

Acts 5:12-16

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[0 : 0 0] Now, I invite you to turn back in your Bibles to Acts chapter 5, the book of Acts chapter 5, and we'll read again verses 12 to 14. Acts 5 at verse 12, the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people, and all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. And I'm particularly bringing together two phrases. Firstly, in verse 13, which says, no one else dared join them. And then verse 14, nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. Now, isn't that a truly remarkable portrait of a Christian church? It seems contradictory, doesn't it? Nobody dared join them. More and more were added to their number. At one and the same time, you have a Christian church repelling people and attracting people. The same body of people. The same body of people, the church of Christ in Jerusalem at that time, was driving people away and was drawing people in. Or if we could use some scientific language, there was a centrifugal force bringing people in, and there was a centripetal force driving them away. Now, you might say, well, of course, that's historically conditioned.

There were certain aspects of the church in Jerusalem in those early days that made that inevitable, repelling and attracting at the same time. On the one hand, you've got what we read in verses 1 to 11, the solemn judgment that fell upon Ananias and Sapphira for lying to God and pretending to the church that that wasn't the case. Severe judgment fell on them. They dropped down dead. And you might well say, well, that sort of thing doesn't happen nowadays. We don't expect that in our churches. And at the same time, you find that the apostles were performing many miraculous signs and wonders. People were being brought, and it actually says that if they took them near Peter, so the shadow would fall on them, they were being healed. And you would rightly say, we don't see that sort of thing nowadays. In fact, the New Testament, I believe, doesn't lead us to expect that kind of thing because we're told that these signs and wonders were, to quote Paul's words, signs of an apostle.

God at that particular juncture was using these things not to say that He can't today, not to say that in certain circumstances He doesn't today. But as a general rule, Scripture doesn't lead us to believe that that kind of thing would be happening among ourselves. So, you could argue, well, that was a historical situation. But now, really, it's different. Yes, we go along with the attracting people. Isn't that what we're trying to do all the time? We're inviting people to come to our services.

That's why we have various forms of outreach. That's why we try and invite our neighbors or our work colleagues or members of our family who aren't believers in the Lord Jesus. And sometimes we're doing it again and again and again and again. Come along, come along and join us in our service.

And we like to think of that, the attracting people, more and more people being added to the church. We want to see that. But somehow the driving people away, that doesn't appeal to us quite so much, and we wonder what that's all about. But I'd suggest to you that this is not just a historical situation.

[5 : 04] It is characteristic and should be characteristic of the Christian church in every age, that we are at one and the same time the kind of body of people, the kind of place, the kind of group, whatever word you care to use, where there is something about us that means that some people don't want to be there because they're afraid, because there's something that tells them that they can't become part of this. And at the same time, as I was saying, there is this inviting, this drawing, we're praying for it, we're working for it.

When the church of Christ is true to itself and true to the Lord Jesus Christ, then I believe that both these impacts, the driving away and the drawing in, that they are both expected by God from us, and they are both commended by God as his church lives, as her church lives its day, its life day by day.

But before we go on to look at what this actually means, that we should be a body that at the same time is repelling and attracting, let's notice that there can be wrong reasons for repelling people out there away from our church. Just as there can be wrong reasons for attracting or for trying to attract people into our church.

Firstly, wrong reasons for repelling people. And clearly, as we go through the Scriptures, perhaps the top of the list there is a lack of love. When there is a lack of love in a Christian church, when, to quote Paul's words to the Galatians, chapter 5, verse 14, and the context there is he talks of the royal law of loving our neighbor as ourselves. And then he says, but you folks, you're biting and devouring each other.

You're always arguing, you're always quarreling, you don't love one another as you should, so beware, he said, lest you devour yourselves. But he's also saying, implicitly, how do you expect other people to believe you when you say the church is a great place, the Bible is a great book, and you can know God's love by coming along here? And Paul says, no, if there is a lack of love, that won't happen. In the very early days of the Christian church, after the New Testament was written, it was well known, it became a well-known saying in many of the churches, in many parts of the Roman Empire at that time, that Christians were people who always went the second mile, who always loved sacrificially, loved sacrificially themselves and others. And so the saying was well known, see how these Christians love one another. Perhaps it came to the fore particularly in,

[8 : 40] I forget which century it was, I think the third century, when there was the plague sweeping through some cities in North Africa. And if you had any money, you headed out of the city and into the hills, to the fresh air of the hills. But the poor, of course, they had to stay in the city, more and more infected, and they were dying in huge numbers. And there were Christians who formed themselves into a band of helpers. They refused to leave the cities. They could have done, but they didn't.

They buried the dead. They cared for the sick, knowing that probably they would end up dead themselves, as many did. And those who were not Christians looked on in awe, and they said, see how these Christians love one another. But then, as time went by, a couple of centuries later, after the Roman emperor had made Christianity the official religion of the empire, if you know anything of the history following that, there was a lot of good came from that, of course. Persecution ceased, or at least it was much reduced. But there were, well, the emperor had things to offer. He had plenty gifts to give to those who would do what he wanted. And so, he was doling out bishoprics and archbishoprics and other lucrative offices. And it's an ugly picture, as you see church leaders running back and forth throughout the empire, as Paul says, biting and devouring one another. And that phrase that I've already mentioned, it came back into use. See how these Christians love one another, sarcastically pointing out their deep, deep failures. So, there can be wrong reasons for repelling people, where there is a lack of love in a congregation and among its members, and also where there is a loss of authority.

The prophets began their messages to the people, thus says the Lord. And that is still true in the Christian church. We preach not ourselves. We preach Jesus Christ and Him crucified, as Paul said.

We preach the whole counsel of God. What does the Bible say? And we have no right to turn away from anything in the Bible, however unpopular it may be in our society. And when there is no authority, then people are confused. They may not like things that we teach. They may not agree with a lot of Christianity, but as they look on. They become completely confused if the church modifies its message, if the church says, well, we believe this. Just to give one modern example, we believe this about marriage. We believe this is what God teaches. But, well, in the name of equality, in the name of what's happening in our society, let's just modify it a little bit to be more equal, to promote equality. But if the church loses biblical authority, then it will indeed repel even those who do not share our beliefs. It was said some time ago, a certain Archbishop of Canterbury was described as nailing his colors to the fence because he refused to speak clearly on what the Bible says on issues of his day. So, if there's a lack of love, if there's a loss of authority, and if there is in the church an insular attitude. Remember how the Lord Jesus said to his disciples in a time of much persecution, fear not, little flock. Well, indeed, the church is a little flock, and we thank God that numbers in that sense don't matter. We thank God that though the world may turn against Christ as it does, that we are His flock, and we follow the Good Shepherd. But it's so easy to have the mentality that we are the little flock, and so we'll close our doors, we'll enjoy each other's company as Christians, we'll do things the way we've always done them. We can't think of changing. I'm not referring to changing doctrine or changing biblical practice, but we can't make any change in order somehow or other to make better contact with the world outside. We're unwilling to make the effort because we're comfortable the way we are. So, these are wrong reasons for sadly repelling the world outside, a lack of love, a loss of authority, an insular attitude. And as I put this to you in bon accord so that you will examine your congregation and yourselves, so I do, thinking even now of the congregation of which I'm a member there in

Leith and Edinburgh. How do we measure up to the picture that's set before us here in Scripture? But there can be wrong reasons also for attracting or trying to attract the world outside, and some of them are the other side of the coin of what I've just said. For example, there can be an elimination of doctrine, eliminating doctrines that don't appeal to the world outside. Does the Bible speak of a final judgment? Does the Bible speak of God's hatred of sin? Does the Bible speak of a final destination, heaven or hell? Does the Bible tell us that God from all eternity elected a people to Himself? Does the Bible tell us that predestination is a biblical doctrine? Does the Bible? Does the Bible tell us that what God says in His Word is inspired and infallible and can't be adapted or modified to suit the prevailing intellectual or religious whims?

[15 : 38] Does the Bible tell us that we have to live lives of holiness, however much that holiness is derided in the world around us? Well, of course the Bible tells us all these things. And the church dare not modify or even reject any true biblical doctrine. So, eliminating doctrines are also emphasizing the spectacular, filling the church, filling the church perhaps with a kind of, well, modern attempt at the signs and wonders of which we're told here, apostolically granted, divinely given at that time. Instead of...now, I'm not making any comment on issues that are relevant in our denomination at the present time when I say that spectacular, the spectacular in the church may involve the kind of music taking over the worship and the preaching of the Word being squeezed out. Or other activities that...words of knowledge and so on that, again, squeeze out the true Word of God and bring men and women and their situation and their thoughts to the fore.

So, some of these things, yes, they can be used to attract the world outside. But they're wrong reasons. And just to mention one other one, it actually follows on from what I was saying to the children, and that's when the church becomes a social center and nothing else, the loaves and the fishes, which Jesus provided. And so, they were justified. They were compassionate. But when they likewise become the heart of the church's ministry instead of the ministry of the Word and the pointing out to men and women that they are sinners in the sight of the sight of God, they are sinners in the sight of God and need salvation through Jesus Christ. But when the church is what she is meant to be, according to the passage before us, the church will be both repelling and attracting the world outside. And so, I want to pass on to consider, firstly, why it is that it is right at times that the church should drive away those who are not believers.

And then we'll see how the church is called to attract others who also are not believers. There are two things with regard to this driving people away, two things that explain why, in the passage we read, it tells us that no one dared join them. Firstly, because the church is called to proclaim and to reflect the holiness of God. Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, describes the believers there as the church of God in Thessalonica. And that truly is what you and I are meant to be, the church where God is central, God is sovereign, God is the one who is to be worshiped, that God who is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being, holiness. It's my age, folks. I've just forgotten how it goes. In His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth. That's the way I used to say it as a child. It's that God, that God that we are called to worship, that God who is a consuming fire. That God before whom, or about whom, Manoah, the father of Samson, when he did a revelation of God and His holiness, telling him what he was going to do, we shall surely die, he says, because we have seen God. It's the attitude, it's the God who is expressed or described in Jacob's words there at

Bethel, when after his revelation in his sleep of God and his purposes, he says, surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it. He was afraid and said, how awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God. This is the gate of heaven. It's the God before whom Isaiah fell that day in the temple and said, woe is me, I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips, for I have seen the Lord, the Lord of hosts.

It's the God before whom Peter fell in the presence of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and said, depart from me, for I am a sinful man. It's the God who is described so often, all through the Psalms, the same God of holiness, of majesty, this God before whom you and I and the world outside must bow in utter reverence and godly fear. Psalm 99, for example, the Lord reigns, let the nations tremble, he sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake, great is the Lord in Zion, he is exalted over all the nations, let them praise your great and holy name. Or Psalm 97, clouds and thick darkness surround him, righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne, fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side, his lightning lights up the world, the earth sees and trembles.

[22 : 02] God is not a pally, cuddly kind of God, but a God who is holy, and a God who demands holiness from those who worship him. God, like the sunbeams that stream into our house or into the church and show up the dust, they show up the dust where we thought we had dusted but we hadn't. And so it is that in the presence of this holy God, the sin of men and women is exposed. And the Bible doesn't just tell us, and this passage doesn't just teach us that we should respect and acknowledge and fear with a godly fear the holiness of God, but we must reflect it. If you're going to be part of this body, which is the church of Jesus Christ, we have to say to men and women that they have to bow in repentance and faith before Jesus Christ, and then they must be like him, and they must live lives of holiness, be holy as I am holy. And Ananias and Sapphira failed the test. They were part of the church outwardly. Maybe they were true believers. I hope they were. Probably they were. But they failed in the test of reflecting the holiness of God. And David, that man of God, how he failed. We know the kind of things he did, and we know how the prophet had to come to him and say, because you're not living a holy life, you have caused the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme. And to take the words of the Song of

Solomon referring to the Bridegroom, but also surely meant to be a description of the church of Jesus Christ, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as the stars in procession. So, is it any wonder that there were those who didn't dare join the Christian church, because they sensed the holiness of the holiness of the God whom these people worshiped? And also, the church living as she should live drives away people, not only because she proclaims and reflects the holiness of God, but because, and this follows, because she demands a consistent life from her members. And the world outside must know what standards are expected in the church if they are to become part of it. We know, of course, that the Ten Commandments are there as a foundation, the Ten Commandments not just in their outward form, but in their inward spiritual form that Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount. Not there for our salvation by our keeping of them, but there to describe the kind of people we ought to be if we are part of the church of Jesus Christ. Paul puts it this way, that we must live a life fitting for saints. And among many passages, let me just read from Ephesians 5 at verse 8, if someone comes into this church, wants to be part of the church. Paul says, for you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light, for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness, and truth. And find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.

And this, of course, involves church discipline, as happened with Ananias and Sapphira, and is still relevant in the church today. But the world outside tends to say, well, why should I? What business as a church to cartel my liberty to decide on the way I want to live? And the church should be such a body, with the holiness of God in her midst, that those who do not wish to bow to the yoke of Jesus Christ in repentance and faith. Hard words. But it should be true of them that they dare not join a body such as that. But that's only one side of the coin. We can't leave this in isolation, because the passage tells us that the church, at one and the same time, must drive people away, but also draw people in.

And it's interesting, isn't it, how it says that, you know, nobody dared join them. And then the very next verse goes on to say, not only that there were people who believed, but it says, more and more men and women believed, and they joined them, and they were added to their number. So, what is it that should attract those people as they were attracted then? Let me mention three things as we draw to a close.

And this may seem very contradictory, because the first thing that I mention is holiness. Holiness should attract sinners outside. Now, haven't we just said that true holiness repels sinful men and women? Isn't it the case that men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil?

[28 : 02] But here's a strange phenomenon, isn't it? That this holiness of which the Bible speaks, yes, it drives away, for our God is a consuming fire in His holiness. But at the same time, amazingly, wonderfully, wonderfully, this very holiness attracts sinners, even without their being willing to, even without their realizing why. There's some very striking words in John Milton's famous epic poem, Paradise Lost. The situation is that Satan has rebelled against God with his rebel angels. He's been driven out of heaven, and Milton paints a scene where one of God's angels, the cherub, is pronouncing judgment on Satan. And here's what it says, You get the picture.

He hated holiness. He hated holiness. But now he realizes how beautiful, how lovely holiness is. But for him, it's gone forever. For him, there is only despair. But for the world outside, those who today are maybe denouncing the church as being old-fashioned and not going along with the times, especially in some of the ethical issues that are being discussed in Parliament and elsewhere at the present time, the world outside, which mocks Christians, we don't want the kind of grim life that you folk live.

Yet, when through the faithful witness of God's people and the faithful ministry of God's Word, when there's opportunity to bring it to them, they sense the reality, something of the reality and the beauty of holiness. The holiness that, like Satan here, they turned away from, and yet there is that drawing power.

I can think of when the smoking ban started coming in in England. We were living in London, and in the city center where our church was, there were lots of office blocks. And you used to see office workers standing outside having a puff at their cigarettes. And I remember once or twice just making a friendly comment to some of them. I must admit I didn't feel overly sympathetic, even if it was raining or snowing. But make a friendly comment and say, it's hard for you, isn't it, to have to go out into the snow and the rain just to have a cigarette? And quite a few times there were some who would say to me, yeah, it is, but you know, we're glad for it. And how many said, I really want to stop smoking.

I've been trying to stop smoking for ages. I know it's not good for my health, but I haven't the willpower. I can't do it. I know life without smoking is much better, but I'm hooked. But this helps me. I can't smoke now inside the office. It's hard to come out here and do it. So, sometimes if it's really cold, I don't do it. And little by little, I'm learning to do without the cigarettes. And you see the point.

[31 : 56] They want this life. They want a life that's healthy. They want a life that's not dominated by tobacco. They can't do it of themselves. And they're grateful that there are others who have put in place some measures at least that will help them. And so, the world outside, if you and I are living holy, godly lives, if this church, yes, loving, yes, caring, we'll see that, but if we are also holy, reflecting in our lives, our lifestyle, in our words, our thoughts, our actions, the purity and the holiness of God, don't be surprised if the very people who hate it will perhaps come along in response to an invitation. And that very holiness will, instead of repelling, attract them to the Lord. Just to mention briefly a couple of other things. When there is holiness, when there is unity, because we read in these early chapters of the book of Acts that the believers were of one accord.

They shared with those in need. There was the family spirit. They were fulfilling what Jesus said, I pray that there may be one that the world may see and believe. And when we as a congregation, you as a congregation, are demonstrating in your worship, in your life, in your action, in your relations with other churches where the gospel is faithfully preached, that you are all one in Christ Jesus, all races, all ages, all social classes, well, I don't need to develop this, because you know it, and thank God I know that it is practiced in this congregation. Then, by God's grace, the world will be attracted to the church of Christ. And I finish with love. I began by saying that the lack of love would be a reason, sadly a wrong reason, why people are repelled from the church of

Christ. But the church that is to fulfill what we read here, the church that is to see men and women coming in, believing, being added to our number, is the church, of course, that shows compassion. We see it here, compassion for the sick and for the poor, the kind of compassion that I was referring to in our own church, the kind of compassion you seek to exercise in cooperation with the Bethany Christian Trust, and we thank God for them and for their ministry. But the greatest expression of all, of that love of God that has been poured out in our hearts, is when we engage in true evangelism, when we make the gospel known to all and sundry, and then we find that believers are added to the church, and when there is a preaching here as people are brought in that points them to the love of Calvary of the Lord Jesus Christ, then, friends, I hope and pray that you will see the kind of thing that that church in Corinth saw. When that man, Paul tells us, 1 Corinthians 14, he's wandering along, don't know what his situation is, don't know if he's troubled, don't know if he's lonely, but he realizes something's happening. He goes in where there is a church, and God's Word has been preached, and the believers are together, and there's a sense of holiness and a sense of love. And as God's Word is faithfully preached, not watered down in any way, we read that the thoughts of his heart are exposed, not to everybody around, but to himself, and he is brought to repentance. And he falls down and he says, truly, God is among you. May God help us so to live as a church of Jesus Christ. Let us pray.