

The Gospel: Good News That Disturbs

Acts 4:1-22

“Feeling troubled? Sad? Overwhelmed? Try Jesus.”

These all-too-common kinds of appeals for Christianity are completely *unlike* the apostles’ presentation of the Christian message in the book of Acts. In Acts 4, Peter did not present Christianity as a religious option that would help the priests cope with their stressed lives or raise the Sadducees’ standard of living. Rather, he proclaimed a message that made them “greatly annoyed,” that is, “greatly disturbed” (4:2, see the *New International Version*). Even though not everyone responded as the religious leaders did, it is true to say that the Christian message is intrinsically a message that disturbs.

The response of the religious leaders, along with Peter’s brief speech (4:8-12), shows us three reasons the Christian message is so disturbing. But in examining these reasons, we will also discover why it must be disturbing to be any good at all.

1. The Christian message is disturbing because of the facts it reveals (4:9-10).

We are not disturbed by things we can easily ignore. However, as the religious leaders admitted, they were confronted by undeniable facts (Acts 4:16). In his speech Peter was concerned to point out two such facts: the healing of the lame man and the resurrection of Christ (4:9-10). We learn later in the passage that they could not ignore the powerful testimony of the apostles (4:13). Observe these unignorable facts of the Christian message:

- a. *The claims of Jesus are unignorable* (see Luke 14:26; John 8:48-59; John 14:6; Mark 14:61). Rather than being self-effacing and directing people’s attention away from himself, Jesus was always directing people’s attention *to* himself and making radical claims about his origin and identity.
- b. *The character of Jesus is unignorable* (4:10). Besides these radical statements about himself, Jesus demonstrated radical selflessness. He mingled with the outcasts of society—prostitutes, tax collectors. In a highly fragmented, racist, and sexist society, he had no racial or gender bias (see John 4). He served his followers in ways that no one else was willing to do (John 13).
- c. *The resurrection of Jesus is unignorable* (4:10-11). At the heart of the Christian message is the fact of the resurrection, which even contemporary inhabitants of Jerusalem made no effort to refute—because they could not (see Matthew 28:13).
- d. *The testimony of Jesus’ followers is unignorable* (4:13-14). The religious leaders had to admit that the apostles bore the stamp of Jesus’ words and character, making it impossible to pin any wrongdoing on them.

2. The Christian message is disturbing because of the judgment it renders (4:10-11).

Peter had the courage to point out that the religious leaders had wrongly crucified Jesus. Whereas the leaders thought Jesus was a blasphemer, the resurrection revealed Jesus to be the Messiah. Peter drew upon Old Testament prophecies to illustrate their guilt: Jesus was like a cornerstone of a building, which the builders failed to recognize as such (Acts 4:11). Peter was not concerned to accuse them of murder as such, but of unbelief (see Acts 3:17). Because they were wrong about Jesus, they were wrong all over.

The same disturbing reality is an essential part of the Christian message, which reveals that all humans stand guilty before a righteous God who must punish sin (see John 3:18; Romans 1:18). Many Westerners object to the idea that God could be wrathful, but our very notions of fairness, justice, and mercy (without which civilized society falls apart) depend on the idea of such a Being. The pertinent issue is not whether we like it, but whether it is true.

Even Christians often lose sight of the fact that at the heart of the Christian message is the reality that we are utterly condemned apart from God's grace. We must constantly bear in mind, however, that the Christian message is not good *unless* it first tells us the truth about our condition. This is the consistent testimony of Christians throughout history:

- The Apostle Paul: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Timothy 1:15).
- John Newton: "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!"
- Elizabeth Cecilia Clephane: "From my stricken heart with tears / two wonders I confess, / the wonders of redeeming love / and my unworthiness."

3. The Christian message is disturbing because of the choice it requires (4:12).

Peter clearly proclaims the exclusivity of the way to salvation: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." As with the idea of a God who is utterly opposed to evil, people have a hard time accepting that Christianity is *the* only way to salvation. But the elements of the Christian proclamation stand or fall together. If Jesus really rose from the dead, then his claim "I am *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life" (John 14:6) must be true as well. The exclusivity of Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation follows from the fact of the resurrection.

But how does this *not* lead to a sense of superiority or even fighting? Because the Christian faith invites people to accept the most humbling reality: that they are so flawed that no amount of religious practices could ever elevate them to God. Instead, they needed the Son of God to die for their sins in order to make them right with God.

We tend to gloss over the disturbing nature of the gospel, forgetting that it is not good unless it does disturb. No one accepts an invasive surgery unless they have first been convinced of the devastating diagnosis. No one comes to trust in Christ unless they were first "cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37).

Application Questions:

1. How does Peter's presentation of the Christian message in Acts 4 differ from the gospel appeals many people are used to hearing? How do you feel about the Christian message being intrinsically disturbing?
2. The Apostle Paul also speaks of the disturbing nature of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. In this passage, what marks the difference between those who find the gospel to be scandalous and foolish, and those who find it to be the power and wisdom of God?
3. Luke notes that the religious leaders "recognized that [Peter and John] had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13). Clearly, there was something about their sincerity and courage that reminded them of Jesus. Consider whether others would observe, in your words and actions, something distinctively Christlike about you. Although you cannot physically "be with Jesus" what practical steps can you take to nurture such a character?
4. Why is it true that the gospel cannot be good *unless* it does disturb us?
5. The gospel teaches us the depth of our sinfulness, but also the heights of God's love and forgiveness. Why is it important to bear both of these in mind? What effect does this have on how we view ourselves? on how we treat others?