

# Speaking With Power

## Acts 4:1-12



Power can be a cruel master, for it is most often built upon fear. If we do not control it, it may control us. It has been said that “power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely.”<sup>1</sup> In light of that backdrop, we often have difficulty when we speak from positions of power and with others who hold positions of power. It is all too tempting to allow the vantage points of power to determine our course of action. How can we speak with power in the face of opposition? How can we speak with courage in the face of power structures that would inhibit our actions, words, or witness? How should faith respond to constraint and intimidation?

When Peter and John went to the Temple that day, they took the people by surprise. Likely they were surprised as well. They were heading to the Temple to pray, but opportunity to minister altered their plans and actions. A lame man begged alms of them, but they responded in an unexpected manner. Contrary to the norm, they looked at the man and asked him to look at them. It would have been more natural to have avoided contact with a beggar. They looked at him, granting him respect as one loved by God. Rather than give him money, however, they shocked him with their response. “I have no silver or gold to give you, but I give you what I do have. Under the authority of Jesus Christ, walk!”

Who would have expected such a response? How would you have reacted if you had been the one who was lame? Would you have sat there dumbfounded? Would you have looked at Peter and John as though they needed to be confined to an asylum? Would you have laughed at how ridiculous such a thing would sound? As Peter stretched out his hand to help you stand, how would you have responded?

I don't know but that maybe the man took Peter's hand simply because it was offered, not even thinking what he was doing. I don't know how I would have responded, but this man took Peter's hand, allowing him to help him stand. Joy, oh joy! Doubtless his questions did not end when he stood, but now they would take a different angle. Who is this Jesus under whose authority he had been granted the ability to walk? Who were these two men through whom he had been restored? The man took hold of Peter and John, not letting them out of his sight, walking and jumping and praising God for the blessing of being able to walk!

Having set out to the Temple to pray, Peter and John found themselves surrounded with people who wanted to know what had happened to the lame man. Peter didn't bother with the specifics of how the man had been restored, simply with the good news of Jesus, by whose authority the man could now walk. They focused not upon themselves, but upon the Christ they served.

Peter shared with them of Jesus as the fulfillment of the prophets' expectations. He spoke of the necessity of Messiah's suffering, but also of God's vindication in resurrection. He spoke honestly, yet with grace. Peter pointed out that they had participated in Jesus' condemnation and death, all the while extending God's invitation for forgiveness and restoration. He spoke of the people's wickedness as well as God's desire to reclaim them.

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<sup>1</sup> Lord Acton, in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, 1887.  
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Peter got himself in trouble with the authorities. His words were not an attack on the religious establishment, but they did not mesh with the accepted ways of thought and practice. The Sadducees did not like his teaching on the resurrection. As has been the case all too often, they felt threatened. Peter's words did not agree with the Sadducees' disbelief in resurrection. Peter was no authorized rabbi and his words ran counter to accepted belief of the Jewish religious authorities. Peter and John found themselves carted off to prison as disturbers of the peace.

On the next day they were brought before the Jewish authorities. The question posed to them was a reflection not so much of belief and a search for truth, as a question of power. They wanted to know who was behind their actions, granting them authority to teach contrary to accepted norms. What right did they have to defy the authorities with unsanctioned teaching?

They were supposed to cower and bow to the will of the authorities. They were supposed to be humbled by the presence of the high priest and rank of those questioning them. They were supposed to recognize the error of their way and beg forgiveness. Instead, they recognized a higher authority than the religious establishment. While Peter's attitude was not of defiance, it was an honest declaration of the essential faith behind their actions. As Jesus had done during conflicts with religious leaders, Peter pointed to the quality of mercy in restoring the lame man and to the authorities' rejection of Jesus.

Peter's courage to speak openly to the authorities was matched by the quality of his actions. While he claimed Jesus' authority for his actions and teaching, he lived in accord with his professed faith. Peter and John amazed the authorities. They had not simply cured the lame man, but had stood before the authorities in confidence. They offered no direct affront, so much as the courage to speak the truth to the power structures holding sway over their lives. Their responses were words of integrity, courage, and power. This was no power of their own, but a power of humble presence.

The disciples had a very different perspective on faith than we find in many areas of the Christian world today. Faith was not something to hold and cherish out of convenience. Faith was not a matter of a private affair that affected only one segment of their lives. Faith was not something that gained expression only around a select group who held to common beliefs. Faith was not a personal treasure for personal benefit. For these disciples, faith was a question of sharing the transforming power of the gospel with those they encountered. It was accepting and living the authority which Jesus had granted them to be witnesses and ministers of grace to the whole of their community.

In our litigious society, we are surrounded by messages that call us to be careful of what we say and do. Our world is zealous for self-preservation and playing games of power and influence. We must be careful of what we say. Often we are uncomfortable with speaking what is on our hearts and minds, for fear of how our words might be used against us. We have heard the repeated warning, "Everything you say can and will be used against you."

How shall we speak in the face of opposition? Are we called to reticence in a society which does not want to hear of faith? Have we the confidence of faith to live such that our words reflect lives of confidence in God? Peter and John had authority and power to speak from the integrity of the faith they lived. Confidence in God gave them voice. Will our words and actions be directed by fear or faith? If we are directed by fear, have we not been corrupted by power? How shall we then live?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*