



The Boldness of Spirit-Filled Believers (Acts 4:1-31)

Commentary: Week Nine

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

New American Commentary¹

3. Peter and John Before the Sanhedrin [4:1-22](#)

Up until this point in Acts, there had been no resistance to the Christians on the part of the Jews. Indeed, the picture has been that of the general acceptance and favor accorded them by the people (cf. [2:47](#)). In chap. [4](#) the picture changes. Not, however, with the people. They still were responding favorably to the message of the apostles, indeed, in an overwhelming way (cf. [4:4](#)). It was the officials who turned against the apostles, and not even all of them. The primary enemy was the priestly Sadducean aristocracy for whom the Christians were a serious threat to the status quo. Twice they arrested the apostles. The first time occurred here, as they descended upon Peter and John in the course of their witness in the temple square. This time the two apostles were given a “preliminary hearing” in their proclamation of Christ. Because the apostles did not heed this warning and preached Christ all the more, the Sadducees were enraged, and they arrested and tried all the apostles ([5:17-42](#)).

This section falls into two natural divisions, corresponding to the arrest of the apostles ([4:3](#)) and their release ([4:21](#)). The first section treats the arrest, interrogation, and defense of Peter and John ([4:1-12](#)). The second relates the deliberations of the court, the warning to the apostles, their response, and their release ([4:13-22](#)).

(1) Arrested and Interrogated [4:1-12](#)

THE ARREST ([4:1-4](#)). [4:1](#) Peter’s sermon was suddenly interrupted by an official contingency comprised of priests, the captain of the temple guard, and Sadducees, who “descended upon” the apostles. That Luke used the plural “while *they* were speaking” is interesting. It was Peter’s sermon that was interrupted. As always he was the spokesman, but the plural shows that John was not silent. Like all the apostles, he also was bearing his witness to Christ.

The priests who were present in the arresting company were perhaps those who were on duty that day for the evening sacrifice. The captain of the temple (*stratēgos*) was probably the official whom the *Mishna* designates the *sagan*. The *sagan* had extensive duties, which included assisting the high priest in all ceremonies and serving as his alternate in such capacities. Ranking second in the priestly hierarchy, he was always chosen from one of the families of the priestly aristocracy. Indeed, serving as *sagan* was viewed as a stepping-stone to appointment as high priest. The *sagan*’s involvement in this scene is particularly appropriate since he had ultimate responsibility for order in the temple grounds and had the

1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 136-150.

power to arrest. His linkage with the Sadducees here is also quite natural. Representing the priestly aristocracy, he belonged to their ranks.

The Sadducees were clearly the powers behind the arrest of the two. Josephus listed them as one of the three “schools of thought” among the Jews of the first century, along with the Pharisees and Essenes (*Ant.* 13.171). The origin of their name is disputed but may go back to Zadok, the high priest in Solomon’s day. The Sadducees of the first century represented the “conservative” viewpoint. They rejected the oral traditions of the Pharisees and considered only the written Torah of the Pentateuch as valid. They considered the concepts of demons and angels, immortality and resurrection as innovations, believing in no life beyond this life.

More important than their theology, however, was their political orientation. Coming largely from the landed aristocracy, they were accommodationists with regard to the Roman occupation of Israel. Possessing considerable economic interests, their concern was to make peace with the Romans, preserve the status quo, and thus protect their own holdings. In return the Romans accorded the Sadducees considerable power, invariably appointing the high priest from their ranks, who was the most powerful political figure among the Jews in that day. The prime concern of the Sadducean aristocracy, of whom the high priest was the chief spokesman, was the preservation of order, the avoidance at all costs of any confrontation with the Roman authorities.

[4:2](#) The Sadducees’ annoyance at Peter and John’s witness to the resurrection was not so much theological as political, as was generally the case with the Sadducees. Note the wording in v. [2](#): not “they were proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus” but “they were proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead.” The idea of a general resurrection was an apocalyptic concept with all sorts of messianic overtones. Messianic ideas among the Jews of that day meant revolt, overthrow of the foreign overlords, and restoration of the Davidic kingdom. There had been such movements before (cf. [5:36–37](#)), and the Romans had put them down. There would be many more in the future. In fact, the worst fears of the Sadducees were indeed realized when war broke out with the Romans in A.D. 66, with terrible consequences for the Jews. Here, with the large crowds surrounding Peter and John, their fears were aroused. The notes of Peter’s sermon alarmed them: resurrection, Author of life, a new Moses. These were revolutionary ideas. The movement must not spread. It must be nipped in the bud.

[4:3](#) So they arrested Peter and John and placed them “in jail” until next morning. The Jewish high court, the Sanhedrin, had jurisdiction over matters of temple violation. It met regularly each day, with the exception of Sabbaths and feast days. Since it was now already evening and the Sanhedrin had already recessed, Peter and John would have to be detained until the court reconvened in the morning.

[4:4](#) Verse [4](#) comes almost as an intrusion in the narrative. It is not so. The interruption had been the arrest. Luke returned to Peter’s temple sermon. Despite adversities the sermon was no failure. Many did respond and place their faith in the Author of life. So much was this the case that the total number of Jewish Christians came to 5,000. Not only does this serve as a suitable climax to the sermon of chap. [3](#), but it also serves as an introduction to the trial scene of [4:5–22](#). The Sadducees tried their best to stop the witness of the apostles. They did not succeed. The Christian message was finding too much acceptance with the people. The rulers raged, but it was all in vain ([4:25](#)).

THE COUNCIL’S INQUIRY ([4:5–7](#)). [4:5](#) The next morning the council convened to hear the apostles, just as they had tried Jesus in a morning session ([Luke 22:66](#)). At this point Luke did not use the term Sanhedrin, but it appears at v. [15](#). The term was also used of minor, local courts; but the reference here was to the supreme court of the land, which held the jurisdiction over the temple area. Exactly where it met is uncertain. Josephus indicated that it met outside the temple precincts and just to the west of it, while the rabbinic sources placed it within the temple area in a room especially designated for it on the

south side of the forecourt. Its origin seems to date to Hellenistic times when Israel was a client-nation and no longer had a king as its supreme political authority.

Matters regarding local jurisdiction were entrusted by the Hellenistic overlords to a council of Jews, which developed into the Sanhedrin of New Testament times. It seems to have consisted of seventy-one members, based on [Num 11:16](#), counting the seventy elders mentioned there plus Moses as presiding officer. The presiding officer in the New Testament period was the high priest. At first the Council seems to have consisted primarily of the leading priests and lay elders from the aristocracy. From the time of Queen Alexandra (76–67 B.C.), however, Pharisees were admitted on the Council. Probably always in the minority, the latter still had considerable clout because of their popularity with the people (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 13.298).

The picture of the assembly here in v. [5](#) comports well with the known composition of the body. It consisted of the ruling priests, the elders, and the scribes. Luke used the term “rulers,” but this almost certainly refers to the priestly representation on the Sanhedrin. Verse [6](#) mentions four of these plus an unspecified additional number of members from the high-priestly families. The “elders” were the lay members from the Jewish aristocracy, probably comprising the bulk of the entire body and being of Sadducean persuasion. The “teachers” were the scribes, students of the law and responsible for interpreting it before the body. Most scribes were of Pharisaic outlook, so it was likely in this group that the Pharisees were represented on the Sanhedrin.

[4:6](#) In v. [6](#) Luke gave an “aside” that mentions by name several of the high-priestly group represented on the Council. Annas is named as high priest. Actually, Annas was high priest from A.D. 6–15, and at this time (early A.D. 30s) his son-in-law Caiaphas was the reigning high priest. Luke’s attribution of the title to Annas may reflect the actual state of affairs. Annas was the most powerful political figure among the Jews at that time. Five of his sons, one grandson, and a son-in-law all acquired the rank of high priest. He may well have been the power behind the scenes, calling all the shots. Caiaphas, Annas’s son-in-law, was high priest from A.D. 18–36, the longest tenure of any high priest during New Testament times. He seems to have struck it off well with Pilate, since he survived the entire period of the latter’s term of office. He and his father-in-law were instrumental in the conviction of Jesus ([John 11:49f.](#); [18:13f.](#)). At this time they were considering a pair of his followers whom they probably saw as equally threatening to the peace and consequently to their own considerable interests.

There is no known John among those who held the office of high priest. Codex Bezae, however, reads “Jonathan” in this verse. If one follows that variant, he would then be the Jonathan, son of Annas, who served as high priest in A.D. 36–37. No record exists of an Alexander who served as high priest in the New Testament period. He may have belonged to one of the families of the priestly aristocracy.

[4:7](#) The interrogation began with the apostles being brought before the Council. The Greek says literally “in the middle” (v. [7](#)), which comports well with the rabbinic statement that the Sanhedrin sat in a semicircle: “The Sanhedrin was arranged like the half of a round threshing-floor so that they might all see one another. Before them stood the two scribes of the judges, one to the right and one to the left, and they wrote down the words of them that favored acquittal and the words of them that favored conviction.” The question was then posed to the apostles: “By what power or what name did you do this?” The verb is plural, as if the Court asked the question in unison; but one would assume that the high priest, as presiding officer, served as spokesman in beginning the interrogation. Some interpreters assume that the question has to do with the man’s healing, but the main reason for the arrest had been the preaching of the apostles (v. [2](#)). They were concerned about the source of the disciples’ teaching and the possibility that their emphasis on the resurrection could lead to a major messianic insurrection with serious political repercussions. They were concerned about authority, proper accreditation, law and order, keeping the peace.

PETER'S RESPONSE ([4:8–12](#)). [4:8](#) The question as to the “name” behind their preaching was a question of accreditation and authorization, but Peter could not let this one get by. The lame man was healed by the name of Jesus. If the Sanhedrin wanted to know about that name, he would tell them all about it. Instead of the expected defense, Peter gave them a sermon. In fulfillment of Jesus' promise ([Luke 12:11f.](#)), he was given a special endowment of the Holy Spirit to bear his witness with boldness.

Verses [9–12](#) comprise a minis sermon on “the name that brings salvation.” It begins with the reference to the name raised by the Sanhedrin and repeated by Peter (vv. [7, 10](#)), which is linked to the word “saved” with regard to the healing of the man (v. [9](#)). These two concepts are brought back together at the conclusion, with the reference to salvation in no other name (v. [12](#)). The crux of the sermon is a play on the Greek word *sōzō*, which means both physical “salvation” in the sense of healing (v. [9](#)) as well as the spiritual, eschatological sense of salvation (v. [12](#)). The physical “salvation” of the lame man through the name of Jesus is thus a pointer to the far greater salvation that comes to all who call upon his name in faith.

[4:9](#) In many ways Peter's testimony before the Sanhedrin is a condensed form of his address in Solomon's Colonnade. It began with a reference to the healing of the lame man (v. [9](#)). The crowd in the temple wondered about the source of the lame man's healing, and Peter pointed to the name of Jesus. The Sanhedrin wanted to know about the name, and Peter pointed them to the healing of the lame man. The two go together: wholeness, salvation, is in the name of Jesus; the name of Jesus brings wholeness. Peter's words contain a bit of irony. The rulers were worried about the political dangers of the “name” the apostles were preaching. “This name is not destructive,” said Peter; “it brings good things; it brings wholeness” (author's paraphrase). Peter underlined his point. “Be very sure of this,” he said, “you and everyone else in Israel.”

[4:10–11](#) Peter was ready to preach to all, even the Sanhedrin. But like the crowd in the Colonnade, the judges in the Sanhedrin rejected the *name* that could bring them salvation. Peter repeated the familiar kerygmatic formula: “Whom you crucified, but whom God raised.” Indeed, it is by the very fact that God has exalted him that the power had come for healing the man. The themes are the same as before: the healing name of Jesus, which proves his resurrection and points to his salvation, the guilt of the Jews who rejected him. Also, as before, there is a proof from Scripture, this time from [Ps 118:22](#). It establishes the guilt of the Sanhedrin. They were the “builders,” the leaders of the nation, who rejected the very rock on which God's people are to be built. Very early [Ps 118:22](#) came to be viewed by the Christians as pointing to Christ, the one rejected by his own people, whom God made the crowning stone of his people. This text also appears in [Luke 20:17](#) as well as in [1 Pet 2:7](#) and in both passages is linked to other Old Testament texts that incorporate a “stone” motif. Many see this as evidence that the early Christian community made collections of Old Testament texts that were applied to Christ.

[4:12](#) All Peter's sermons to this point ended with an appeal, but there seems to be none here. The appeal, however, is present implicitly. If there is salvation in no other name (v. [12](#)), then obviously one must make a commitment to that sole name that brings salvation. But the appeal is even stronger than that. Peter switched to the first person at the end of the verse, “by which we must be saved,” amounting to a direct appeal to the Sanhedrin. Peter had been bold indeed. He had come full circle. They asked for the name in whom his authority rested. He answered their question. It was the name, the power of Jesus. He directed the charges. The Council had rejected the one who bore this powerful name. The ultimate verdict rested with them. Would they continue to reject the one whom God had placed as the final stone for his people, the only name under heaven in which they would find their own salvation? The final verdict would rest in their own decision.

(2) Warned and Released [4:13–22](#)

[4:13–14](#) Peter had borne his testimony. It was now time for the Council to deliberate. They assessed the evidence (vv. [13–14](#)). First, there was the courage, the sheer freedom with which Peter spoke. They hardly expected this from men who had no formal education in matters of the law, who were ordinary laymen. Then there was the fact that they had been with Jesus. He too had been just a “commoner” but also with an amazing boldness and knowledge beyond his training. But he too had been a dangerous person, a threat to their peace; and they consequently had condemned him to death. Finally, there was the healed man, standing with them before the Tribunal. Whether he was there voluntarily in support of Peter and John or whether he had been summoned as a witness, we are not told. In any event there he was, standing there, “exhibit A,” a “known sign” (v. [16](#)). He was hard to overlook. It was hardly a clear-cut case. The Council sat in silence. At this point there was nothing they could say. Indeed, Jesus’ promise was being fulfilled before the apostles’ eyes ([Luke 21:15](#)). The irony can scarcely be missed—the accused spoke with utter boldness and freedom; their accusers sat in stony silence.

[4:15–17](#) When the Sanhedrin ordered Peter and John out of the courtroom (v. [15](#)), they were following normal procedure. Their custom after hearing the witnesses was to dismiss them in order to have as clear and open a discussion among themselves as possible. In this instance they were at something of a loss. They really had no charge to lay upon them. Further, the accused were popular with the people, for the news about healing of the lame man had already spread throughout Jerusalem. There was only one thing they could do—they could threaten. They would warn the apostles to no longer speak “in this name” (v. [17](#)).

[4:18–19](#) Although only implicit at this point, this would also establish culpability should the apostles decide to transgress the interdiction of the court (cf. [5:28](#)). So the apostles were brought back into the court and given the warning. They were no longer “to speak and teach in the name of Jesus” (v. [18](#)). The warning was given in narrative style rather than in direct speech, perhaps Luke’s way of underlining the timidity of the Council on the whole matter. The response of Peter and John was in direct discourse; it was bold and almost defiant: “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God.”

[4:20–22](#) The response was much the same as that given by Socrates to his Athenian accusers who warned him to desist from his teaching. The saying had become quite proverbial, however, and was widely used by Jews and Greeks. It would seem a bit ironic if these unlearned and common men (v. [13](#)) were throwing the words of the Greek philosopher at them. The stronger irony, however, is in the boldness of the apostles and the timidity of their accusers. The apostles could only speak of what they had seen and heard (v. [20](#)). They were the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ entire ministry ([1:21f.](#)), the witnesses to his resurrection ([2:32](#); [3:15](#)). Peter and John had no choice but to defy the court’s order, for it had “stepped in between the conscience and God.” The court had no alternative but to threaten them further and release them (v. [21](#)). They could find no grounds for punishing them at this point, and they feared the apostles’ popularity with the populace. The man, born lame, was over forty years old (v. [22](#)), so the miracle was particularly striking; and the people took it for what it was, an act of God, a sign. The little word “sign” should not be overlooked in the Greek text of v. [22](#). That is what the man’s healing had been—a sign to the temple crowd in Solomon’s Colonnade that attracted them to the gospel and ultimately to faith. It had been a sign to the Sanhedrin as well, a pointer to the sole name in which salvation (ultimate “healing”) is to be found. There is no record of response for Peter’s appeal to the Sanhedrin, as there was for his temple sermon (v. [4](#)). Here for the first time is found a theme that will recur throughout Acts—the rejection of the Messiah by the Jews. For many of them, particularly their official leadership, he was, and continued to be, the stone rejected by the builders.

4. The Prayer of the Community [4:23–31](#)

Peter's first sermon, at Pentecost, was followed by a glimpse into the common life of the Christians in Jerusalem ([2:42–47](#)). Here, after Peter's witness before the crowd in the temple square and before the Sanhedrin, we are again given a glimpse into the life of the Christian community. Just as chap. [2](#) spoke of their common prayer life ([2:42](#)), here again the prayer of the Christians is emphasized, with the major difference being that what was mentioned in summary fashion in the former passage is here related concretely with an example of their prayers.

[4:23](#) Verse [23](#) provides the setting and the linkage with the preceding narrative. After their release Peter and John returned "to their own people." Many interpreters see this as referring only to the other apostles, viewing vv. [24–30](#) as the apostles' prayer for boldness in their witness. The apostles, however, were not the only bold witnesses in Acts. Note Stephen ([6:10](#)) and Philip ([8:5](#)), to mention only the next two major witnesses in Acts. The whole community was involved in the proclamation of the word, and the community gathered for prayer when the apostles were in difficulty (cf. [12:12](#)). That is the picture here—the Christians gathered to pray for the deliverance of the two apostles from the Sanhedrin. When Peter and John arrived on the scene, they informed them of the warning given by "the chief priest and elders." The fellowship responded with praise to God for delivering the apostles (vv. [24–28](#)) and a petition for courage to continue their bold witness in the face of such opposition (vv. [29–30](#)).

[4:24–28](#) Together they lifted their voices in praise to God. That they offered an occasional prayer of this nature in unison is unlikely. Luke was simply expressing that the whole community joined together in this prayer. God was addressed as "Sovereign Lord," a common designation for God in the Old Testament and appropriate to this gathering of Jewish Christians. God was further addressed as Creator, Maker of heaven, earth, the seas and all that dwell in them, again in language thoroughly steeped in Old Testament phraseology (cf. [Exod 20:11](#)). More than that the whole form of the prayer has Old Testament precedents. Compare Hezekiah's prayer in [Isa 37:16–20](#), where the same elements appear: God was addressed as Lord and Creator, there followed a reference to the threat of Israel's enemies, and the prayer concluded with a petition. It is in the petition that the major difference from the Christians' prayer appears. Hezekiah prayed for deliverance. The Christians prayed for courage.

In the community's prayer the reference to the threat of enemies is given in the form of a scriptural proof. The Scripture is in the exact Septuagintal rendering of [Ps 2:1–2](#) and is presented as a prophecy, spoken by God through David under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Most likely originally relating to God's triumph over Israel's enemies through the anointed king, the Christians came to see it as in a real sense prophetic of Christ. All the details of these first verses of the psalm were applicable to the passion of Christ, and the Christians did so in their prayer (v. [27](#)). The raging nations represented the Gentile rulers and their cohorts, the soldiers who executed Jesus. The people of Israel were those who plotted in vain. Herod represented the "kings of the earth"; Pilate, the "rulers"; and Christ, the "anointed" of God. Here again as in chap. [3](#) the title "servant" is applied to Jesus. Here in a prayer the term is primarily liturgical and is applied to David as well in v. [25](#). The theme of v. [28](#) is by now familiar. All the plotting against God's anointed is in vain because God has already predetermined the outcome (cf. [2:23](#); [3:18](#)). In the paradox of human freedom and divine sovereignty, despite all the raging of humanity, God's purposes prevail. They did so in Christ. They did so with the apostles before the Sanhedrin.

[4:29–30](#) The community turned to its petition: "Now, Lord, consider their threats." Whose threats? The Sanhedrin's, of course. Just like the threats, plots, and rages against Jesus, the community viewed itself in much the situation he had experienced. The authorities had raged against him, and God made him to triumph in the power of his resurrection. So now the same temporal powers had raged and plotted against the apostles. Like Christ, God had delivered them. The Christians realized that the opposition was not over. The Sanhedrin continued to threaten them. One would expect them to ask God for further deliverance. They did not. Instead, they asked for more of the same, requesting of him boldness in

witness and further miraculous signs. The request for miracle was not a request for power over their enemies. It was closely related to the request for boldness in witness.

In Acts the miracles are always in the service of the word. They are “signs” in the sense that they point beyond themselves to the ultimate power of the gospel message of Christ’s resurrection and the salvation that is in him ([4:12](#)). That was amply illustrated in the miracle they experienced. The healing of the lame man started the whole train of events that took them before the Sanhedrin. The healing did not deliver them from danger; if anything, it provoked it. On the other hand, the healing first attracted those who listened to Peter’s sermon in Solomon’s Colonnade and responded to the word in faith. This is what the community prayed for—more signs to undergird the word, more boldness to proclaim it. They surely knew what the result would be—more persecution.

[4:31](#) Their prayer was answered by the shaking of the house. Perhaps a shaking from thunder or a quaking of the earth, it gave them a tangible sense of God’s presence and his response to their prayer. And their prayer was fulfilled at once. Immediately they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word with boldness, just as they had petitioned. This was not a “second Pentecost.” They had already received the Spirit. The Spirit had helped Peter and John in a mighty way before the Sanhedrin. It was a fresh filling, a renewed awareness of the Spirit’s power and presence in their life and witness. This was not an ephemeral ecstatic manifestation but a fresh endowment of power for witness that would continue (cf. [4:33](#)).