

Ordinary People; Extraordinary Experience • Acts 4:13-17

Erwin McManus is a friend of mine from El Salvador. He tells an interesting story about sending his young son Aaron to a Christian camp because he didn't want his boy hearing a bunch of scary ghost stories. What he didn't expect was that Aaron would instead hear a bunch of scary stories about demons and Satan. He came home terrified.

"Dad, don't turn off the light!" he said before going to bed. "Daddy, could you stay here with me? Daddy, I'm afraid. They told all these stories about demons."

Erwin was tempted to tell his son that demons aren't real. But they are real. Aaron asked, "Daddy, Daddy, would you pray for me that I would be safe?"

Erwin decided to pray beyond safety. He said, "Aaron, I will not pray for you to be safe. I will pray that God will make you dangerous, so dangerous that demons will flee when you enter the room."

Aaron answered, "All right. But pray that I would be really, really dangerous, Daddy."

The Bible relates the story of Christians who would rather be dangerous than safe. Peter and John were arrested and hauled before the Sanhedrin, the religious Supreme Court of Israel. They should have been scared to death because death was a very real possibility. But God did more than keep them safe. God made them dangerous. We read about it in Acts 4:13-17:

When (the Sanhedrin) saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done

an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name."

An axiom around courts states that anyone who is his own lawyer has a fool for a client. You'd certainly think this axiom applied to Peter and John. They were defending themselves in front of skilled and experienced lawyers, leaders and judges. You'd expect them to be cautious, stumbling and uncertain but they were courageous and confident. There was passion in their voices and conviction in their words. They were surprisingly comfortable in a setting that was intimidating. Their words were well chosen and their arguments were carefully crafted. Their answers were short and to the point. It seemed that they were the ones in charge rather than being the ones who were facing charges.

To capture a sense of what could have been their emotions let's think of a few scenarios. Imagine yourself lecturing on tort reform before the American Bar Association—and you've never been to law school. Imagine yourself discussing stem cell

research to the American Medical Association—and you've never studied medicine or biology. Imagine yourself debating the Hypostatic Union at the Evangelical Theological Society—and you've never been to seminary. Imagine yourself holding the

football in the middle of the field during a Monday night telecast game of the National Football League—and you've never played collegiate or professional football before. If you're normal you would be scared, cautious and probably incompetent.

Peter and John stood before the Sanhedrin with courage and confidence. They were like experienced professionals. The members of the Sanhedrin

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realized “*they were unschooled, ordinary men*” and were “*astonished*” by both their content and demeanor.

Unschooled meant that they hadn’t gone to rabbinical school like just about everyone else in the room. The members of the Sanhedrin had spent decades studying minute details of the Old Testament law and customs. They were part of a tutorial system where rabbis dialogued for hours every day with students until their knowledge was extensive and their debating skills were highly honed.

Ordinary meant “amateur” or “laymen”. They were like amateur tennis players in a meeting of Wimbledon champions or Little League coaches visiting the Baseball Hall of Fame. It wasn’t that Peter and John were illiterate or stupid but they were not full-time scholars. It was like the difference between someone who has a weekend hobby and someone who is a professional with credentials and is full-time in the field.

How could this be explained? Why were Peter and John so good at what they were doing? The answer is in Acts 4:13: “*When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.*” Peter and John had spent 3½ years with Jesus. That explained everything!

These same Jewish leaders had earlier wondered why Jesus was so smart in John 7:15: “. . . *Jesus (went) up to the temple courts and (began) to teach. The Jews were amazed and asked, “How did this man get such learning without having studied?”*”

Many encounters with Jesus had taught them that he knew the Hebrew Scriptures better than they did. Jesus combined knowledge with quick wit, able debating skills and a supernatural presence unlike anything they had ever seen. They never could explain how Jesus knew so much without formal rabbinical training but there was no doubt about his knowledge. It was obvious that Peter and John had studied under Jesus. They sounded like Jesus. They quoted the Bible like Jesus. They had a spiritual confidence like Jesus. The 3½ years with Jesus had shaped and formed them. It was obvious that they had been with Jesus.

In Minnesota we have short winter days and many of our faces grow pale from lack of sunlight. When we see someone in mid-February with a

golden tan and a radiant glow we can’t help but notice. We say, “You’ve been south”; or, “You’ve been in the sun.” It shows. That’s the way it was with Peter and John. They had been with Jesus and even a casual observer could tell the difference Jesus had made.

We are all shaped by those with whom we spend much time. I can sometimes spend an hour with someone and tell you what books they read, which radio stations they listen to, how much time they spend on the Internet, where they go to church and who are the kinds of people they hang out with. I can also tell those who have been with Jesus. Those who meditate on the words of the Bible, who meet Jesus on the pages of the New Testament, who pray to him daily, who experience him in worship and who spend time with godly followers of Jesus become like Jesus. They respond like Jesus. They love like Jesus. They think like Jesus. They sound like Jesus.

One of the greatest compliments any friend or critic can give us is that we may not have formal theological training or be professional ministers but it’s obvious that we have been with Jesus! May you be like Peter and John. May your time with Jesus so transform you that people are astonished and take note that you have been with Jesus.

The religious leaders found themselves up against an uncomfortable dilemma. Acts 4:14 tells us, “. . . *since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say.*”

Exhibit A was the man who had been healed on the command of Peter. This man who was born disabled and had never walked in more than 40 years was standing in front of the court. He was a well-known beggar in Jerusalem. There was no doubt that he was a congenital paraplegic and it was obvious that he could now walk and stand. There was no denying that a miracle had been performed.

However, most of the Sanhedrin had taken a formal position against Jesus and supported his crucifixion. They weren’t about to acknowledge that the power of Jesus was still operative and had healed this man; yet they had no other explanation. Standing before them was a man with a transformed life and the transformation was fully credited to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

What do you do when you've gotten yourself into a corner and you can't think of a way out? The men of the Jewish Sanhedrin faced a dilemma common to leaders who take strong positions. Even when faced with contrary evidence we tend to hold onto our prior opinions. It is commonplace to get louder and more emotional when our positions are threatened. After all, it is very difficult to admit when we are wrong.

The members of the Sanhedrin were speechless. So, they called for a time out in Acts 4:15-16:

So they ordered (Peter and John) to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. "What are we going to do with these men?" they asked. "Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it."

It's fascinating to listen to what was said behind closed doors. They ignored the central message of Peter and John that Jesus was raised from the dead. Resurrection was the central issue even more than the miracle of healing. The evidence that Jesus was alive and still powerful was becoming undeniable, but they just ignored it. Instead of responding to the truth and the evidence they looked at the public opinion polls and said,

"Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle." They couldn't deny what happened but they also refused to acknowledge it. They were stubbornly blinded by the positions they had taken.

An interesting question has arisen over the words of Acts 4:15-16. If this was a secret session, how did Luke know what was said? He obviously wasn't there; so how could he know?

Somebody who was there must have told him. We don't know for sure but have a pretty good guess. Luke was close friends with the apostle Paul. They traveled together across the empire. Paul was educated in a rabbinical school under the famous Jewish rabbi Gamaliel, a member of the Sanhedrin. So, it is more than possible that Gamaliel told Paul what happened in the closed session and that Paul told Luke who wrote it down.

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However, there may be a more interesting explanation. Back in those days Paul's name was Saul. He was one of the most anti-Christian men who ever lived. He was a Christian-hunter, Christian-persecutor and Christian-killer. In Acts 26:10 he says that he cast his vote for the execution of Christians. The only likely setting where such a vote would take place is the Sanhedrin. That seems to indicate that Saul was once a member of the Sanhedrin and could have been there in that executive session trying to figure out what to do with Peter and John.

If Paul was there then he was one member of that Sanhedrin who converted from being the judge and enemy of Peter and John to become a Christian and fellow apostle. It was a truly amazing conversion. Never give up on the most unlikely anti-Christians becoming followers of Jesus.

Recently I met a man in Portland, Oregon, who had just come back from a trip to Africa and the Middle East with a United States diplomatic mission. He told about a meeting with a famous world leader whom many would call an anti-Christian terrorist with the blood of many on his hands. After the formal meeting this man requested a private session with a United States senator. They

spent an hour alone together in this Muslim leader's home. The entire hour was spent talking about Jesus Christ and concluded with the senator praying for him in Jesus' name. Never

give up on the most unlikely anti-Christians becoming followers of Jesus.

That day the Sanhedrin concluded their secret session with an unenforceable threat: ". . . to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name." (Acts 4:17)

They could not disprove the resurrection of Jesus. They saw for themselves the man who had been miraculously healed. They admitted that they were astonished by the knowledge and eloquence of Peter and John. They knew that most of the people in Jerusalem believed in the miracle

performed in the name of Jesus. It was politically foolhardy to punish Peter and John. They hadn't really done anything wrong. Public support was with them. There was the risk of turning them into martyrs and further advancing their cause. So, they officially ordered Peter and John to just shut up: "Don't ever speak the name of Jesus again."

Speak no longer to anyone in the name of Jesus? Impossible! That is like telling hearts to no longer beat . . . like ordering the sun not to rise . . . like ordering a lover not to say, "I love you."

Peter and John were Christians. Talking about Jesus is what Christians do. When Jesus has died for you on the cross, when God has raised him from the dead, when the Holy Spirit has filled your life . . . silence is not an option!

Your name may be Peter, John, Saul, Paul or something else. If you are a Christian, may you be bold and courageous to speak for Jesus. It's not your education that makes you what you are. It is Jesus!

Trust God to give you the words in the most difficult situations. And never forget that when Jesus loves you, when Jesus died for you, when Jesus rose for you, when the Holy Spirit has filled your life . . . silence is never an option. Let no one ever silence the name of Jesus Christ!

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