

From God or From Man

Easter 2; Series A
Acts 5:29-42

Part of the privilege of being the Pastor of a congregation situated in the midst of a neighborhood like Atonement Lutheran Church is that you often get to talk to the neighbors. Every Tuesday an AI Anon Group meets in our Library. Every other Wednesday evening the cub scouts have their meeting. Every Thursday morning a group called "A Better Life Together" that helps people with disabilities to live independently uses our kitchen and fellowship hall. In addition to this families with children will come up here to walk their dog or ride their bikes. I enjoy engaging them in conversation. Inevitably, at some point in the conversation, people point to our building and ask this question, "What kind of church is this?" After addressing this question many times I have come to realize what people are really asking. They want to know about Lutherans and the Lutheran Church. They want to know whether or not it is a Christian church. They want to know if we teach and preach from the Bible. Outsiders looking in and asking if what we do here "is from God or from man."

This is the very same question that we find observers of the early Christian Church asking in our first reading from Acts. We find the Apostles faithfully carrying out the command that Jesus gave them to "Go into all the nations making disciples, baptizing and teaching (Mt 28:19-20). As they continue his Ministry of teaching, preaching, and healing to advance the Kingdom of God in the world, many questions were being asked. Is this movement from God or from man? Are the rumors of Jesus of Nazareth, their leader, true? Is he from God or from man? How can we know for sure?

One such observer of the early Christian Church was the well-respected rabbi, Gamaliel. He was the teacher of the Apostle Paul (Acts 22:3). Even Jewish writings of the time of Jesus speak highly of Gamaliel. In our reading from the book of Acts we hear some advice that he gives to the High Priest and other Jewish leaders who are outsiders and looking in. They are observing the Apostles and the advancement of the Christian Church. Gamaliel gives advice in the form of two "if" clauses. First, he says that *if* this undertaking of the Apostles is from man then it will fail. Second, he says, *if* it is from God, then you will not be able to overthrow it. It will succeed in spite of the most violent efforts of resistance. And the opposition will even be found opposing God! Gamaliel presents us with two possible answers to the question of the origin of Jesus, Christianity, and the early Christian Church as it is advanced by the Apostles. Either it is from man or it is from God.

We know the true answer. We heard Thomas proclaim it this morning when he said to the risen Lord Jesus, "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28)! We also are resurrection people. We are now living in the after-glow of our celebration of the resurrection of Jesus last Sunday. We know that the leader of the Apostles and the Christian Church is God himself in the flesh. We know that he is risen, he lives, never to die again. He did battle not only with Jewish religious officials, and Romans, but he even fought against and overcame the great enemies that plague our hearts, minds, and infect our very actions: jealousy, anger, hatred, and pride. This Jesus even fought death itself and won the eternal victory for us. Jesus is God. The good news, gospel message of the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation that he brings is from God.

There is another answer to the question about the origins of Jesus, the message of the Gospel, and the early Christian Church. Many who observe Christians and the Christian Church conclude, "It is from man." This is certainly what the Jewish High Priest and council assumed in our reading. The High Priest and council that had these Apostles arrested and put in prison. They were convinced that Jesus was a dead heretic. They were convinced that the Apostles, his followers, were wrongly spreading his heretical teaching. They sought to undo this undertaking of men.

There are many onlookers and observers of the Christian Church today that look at Christians and the Christian Church and declare emphatically, "It is nothing but an undertaking of man!" And then they watch carefully and listen critically for evidence of failure. There are some who assume that the Christian Church and its message is nothing but a human undertaking because they don't even believe that there is a God in the first place. There are others who assume that the Christian Church and its message is a product of men because they look at and listen to people who call themselves Christians. When they do they see people unashamedly, unapologetically, and unrepentantly acting in ungodly, immoral ways. And so they slap on labels that accurately describe what they see. Labels like "hypocrite" and "judgmental." They hear the hateful, envious words that unthinkingly come out of their mouths. They hear the way they talk about and disparage other people, even other Christians. They see the questionable, self-centered lifestyle choices that they willingly make. They see and hear and then wait for this whole charade to fall apart in one ugly train wreck. Still there are others who declare the church is nothing but a human undertaking because they have been deeply, personally hurt by the church and her members, maybe even by you and me. Yes, outsiders look in at Christians and the Christian Church and see nothing but the undertakings of men.

We might add a third possible answer to Gamaliel's two possibilities. When observers and onlookers look at Jesus and the Christian Church, could it be that what they are observing is the true, perfect God working out his perfect plans and purposes through imperfect people? Could it be that the plan and undertaking of God's plan of salvation is from God *through* men?

After all, this is how God has always done his work. He undertakes his plan of salvation through men and women and within human History. He first spoke his plan to redeem a broken, fallen creation to the very man and woman that betrayed his trust and doubted his goodness. He continued to work out his plans and purposes through a man named David that he claimed to be after his own heart even as that man lured a woman to be unfaithful to her marital vow and sought to cover up this act of sexual immorality through an act of murder. Through a well-known prostitute named Rahab God worked to keep his promise to give to his people a land to live in. God worked out his plans and purposes of salvation through a fisherman named Peter who would later deny Jesus and a zealous Jew named Saul who would hunt down Christians and persecute them like a ravenous dog. All of God's work is done from him and, at the same time, through sinful, struggling-to-be-faithful people. His perfect plan worked out through our imperfect plans.

From God and through the faithful God-man Jesus Christ God worked out his plan of salvation. He took on all the hurtful, hateful, vindictive, jealousy-filled plans of men to squash and defeat it. And at first glance almost all who observed the culminating work, the magnum opus of God's salvation plan, declared emphatically, "From man!" It looked as though it was a colossal failure. But you and I know that appearances can be deceiving. Three days later it was undeniable that a cross and a death of crucifixion was God's undertaking. God, the Father raised Jesus from the dead according to the

perfect plan and purpose of God. It was perfectly clear on that first resurrection Sunday that this leader of what started out as an apparent Jewish sect, was no ordinary man. It could not and never will be able to be overthrown. “But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”

So now God continues his salvation work through men and women—the imperfect works-in-progress that we are. When God put his name on you in the waters of Holy Baptism he joined you to his plan and purposes of salvation. The purification of sins that Jesus purchased on the cross is now given to you as you are washed and purified in the waters of Baptism. The resurrection from the dead that Jesus accomplished on that first Easter Sunday is now given to you as your old self so filled with thoughts and desires of jealousy, hatred, anger, lust, and sin is drowned and a new-self rises. A new self that has the desire of God’s Spirit to join his greater purposes and plans in this world. We know the true answer. You and I are from God.

So when observers and onlookers look at us, what will they conclude? When they look at our works and plans will they conclude, from God or from man? How will they know?

Others will be looking to see if you are “from God or from man.” They will be looking to see if our congregation is “from God or from man.” After our Worship service today we will have an opportunity to consider our congregation’s plans for the future. We will consider a strategic plan that seeks to do exactly what the Apostles did in the early Church as we heard in our reading from Acts. At the end of our reading we learn that “every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (Acts 5:42). As a Christian congregation this is what we are about. Our well-intentioned but so often imperfect plans and purposes are joined to the perfect plan and purpose of our Lord to spread his kingdom and good news of salvation. Others will question our work. They will question our intentions. They will be testing to see if we are from God or from man. All the while, through our plans and purposes, and through our words of forgiveness and deeds of love, our Lord is leading us. From house to house our risen Lord redeems our plans and purposes and joins them to his perfect plan. For we are of God and because of that nothing is able to overthrow or overcome us. Amen.