Here's how we began...

In 1905, over 40 charter members of Edgewood made a covenant: "...to contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry, the expense of the church, the relief of the poor, and the spread of the Gospel through all nations."

1 Chronicles 12:32 tells us there were individuals from the tribe of Issachar, "who understood the times and knew what Israel should do." Ever since the founding of Edgewood, faithful men and women have been acutely aware of the times in which they lived...and they stepped out with courageous faith at the right time and at the right place to do what God was calling them to do.

We're simply building off the courageous faith and radical generosity of previous generations...God's people dared to do whatever it took to keep growing their faith, to grow the church family and to grow in ways that allowed Edgewood to be positioned for future faithfulness.

Grab your Bibles and turn to Acts 4:1-22 (You'll notice we have Bibles in the racks in front of you. If you don't have a Bible of your own, feel free to take one home with you). Last week we learned to *practice continual repentance as we call others to do the same*. Repentance releases us from our sins, it brings the refreshment we're searching for, along with the restoration God alone can bring to our lives.

Today we'll be encouraged to imitate the example of Peter and John so we can weather the waves of persecution that are headed our way. Here's the main idea: *We must keep speaking even when we're told not to.*

On this day of dedication for our facility, I'm calling us to dedicate our faith to the Lord. While we will dedicate the building, it's even more important we dedicate our bodies to the Lord and His purposes.

In line with Peter and John, along with those who came before us at Edgewood, I call us to make seven resolutions.

1. Embrace opposition (4:1-7). After the lame man started leaping, Peter began preaching. This made the religious authorities anxious, as we see in verses 1-2: *“And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people...”* These three groups came together in a show of force. The *priests* were the ones who were supposed to do the teaching, so they were threatened. The *captain of the temple* was the chief of the temple police and was in charge of keeping order. The *Sadducees* were the religious liberals of the day, denying the supernatural and the resurrection. They were loyal to the Roman government, they were committed to the status quo, and they only followed the first five books of the Bible.

The phrase *“came upon them”* means, *“they burst upon them suddenly with hostility.”* One Greek scholar says they came *“stomping upon them.”* To be *“greatly annoyed”* in verse 2 indicates they were *“continually provoked and aggravated.”* Write this down. When God is at work, Satan goes to war! Where the gospel advances, the Devil attacks. They turn up the heat even more in verse 3 when they arrest Peter and John and put them in jail. The next day, the Sanhedrin, which was like the Jewish Supreme Court, put them on trial and demanded in verse 7: *“By what power or by what name did you do this?”* Incidentally, this is the first of 10 known persecutions against Christianity during the first three centuries.

On Wednesday, I read an article about a soloist threatening to cancel her halftime performance for the Dallas Cowboys' Thanksgiving football game promoting Salvation Army's "Red Kettle Kickoff." She reportedly said unless the Salvation Army shows support of gay marriage, she wouldn't perform. She made these demands after fans told her of the Salvation Army's stance for traditional marriage.

In her statement, she said she would have no choice but to “*pull out unless they very quickly made a solid, committed pledge or donation to the LGBTQ community.*” Later in her statement she calls the Salvation Army “*an anti-LGBTQ charity.*”

Did you catch how a commitment to biblical marriage is now called “anti-LGBTQ”?

Brothers and sisters, we should not be surprised by this. Jesus said in John 15:20: “*If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.*” 2 Timothy 3:12 says, “*Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*” Trevin Wax puts it like this: “*When we say we want to be the hands and feet of Jesus; we must remember what happened to the hands and feet of Jesus.*”

I love the contrast in verse 4: “*But many of those who heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.*” Even while Peter and John are imprisoned, the Word of God is setting captives free! The gospel leads to the conversion of some and confrontation from others. BTW, it’s the Word that caused people to believe, not the miracle of the man being healed.

We must keep speaking even when we’re told not to. We will continue to teach marriage is between one man and one woman for life. We will unapologetically declare life begins at conception and is therefore worthy of honor and protection. We will call people to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as the only way to be saved. We will stand on the Scriptures as the full and final revelation of God, no matter what others think of us or do to us.

Will you dedicate yourself to embracing opposition?

2. Proclaim the Resurrection (4:2, 10). Brothers and sisters, we are a resurrection people! No matter what happens, we must continue to proclaim Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins and was raised from the dead on the third day. In verse 2, Peter proclaimed “*in Jesus the resurrection from the dead*” knowing it would light the Sadducees up. He proclaims it again in verse 10: “*...whom God raised from the dead.*”

The reality of the Resurrection pulsates through the Book of Acts and often the preaching of it provoked persecution. One example is Acts 17:30-32: “*The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to*

repent, because He has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom He has appointed; and of this He has given assurance to all by raising Him from the dead.” When you think about it, all the enemies had to do was produce the body of Jesus and Christianity would have crumbled.

Team, we will continue to proclaim the resurrection because it shows Jesus is the Son of God. It means His sacrifice for sin was accepted by God the Father. He is alive and active, able to help us in time of need. The Resurrection also demonstrates the power Jesus has over death, sin and Satan!

Will you dedicate yourself to proclaiming the resurrection?

3. Be filled with the Spirit (4:8). It’s interesting how the filling of the Spirit is linked with the sharing of one’s faith. Jesus first told the disciples to wait to witness until the Holy Spirit had given them power to do so in Acts 1:8: *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* Peter experienced this power in Acts 4:8: *“Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them...”* To be filled with the Spirit means to be fully surrendered to the Spirit. It doesn’t mean we get more of the Spirit, but the Spirit “gets more” of us.

Peter is experiencing what Jesus predicted in Matthew 10:18-20: *“And you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”*

The filling of the Holy Spirit gave Peter boldness, which is quite a contrast to the disciple who denied the Lord and was afraid of a little maid in a courtyard just weeks earlier.

Brothers and sisters, we must be filled with the Holy Spirit if we’re going to have any fruit in our lives. Ephesians 5:18 says, *“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.”* Are you surrendered fully to Him? Have you confessed and repented from all known sin in your life?

Will you dedicate yourselves to the filling of the Holy Spirit every day?

4. Preach Jesus as the only way (4:9-12). The fourth truth we stand on is Jesus is the only way to Heaven. Look at verse 11: *“This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.”* This is a direct quote from Psalm 118:22. Jesus quoted this same verse in Matthew 21:42.

The cornerstone is the most important stone in a building. If this stone is straight the whole structure will be straight. Everything must line up with this stone in order for the building to be strong. In a similar way, you and I are to build our lives on the foundation of Christ and to make sure everything we do lines up with the Lord. Let’s keep Jesus as the cornerstone of what God is building at Edgewood!

Jesus is called the Stone in verse 11 and in verse 12 we see He is Savior: *“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”* This claim was radical then and it remains so today. I see four elements of salvation that Jesus alone offers:

- **Universal.** The offer of salvation is available for everyone.
- **Exclusive.** There is no other way to be saved except through Jesus. Salvation does not come by Buddha, Confucius, Mohammad, Gandhi, Mary, or any other plan or person.
- **Certain.** You can be sure of your salvation once you are saved.
- **Emphatic.** This is a command to be saved. The word *“must”* means it’s a compelling necessity.

My heart was so full after witnessing people venture out in the snow and cold on Monday for our Prayer Walk. The first person to arrive was a man fighting cancer - it was a joy to watch him pray with his hands raised to Heaven. It was moving to see another man on his knees praying in the Worship Center and to see a mom, and later a millennial, literally touch every seat in this room to pray for the people who are sitting here right now. Two grandparents brought their young grandson to pray. One teenager had his head bowed in the Worship Center while another teen repented and received Christ in the Fireside Room while people were in the building praying people would get saved!

I’m delighted we have so many partnerships with ministries and missionaries all around the world. This weekend the Traveling Team is with us to share how teens

and young adults can respond to God's call to take the gospel to the nations. They have been stirring university students all over the country to rise up and join God in reaching the world for Jesus Christ. Think of them as a missions conference on wheels. This team was just at Purdue and will be headed to the University of Illinois this week. They'll be speaking at Mainspring tonight in the Life Center at 6:30 p.m.

I received an anonymous letter last weekend from someone who signed his name as "LOST." I've read it multiple times and have prayed for this individual every day this week. The letter was addressed to God and was filled with hurt and pain. Here's how the letter ends: *"I'm becoming lost in my own transgressions and I need to be set free. I need you. I want you. Will you take me?"* I bring this up because this person was in one of our services and I want him or her to know there is hope, healing, forgiveness of sins, and salvation in the name of Jesus Christ. Luke 19:10 says, ***"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."***

If you're here today, or watching online, would you please contact me or another pastor so we can help? The short answer to your question is, *"Yes, Jesus will take you! No matter what you've done, Jesus did it all for you when He died on the cross and rose from the dead on the third day. When you repent, like the prodigal son did, the Father will run to you, embrace you, and welcome you home. He's searching for you and seeking you right now."* LOST, you are not alone because the Bible says we are all lost apart from Christ.

Edgewood has always been a church committed to preaching Jesus as the only way. I was so moved to see you put 2600 names of people you long to follow Christ up on the west wall of our Worship Center. This reflects your desire to see people come to saving faith in Christ and follow Him the rest of their lives.

During our renovation and expansion of our building, I've been asking God to renovate our hearts and homes in order to expand our reach into our neighborhoods and the nations. Will you rededicate yourselves to preaching Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation?

5. Spend time with Jesus (4:13). In verse 13 the religious elite had a difficult time figuring out how these uneducated and uncultured Christians could be so bold: ***"Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus."*** The word ***"boldness"*** means to have the freedom

to speak frankly and without reservation. This was astonishing because to be **“uneducated”** literally means they were *“unlettered or illiterate.”* To be **“common”** tells us they had no official religious training. I’m reminded of what Moses said about himself in Exodus 4:10: **“Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I am slow of speech and of tongue.”**

The religious leaders recognize it’s not *what* they know, it’s *who* they know! It’s as if Jesus has reappeared in these men because their lives lined up with the Lord. Mark 3:14 tells us the reason Jesus picked the disciples: **“And He appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and He might send them out to preach.”** They were to be *with* Him and then *witness* for Him. The same is true for us.

Are people astonished when they look at you? Do they wonder how you can be so bold and gracious and kind? Do they conclude it’s because you’ve been with Christ?

Fellow Christ-follower, will you dedicate yourself to spending time with Jesus every day?

6. Keep speaking of Jesus (4:14-20). After the leaders recognize the disciples reflect Jesus because they have a relationship with Him, they try to think of ways to silence them. Verse 14 tells us this was very difficult because the healed man was standing right beside them! They couldn’t deny the miracle. After huddling up, they come up with a plan in verse 17: **“Let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in His name.”** In verse 18 they **“charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.”** Since they can’t deny or destroy the truth of Christianity, they hope to prevent its diffusion.

I love the answer Peter and John give in verses 19-20: **“But Peter and John answered them, ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.’”** Literally in the Greek, they are saying this using a double negative: *“For we emphatically are not able not to speak!”* Later, in Acts 20:27, Paul says, **“For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.”**

It was in this spirit tMartin Luther stated his commitment to Scripture alone, which teaches salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory

of God alone: *“I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.”* John Bunyan, who wrote *Pilgrim’s Progress*, was put in prison for 12 years for preaching the gospel. He was told he would be let out if he promised not to preach again. Listen to his answer: *“If you let me out of prison today, I will preach again tomorrow, by the grace of God. If I lie in jail till the moss grows on my eyelids, I will never conceal the truth which God has taught me.”*

This takes me back to Jeremiah 20:9. The prophet is tired of speaking up and shot down, so he considers shutting down. But that doesn’t last too long: ***“But if I say, ‘I will not remember Him or speak anymore in His name,’ then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire shut up in my bones; and I am weary of holding it in, and I cannot endure it.”*** Beth recently had this verse put on canvas to hang in my office.

Brothers and sisters, we will not go quiet about Christ, will we? Will you *keep speaking even when you’re told not to?*

7. Give all the glory to God (4:21-22). Look at verse 21: ***“And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened.”*** This literally reads, *“For all kept on glorifying God.”* Because the people were praising, the leaders couldn’t punish them! We’ve come back to Psalm 115:1 many times during Grow Time: ***“Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!”***

The story of *Grow Time* is about His glory, not our own. It’s all for the fame of His name, not our own. We affirm Romans 11:36: ***“For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen.”***

It’s Grow Time!

We’re going to dedicate our building to the Lord but more importantly, we’re going to dedicate our bodies to Him. Over this last year, we’ve been asking God to grow our faith, to grow our family and to grow our future.

The word “dedicate” in the Bible has the idea of separation from sin in order to be separated to the Savior. It means to be made clean for sacred purposes. A similar

word is “consecrate,” which was often used of the spiritual act of setting aside places, possessions and people for God’s purposes.

My mind goes to Romans 12:1-2: ***“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”***

Would you please stand if you’re able? As a way to summarize what we learned today and to personalize our commitment, I’m going to read each resolution and ask you to respond with, *“We dedicate ourselves to do so!”*

1. **Will you embrace opposition?** *“We dedicate ourselves to do so!”*
2. **Will you proclaim the resurrection?** *“We dedicate ourselves to do so!”*
3. **Will you be filled with the Spirit?** *“We dedicate ourselves to do so!”*
4. **Will you preach Jesus as the only way?** *“We dedicate ourselves to do so!”*
5. **Will you spend time with Jesus?** *“We dedicate ourselves to do so!”*
6. **Will you keep speaking of Jesus?** *“We dedicate ourselves to do so!”*
7. **Will you give all glory to God?** *“We dedicate ourselves to do so!”*

Now that we’ve dedicated our bodies to the Lord, we’re almost ready to dedicate the building to Him and His purposes. But before doing so, I want to give us some cautions.

1. **Don’t idolize our facility or focus on its flaws.** Buildings don’t change lives, but what happens inside of them does. This is simply a tool for us to utilize as we live on mission for Him.
2. **Don’t think we’re finished because the building is done.** In a real sense, we’re just getting started. With as much as God has done in and through the ministry of Edgewood over the past 114 years, *what if the best days for Edgewood lie ahead of us, not behind us?* Deuteronomy 3:24: ***“O Lord GOD, you have only begun to show your servant your greatness and your mighty hand.”***
3. **Don’t stop giving now.** I’m praying we can pay off the balance of our loan as soon as possible to free up our finances for further ministry initiatives.
4. **Don’t equate comfortable seating with comfortable Christianity.** We want people to be comfortable so they can hear the dangerous message of

the cross. As I mentioned last weekend, I'm much more interested in our sending capacity than I am our seating capacity.

Dedication Prayer

*Almighty God, You are holy, holy, holy. We thank You for this place where we can gather, grow, give and go with the gospel, all for Your glory alone. We set it apart for Your purposes and for the fame of Your glorious name. May we take the gospel to our neighbors and to the nations through our missionaries. May Your Word be boldly preached so many will be saved and baptized, and become equipped and mobilized to live on mission. May this be a place of grace for those who are out of place, a hospital for sick sinners. We echo the request of the psalmist in *Psalm 85:7*: **“Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?”** We ask this in Jesus' Name, the Lord and Leader of this church, Amen.*

When Solomon finished his prayer of dedication for the Temple, he said these words to the people in *1 Kings 8:56-61*: ***“Blessed be the LORD who has given rest to his people Israel, according to all that he promised. Not one word has failed of all his good promise, which he spoke by Moses his servant. The LORD our God be with us, as he was with our fathers. May he not leave us or forsake us, that he may incline our hearts to him, to walk in all his ways and to keep his commandments, his statutes, and his rules, which he commanded our fathers. Let these words of mine, with which I have pleaded before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night...that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other. Let your heart therefore be wholly true to the LORD our God, walking in his statutes and keeping his commandments, as at this day.”***

Incredibly after this charge to the people, 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep were offered in sacrifice to the Lord! For me, the highlight of Grow Time for me was what happened on Commitment Weekend a year ago when hundreds of people got up and came forward with their sacrificial pledges and placed them in buckets on the platform.

We're going to end our service by singing the song, “Lay Me Down.” I want to invite you to come up to the front, not with a financial pledge, but with a faith pledge to offer yourself in dedication to God and His purposes, with a renewed

passion to gather with God's people, to grow in your faith, to give what God has given you and to go with the gospel, all for the glory of God alone.

Closing Song: "Lay Me Down."

New Members

Saturday – John Mutum

Sunday at 10:45 – Clint and Heather Cox (Caleb, Allison and Ryan)