

At first glance, this beautiful garden looks like it is set in a very lush and nurturing setting. This is the “Prince’s Garden” built around 1850 for Mohammad Hassan Khan Sardari Iravani on 5.5 hectares.

But pull the camera back to reveal the setting of Mahan, Iran where the garden is located, and you discover that it flourishes in a harsh context. This garden is now a UNESCO World Heritage site.

We often see the Good News of Jesus Christ “*bearing fruit and growing*” (Colossians 1:6) even in the face of much “push back”. Imagine a rugby game in which one team is trying to move the ball down the field, but they face physical “push back”. In *Missionary Ideals* (IVP, 1969, 23), Thomas Walker writes,

From the very first, strenuous opposition was offered to the progress of the gospel. The ground was stoutly contested step by step. Motives of self-interest, racial pride, political prejudice and pagan zeal influenced men in their antagonism to the truth. But behind all these we recognize the great protagonist, Satan. Just as, on the one hand, we see all through the history the Holy Spirit directing, controlling and crowning with success the labours of His servants, so on the other hand, we see the archenemy busily at work, trying to hinder and thwart in every way their earnest efforts.

Proposition

As we journey through the book of Acts, we are trying to trace the way the Gospel advanced “down the field” of the first Century. As the Good News rippled out from Jerusalem...to Judea and Samaria...and finally to the ends of the earth we have much to learn for the way we share the Gospel today. Today we are looking at Acts 4 which is set in the first phase of Acts...**The Church Established (Acts 1-7)**.

In Acts 2 we considered the **wait, witness, win, repeat** pattern. Last week we encountered the power of **Jesus’ name**. Today we see another ripple of the Gospel and the “push back” Peter and John faced.

Major Ian Thomas, founder of Torchbearers schools, stated that the early Church was “*incorrigibly happy, utterly unafraid, and nearly always in trouble*.” (PBI conference sermon, 1984) In **verses 1-12** we read about one example of such trouble. This story contains further fallout from the miracle which we examined in chapter 3 (see 4:9-10, 21-22). In this account there are **three positive results** which resulted from this occasion when the infant Church felt “push back”.

[A] Surprising boldness – vv. 13-22

The Jewish leadership was angry at the witness of Jesus’ resurrection among the people. Of course this would cause push back. They had rejected Jesus as Messiah. At the root of the problem was that Jesus had condemned “performance based religion” and called the people to repentance.

First, Luke recorded the “courage” or “boldness” or “confidence” (*παρρησιαν*) of Peter and John which surprised the religious rulers. In their minds, such boldness contradicted the social and educational standing of Peter and John – who clearly demonstrated that they were reflecting the life of Jesus (v.13b). Further, seeing the healed man, there was nothing the Jewish officials could say (v.14).

Their conclusion was not to acknowledge the power and authority of Jesus in this situation. They did not honor the Holy Spirit’s power. Instead, they forbade Peter and John to “*speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus*” (v.18b). In the fact of this, Peter and John declared that they could not stop witnessing to the truth of who Jesus is, what He taught, and the reality of His resurrection

Are we prepared to live boldly in the contradiction between our culture and the truth of Jesus Christ?

[B] Sincere readiness – vv. 23-31

What a testimony! When faced with push back, the early Church prayed for more boldness. There was a sincere and honest response. There is a good balance here between two realms of prayer.

- **Reactive prayer (vv. 24-28)** – honestly confessing confusion and struggle regarding opposition in light of God's eternal plan of redemption. This means leaning into the power that is in Jesus' name.

To pray in the name of Christ means to pray in the awareness that our prayers have no worthiness or efficacy apart from his atoning sacrifice and redemptive mediation. It means to appeal to the blood of Christ as the source of power for the life of prayer. It means to acknowledge our complete helplessness apart from his mediation and intercession. To pray in his name means that we recognize that our prayers cannot penetrate the tribunal of God unless they are presented to the Father by the Son, our one Savior and Redeemer. (Donald Bloesch quoted in **Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home**, Richard Foster, HarperOne, 1992, 194)

- **Proactive prayer (vv. 29-31)** – hearts that are ready and eager to be engaged in the way in which God will answer the prayer. This is not to suggest that the former is a passive prayer but this kind of praying is eagerly expectant of God's answer.

This is St Nikoli Church in Leipzig. In ***Finding God In Unexpected Places*** (Moorings, 1995, 134-135), Philip Yancy tells about amazing results when people gathered to pray proactively, with ready hearts.

Do we pray both reactively and proactively for God to work through us even when there is push back?

[C] Strategic oneness – vv. 32-37

In verse 31 we read that believers were “*of one heart and soul*”. What was the demonstration of such oneness. Was it merely theoretical? Or was it rather pragmatic? From these verses we see that it was a strategic effort to support the welfare of the Body of Christ in order to sustain Gospel witness. What was the result? Four factors point us in the direction of this expression of unity being strategic.

- **Practical care, not individualism – vv. 32b, 34-35**
- **Powerful witness, not escapism – v. 33a**
- **Plentiful grace, not humanism – v. 33b**
- **Prepared servants, not elitism – vv. 36-37**

Is our unity essentially theoretical? Organizational? Or does it result in a greater Gospel witness?

Conclusion – Digging Deeper

Israel is surrounded by hostile nations but their national air carrier, El-Al is considered one of the world's safest. In his book ***Predatory Thinking*** Dave Trott writes about flying with El-Al. He chatted with a very diligent baggage inspector, then said goodbye, but the inspector said, "No, I'll see you on the plane." Every El-Al baggage inspector is required to fly on the same plane as the luggage they just inspected. Therefore, no El-Al inspector does a mediocre job because they have to bet their life on it.

Are we just playing at the Gospel? Is it just something that sounds good, but when there is push back, we fall silent or inactive. Are we willing to stake our lives on it?