

# A PERILOUS CHURCH FOR PERILOUS TIMES

Text: Acts 4:1-31

## ***Introduction***

Every time I'm called upon to conduct a consecration service for a new pastor at one of our network churches I preach a message about the Lord's promise in Matthew 16. The focal point of the passage I use for that message is found in verse 18 when Jesus declares, "***I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.***"

Did you hear that? Did you catch what Jesus said? He said that He would build His church and the **gates of hell would not prevail against it**. Think about that just for a moment and ask yourself, "**What does a church look like that the gates of hell cannot stand against?**"

I don't know about you but that sounds like a pretty powerful church to me. It sounds like a group of Christ-following believers who would be considered dangerous and threatening to the world and its ways, to the devil and his unholy forces.

It doesn't sound like a safe church, one that can be brushed to the side by society or modern culture and ignored. It sounds like a church whose influence is not measured by political involvement or social activism. It sounds like a church that's known for more than its candy Easter eggs in the spring or its apple butter in the fall. **It sounds like a church that's full of the Presence of the very one who bled, died and was resurrected for it, a church that the Lord Himself is in the midst of, that is empowered by His Spirit and that is advancing the Kingdom of God by winning the lost and making disciples of all peoples just like Jesus told it to (Matthew 18:19-20)!**

The church I'm talking about is what I call *A Perilous Church for Perilous Times* and it's also the topic of my message to you this evening. I believe God desires for His church, His bride, to be a perilous bunch of people, willing to take **faith-inspired and faith-required** steps that will continue the work that Jesus began and for which He poured out His Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. I believe that is **the only church** that can make a difference in these perilous times in which we find ourselves living today. And I believe it's the type of church we **must** be here in the Appalachian Ministry Network if the Assemblies of God is to fulfill its divine mandate as a part of God's redemptive plan for the people of Appalachia.

## ***Perilous Times***

There's no doubt whatsoever that we are living in times like we've never seen before. Newspaper headlines read like prophetic passages right out of the Bible. If you doubt that then listen to Paul's prediction from 2 Timothy 3 about the last days before Christ's return:

*But know this, that in the last days perilous (difficult) times will come. For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. They will betray their*

*friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. They will act religious (have a form of godliness), but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that! (Have nothing to do with them.)*

Now I still consider myself to be a young man but I've never seen such a time in my 50+ years where there is little or no shame about evil. In fact, much of what the Bible clearly labels as sin is now touted as normal and healthy.

What used to embarrass us now entertains us. What God's Word says—and even what society itself once believed—is right and true is now said to be wrong and false, even harmful. And likewise, those things declared by God—and also once believed by society—as wrong and immoral are now proclaimed as right and amoral. God spoke to this attitude thousands of years ago through the Old Testament prophet Isaiah when he wrote, *“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter,”* (5:20, HCSB).

And God help the person or church that dares take a stand for righteousness. Speak up for morality and the truth of God's Word and you're likely to be labeled a bigot, hate-monger, or ‘-phobe’ of some kind.

This is the world we find ourselves in today. And it's easy to be overwhelmed with fear and anxiety about the way things are. And if it's this bad today, what in the world is it going to be like in just a few years, should Jesus delay His return?

Well, believe it or not, though these are fearful times, **as the people of God we don't need to live in worry.** God told us these times would come. In 2 Thessalonians 2:3 He tells us that a *“falling away”* or *“apostasy”* will take place before His coming. And the events and evils that we see happening all around us are moving us in that direction.

Yes, these are uncertain and perilous times. But *“let not your hearts be troubled”* saints, for Jesus told us in Luke 21:28, **when you see “these things begin to happen (come to pass), then look up, and lift up your heads, for your redemption draws near.”** I love the way one version puts it: *“When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!”* (MSG)

### ***Perilous Times Demand a Perilous Church***

**Perilous times demand a perilous church!** But as we asked ourselves a few minutes ago, what does a perilous church look like? And even more importantly, how can every one of the 109 churches in the Appalachian Ministry Network become a perilous church if they aren't already? Let's look to Acts chapter 4 for the answer. **Read Acts 4:1-31.**

Here in the first few days of the church's existence it finds itself at a crossroads. The religious leaders of the day who had also orchestrated the crucifixion of Jesus had commanded them to no longer preach or teach in the name of Jesus (v. 18). Why? Because we read about in the previous chapter a miracle of healing had been done that caught the attention of the entire city. A lame man who was over 40 years old (4:22) and had been carried to the temple gate every day for decades to beg was instantly healed in the name of Jesus.

What was the response of Peter and John? Were they rude and rebellious to those in authority? No! To their credit and as an example for us they respectfully told the religious leaders to decide or judge for themselves whether the disciples should obey them or obey God. And I love what they said next, *“We can’t help (stop) speaking about all the things we’ve seen and heard,”* (v. 20). How many of you know that **when you’ve had a true encounter with God and you’ve been truly touched by His power you just can’t keep it to yourself?** You’ve got to tell somebody what the Lord has done for you!

After being threatened some more and being released, Peter and John went back to the rest of the believers and told everything that had been said to them. And I believe it’s at this point in the story that we learn what makes for *A Perilous Church for Perilous Times*. Three quick observations that will help us in our churches.

First, **a perilous church must be a church that is FULLY PRAYING**. What was the first thing the Early Church did after being threatened and told not to minister anymore in the name of Jesus? Did they fire off a letter to the editor of the local newspaper or call their politicians about how their religious liberties were being infringed upon? Did they organize a protest march through the streets of Jerusalem to let everyone in the city know that they would not stand for this type of treatment by those in authority?

No! The Word tells us that they immediately turned to God! They called out to God in prayer! I fear that **too many in today’s American church have confused civil liberties with Kingdom priorities, elevating the former over the latter**. Please understand that there’s nothing wrong with letting our opinions be known and our voices be heard on those things to which the Word of God speaks, but it seems that **too many in our churches today would rather protest than pray and would rather be irritated than intercessors**. If that’s so then we’ve got it all wrong.

Again, **a perilous church must be a church that is fully praying**. Why? Because it’s only through prayer that the Presence of God is manifested and the Power of God begins to flow in a way that changes our lives and the lives of those around us.

A second observation: **a perilous church must be a church that is FULLY PERSUADED**. Remember again what Peter and John told the religious leaders: We can’t stop talking about the things we’ve seen and heard God do!

I ask you, does that sound like the statement of people who know that they know that they know God and what He can do? Of course it does! And it’s this very confidence that causes us to echo the words of the Apostle Paul in Philippians 1:6 when he says, *“Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun (started) a good work in you will perform (complete) it until the day of Jesus Christ.”* It’s this level of persuasion that enables us to say as Paul did in Second Timothy while being imprisoned for his ministry, *“I know whom I have believed and I am **persuaded/convinced** that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against (until) that day,”* (1:12).

Once more, **a perilous church must be a church that is fully persuaded**. Why? Because when you know what is certain you’ll be able to stand in uncertain times and circumstances.

A third observation: **a perilous church must be a church that is FULLY PENTECOSTAL**. I find it interesting that the Early Church’s prayer here wasn’t for deliverance from their persecutors.

Their prayer was not for God to ease their sufferings or to take vengeance on those causing them trouble.

No! Their prayer was for God to give them boldness to proclaim the message of the resurrected and risen Savior while God did His part with healings, signs and wonders through the name of Jesus Christ. In other words, you could say that they prayed, “God, give us even more trouble than we’re already in.” And verse 31 tells us that God not only heard their prayer but He answered their prayer: **“After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly!”**

A church that is Pentecostal in **both word and deed** will be a church that is powerful in its proclamation of the soul-saving and sin-delivering grace of the Lord Jesus Christ! A church that is Pentecostal in **both form and function** will be a church that is powerful to the pulling down of strongholds (2 Cor. 10:4)! A church that is Pentecostal in **both style and substance** will be a church that is blessed by God and saturated with His Presence!

Again, **a perilous church must be a church that is fully Pentecostal.** Does this mean that God cannot use churches that do not agree with us on the role and activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer? No, not at all! But for we who are part of this Pentecostal fellowship known as the Assemblies of God and the Appalachian Ministry Network we must be fully Pentecostal to impact our communities as God intends for us to do so.

## **Conclusion**

So what’s the end of the matter? What’s the takeaway from a message like this? What are the application points we put into practice after we’ve considered what it means to be *A Perilous Church for Perilous Times*?

First, **we need to pray like we’ve never prayed before.** Second, **we need to believe like we’ve never believed before.** And third, **we need to be people of the Spirit of God like we’ve never been before.**

Church, listen closely to what I’m about to say. It’s something I’ve said before but I think is truer today than when I first said it some time last year. **“The greatest threat facing America and the world today is NOT Islamic terrorism or aggression. It is NOT the rapid advance of a militant homosexual agenda nor the ever-increasing decay of society’s morals and values. It is instead a lukewarm church, one that is more concerned with its comfort and traditions than being the bold, Spirit-filled and Spirit-empowered body intended and provided for by the Lord Jesus Christ!”**

The church has many enemies; the biggest obviously is Satan himself. He has many weapons at his disposal to attack God’s people and he’s very skilled at using them against us. But let’s not forget that **we can also be rendered ineffective and useless for the Kingdom and mission of God by our own contentment, complacency and compromise.**

Yes, these are indeed perilous times, but God still has a work for His church to accomplish, and to do that work to His satisfaction and our eternal reward we’ve got to be a perilous church. If we’re willing to be perilous people for God, then we’ll be the church that Jesus is building, the church that the gates of hell cannot stand against, and the church that the King of Kings is coming back for!