

Acts 4:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.

Analysis

The Greek construction 'ou dynameth laleiv' (cannot but speak) expresses moral compulsion, not mere inability. The apostles declare they are witnesses (martyres) who must testify to what they have 'seen and heard' - emphasizing the eyewitness nature of apostolic authority. This echoes Old Testament prophets who could not remain silent when God spoke (Jeremiah 20:9, Amos 3:8). Their response embodies the principle that obedience to God supersedes human commands when they conflict (Acts 5:29), establishing a foundation for Christian civil disobedience rooted in allegiance to Christ above all earthly powers.

Historical Context

Spoken to the Sanhedrin after being commanded to cease preaching in Jesus' name. This confrontation occurred within weeks of Christ's resurrection, when the ruling authorities sought to suppress the explosive growth of the early church. The apostles' defiance of religious authorities who held power over life and death demonstrated unprecedented courage.

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

1 John 4:8 — God is love

Study Questions

1. What truths about Christ have you seen and heard that compel you to speak, despite potential opposition?
2. How do you balance submission to governmental authority with the higher allegiance owed to God's commands?

Interlinear Text

οὐ	δυνάμεθα	γὰρ	ἡμεῖς	ἃ	εἶδομεν	καὶ
cannot	G1410	For	we	the things which	we have seen	and
G3756		G1063	G2249	G3739	G1492	G2532
ἠκούσαμεν	μὴ	λαλεῖν				
heard	but	speak				
G191	G3361	G2980				

Additional Cross-References

Acts 22:15 (Parallel theme): For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard.

Jeremiah 20:9 (Parallel theme): Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.

Acts 5:32 (Parallel theme): And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Ghost, whom God hath given to them that obey him.

Ezekiel 3:11 (Parallel theme): And go, get thee to them of the captivity, unto the children of thy people, and speak unto them, and tell them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear.

Acts 2:32 (Parallel theme): This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.

Acts 3:15 (Parallel theme): And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses.

Acts 18:5 (Parallel theme): And when Silas and Timotheus were come from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus was Christ.

Jeremiah 4:19 (Parallel theme): My bowels, my bowels! I am pained at my very heart; my heart maketh a noise in me; I cannot hold my peace, because thou hast heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war.

Numbers 23:20 (Parallel theme): Behold, I have received commandment to bless: and he hath blessed; and I cannot reverse it.

Numbers 22:38 (Parallel theme): And Balaam said unto Balak, Lo, I am come unto thee: have I now any power at all to say any thing? the word that God putteth in my mouth, that shall I speak.