

## Lesson Three: Speaking Truth to Power

### Part I: Preparation

**Bible Passage:** Acts 3:1-4:33, 5:12-42

**Key Verse:** "But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you, rather than to God you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.'" (Acts 4:19-20)

### Summary

The story of Peter and John's arrest is one of the most notable examples in the Bible of civil disobedience. It contains dynamics still present in social justice movements today: the threat that authorities feel when confronted with injustices they have committed, how a willingness to be persecuted and jailed furthers a message, and the part that just people like Gamaliel working within the establishment play in the life of a movement.

### Study

Peter and John's violation of an order not to preach is not the first biblical account of civil disobedience. (For the purposes of this lesson, we will define "civil disobedience" as the deliberate violation of an immoral law, or the violation of laws committed in order to draw attention to the immoral actions of the establishment.) The daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh and the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah pointedly violated the Pharaoh's edict to kill all male Hebrew children. Even after he was ordered to be silent, Jeremiah continued to preach that Jerusalem was doomed unless its leaders repented and submitted to the Babylonians. Jesus Christ broke Sabbath laws and carried out a public witness in the Jerusalem temple for which the authorities crucified him.

The story of Peter and John speaking the Gospel in defiance of the authorities has a more contemporary feel to it, however. Like Christians in subsequent generations who faced imprisonment and violence by speaking out for the sake of the Gospel, peace, and justice, Peter and John consciously chose to defy the authorities. As in subsequent generations, their decision to break the laws of the establishment attracted people to their cause rather than scaring them away.

The first volume of Luke-Acts establishes that Jesus is engaged in a public witness when he tells the disciples of John that he is healing the afflicted and bringing good news to the poor. In mentioning those who take no offense regarding his preaching or his actions, Jesus implies that some people will regard his actions negatively. All the Gospels show that there were a number of people in power who did indeed take offense. In Luke 21, just several weeks before Peter and John's run-ins with the authorities take place, Jesus had warned his followers that they would be handed over to the authorities.

By putting Peter's healing of the lame man right after the end of Acts 2 – which describes thousands of people devoting themselves to the Apostles' teachings, fellowship and prayers – Luke shows that prayer is not a "detour around the misery of the world," according to William H. Willimon. The mysterious work of the Holy Spirit is not just a force that changes people internally. It changes society.

The Greek of Peter's speech is not as polished as the rest of Acts. G.H.C. Macgregor, in his commentary on Acts writes that the phrasing of 3:16 is "intolerably awkward." Thus, many scholars believe that it was originally written in Aramaic, the language of Palestine, not Greek. The awkwardness of the speech supports that Peter and John were, as the scribes, priests and other rulers perceived, "ordinary uneducated men" (Acts 4:13) – not qualified to be proclaiming the true faith.

The religious authorities probably had the apostles arrested more for disturbing the peace than for theological reasons. The Sadducees, or priestly class were "tolerant to a fault," according to MacGregor. Roman authorities allowed them to remain in power precisely because they kept the people under control. Additionally, the temple and its precincts were the Sadducees' "turf" so they may have taken exception to Peter and John choosing that particular place to preach.

Note that after their brush with authorities, Peter and John do not pray for protection, but rather, in Acts 4:29, for boldness.

The rabbi Gamaliel was a descendant of Hillel, a rabbi whose teachings in the Talmud often parallel Jesus' (e.g., "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary.") Jewish tradition regards Gamaliel and his wisdom with reverence, and his speech in Acts 5:34-39 supports his merit.

Theologian Walter Wink has said that activists in social justice movements often do not give enough credit to leaders working within domination systems who realize they cannot dominate people forever.

F.W. DeKlerk and Mikhail Gorbachev were visionaries along with Nelson Mandela and Vaclav Havel in that they realized white South Africans and the Soviet Politburo had to relinquish power if they were to survive. Gamaliel seems to have been such a visionary as well. Gamaliel's words to the religious council of the first century remain sound advice to contemporary critics of those who find themselves breaking laws and disturbing the status quo as a consequence of following Jesus.

From its inception, Christian Peacemaker Teams has held up civil disobedience and public witness as part of its mandate – partly because these strategies have been a part of all the great movements for social change and partly because in doing so, CPTers have felt they were following in the footsteps of Shiphrah, Puah, Pharaoh's daughter, Jesus, Peter and John.

Of all the criticisms leveled at CPT by fellow Christians, most revolve around brushes that CPT volunteers have had with the legal system – particularly when engaged in public witnesses. Romans 13 has a powerful hold on many Christians, but, as the text for this lesson amply shows, Romans 13 is not the only model for how Christians should relate to the authorities.

Another important connection in the lesson today with the work of CPT is the power of "ordinary, uneducated" people (Acts 4:13) to effect social change. Rather than spending large amounts of time with politicians and diplomats, CPTers find themselves collaborating with farmers, electricians, construction workers and homemakers who have chosen to resist oppression nonviolently. In doing so CPTers with post-graduate degrees have found they have a lot to learn from people who never graduated from elementary school.

## **CPT Stories**

July 17, 2000

CHIAPAS: Transformation of Military Base Revisited  
by Scott Kerr

On April 22, members of CPT and some Abejas from the community of X'oyep transformed a neighboring military base into a peace camp. *[The Abejas (or "Bees") are a group of Mayan Indian pacifists who chose to resist nonviolently the militarization of their region in Chiapas, MX. Paramilitaries slaughtered 45 of them in December 1997 while they were praying for peace.]*

This action, which concluded the Chiapas team's "Tent for Lent" campaign, involved rearranging the white stones forming an "H" on a helicopter pad to read "PAZ," ["peace"] and erecting flags and banners of peace.

I am often asked by family and friends if these witnesses and actions at military bases actually do anything for the long term situation there. These questions can be difficult to answer. I remember feeling empty inside returning to the same base the day after the action for a communion service and seeing all of the symbols of peace removed and "the base restored," as the commanding officer put it.

Upon subsequent visits to the base and neighboring community I have been given hope that actual transformation took place that day, and is still taking place. The military had placed two rows of barbed

wire around the helicopter pad. After a month, the pad became overgrown with high-grasses and other vegetation to the point that on my last visit there it was impossible to make out the encircled "H" within the pad.

So many times the work of CPT and other activist communities is symbolic and seems to change nothing, but sometimes these symbolic actions have very real consequences. In X'oyep it means that there is no longer a functioning helicopter pad.

## **Hebron 1995**

In the summer of 1995, the primary work of the team in Hebron involved being present and trying to intervene on Dubboya Street when Israeli settlers attacked the residents there. One day, two adolescent settler youth told a man in his seventies that his wife and daughters were whores. He began shouting at them and, before CPTers Kathleen Kern and Wendy Lehman could intervene, they kicked and punched the old man.

Lehman and Kern accompanied the man to the police station so he could file a complaint. (He was perplexed when he found that he could only file charges for the physical assault and not for the insults.)

An officer of the Shin Bet (Israeli intelligence) interviewed Kern and Lehman separately. In an effort to show that CPT was concerned with more than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Kern told him about its work in Haiti and Washington DC. She then told him that CPT had received a joint invitation from Chechen women's groups and mothers of Russian soldiers to provide a violence-detering presence in Chechnya. The Shin Bet officer smiled and told Kern, "Don't go to Chechnya. We need you here."

## **Sidebars**

Some Reasons that CPTers have been arrested:

- For crossing over into the West Bank along with hundreds of Israelis and international activists in the "March for a Peaceful Future"
- For protesting U.S. Policy on Haiti at a "no protest zone" in front of the White House.
- For breaking open the gate to Hebron University which the Israeli military had kept sealed since the first Intifada in the 1980's.
- For helping a Palestinian remove olive trees illegally planted on his farm land by Israeli settlers near Yatta, in the West Bank.
- For helping Palestinians to remove gates that the Israeli military had installed for crowd control in the Hebron market
- For pouring blood on the Pentagon
- For removing lobster traps from a Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans boat that had been illegally confiscated from Mi'qmaq fishers in New Brunswick.
- For trying, along with Israeli peace activists, and other internationals to remove earthen barriers erected by the Israeli military around Palestinian towns
- For participating with Israeli, Palestinian and other peace activists in a march to land that Israeli settlers had taken from a Palestinian village.
- For refusing to stop reading/singing portions of Martin Luther King's writings in a U.S. Senator's office in the Chicago Federal Building on Martin Luther King weekend. (The witness was intended to protest the impending war with Iraq.)
- For participating in witnesses at the Extremely Low Frequency (ELF) site in northern Wisconsin. ELF communicates to Trident nuclear submarines in order to facilitate first-strike capacity in the event of a nuclear war.
- For carrying coffins in funeral processions to the Chicago Federal Building and the United States Capitol to protest the impending (and later actual) war with Iraq.
- For standing in front of soldiers about to shoot nonviolent demonstrators in Hebron (see previous lesson)
- For trying to prevent U.S. Navy bombing practice on the island of Vieques
- For trying to return irrigation hoses confiscated by the Israeli military to the Palestinian families who had bought them.

- For trespassing at the “School of the Americas” in Fort Benning, GA to protest the U.S. Military’s training of Latin American military personnel who have committed horrendous human rights abuses.
- For accompanying a widow escorting the body of her husband back to their hometown of Yondo in Colombia.
- For dumping red food coloring in the Chicago River near Boeing Headquarters to symbolize the bloodshed caused by Boeing weapons.
- For protesting the sanctions on Iraq in front of the White House
- For crossing the line at the Air National Guard airport with food for the people of Iraq.

When the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’”

Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” Luke 7:20-23 (NRSV)

3) “When Peter spoke before the people, five thousand repented and became part of the movement. But when much the same testimony was given before the authorities, Peter and John were sent packing and no one was saved. A man whom the world regards as unlearned and ignorant has made a group of powerful men look impotent and confused.” (Willimon, page 50)

## **Part II: Session**

### **Focus** (10 minutes)

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word, "civil disobedience?" If you have ever committed an act of civil disobedience share your experience with the group at this time.

Next, reflect as a group on the great movements for social change in this century and the last, e.g., the struggle for civil rights in the U.S., the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Try to think of examples of social change movements that did NOT involved civil disobedience.

### **Transition:**

Resisting the authorities can make North Americans uncomfortable, because they have a great many civil liberties that people in other countries do not. We should remember that the members of the first century church lived under military occupation by the most powerful empire in the world. They therefore had more in common with people today who face serious consequences for speaking out against the status quo and violating rules that the authorities impose on them.

### **Engage the text (20 minutes)**

You may wish to present the text for today as a dramatic reading with people in your group taking the parts of Peter, the crowd, the religious authorities, the apostles’ friends (4:24-30), the angel, the temple police, Gamaliel and the narrator. Since the passage is a long one, someone in the group may wish to photocopy a “script” and summarize between the dialogues.

Separate Acts 3:1-4:33 from Acts 5:12-42.

Divide those playing the crowd into groups who are inclined to be open to Peter’s message and others who are inclined to be skeptical. If you wish, have someone in the class act as a reporter who is interviewing crowd members for their reactions to Peter and John’s behavior. You can even have a “church” reporter -- someone who will cover their behavior sympathetically, while the reporter from the mainstream media gives unsympathetic coverage.

Identify precisely what Peter and John did to challenge authority. What did las Abejas (“the Bees”) in Chiapas do to challenge authority? What were the consequences of their actions?

Recall the social justice movements that the group named in the “Focus” activity and identify the people in power within a domination system who made it possible for the people challenging the system to work, e.g. F.W. De Klerk in South Africa. What qualities do these people share with Gamaliel and the Shin Bet officer in the anecdote about the attack of the old man in Hebron?

### **Respond**

As a group discuss your comfort level with comparing Peter and John's evangelism to political activities of CPT. Are there biblical role models that seem better matched to the work CPT does?

What causes would members of your group be willing to get arrested for? To die for?

Identify examples of authority, e.g., parents, pastors, police, mayors, governors, prime ministers, presidents. What is your gut instinct when you think of these authority figures? Hostility and suspicion? Respect and gratitude? Mixed? Does your attitude toward authority affect your view of civil disobedience?

Which authority figures have the most influence in your lives? Which need to be challenged?

### **Closing**

Have someone read aloud Acts 5:27-29 and then reflect silently on the passage for two minutes. Pray for people currently violating laws or standards for the sake of justice and pray for the people who work within the systems that these dissidents are challenging.

### **Part III: Leader Guidelines**

#### **Items needed**

Photocopies of text for today with dialogue highlighted for the different parts.

#### **Resources**

G.H.C. MacGregor, Acts. *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9 Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954.

You may wish to get a copy of the video *A Force More Powerful* to review the great social change/resistance movements of the last century. Ideally, the group might want to meet during the week to view all or parts of the video before the session for today (or alternatively, you may wish to extend the number of sessions to include showing *A Force More Powerful*.)

#### **Tips for leading**

Because the passage for today is long, it would make the class flow more smoothly if you made photocopies of Acts 3:1-4:33, 5:12-42 and then highlighted the speaking parts. The narrator can summarize Peter's long sermon in Acts 3:12-26 e.g., “Peter then preached about how Jesus was rejected and called people to repentance”) and the portions between the dialogue.