

Fanning the flames: Sunday, April 22

*Acts 5:17-42*

by [Heidi A. Peterson](#) in the [April 11, 2001](#) issue

Alice Thompson lived with her parents in rural southern Illinois. Besides a house and a tool shed, the other building on their small acreage was a chicken coop where the egg-laying hens roosted. When young Alice found some matches, she took them into the chicken coop to see if she could figure out how to strike one. She did figure it out, and held the burning wooden matchstick until it got too hot, then dropped it. Instead of burning out, the bit of flame fell on a piece of straw, which came alive with fire.

Determined that no one know about the matches, Alice covered up the flame with readily available material—a handful of straw. For a minute, it seemed to work, but then the pile began to smolder. She decided to smother the whole thing, so she scooped up a full armload of straw to bury the evidence once and for all. Satisfied that she had finally taken care of the matter, she ran out into the yard to play. Soon the chicken coop had burned to the ground.

The high priest saw a fire starting and wanted to get it under control. Burying Jesus seemed like the best solution. If he were done with Jesus, then he would be done with civil unrest, and done with excited crowds. If he were done with Jesus, he could get back to the story of his life the way it was originally written—with the high priest as the central religious figure, the true keeper of God. After all, he had a demanding job. Besides managing the temple, he had Rome to consider. The whole Jesus flap created the kind of disturbance that might bother the emperor.

Disappointingly, the death of Jesus only yielded three days of calm before the disciples came out of hiding claiming that he was raised to new life. By Pentecost the flames were beginning to roar. As the high priest's frustration escalated, so did his attempts to deter Jesus' disciples from teaching, healing and preaching.

The disciples gave the high priest a headache, especially the one named Peter. He already had been detained once, but when the council of elders listened to his appeal they could find no reason to keep detaining him. The high priest seemed determined not to make that mistake again. This time he jailed Peter and his comrades straight away. No Miranda. No “one phone call.” But no need for them either, as the prison locks were not an effective barrier to the Holy Spirit. Before daylight Peter had returned to the scene of his crime and picked up where he had left off teaching. Until the police found him he was free to tell the story a few more times to a few more people. He would not be found in hiding. The whole point of being free was being free to do ministry.

The passage presents a striking contrast between the disposition and mission of the high priest and that of Peter. Throughout, the priest is beset with anger and fear over his mission of shutting Peter down. But not Peter, who is focused on the dissemination of the gospel—a mission that affords him a joyful and resilient attitude.

The high priest’s questioning of Peter was to the point. Why have you defied my express directive to desist this witnessing? There was a time when Peter might have thought that a reasonable question. There was a time when Peter thought the Holy Spirit could be managed if human beings were just properly instructed in matters of authority and restraint. Right after experiencing the transfiguration, he and companions James and John had spoken sternly to a man who was casting out demons in Jesus’ name. They reasoned that the man was not on the official roster of disciples. They even reported the incident to Jesus as if they had done a good thing (Luke 9:49-50).

But that was before: before Jesus’ crucifixion, before Peter’s own denial, before Peter saw the risen Christ, before the church received the gift of the Spirit. At this point, when the high priest forbids Peter to witness, he might as well have been forbidding Peter to breathe.

Peter’s answer makes clear that from his perspective the role the high priest plays is not that of authority but of executioner. The council is enraged to the point of wanting to silence Peter forever, as they thought they had silenced Jesus. They are politicians who fear a loss of power and credibility, as well as repercussions from Rome. They are the officials of faith, and do not take kindly to being upstaged in the realm of religion. They are spiritual beings and do not welcome the realization that

they have grown distant from God. Killing Peter could solve the problem of his filling up Jerusalem with impassioned teaching and relieve the building pressure of their rage.

But in the end, the level head and historic perspective of council member Gamaliel prevailed. He recognized that this criminal was not a common market thief, and that in time one of two things would happen. The chicken coop would be reduced to ashes and lost to memory, or the fire would spread, refusing to burn itself out. It was beyond the power of the high priest to determine the outcome.

He could only order that the accused be flogged and scolded, a dishonor that Peter interpreted as an honor in a manner that Reformer John Calvin echoed: "For whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship ought to prepare themselves for a hard, toilsome and unquiet life, crammed with very many and various kinds of evil."