

"Fading?"

Text: Acts 5:29-42

1 Corinthians 1:2-3: "To those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Fading. Think about that word for a bit. Fading. The word itself is inherently nostalgic, reflective, melancholy, even slightly depressing or demoralizing. We typically only use the word when we describe the passing of something good, or vibrant, or beautiful. Flowers fade. Talents fade. Sunsets, tapestries, creativity all fade. So it is that the word has taken on the wistful flavor of gradually losing something good.

Not long ago I read an article boldly asserting: "*Christianity in America is fading.*" The article was written by a man who described himself as "*formerly a good Methodist but now a great atheist.*" In the article the author gave what he claimed was "statistical evidence" that a growing number of Americans are distancing themselves from their association with the Christian faith. While the "the good atheist" tried to convey neutrality and sympathy, it was abundantly clear that he believed a decline in Christianity was not only real, but inevitable and necessary.

Yet it remains forever true that "*saying something is so don't make it so.*" (Bad grammar, but true nonetheless.) So is it true that Christianity is fading? More on this in a bit. The greater question is "*Why even ask the question?*" Will a "yes" answer cause Christians to try harder to save souls? Probably just the opposite, which explains why an atheist would ask the question. The perception that Christianity is fading can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It plays to man's natural desire to move with the herd. It plants the seed that maybe it is no longer cool to be Christian, and that the in-crowd has evolved and moved on from "organized religion." What, in the end, does it matter to us if the "answer" is yes or no? You and I both know that a frightening percentage of those who identify as Christian today really have no idea what true Christianity is. Further, does it have any practical bearing on the Great Commission if 150 million Americans are unbelievers as opposed to 125 million? Either way, there will never be a shortage of work for Christians. More to the point this morning, whatever the national trend, you and I need to be concerned with *our* faith, *our* resolve, *our* commitment.

Our text for this morning – God's Word found recorded in the Fifth Chapter of the Book of Acts – offers divine encouragement and advice:

ESV Acts 5:29-42 *But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. ³⁰ The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. ³¹ God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. ³² And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." ³³ ¶ When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. ³⁴ But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law held in honor by all the people, stood up and gave orders to put the men outside for a little while. ³⁵ And he said to them, "Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. ³⁶ For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered. ³⁸ So in the present case I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!" So they took his advice, ⁴⁰ ¶ and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. ⁴² And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.*

These are the verbally inspired words of our God – the very words through which eternal life is both given and sustained. Mindful of the great value of these words from our God, so we petition that same God: "**Sanctify us** (that is, set us apart for holy purposes) **by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.**" Amen.

Whether or not Christianity is advancing or declining around the world is known only to God. A much more insightful (and verifiable) question is why Christianity – the only true religion and the one path to eternal life – is under growing attack worldwide? According to a variety of news reports, persecution of Christians is not only increasing dramatically, it has spread to every corner of the globe. Light and truth are clearly under attack by the proponents of falsehood and darkness. Why is that?

First of all, whether or not true Christianity is fading we will address in a bit, but one thing we know: the world itself certainly is. This earth's demise is certain. Its condition is terminal. God has declared it. First from Isaiah 34:2,4: ***For the LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction, has given them over for slaughter. ⁴ All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree.*** From the same man who spoke to us in our text for this morning, the Apostle Peter: ***But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.*** 2 Peter 3:10 Finally from the Apostle John: ***Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world--the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions--is not from the Father but is from the world. ¹⁷ And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.*** 1 John 2:15-17

For whatever reason, throughout history God has allowed darkness and falsehood to rise and fall, and he alone knows why. Nothing new here. In our text for this morning, Gamaliel, the man who also instructed the Apostle Paul when he was still a Pharisee named Saul, spoke of the phenomenon: ***"Men of Israel, take care what you are about to do with these men. ³⁶ For before these days Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing. ³⁷ After him Judas the Galilean rose up in the days of the census and drew away some of the people after him. He too perished, and all who followed him were scattered."*** You and I could add to Gamaliel's list the names of men from our own times. No doubt every generation could compile their own list. All have two things in common: 1) their popularity is built around (founded upon) a man, not on God, and, 2) because of that though they may rise, they inexorably, unavoidably, fade.

Gamaliel offered a bit of counsel in our text that still holds great value today: ***"... let these men alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail; ³⁹ but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!"***

There is wisdom here on a number of different levels. First is the demonstrable truth that just as false prophets will continue to rise up, so also they will continue to fade away. It has always been so and will always be so. God can and does accomplish his good pleasure through them, but the false teachers themselves, in the end, self-destruct. They fade away as did the men Gamaliel mentioned in our text.

The greater truth or value here for those of us living as Christians in our 21st Century world is learning just how we can avoid being carried away by a passing fad or novelty, or by a demonic force of darkness, and how we can avoid buying into the nonsense that Christianity itself is somehow fading.

Already in the opening words of our text, Peter established a basic truth that will serve us well all the days of our lives: ***"We must obey God rather than men."*** While he spoke these words in response to those Jewish religious leaders who had commanded the disciples to stop teaching others about Jesus, these words are really foundational to everything that the Christian thinks, says, or does. The basis of life itself is not so much about our relationship with other human beings as it is about our relationship with our God. To put it another way, if our relationship with our God is wrong, nothing else in life can be truly right – no matter how cleverly outward circumstances might mask that truth.

Against this truth, this backdrop, consider all the different pastimes and pursuits that occupy man's time and talent and it all takes on a different perspective, a different meaning or character. Jesus' disciples finally got it after his death and resurrection, didn't they? They were different men, especially after they were filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. They no longer argued with each other about who was to be the greatest when Jesus established what they thought would be an earthly kingdom. They no longer made special requests for positions of authority that would assure them of the praise and envy of men. Suddenly they recognized "privilege" where they would never have thought to look for it. You heard it in our text, but did you actually process the words when

you heard them? The words are truly stunning, not only in the truth that they convey but in the profound change of heart that they indicate: from verse 41 of our text: **"Then they (the disciples) left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name."**

Understand the amazing transformation that had taken place in these men. By the events of Good Friday, Easter Sunday, and Pentecost these men had been transformed into something truly different, truly special. Their lives were no longer all about what was in it for them but what was in it for their Lord, and for those who needed to come to know their Savior. While they certainly didn't search out pain and persecution, they learned to recognize such things as that which they truly were and are: examples of divine privilege and honor as they sought to **"serve God rather than men."**

It's important that we recognize not only the nature of such things, but just how and why Christians can and should expect nothing less. God does not instruct his children to go out and seek to inflame or irritate unbelievers, he has commanded us to obey – thus the **"We must obey God rather than men."** The reality of life in a sinful world is that obedience to God will often result in difficult times of one sort or another. Our Savior is the most obvious example – the only sinless man, who nevertheless suffered as no other.

Evil is certainly on the rise in our day. Where Satan first tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden with: **"You will be like God, knowing good and evil,"** now he is seeking to seduce all mankind with an even bolder variation on that theme: **"You yourself will be God, determining good and evil."** The sheer prideful blasphemy and arrogance is breathtaking in its audacity.

If then the basis of our lives is boiled down to Peter's simple statement that **"we must obey God rather than men,"** what then is it that God has called us to do? Our text did not leave us without an answer: **"And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."** You and I are called to be teachers. More than that, we are *privileged* to be teachers in the service of our God.

So we return to our basic question: *Is Christianity fading or passing away?* Clearly not. That religion, that faith, God's Church, will never fade or fail – because it is ordained, protected, and blessed by God himself. Remember this exchange between Jesus and his disciples? ^{ESV} **(Matthew 16:15-18) Jesus said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.**

Notice, in particular, who here takes ownership not just of the Church itself, but of the building and preserving of that Church. All belongs to Jesus himself. It is *his* Church and *his* work. Society's attitude toward the Christ and his Church may rise and fall, strengthen and weaken, but the Church and the Christian faith is built on the Rock, Jesus Christ, and our Savior's Church will remain until he returns. We have his Word on that.

What is left to you and me is to recognize what his first disciples came to realize – the kingdom, the power, and the glory are God's, but he has chosen us to share in that work. That work begins in the home. There our comfort, joy, and dedication can only fade if we allow it to. There we are to say with Joshua: **"As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."**

The work doesn't end there, of course, for we have also been called to share our faith with those around us, but that is where it must begin – with the individual and in every home. Will it be easy? Most likely not. Is it "worth it"? Nothing on earth could ever be more important.

So, is Christianity fading? Not God's Church. Never. But is the number of Christians declining? Wrong question. The right question is this: *Am I doing what my Savior asked me to do, in my own life, in my own house, and among those with whom I interact?* In the peace of forgiveness, be bold in the Lord. Amen.