

Acts 5:29 (William John Hocking, Editor) 211604

The Believer's Monthly Magazine: Volume 3, Obedience to God or Men: Which? (5:29)

THE question at issue between the Sanhedrin and the apostles was not founded upon mere differences of opinion in religious matters, as in the case of the Pharisees in their opposition to the Sadducees. In such instances, while there is the slight probability of one party being in the right, there is always the very likely possibility of both being in the wrong. The position of the apostles, however, was not one taken by them for the purpose of spreading their own particular views upon spiritual subjects. If their defiance of the Jewish council was only based upon a dogged determination to promulgate their own convictions of the resurrection of Jesus, we should find it a difficult task to justify their conduct. On the contrary, it was their simple effort to obey the divine commands to preach the gospel that brought them as prisoners before the tribunal of the high priest; and in their defense they enunciated a noble and beautiful principle, the abstract truth of which none can deny. They said, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). The effect of this unsophisticated remark was to show that the character of this struggle was altogether of a higher nature than that of the fierce bickerings and brawls not infrequent in those days, rising as they often did from discussion upon such 'trivial questions as to whether the hands should be washed above the elbow or only above the wrist before eating.

The apostles had received a definite command to preach the gospel; as Peter declared to Cornelius and those assembled in his house, "He [the Lord Jesus] commanded us to preach unto the people." And there were abundant tokens that this command was in no sense imaginary on the apostles' part. There was the gift of tongues at Pentecost, the multitude of conversions, the cripple healed with a word, the crowd of sick folk cured in the streets, these things all showed that the Lord was confirming the word of His servants by "signs following." They were all so many assurances of the Lord's presence with them in their work of testimony. So that by these means they were strengthened to resist the council when they "commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18).

Nothing but the direct command of the Lord could authorize them to disobey the rulers; because the "powers that be are ordained of God" (Rom. 13:1). Plainly however He Who placed the "higher powers" in their positions of responsibility to Himself could also set their authority aside when they failed, and arrayed themselves in opposition to the spread of His truth.

And this was the ground taken by the apostles. The Lord had spoken and confirmed His word to them, and none could dispute that they were bound to obey God rather than men. But we doubt whether all who have since sought the support of these words have had the reason to do so that the apostles had. The words do not mean as they have been thought to do. We ought to obey what we believe God has enjoined upon us, rather than men. This is quite a different position.