

# KINGDOM AND CULTURE (2): ACTS 4



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*A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe*

**The Fellowship of Ailbe**

Kingdom and Culture (2): Acts 4  
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## Introduction to Acts 4

We have seen that Christianity can have a powerful effect on people and their culture, bringing healing, restoration, and reconciliation to God for all aspects of life.

But as surely as Christianity makes an impact on culture, culture makes an impact on Christianity as well. That impact can be negative, bringing – or seeking to bring – harm or hindrance to the faith. Or it can be positive, enhancing our experience of Christ and contributing to the progress of His ongoing work.

In Acts 4 we'll see both sides of the impact of culture on the growing Christian movement. The Kingdom of God exists within the cultures of the world, so we need to be well prepared, as Kingdom citizens and ambassadors, for understanding culture and how to make the best use of it for Christ and His glory.

We're happy to offer a series of brief videos to introduce each portion of this study. You can view each one *by [clicking here](#)*.

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We hope you find this study of Acts instructive and helpful to equip you for your walk with and work for the Lord. Thank you for joining us.

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## 1 Here We Go Again

Be sure to view the video introducing our study of Acts 4 (Lesson 4) by [clicking here](#).

Read and meditate on Acts 4.1-4.

What does it say about the tight grip and informing network of these religious leaders that they were able to react so quickly to this situation? These men were serious about preserving their status (cf. Jn. 11.48), and they were going to nip this thing in the bud – again. They hoped. The religious leaders regarded themselves as the arbiters of social, cultural, and spiritual life, and they were determined to keep it that way.

*For reflection*

1. As Peter and John were doing the follow-up from Peter's brief sermon, they were taken into custody and charged with teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead (v. 2). Guilty as charged. Would this charge stand up if it were brought against you? Explain.
2. Note that they were arrested near evening. Peter and John had gone up to the temple in the middle of the afternoon. They had been working this crowd for several hours, and that helps to explain why their ministry bore such wonderful fruit (v. 4). Peter and John had gone into the most prominent cultural arena in Jerusalem, where they brought the healing, restoring, and reconciling life of Christ to a lame man. What are the most prominent cultural arenas in your community?
3. Now the tiger is out of the cage. The Holy Spirit is loose in the world, and nothing will be able to stop the advance of Christ's rule on earth as it is in heaven. Peter and John knew this, and they had absolutely no fear that the religious leaders of Jerusalem, who thought they had stopped the work Jesus *began* to do, would have any more success impeding the work He was *continuing* to do. What are the primary hindrances keeping us from proclaiming Christ and His Kingdom like Peter and John?
4. The religious leaders seem almost comical here as they fuss about, trying to silence the preaching of Jesus and the resurrection. Rather than scorn these men, however, we should look upon them with sadness and pity, for the depth of their spiritual blindness is great, as we shall see. How serious a matter is it to be lost in sin? How can we nurture more sympathy and love for our lost neighbors?
5. How do you think you would feel if what happened to Peter and John happened to you? How could you have the kind of boldness and confidence Peter and John show in this chapter? What's preventing you from becoming a more consistent witness for Christ with the people in your life?

*Summary*

The keepers of the unbelieving *status quo* are ever vigilant against anything that threatens their place of authority and privilege. In their folly and blindness, they thought a harsh warning would get them their way. Were they in for a surprise! What's the primary insight or lesson you take away from Acts 4.1-4?

*Closing Prayer.*

I will sing of Your power;  
Yes, I will sing aloud of Your mercy in the morning;  
For You have been my defense  
And refuge in the day of my trouble.  
To You, O my Strength, I will sing praises;  
For God *is* my defense,

My God of mercy.

Psalm 59.16, 17

## 2 As If

Be sure to view the video introducing our study of Acts 4 (Lesson 4) by [clicking here](#).

Read and meditate on Acts 4.5-12.

The religious leaders decided to let Peter and John think it over for an evening in the local jail. As if that was going to affect their testimony the next day.

*For reflection*

1. Following “due process,” the judge invited the apostles to explain their behavior – as if they didn’t know exactly what had happened. Was this the apostles’ chance to maneuver a bit, to oil their way around the name of Jesus and attribute this miracle somehow vaguely to God, which the Pharisees would probably have accepted? Many Christians feel comfortable talking about *God*, but not nearly so comfortable talking about *Jesus*. Why do you think that’s so?

2. Peter and John, however, were filled with the Spirit, and the Spirit’s work is to testify about Jesus in and through the followers of Jesus (cf. Jn. 15.26, 27). Undoubtedly Peter and John recalled Jesus’ words in Luke 12.11, 12. Does this mean they hadn’t prepared for this situation *at all*? Put yourself in Peter’s place. What would you be thinking as the judge spoke to you?

3. Note Peter’s emphasis: a *good deed* has been done to a crippled man (v. 9). Isn’t that kind of important to keep in the purview here? We need always to make sure that good deeds back up our proclamation of the Gospel. But this fact didn’t cut any ice with the Pharisees, who were bent on squelching this Jesus thing. The apostles could have healed every man, woman, and child in Jerusalem that afternoon, and these religious leaders would still have been after them because of the name of Jesus. Why?

4. Peter puts it right in their faces: “the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.” Then the indictment: “whom you crucified...” Peter turns the tables of the trial and makes God, not men, the Judge: “whom God raised from the dead...” This is really skillful, bold defending of the faith. Then the Gospel: only in the name of Jesus must (note that, Greek: *dei*, literally, “it is necessary that”) men be saved. Using these phrases from Peter, outline the Gospel as you might share it with an unsaved friend or neighbor:

5. Imagine the shock those religious leaders must have felt. I wonder if any of them began to have second thoughts about what they’d done, or what they *thought* they’d done. Mere human power has no defense for the proclamation of the Gospel supported by the evidence of the Kingdom’s presence and progress – healing, conversions, bold witnesses, undeniable and irrefutable facts, conviction of sin. The religious leaders had erected strong walls against the Name of Jesus, and these walls would need a bit more battering, but soon enough, they would come down as well (cf. Acts 6.7). Here the highest court of the culture of Judaism is bearing down on the faith of Christ. Do we need to fear any attempts on the part of our culture to silence the Good News? Explain.

*Summary*

The entrenched cultural powers of the day were no match for one man, filled with the Spirit of God. Meditate on Ephesians 5.18-21. What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? How does one become filled with the Spirit?

*Closing Prayer*

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from Your presence,  
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation,  
And uphold me *by Your* generous Spirit.  
*Then* I will teach transgressors Your ways,  
And sinners shall be converted to You.

Psalm 51.10-13

### 3 The Blinding Power of Sin

Be sure to view the video introducing our study of Acts 4 (Lesson 4) by [clicking here](#).

Read and meditate on Acts 4.13-17.

I supposed I'd be amazed, too. These men were *Galileans*, for crying out loud! Fishermen, not theologians, like these judges! "Where do they get off preaching to *us*! After all, their only 'credentials', such as they were, were that they had been with...but let's not go there."

*For reflection*

1. Look at the evidence! A healed man standing there. Two fishermen boldly taking on the religious leaders of the day. A "notable miracle", indeed! But of what? What were these judges missing here? Why?
2. The apostles are dismissed while the leaders deliberate. But they only deliberate about one thing: This has got to stop! Didn't they care that others might also be healed? Didn't they want to hear a bit more about this Jesus from those who'd known Him? No. No, they did not. They wanted all this to stop. Now. How should churches prepare for the opposition they might expect from the surrounding culture, as they go forth to *sign* the Kingdom of God?
3. So the religious leaders make an epic decision: "Let's tell them to stop preaching." See what I mean about comical? This is utterly laughable to think that the words and threats of mere men could keep the Gospel from going forward. Well, it was in Peter and John's day, anyway. What about today?
4. Does being with Jesus make a difference? By being with Him we actually *participate* in Him, in His presence and glory, and there we are transformed, as Peter and John were, by the Spirit of God working with the Word of God in our lives (2 Cor. 3.12-18). Nothing can substitute for being with Jesus if we are to be faithful witnesses to His resurrection. What does it mean for you to be with Jesus? Does your being with Jesus have the same kind of effects on you?
5. Would you describe your time of Scripture reading and prayer as "being with Jesus"? Why or why not? Is your time with Jesus fitting you to be a bold ambassador for Christ and His Kingdom?

*Summary*

The religious leaders are completely flummoxed at the courage and conviction of Peter and John. Yet, in spite of the miracle and the bold preaching, they determine to try to contain the threat to their authority and status. Should we expect similar responses today? Explain.

*Closing Prayer*

When the LORD brought back the captivity of Zion,  
We were like those who dream.  
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
And our tongue with singing.  
Then they said among the nations,  
"The LORD has done great things for them."  
The LORD has done great things for us,  
And we are glad.

Psalms 126.1-3

## 4 “We cannot but speak”

Be sure to view the video introducing our study of Acts 4 (Lesson 4) by [clicking here](#).

Read and meditate on Acts 4.18-22.

Peter’s response to their warning was concise: “Not gonna do it.” I suspect the religious leaders were feeling fairly magnanimous here. After all, they didn’t *crucify* Peter and John. They just admonished them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. Fat chance of that being obeyed.

*For reflection*

1. Since they had no intention of obeying that unjust ruling, Peter and John said so. We are not obliged to obey unjust laws, especially such as pose a threat against the progress of the Gospel. What does this story suggest about the circumstances under which a Christian might disobey authorities in our day?
2. So how did the leaders respond to these words? They threatened them again (v. 21). It’s all they could do. Was this additional threat likely to deter Peter and John? Why not?
3. One red line drawn after another, each one crossed defiantly. The people, after all, were psyched! They were all abuzz about this man’s healing, and, the religious leaders feared the people as much as they feared Rome. The mention that this man was more than forty years old emphasizes the magnitude of the miracle. Doubtless many people, probably even many of these leaders, had seen this man begging year after year after year. No more. What threats to the ongoing work of Christ can you discern in our day?
4. Peter and John knew they could not possibly *not* talk and teach about Jesus. They’d been with Him, and now He was alive in them, by His Spirit. How could they help themselves? How can we? Are our churches equipping us to deal with threats to the ongoing work of Christ, so that we can respond like Peter and John?
5. What would it take for you to become more outspoken as a witness for the risen Lord? What is your responsibility in preparing for this? How can your church help?

*Summary*

Peter and John had crossed a spiritual Rubicon; they had made the Kingdom turn into a new world, a new reality, and a new power. There would be no going back, but only pushing forward in the ongoing work of Christ. Have you made that Kingdom turn? How do you know?

*Closing Prayer*

Give the king Your judgments, O God,  
And Your righteousness to the king’s Son.  
He will judge Your people with righteousness,  
And Your poor with justice.  
The mountains will bring peace to the people,  
And the little hills, by righteousness.  
He will bring justice to the poor of the people;  
He will save the children of the needy,  
And will break in pieces the oppressor.  
They shall fear You  
As long as the sun and moon endure,  
Throughout all generations.  
He shall come down like rain upon the grass before mowing,

Like showers *that* water the earth.  
In His days the righteous shall flourish,  
And abundance of peace,  
Until the moon is no more.  
He shall have dominion also from sea to sea,  
And from the River to the ends of the earth.

Psalm 72.1-8

## 5 Borrowed Blessings

Be sure to view the video introducing our study of Acts 4 (Lesson 4) by [clicking here](#).

Read and meditate on Acts 4.23-28.

I think it's safe to assume that this must have been a gathering of several hundred people to whom Peter and John gave their report. Whereupon, perhaps one of them began to pray Psalm 146.6, followed by Psalm 2. And everyone joined in – they “lifted their voices together.”

*For reflection*

1. The Kingdom of God came into the aggregate culture of Rome and Judea. We've seen one way that culture tried to impact the Kingdom, and it wasn't encouraging. But here is another example. People in ancient Israel prayed the Psalms, using them like a prayer guide or for daily devotions. Here we see the new Christian community doing the same. Given their experience with Judean culture, why didn't they just reject this practice as well, rather than embrace it like this?
2. This spontaneous, unison praying could happen because these people regarded the Psalms as their prayer book. God had given them these scripts, and they had learned to pray them. Start anywhere, and most folks could join in. Just like if I said, OK, let's sing together: *Amazing grace, how...* You'd know it, right? Have you ever tried using the Psalms for prayer? Should you?
3. Praying the psalms was relevant (v. 27). Praying the psalms assuaged their fears. Praying the psalms united their intentions and focus. Praying the psalms stiffened their resolve and gave them confidence. We don't know how to pray as we should (Rom. 8.26). God knows how we should pray. If you were asked to try out for a performance of *Hamlet*, you'd ask for a script. You wouldn't just start babbling on about “to be, or not to be” or whatever! If you want to talk with God, *get a script He's prepared and learn to use it well*. He's written 150 for your convenience. If you had to choose a psalm to pray about the day ahead of you, which would it be? How about Psalm 90?
4. This passage reminds us that prayer is indispensable to the ongoing work of Christ. Joshua and Israel messed up with the Gibeonites because they failed to seek the Lord before entering into a covenant with them (Josh. 9). The apostles, filled with the Spirit, would not make the same mistake, nor should we. What do we learn from this situation about the role of prayer in the life of faith?
5. Take the two Psalms used in this prayer – 146.6 and Psalm 2.1, 2. Use these to write a prayer you can pray several times throughout the day. Make your prayer as relevant as possible to your life and our world today.

*Summary*

In the Kingdom of God we can make use of the good cultural contributions that are available to us from without. Even though the Jewish leaders were threatening the Church, the Church didn't feel like it had to make a clean break with Judaism. The culture of Judaism helped to equip the citizens of the Kingdom to continue the ongoing work of Christ. How can we decide which cultural resources are useful for advancing the Kingdom, and which are not?

*Closing Prayer*

The chariots of God *are* twenty thousand,  
Even thousands of thousands;  
The Lord is among them *as in* Sinai, in the Holy Place.  
You have ascended on high,

You have led captivity captive;  
You have received gifts among men,  
Even *from* the rebellious,  
That the LORD God might dwell *there*.  
Blessed *be* the Lord,  
*Who* daily loads us *with benefits*,  
The God of our salvation! *Selah*  
Our God *is* the God of salvation;  
And to GOD the Lord *belong* escapes from death.

Psalm 68.17-20

## 6 Ongoing and Then Some

Be sure to view the video introducing our study of Acts 4 (Lesson 4) by [clicking here](#).

*Read and meditate on Acts 4.29-31*

This is what you get when you pray according to the Lord's will, using the Lord's resources: results. We note here no trembling and whining about the "threat to their religious liberty." They could have cared less. They had a job to do and no threats or restrictions imposed by mere men were going to stop them.

*For reflection*

1. The believers did not seek relief from religious oppression; they sought power and boldness to stand up to it and overcome it. That is precisely what the Lord sent them, just as He had in Acts 2, and just as He'd promised in Acts 1. Do we dare expect the same in our day? Explain.
2. We're supposed to see something of a trajectory here: The Lord makes a promise, the Lord fulfills the promise, the Lord fulfills the promise again...and so on. Our job is to stay within the parameters of the promise and always be moving toward it. Based on what you've seen thus far in Acts, how should Christians do that?
3. This all seems very simple. They didn't organize a petition, create a training program, move to a new building, hire a specialist, or find some way of accommodating their practice to the changing environment or the demands of the culture around them. How would Christians today – your church – likely respond to a situation such as we've been looking at in Acts 4? Explain.
4. Promise, power, prayer, practice: Diagram the relationship between these, as you have observed it thus far in Acts. Explain your diagram.
5. What do you think the Christian community could do today to begin to get back on this trajectory? What could you do to help your church make this Kingdom turn?

*Summary*

The ongoing work of Christ is the work of the Spirit. He brings the power, according to the promises of God, so that we can practice the Kingship of Jesus the way we should (cf. Acts 17.1-9). On a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is the highest rating, how well does this explain your walk with and work for the Lord? Explain.

*Closing Prayer*

For the LORD has chosen Zion;  
He has desired *it* for His dwelling place:  
"This *is* My resting place forever;  
Here I will dwell, for I have desired it.  
I will abundantly bless her provision;  
I will satisfy her poor with bread.  
I will also clothe her priests with salvation,  
And her saints shall shout aloud for joy.  
There I will make the horn of David grow;  
I will prepare a lamp for My Anointed.

His enemies I will clothe with shame,  
But upon Himself His crown shall flourish.”

Psalm 132-13-18

## 7 Sign of the Kingdom

Be sure to view the video introducing our study of Acts 4 (Lesson 4) by [clicking here](#).

Read and meditate on Acts 4.32-37.

Here we get a glimpse of the Church as it signs the Kingdom into the surrounding culture.

*For reflection*

1. What “signs” do you see here to indicate that a new power is at work among these people?
2. Note that “one heart and one soul” (v. 32). Meditate on Ephesians 4.3 and John 17.21. Why is it so hard to maintain unity in the Spirit? Why is it so important we do so?
3. What does it look like in a church when “great grace” is abounding on everyone? Can we expect our churches to be like this apart from the proclamation of the resurrection of Christ? Explain.
4. The selflessness and generosity of this new community stood out in stark contrast to what was typical in that culture. From these verses, comment on the interaction between Christianity and its culture. How does this passage encourage us to think the Church today might make a more positive and powerful impact on its culture? How would that happen?
5. We’ve been looking at this first Christian community as a *sign* of the Kingdom of God. How can you see that it was also an *outpost* of the Kingdom?

*Summary*

Here is the reality of the Kingdom: The Good News is boldly proclaimed. A new society has come into being. The poor are cared for and those with means gladly relinquish them – not all at once, but as needs arose. The shepherds of the community exercise oversight in care and instruction, and the power of the Spirit is flowing in every direction for life and fruitfulness. This is what God intends for men, and it is the Church’s privilege to present a model of such a just and loving society for the rest of the world. Do you think your church could benefit from a more careful study of these first Christians? Explain.

*Closing Prayer*

O Israel, trust in the LORD;  
He *is* their help and their shield.  
O house of Aaron, trust in the LORD;  
He *is* their help and their shield.  
You who fear the LORD, trust in the LORD;  
He *is* their help and their shield.  
The LORD has been mindful of *us*;  
He will bless us;  
He will bless the house of Israel;  
He will bless the house of Aaron.  
He will bless those who fear the LORD,  
*Both* small and great.  
May the LORD give you increase more and more,  
You and your children.  
*May* you *be* blessed by the LORD,  
Who made heaven and earth.

*Kingdom and Culture (2): Acts 4*

The heaven, *even* the heavens, *are* the LORD's;  
But the earth He has given to the children of men.  
The dead do not praise the LORD,  
Nor any who go down into silence.  
But we will bless the LORD  
From this time forth and forevermore.  
Praise the Lord!

Psalm 115.9-18

*For reflection or discussion*

1. In what ways does the culture into which the Kingdom comes impact the Kingdom? Can you give some examples from our day?
2. Describe the relationship between promise, prayer, power, and Christian practice:
3. Why does it make sense to use the Psalms in our prayer lives?
4. What do we mean by saying that churches are *signs* and *outposts* of the Kingdom?
5. What's the most important insight or lesson you've learned from Acts 4?

We are transformed into the image of Jesus Christ *from* the glory we encounter in God's Word to the ways we *live for His glory* in the world (2 Cor. 3.12-18; 1 Cor. 10.31). What have you encountered of God's glory in our reading and meditations in Acts 4? How has He shown Himself to you more clearly? How can this help you to live more consistently for His glory in the daily details of your life? What have you learned about yourself from Acts 4 to help you in being a witness for the Lord?

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Thank you.