

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

“Inside and Out”

Acts 4: 5-22

May 7, 2006

At DaySpring we talk a lot about The Tradition with a capital T. I guess it's a word that can mean a number of things... depending on who's using the word, but let me tell you what I mean by it when I use it. When I say, The Tradition, I'm using it to refer to one of three things.

First... there's the Apostolic Tradition – The teachings of those who were with Jesus that have been preserved for us in scripture. So... when you hear The Tradition, I might mean that... the sermon that the Apostles were preaching.

Or... I might mean by The Tradition – The Teachings of the Early Church Fathers... those theologians and pastors who lived and taught and wrote, in the first five or so centuries of our history. Folks like Gregory of Nyssa or Augustine or Maximus the Confessor... I might mean that, when I say “The Tradition”... the doctrines the church came to articulate and profess together.

Or I might mean The Spiritual Tradition... Those Saints, the Desert Mothers and Fathers who learned about and taught about the spiritual path to transformation... I might mean by Tradition, the spiritual wisdom handed down to us about knowing God.

However it's used, it's all real important here at DaySpring. We like to say we're a Baptist Church, centered in The Tradition... anchored there. We're coming to appreciate the depth of faith that can be ours when we're willing to be submissive to what has come before us... Not traditionalism, what someone called “the dead faith of the living” but The Tradition, “the living faith of the dead.”

It's a big deal around here... in case you haven't noticed.

And the more I live in it and think through it, the more important it seems... particularly for new Christians and for children. It's like a safe container that we offer. And it serves as a way to understand the faith and it helps us know how to practice the faith... and how to pass it on.

It gives structure to our thinking...

Boundaries to our living...

Depth to our praying...

You've heard me say this kind of thing along the way, but it really is nearly impossible to have a healthy faith apart from a Tradition. You have to have the structure. There has to be a confessional community and a consensus that everyone believes. ... Some sense of certainty to have confidence in.

People who knew me in my twenties would be shocked to hear me say I suspect... but this kind of conservative home base is what we all need... especially early on.

We need law... and doctrine...

Authority and boundary.

And form.

You can't start “formless.” You have to have a form... Hardware for the Divine Program... if you will. Something to hold and house it... You have to have a temple.

But here's the thing... In our text today... and in fact throughout the first 8 chapters of Acts and almost all through the gospels... this Jesus movement is colliding with the consensus.

It's running head on into the temple.

It seems to be in conflict with... The Tradition.

Spirit and form are in a battle.

And it's pretty intense here in chapter four of Acts. Last week we remembered the incident that set it all off. Peter and John were going to the temple to pray (following the custom and form) and a lame man reaches

out to them and they reach back. And this guy who had been crippled all his life... for forty years... gets up and walks.

It's just one of those miraculous moments that seem to be commonplace in the early days of the church. The Spirit that was so present and condensed in Jesus was now pouring through his followers and things were sort of wild.

Picture the Spirit as a river flowing into life from the source... the headwaters of God's heart. Sometimes the river is wide and meanders like the Brazos and sometimes the channel narrows and it becomes a powerful force... There was a torrent of Spirit in the incarnation and rapids in the early church.

There was a power available and moving through them.

And on that day, a guy got healed down at the temple.

And everyone was so used to him sitting and begging that when they saw him walking it was big, big news. Everybody heard he was healed and everybody heard who had done it. It was those followers of Jesus and now everyone wanted to hear what they had to say... and lots of folks were signing onto and up with this unorthodox movement.

So... the folks down at the Temple called a meeting. And listen to this line-up. **“Rulers and elders and teachers of the law... and the high priest and his family... talk about your heavy hitters... And they're in the Temple... in Jerusalem.”**

They're all there... keepers of the consensus.

Stewards of the Tradition.

Guardians of what is true.

And in your minds, please take those black hats off them. You'd love them. These are the folks that hold things together... model citizens... most of them, good-hearted people who care about society. All of them have “family values.”

You'd be excited if anyone of them joined your church.

Well, all of them get together to investigate what is going on... because that's their job and their roll... to take care of the institution. And again, no Darth Vader music please... these are good people trying to do the right thing.

But... but they are nervous, huh?

The crowds are growing out in the temple court... and they're gathered around some fishermen from Galilee with no credentials... with no training... loose connections to the tradition at best.... And... they're associates with someone executed for blasphemy... A known traitor.

On top of that... they may have some sort of magical powers that they're wielding about... and certainly seem to influence folks who are naive and gullible and vulnerable.

You'd want someone to investigate too. ... because it matters and I mean that. Charismatic leaders outside of and not submissive to any Tradition or any larger community, are often unhealthy, right? It can't just be you and God and your opinions... with a bunch of immature folks who believe in you... that's dangerous and here in Waco, we've known that and know that in very real ways.

It's dangerous to people and to the institution, which is so important to the people... So, they arrested Peter and John, called a meeting, and brought the disciples in for a hearing.

“How in the world...

by what power or name...

did you pull this off?”

They give their patented apostolic answer... **“It's Jesus, whom you crucified and God raised... and by whose name we're saved.”** It's the answer that's on most every page of Acts.

So... the folks down at the temple have a dilemma, don't they? These guys have done a good thing. Peter even pointed that out... **"Um... are we on trial here... let me get this straight... are we on trial for being kind?"**

There was kindness...

There was a miracle...

It happened beyond the bounds of the temple.

And you can just feel their fear and frustration. **"This isn't just going to go away... what are we going to do?"** When in doubt, put the "quietus" on it.

So they call them back in.... **"Okay, we've talked about this and you cannot speak in his name anymore... your preaching days are over."**

I love their response... Peter and John seem very humble and understanding really... as they say, **"You have to decide for yourselves what you're going to do, but we really have no choice... we must obey God."**

Well... as Jesus said one night to Nicodemus... the Spirit will blow where it will... It just will. And the work of God is going to happen when and where God wants it to... It just is. And those of us who love and appreciate and value the Temple, sometimes, don't know what to do with that... just like these folks didn't.

And by the way, please be careful assuming that you would have been on the side of what God was doing in this moment. The history of the church... is in many ways about those down at the Temple defending the Tradition... This is how a course in Church History is often organized. This is how the story is told. And often, good people, in retrospect are on the wrong side.

Defending what is... and what seems essential. And not being able to tell the difference between the "faith" that we're defending... and culture and our own big egos... and small minds.

Would you have voted back in the '50s to let African Americans into your church? Are you sure you would have? The pastor at First Austin told me that when Carlyle Marney started preaching about it back in those days, 2000 people left.

Would you have resisted the inquisition?

Protested the crusades?

I wonder what our great, great, grandchildren will think of what we're deciding and defending now?

We have this temple that we love and that is a blessing and even a necessity... but then there is the Spirit and the Spirit doing what it's going to do. And it will absolutely work beyond the walls of the temple.

Anne Lamott has this great line... **"It's funny where we look for salvation, and where we actually find it."** (Traveling Mercies) We most always look down at the temple... insiders look inside. That's where we look. And God is there... in that container... but never contained by it.

The gospel is, in many ways, a story about what God is going to do beyond the walls of the temple. And all the way through Acts, even the followers of Jesus are wrestling with that...

Who are we really going to let in? And what are we going to do now with this law...

And Paul is insistent... Even as he tells folks what's true and how important it is to guard it. He tells them, **"The law is death."**

It's not saving. The temple... The Tradition... The containers that are so important do not make you whole. They are only forms for the Reality. God is what makes you whole. It is the Spirit that gives life.

Not the Church... not DaySpring.

Not Sacred and Simple.

Not the Church Fathers.

And it isn't doctrine...

And it's never a community...

Form will always pass away... forms don't give life. But... neither does formlessness, by the way. Rules or lack of them... temples or lack of them, isn't the real debate.

I know some of you are thinking, **"Where's he going?"**

Some of you are nervous inside, you just are... some are applauding, you just are. That's because some of us are gifted and called to be stewards of the consensus. Others of us are called to be "flies in the ointment."

It's like that everywhere...some drawn to the center and some to the edge.

I think what I'm trying to get to is... this isn't easy. In many ways, if we're healthy, we always live with one foot inside the temple and one foot outside it. We revere the past and sit humbly before it... We look for the Spirit blowing whenever and wherever it is.

We affirm what the Tradition teaches.

We bless the truth wherever it shows up.

We aren't afraid of what's been or what will be.

How do we live there, with one foot in the temple and one outside of it? How do we do that as a church that has built a temple?

And how do you do that as someone who has structured life? For many of you, that's where the rubber meets your road. You have your "law" and your "containers." You've put your life together... predictably together ... made a temple of it. And life or the Spirit may blow it down one day... it will probably happen, just FYI. Your structures aren't eternal.

They never are... they lead us to the eternal and then... often, they stand in the way of it.

I love the little line in the story, **"They took note that these men had been with Jesus."** Maybe the only way to sit beneath Tradition, and look beyond it as well, has to do with whether or not we have been with Jesus.

And it is clear... watching the disciples in Acts... that they had.

So courageous...

so centered...

so like Jesus.

Whether you are defending the faith or fighting the status quo... if you are doing it in the name of Jesus and don't look like Jesus while you're at it... something's wrong.

If it's about fear, it's probably not of the Spirit.

If it's driven by anger...

I doubt it's a God thing.

The people inside the temple, if they haven't been with Jesus, are generally controlled by fear... those outside by anger. It can't be like that if you've been with Jesus at all...

And if it's about you and status and ego... inside or outside of the temple... it's probably evil.

If it's surrounded by love and by peace within you... that's another thing.

A page or so later, as the story continues, this guy named Gamaliel... a Pharisee... speaks up. And he's so mature and calm... so wise. I suspect lots and lots of gray in his hair and lots and lots of God in his heart.

"You know, folks," he says to those ready to put them to death, **"If this thing isn't of God... it'll fade away. We've seen savior's come and go. But if it is of God... you don't want to be standing in the way... do you?"**

Gamaliel's our guy. ... Who holds both sides of the mystery within himself. In the name of love, he bears it... he holds it within himself.

And we pray that we might do the same. Having really been with Jesus, we pray we might do the same.

Copyright, Burt L. Burlison, 2006