

The Sanhedrin's Snafu

Acts 5:14-42

Introduction

I have read that one of the words that came out of World War II was the word “snafu”. Spelled “S-N-A-F-U,” it is really an acronym for, “situation normal, all fouled up”. You have probably used the word to say, “That was quite a ‘snafu’,” when referring to a big mess. The *Chicago Tribune* wrote that the Pentagon later scrapped that word for a new pet word, “fubb”. It is another acronym that simply means, “fouled up beyond belief”. Maybe you can use it some time this week.

If the leaders of the nation Israel could have defined their state of affairs during the time of chapter 5 of Acts, they would have been mumbling “snafu” and “fubb” over and over again. From their perspective, over the course of the next twenty-four hours, things would go from bad to worse. The apostles would just not go away, and now there were more and more people, including priests, defecting from Judaism and accepting Jesus Christ as their risen Lord.

The Sanhedrin's Snafu

Look at verses 14 through 16 of Acts, chapter 5.

And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number; to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and pallets,

...

(the word “cot” refers to a small couch or bed that was a piece of furniture of the wealthy; the word “pallet” refers to the straw mattress commonly used by the poor – so Luke is giving us insight into the fact that

rich and poor were both wanting to be healed by the apostle),

... so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. Also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed.

This gives us a picture that we have previously studied of the magnificent, although temporary, power that God gave His apostles as He established this new era. All of the eras that God established from Genesis onward, were miracle eras that validated the message of those servants who spoke in His name.

You cannot imagine this electrifying scene. There are no long prayers; there is no faith that anyone is mustering up. In fact, the Bible tells us that *all* were healed; there were no failures. We are not even told that there was faith in Christ among those who were healed. They simply put their cots and pallets out and God was validating the message of this new church to be true. The implication is that Peter could even walk by and his shadow fall on one and they would be healed.

The Sanhedrin's jealousy

Now, something has to happen at this point. Verse 17 tells us.

But the high priest rose up, along with all his associates (that is the sect of the Sadducees), and they were filled with ...

(. . . concern for the truth . . . righteous indignation . . . care for the Israelites? *No!* They were filled with . . .),

. . . *jealousy*.

Do not overlook the motive for everything these leaders did. The guardians of the law were so concerned with guarding their own jobs that they ignored the fulfillment of the law through Christ.

This is not the first time nor will it be the last time that jealousy and envy rear their ugly heads.

Matthew, chapter 27, verse 18, informed us that as the Jewish leaders were crying for Barabbas to be released instead of Jesus, that,

. . . *[Pilate] knew that because of envy they had handed Him over.*

In Acts, chapter 7, verse 9a, Stephen stands before the Sanhedrin and reveals,

The patriarchs became jealous of Joseph and sold him into Egypt. . . .

The implication is that the Sanhedrin delivered up their Redeemer because of their jealousy.

In Acts, chapter 13, verses 44 and 45a, we are told,

The next Sabbath nearly the whole city assembled to hear the word of the Lord. But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul . . .

Acts, chapter 17, verses 4 and 5a, tells us that,

And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, along with a large number of the God-fearing Greeks and a number of the leading women. But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar . . .

Isn't that incredible? The human emotion that delivered Jesus up, stoned Stephen, and harassed and Paul and Silas was nothing other than crass jealousy! Their only thought was, "They're stealing power and attention away from us. Let's do away with them!"

Aren't you glad that Christians do not struggle with that? Aren't you glad that the church is not a place of competition, or envy, or jealousy, but is a place where we all automatically serve one another

and esteem the other better than ourselves? On no, far from it!

Paul had to denounce the early church in Corinth for their divisive envy and jealousy. In fact, turn to James, chapter 3, where we are warned of what we see in the Sanhedrin, because it could be seen in us as well. Look at verse 13a. James is writing these very interesting words to the scattered believers.

Who among you is wise and understanding?

. . .

In other words, who, in the assembly, considers themselves to be a wise and understanding person? Well, what is the test? Verse 13b and 14 give us the test.

. . . Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.

In other words, "Don't call it something else. Don't lie about the truth of the fact that it is simple ambition and competitiveness and envy."

The truth is, it is selfish ambition and envy and James says, in verse 15,

This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic.

In fact, you can track this all the way back to the garden, where the enemy of this future church, as we are told in Genesis, chapter 3, would whisper into the first woman's ear, "You know, God has something you don't. Doesn't that bother you?"

Continue to verse 16.

For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.

This is not written to Madison Avenue or to Wall Street. It was written to the church. Skip to chapter 4, verses 1 through 4a.

What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures. You adulteresses, do you not know that

friendship with the world is hostility toward God? . . .

Who is James writing to in these verses? Pagan unbelievers? No! He is writing to Christians! He is saying that believers, who are supposed to be faithful to God, have envy and jealousy in the body and in their lives. They want the things that others have; they want the position and the power that others have and seek to get it for themselves. James says, “You create a church of disorder and every evil thing.”

James continues in verse 4b.

. . . Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

So, you act the adulterer. You are supposed to be faithful to God, but you pursue all of these things for your own pleasure and you become an adulterer; that is, against God, you are unfaithful.

Continue to verse 5.

Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: “He jealously desires the spirit which He has made to dwell in us?”

It is interesting that James uses the word “jealous” for God. While you jealously pursue the things that you would heap upon your own pleasures and lusts, James says, God is jealous over you that you might be dominated by the Spirit.

So, the question is, “What is it that you are really jealous about? Are we jealous of those things that others have that we don’t – power, position, reputation, popularity, things, stuff – or are we jealous to have the Spirit of God dominate our lives?”

The Sanhedrin is in the process of self-destructing. Titus, the general, will, in just a few years, come and squash Jerusalem. He will send the nation of Israel, having been judged by God at that point in AD 70, into oblivion.

I want to make that point simply because, what can happen to Sanhedrins can happen to saints. According to James, we can lose our purity as believers and our unity as a church because of jealousy and envy between one another.

The Sanhedrin scold

Now, let us go back to Acts and find out what happens next. In Acts, chapter 5, verse 18, what is the Sanhedrin going to do? The text tells us,

They laid hands on the apostles and put them in a public jail.

What is happening is that the Sanhedrin, in an effort to disgrace the apostles, place all twelve of them in a public jail. You know as well as I do that whether they are innocent or not, this will disgrace these apostles. Now the apostles have a criminal record; they have “done time in the slammer”. And those who are weak or timid, who are thinking about possibly becoming converted to Christianity, will now say, “But, you know, those leaders have ‘done time’; they’re convicts, surely they can’t be telling us the truth.”

That was the attempt of the Sanhedrin to take steam out of this explosive movement.

Now, at this point, God reveals, what I believe to be, a wonderful sense of humor. The Sadducees did not believe in anything supernatural (and because of that, they were “sad-you-see”). They always tried to explain such things away, like many do today. The Sadducees were the religious liberals of Christ’s day; they were men who were supposedly spiritual, and yet, they would explain anything supernatural away. And so, they denied that Jesus could be God in the flesh because that was supernatural.

One of the “pet peeves” of the Sadducees was angels. They did not like to talk about angels. In fact, they did not believe in angels. So, God in heaven looked down and thought, “Okay, I’m going to get these apostles out of jail. Now, how shall I do it? Should I cause an earthquake to open the doors and break open the chains? [You may remember that He did that one time, with Paul and Silas.] No, I’ll use an angel.”

Look at verses 19 and 20 of Acts, chapter 5.

But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the gates of the prison, and taking them out he said, . . .

(. . . “Run for your life!” No!),

. . . “Go, stand and speak to the people in the temple the whole message of this Life.”

In other words, “Don’t back away from it; don’t take away from it; don’t water it down; don’t make it more comfortable for people to hear, you continue to deliver the whole message of this Life.”

Warren Wiersbe writes in his commentary on this text, an illustration of something that happened to him

during his years of ministry at Moody Church. He writes,

While I was ministering to the Moody Church in Chicago, it was my joy to lead a pastor to Christ. . . .

(You heard it right – he lead a pastor to Christ. There are men, by the way, who stand in pulpits but are not saved. They have an interest professionally in the sacred, but they do not have a relationship with the Savior. Wiersbe lead one of these pastors to Christ.)

. . . He was a gifted man who ministered to a wealthy congregation. He went back to his church and began to share Christ and numbers of his people were saved. Then, the denominational leaders stepped in and started to threaten him with dismissal. “What do I do?” he asked me.

I said, “Stay in there until they throw you out. Be loving and kind, but don’t give in.”

Eventually, he was forced out of the church, but not before his witness had influenced many in the church and in the community.

So the angel told the apostles to go back and continue to tell the whole truth. Look at verse 21.

Upon hearing this, they entered into the temple about daybreak, and began to teach. Now when the high priest and his associates came, they called the Council together, even all the Senate of the sons of Israel, and sent orders to the prison house for them to be brought.

They did not know the apostles had gotten out. Continue to verses 22 and 23.

But the officers who came did not find them in the prison; and they returned and reported back, saying, “We found the prison house locked quite securely and the guards standing at the doors; but when we had opened up, we found no one inside.”

Now, this gives us the picture that the doors are still locked from the outside; the guards are still standing at their posts; nothing has happened. Then, they unlock all the chains and bolts and open all the doors and no one is in there, yet there was no way for them to have gotten out except through the front door that was still locked! Continue to verse 24.

Now when the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests heard these words, they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this.

In the original language, this is a conditional clause and I will amplify it to try to translate it. You could add the words, “they were greatly perplexed about them as to what would come of this, should this continue to go on.”

All of these men are muttering, “Snafu . . . Snafu . . . Snafu.”

It is getting worse all the time for the Sanhedrinists. And, while they are standing there muttering “fubb,” under their breath, they learn more news in verse 25.

But someone came and reported to them, “The men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!”

They think, “This is fouled up beyond belief! We’ve got to do something.”

Look at verses 26 through 28a.

Then the captain went along with the officers and proceeded to bring them back without violence (for they were afraid of the people, that they might be stoned). When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high priest questioned them, saying, “We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, . . .”

Now, be alert, what is missing? How about the question, “How’d you fellows get out? We put you in prison, we locked the doors, the guards are still there, so how did you get out of there?”

Wouldn’t that be the first question out of your mouth? “We want to know how you did it.”

There is no mention of that, however. The truth is, they did not want to know, so they did not ask.

Have you ever seen the old TV show, *Hogan’s Heroes*? Do you remember Sergeant Schultz, who could be bribed with food? When he would see the little Frenchman coming from underneath the dog house or Hogan dressed in a Gestapo uniform in town, he always did the same thing – he closed his eyes tight and said, “I see nothing.”

I see seventy-two men in this scene doing basically the same thing. They know the truth; they

know something is up and they close their eyes as tightly as they can against the truth and say, “We see nothing!”

So, they completely ignore all of that and say, “Didn’t we tell you not to teach in this name?”

They cannot even bring themselves to say the name “Jesus,” by the way. They cannot acknowledge another undeniable truth of yet another miracle.

They continue to scold the twelve, in verse 28b,

“. . . and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.”

The Sanhedrin is basically announcing that the apostles are guilty of three things.

- First, the apostles are guilty of insubordination.

“We told you not to speak in this name and there you go again, teaching.”

- Secondly, the apostles are guilty of indoctrination.

“You have filled Jerusalem with your teaching.”

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the town council of our town called us in and were able to say, “You have filled this town with your teaching.”?

How would that make us feel? We would be excited and thrilled that unbelievers, like a council of Sanhedrinists, would be able to say, “This town is being filled with your doctrine.”

- Thirdly, and this is the real problem in the matter, the apostles are guilty of implication; that is, “You intend to bring this man’s blood upon us.”

This is the real problem. Have they forgotten their own words? In Matthew, chapter 27, verses 24 and 25, when the crowd was crying for Barabbas to be released, Pilate said, “I see nothing wrong with this man, He is innocent,” and they, the religious leader and the nation, screamed back at Pilate, “. . . His blood shall be on us . . .”.

They have been overwhelmed with guilt since that afternoon. Every time they close their eyes, they see that blood stained man, who they knew was innocent. And these apostles are doing nothing more than taking the dagger of the truth and piercing their hearts. Their consciences are guilty. They know it is true!

They are like the main character in the Edgar Allen Poe short story, *The Telltale Heart*. Perhaps

you have read it. He killed a man and buried him under the floorboards of his home. However, he was finally overwhelmed with his guilty conscience because it was as if he could hear that man’s heart beating . . . beating . . . beating.

The Sanhedrin are guilty of the blood of Christ and they said to the apostles, “You are just trying to bring guilt upon us,” but the real problem in the matter was, the guilt was already there.

Truth makes a man of courage. Guilt makes a man of courage a coward. And, these seventy-two men are cowards.

The Sanhedrin’s guilt

Now, Peter and the apostles answer, in verses 29 through 32.

But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than men. The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

Peter is declaring that the resurrection of Jesus Christ proves the guilt of the Sanhedrin. “You did crucify the true Messiah. And the proof of it is that He resurrected from the dead.”

Then Peter goes further in his statement to say, “We are witnesses of it.”

In other words, “No longer is the Sanhedrin the guardian of the truth.”

The apostles who represent the foundation of this new thing, called the “ecclesia,” are now the guardians of the truth. “You Sanhedrinists, are on trial, and you are out of God’s will. We, the twelve, and the church we represent, now have the truth of God for the nation.”

The Sanhedrin got the point. Look at verse 33.

But when they heard this, they were cut to the quick and intended to kill them.

This reminded me of the verse in Hebrews, chapter 4, verse 12a,

For the word of God is living and . . . sharper than any two-edged sword . . .

When the truth penetrates, a person either repents or reacts. These seventy-two men react and are ready to kill these apostles. And they would have, except for what happens in verse 34.

But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people, stood up in the Council and gave orders to put the men outside for a short time.

This is Gamaliel the Elder. A lot has been written in Jewish history about this man. He was the grandson of Hillel, who created one of the two factions of the Pharisaic party. Hillel was the conservative Pharisee. Gamaliel became a famous rabbi, teacher, and tutor of some of the brightest young men in Israel during the time of this writing. In fact, the *Mishna*, which is a compilation of Jewish precepts passed down as oral tradition, stated, “When Gamaliel the Elder died, the glory of the Law ceased and purity died.”

One of Gamaliel’s most famous pupils was a man who would defect from Judaism. His name was Saul, and when he defected, his name was changed to Paul the apostle.

So, Gamaliel the Elder stands, in verses 35 and 36,

And he said to them, “Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a group of about four hundred men joined up with him. But he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and came to nothing.”

Jewish history, by the way, tells us that Theudas claimed to have the power of Moses and the ability to part water with his rod. About four hundred people believed this and so, Theudas led an insurrection against the Roman Empire. He took them by the Jordan River and told his followers, “Don’t worry. When they come after us, I’ll part the waters and we’ll go through and then, the water will come back onto them and they will die – just like in Moses’ day.”

Well, the Roman soldiers came after them and Theudas slaps the water a few times and it does not part. Theudas loses his life and the followers disperse.

Gamaliel goes on in verse 37.

After this man Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census and drew away some

people after him; he too perished, and all who followed him were scattered.

Judas of Galilee was a man who said it was God’s will for the Jews to no longer pay taxes to the Roman Empire. A lot of people thought that was a great idea, and it must be the will of God, so they followed him. Judas of Galilee lost his life and his followers were scattered as well.

So, Gamaliel continues in verses 38 and 39.

So in the present case, I say to you, stay away from these men and let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God.

In other words, “Let’s just wait and see! If this is the work of man, it’s going to crumble; if it’s the work of God, you can’t fight against it. So, let’s not fight it, let’s stay away from it. Let’s see what happens.”

It seemed like good advice and there was truth to it, but it was pragmatic, political, and weak. The Sanhedrin was supposed to judge truth from error, not wait and see what works or does not work; not hide their heads in the sand. If something was not the truth, they were to protect Jerusalem from it; if something was the truth, they were to submit to it and change. They should have already mounted an in-depth study and search of all of these miracles and evidences and at this moment in time, they should have been bowing to the throne of Christ. It had already been validated as being from God over and over and over again.

However, remember, the underlying attitude of the Sanhedrin was not to discover the truth, but to jealously protect their jobs. So their repetitive question was, “How can we suppress the truth?!”

Continue to verses 40 through 41.

They took his advice; and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and then released them. So they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name.

Do not overlook the fact, by the way, that they went away rejoicing not because they had gotten out of prison, not because they had made it out alive, not because they saw an angel, not because they stumped

the Sanhedrin, but because they had been found worthy to suffer shame for His name.

Then, the apostles, according to verse 42,

And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.

Application

Let me give two thoughts from this passage for believers today.

Adversity will be God's stamp of approval

1. First, as to the believer, adversity will be God's stamp of approval.

Many of you go home to unsaved relatives and friends or are surrounded by people who know you are a Christian and consider you to be a "burr in their saddle". Be loving, kind, gracious, and represent your Lord well, but know that should adversity come out of it, that is a stamp of God's approval, not disapproval.

Longevity will be God's stamp of authenticity

2. Secondly, as to the message of the believer, longevity will be God's stamp of authenticity.

Jesus Christ said, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 16, verse 18b,

. . . I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

The message will go on . . . it will go on . . . it will go on.

Last week, we had a memorial service for a dear friend and church member. Dr. Paul Freed went home to be with the Lord last Sunday morning in his home. At about the same time that the third service was singing, "Holy, holy, holy! Lord God almighty!" he saw it. You may remember that we honored him during a service a short time ago, for his ministry with Trans World Radio (TWR). I was reminded that TWR is beaming the message that is ongoing, in spite of everything, to millions of people.

I was riding to the cemetery with one of the vice presidents of TWR and he told me that they were getting sixty thousand letters a month from people in India. Sixty thousand people in India a month are coming to faith in Christ because of TWR! It takes a week's wages to come up with the postage to mail each letter. Sixty thousand per month are giving

testimony to the message of Christ. They have already started over three hundred churches from, what they call, radio converts alone.

A few weeks ago, I was in Toulon, France, helping with a celebration of twenty-five years of ministry through Missions to Military. Toulon is about three hours away from Monte Carlo, so I decided, on a day that we had no scheduled meetings or appointments, to get on a train and travel along the coast of France to Monte Carlo. My parents and my daughter, Candace, were with me on the two and a half hour trip. Monte Carlo is significant and the reason I wanted to go there is because it is the home of one of TWR's outposts.

We were met in Monte Carlo by Dick Olsen, one of the TWR staff members. He took us on a tour of their transmitter building, which is very interesting. It is a massive white column building on a hillside overlooking the sea. It is a building that was originally built by Adolf Hitler. It was from that building that he intended the message of his false ideology to permeate that particular part of the known world. One man's message was silenced and now, that building houses transmitters that are used to transmit the message of the God-Man.

When we left the TWR building, we were shown an interesting sight by Dick. He said, "Look down there by the sea. You will see something white and you'll see columns."

We did indeed see huge, massive white columns that were originally built in a circular fashion on a rocky knoll. As we walked closer to it, we saw that half of the columns had already fallen and crumbled and the other half were still standing. It was absolutely magnificent. This was the monument built by Julius Caesar to honor his victory over France more than two thousand years ago. You can roughly translate the Latin words at the base that are declaring his glory and his might. I thought that was interesting. Underneath the shadows of the TWR antennas, lies the ruined monument of a man who had hoped to rule the world and whose kingdom eventually crumbled.

Gamaliel, you're right, if it is the work of men, their voice will be silenced and their kingdom will not last. If it is the work of God, the message will be ongoing and the kingdom, that is being built and will one day reign on earth and throughout the new heaven and the new earth, is eternal.

Let us live this week in light of the magnificence | of our resurrected Lord.

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