



*A Bible college professor looks at the challenge of teaching contemporary students (Acts 5:11-14)*

## Clear-Cut Ambiguity

**W**hen Ananias and Sapphira dropped dead in Acts 5, Luke says, “Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things. Now many signs and wonders were done among the people through the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico. *None of the rest dared to join them, but the people held them in high esteem. Yet more than ever believers were added to the Lord, great numbers of both men and women*” (vv. 11-14, *New Revised Standard Version*, emphasis mine).

How can it be that, in virtually one breath, “None of the rest dared join them,” yet “The people held them in high esteem,” and “More than ever believers were added to the Lord”? Just what is Luke trying to tell us?

It’s a case of clear-cut ambiguity, a mystery-obscure as darkness, plain as day—this coming to Jesus, this thing we call conversion. On the surface it would seem that Acts 5 is a text fit for our times, times when we’re not sure just what a Christian really looks like. If polls are to be trusted, plenty of folks think they are born again but never set foot in a church building. Most Americans, we’re told, believe in God, but many of these same “believers” have nothing to do with religion. They enjoy books about angels and demons, listen to chant, and read the Dalai Lama, but that’s “spirituality,” not religion. They own Bibles, but very few, maybe 10 percent, read them with any kind of regularity.

I seriously doubt, however, that anyone had trouble identifying a Christian in first-century Jerusalem. Luke seems to be saying, “Back in the days when the apostles stormed Jerusalem, everyone was scared to death. They were all together at the great revival meeting. Outsiders didn’t dare join them—there was so much to lose—but lots of folks thought them decent and interesting, worthy of inquiry. Oh yes, and by the way, the church was growing by leaps and bounds.”

### “The Rest”

If I could draw you a picture, I’d use three concentric circles to represent the groups present in this passage. In the outside circle are the “rest” (v. 13), those who dare not join, or even “associate with” (*kollao* can certainly mean this), the believers. These are the strong and proud ones, the ones deeply entrenched in their own worlds of settled relationships and confusing networks of greed and protection. These are the priests and teachers of the law, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the Sanhedrin, those set against the gospel. Their understanding of faith and God and the universe is carefully formulated but dreadfully mistaken.

It might interest you that on very rare occasions I come across a student in Bible college whose heart is hard, who comes here for reasons that are not at all clear, a student who is not teachable. Such students do not often last in this setting. At heart they don’t belong here. They already know the answers, and their answers do not come from Scripture.

### “The People”

Then there are the “people” (vv. 12, 13), the great Jerusalem crowds, in a second concentric circle. These folks—the masses of miserable, helpless, sick, afflicted, and conflicted people—are attracted to the miracles and press in on the apostles for help. They’ll take what they can from this movement of God, but they aren’t sure they’re ready to leave establishment in order to join the church permanently.

Among them are the interested and inquiring, the seekers, the curious, and the opportunists. And we get some of them here in Bible college. They come searching for meaning and direction, hurting, confused, not fully converted, with wounds open to threat of infection. But they are receptive to the promise of healing. Some are not very good students, but they’d go for a Mountain Dew with a mentor in a heartbeat. Point is, they come. They’re

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here on Solomon's porch, watching, listening, soaking up all they can, deciding for or against this thing we call Christianity, examining us to see if there is anything to it.

### "The Believers"

But it is the committed believers who lie at the heart of these three concentric circles. These are the ones who sold their possessions, lost their jobs to the Jewish establishment, were kicked out of the synagogue, prayed for the release of the apostles, and watched hypocrites die before their very eyes. They paid a high price to be filled with the Spirit, but they were the real thing, authentic and genuine. Exactly what millennials crave. Leaders.

Today, they are still selling their homes, uprooting their loved ones, driving old cars, preaching in little country churches, putting their families to work to scratch out a living. They are the ones who endure ridicule when asked why, as promising juniors and seniors, they would forgo the challenge of the university. And they are among those who, with great difficulty in learning, come to college anyway, not because it is easy—they fight for C's—but because it is right. They are fighting for God.

In the classroom at Lincoln Christian College, I often find myself worshiping with such disciples, as if in a church somewhere. It's a beautiful thing. We're together, in tune, "one in heart and mind," as Luke might say. Then there are days when it feels like I'm on Mars Hill and people are sneering. Maybe they broke up last night, or lost a close friend, or discovered the money ran out. I can't always tell. So I ask questions, pray, and try not to worry about it.

### Putting a Face on It

What I do know is this: this is some complex educational environment I live and minister in. Allow me to put a face on it.

In one of my classes there is a young woman who is both brilliant and quiet, radiant and searching, as well as a fellow who's warm but not always as tactful as we might hope. Another student is quite committed to Christ but sometimes questions the way we've chosen to do things around here (often, with good reason). He's frequently up-front, and yet, like so many of us, I think he shoulders deep pain.

Then there is a woman who graces us with lessons on commitment. She alternately grimaces and smiles—it is a hard course—as she faces unending work: an internship, three classes, houses to clean, a professor to grade papers for, and waitressing. She is very bright, with a servant's heart, and is making straight A's.

Or picture this hard-working student, ever confident but occasionally, like others, clueless. Or this dear friend, hoping to teach upon graduation, yet struggling daily to make it past a lingering depression (a fairly common situation among today's students) and into the classroom. I am especially drawn to one student whom I can only describe as a soul mate (I continually look in the mirror as I face my students), who has powerful feelings of inadequacy, but who consistently makes some of the highest grades in all of my classes. Another student, who is almost always late, comes in perky from way too much coffee during his commute. This man constantly points out relevant application from the text, practicing his good preaching on us all. He's on fire, yet at one point I really wondered whether he would make it.

Finally, consider this tough and tender youth minister, who once cracked open his amazing story in my office after a late-night chapel. He shares the saga of a troubled kid he's ministering to, and it's all he can do to keep from crying the whole time. It means so much to him, to all of us in the class.

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in theological terms. He says, speaking of Jesus, "For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth . . . and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16, 17, *New International Version*). Jesus, whom John calls "the Word," created the universe in an orderly fashion and holds the cosmos together in an orderly way. Therefore, science can study the universe with predictability.

### Education

Christianity has fostered education since Jesus said, "Make disciples." Renowned American universities had their infancy in Christian cradles: Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, Princeton, even flagship state universities such as Kentucky, Tennessee, and, believe it or not, California at Berkeley. The same can be said of Oxford, Cambridge, Paris, Heidelberg, and Basel in Europe.

Public schools came from the same cradle. "As best can be determined, the concept [public schools] first came from the mind of Martin Luther. He believed the country needed public schools, supported by funding from the public treasury."<sup>13</sup> Philipp Melancthon, Luther's principle coworker, helped further Luther's educational desires when he successfully persuaded the civic authorities to implement the first public school system in Germany.

Luther insisted on compulsory education. He wrote, "I hold that it is the duty of the temporal authority to compel its subjects to keep the children in school."<sup>14</sup> The state was to pass laws to enforce it.<sup>15</sup>

Calvin promoted his Geneva Plan. It included "a system of elementary education in the vernacular for all, including reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, and religion, and the establishment of secondary schools for the purpose of training citizens for civic and ecclesiastical leadership."<sup>16</sup>

D. James Kennedy observes, "Every school you see . . . public or private, religious or secular . . . is a visible reminder of the religion of Jesus Christ. So is every college and university."<sup>17</sup>

The multiculturalist should take Christianity down from the shelf, study its accomplishments, and say, "Thank you." Even the byproducts of the Christian faith are a blessing. Jesus said, ". . . believe in what I have done, even if you don't believe me. Then you will realize that the Father is in me, and I am in the Father" (John 10:38, *New Living Translation*).

<sup>1</sup>Thomas Sowell, "A Little Bit of This and a Little Bit of That," *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Sowell, "Elites Practice One-Upmanship, Others Practice Survival," *pp. cit.*

<sup>3</sup>Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 9.

<sup>4</sup>Schmidt, *op. cit.*, 8.

<sup>5</sup>Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), vii.

<sup>6</sup>Dinesh D'Sousa, *What's So Great About America?* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2002), 55.

<sup>7</sup>Wilfred E. Garrison, *A Protestant Manifesto* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1957), 126, 127.

<sup>8</sup>Schmidt, *op. cit.*, 215.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: MacMillan, 1926), 18.

<sup>11</sup>Schmidt, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup>Martin Luther, "To the Councilmen . . ." in *Luther's Works*, 45:350.

<sup>14</sup>Schmidt, *op. cit.*, 179.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup>Schmidt, *op. cit.*, 177.

<sup>17</sup>D. James Kennedy, *What If Jesus Had Never Been Born?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 191.

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# Ambiguity

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It's astonishing to think that these are students in just one relatively small class, a class as unique as any other.

Who are these people? They're folks like you and me, busy discarding an old identity outside of Christ. Some of them are in a period of wilderness wandering and confusion, desiring not only to jettison the chaos of our times for the fullness of life in Jesus, but desperately wanting to give this faith away. They're people who've grown up with the exploding space shuttle Challenger as a defining moment in their corporate lives, to be followed by people whose defining moment will be the school shootings in Littleton, Colorado, to be followed by the 9-11 generation. It's not getting any easier. The greatest needs of these good students are for communal caring and personal attachment, not merely to a great cause—and we have the greatest—but to a great person. And we have that too. Or, better, He has us.

Yes, He has us, gathered here on Solomon's porch, watching the Spirit at work healing people and exorcising old demons, listening to the voice of the apostles as it thunders from the text, praying and mulling over profound personal and relational transformations we witness in the lives of members of our campus community every day. Waiting to see when some of the seekers will cross the line from open inquiry to settled belief, the line from musing to ministry. Praising God for the solid nucleus of the faithful who've long since done so.

It's so exciting. Some days I step onto the "porch" and it's about all I can do just to hang on.