

Text: Acts 16:35-40  
Intended audience: Christians  
Topic: Christian citizenship  
Theme: The Voice of Christian Citizens  
My purpose for this message: To demonstrate that there is a time to speak to the authorities.  
Delivered: June 6, 2004 @ KEFC

### [Book Thesis: The Power of God Spreads the Gospel]

#### **A Time to be Silent, and a Time to Speak**

More and more Christians find themselves being censored for their positions, values, reading material, and holidays. What's a right response?

In 1996, a first grade boy in NJ was prohibited from reading to his class, a story called "The Big Family." It was taken from the Beginner's Bible. There was no mention of God in it, no mention of miracles. But although the teacher has invited achieving students to bring in a story of their choice to read to the class, this boy's story was turned down. Here's what he intended to read.

*Jacob traveled far away to his uncle's house. He worked for his uncle, taking care of sheep. While he was there, Jacob got married. He had twelve sons. Jacob's big family lived on his uncle's land for many years. But Jacob wanted to go back home. One day, Jacob packed up all his animals and his family and everything he had. They traveled all the way back to where Esau lived. Now Jacob was afraid that Esau might still be angry at him. So he sent presents to Esau. He sent servants who said, "Please don't be angry anymore." But Esau wasn't angry. He ran to Jacob. He hugged and kissed him. He was happy to see his brother again.*

The teacher and principal who backed her, refused on the grounds of the story's "religious content." The parent objected and was told by the principal that she and her son did not appear to be "public school material." After all, this was the student's second offense. At Thanksgiving, he'd drawn a picture of Jesus which was initially taken down because of its "religious theme."

How should we respond to such matters? Noisy protests? Quietly disappear into the night? Lawsuits, what? Ecc.3:1-8 reminds God's people that rigid responses that apply the same to *every* situation are misguided, "...[there] is a time for peace, and a time for war (8), a time to love and a time to hate (8), a time to kill and a time to heal (3), and a time to be silent and a time to speak (7).

Find Acts 16:35-40. This was a time for Paul to speak. PRAY.

#### **The Story**

By Paul's calculation, the Philippian magistrates had violated him & Silas in 5 ways:

- Failed to ask if they were citizens
- Condemned them without a trial
- Beat them
- Beat them publicly (humiliation factor)
- Tossed them in prison after their illegal beatings

They had made the best of it. During a painful night in prison, they worshiped God and testified to the other prisoners, and later had the privilege of leading the jailer and his family to Christ. All and all, it had been providentially ordained, God had gained glory

from it, and in the final analysis, accomplished exactly what God intended. Paul could have said, “Well, we served God’s purposes in this awful place.”

Instead, he put up a fuss. “You violated our rights as Roman citizens. So no, we *won’t* just slip away quietly without making a sound. Your ‘judges’ want us out, let them come down to this hole and escort us out.” Paul was well aware of the impact of this. For such an injustice, the judges could be removed. The emperor could strip Philippi of its status as a Roman colony along with all its privileges.

Paul questioned unrighteousness another time. READ Acts 22:25. Was his bold questioning of authorities godly? What’s the Bible say about dealing with the authorities? Find Rom.13:1-7. Paul authored 13 letters that became NT books. And the one he wrote to Christians in the Empire’s capital, is the one containing God’s principles on government. READ.

There are similarities between the US and Rome. Before dictators ruled Rome, she existed as a Republic her first 500 years, and numerous republican concepts survived during the days of the Caesars. Including the rights of citizens. F. F. Bruce says that Valerian and Porcian laws passed between Rome’s founding in 509 BC, and 195 BC, exempted Roman citizens from degrading forms of punishment and had certain valued rights established for them. So Paul called attention to an injustice against him.

Did he respect and obey the authorities by his retorts? Sure. It is not dishonorable to point out unrighteousness, especially when God the *Righteous* judge stands behind and authorizes the local police force, or township commissioners, or state governor, or senators, or president. These leaders are established by God (READ Dan.4:32). They serve God’s purposes in this world to restrain evil.

But when it becomes evil *itself*, it can and should be called into account. Governments are comprised of flawed people. Just like *every* human institution.

Take the church: it too is made up of flawed people. Consequently, God has made provisions for people to challenge not only their neighbors who sin (Matt.18:15), but also leaders who are unrighteous (1 Tim.5:19-20).

So when governmental authorities do what’s unrighteous, the citizens—and not just the pagan ones—are authorized by God to speak out; and in *this* country, are by *statute*, we are authorized by the United States of America.

I do not think this passage is essentially a *command* to speak out; but it shows clearly that it’s not ungodly. It would have been helpful if Luke had recorded Paul’s motives for speaking out. But 2 Cor.11:28 reminds us that this was a man highly motivated by his love for the church. Maybe he wanted to make a point to the authorities that Christians are law-abiding citizens so that the infant church in Philippi would be respected and protected. It is interesting just how well the church developed in this region.

You may object, “It’s fine for Paul to be a spokesman for the defense of righteousness, but I’m timid.” I can be pretty timid myself. So all of us who are, let’s get real honest and admit that timidity is a sanitized term for fear. I don’t share the gospel because I’m shy. Actually I’m afraid. I don’t contact congressional representatives because I’m timid. Actually, I’m afraid. I don’t speak with my friends about important issues of the day that have to do with righteousness or justice, because I’m timid. He might not agree with me; she might discard our friendship; I might hear things I don’t want to hear.

1 Tim.2:1 says, *make requests, prayers, intercession, and thanksgiving for everyone—for kings and those in authority.* But talking with God is just *part* of God’s plan for his children to be an influence for righteousness. After Nathan talked with God, he confronted King David about his murder and adultery. After Elijah talked with God, he challenged the false prophets of Queen Jezebel to a duel. After Mordecai talked with God, he confronted Queen Esther and urged her to speak to King Xerxes. There is a time to be silent, but there is also a time to speak.

**Concl:**

In northern Germany is a tiny village with a handful of houses and a gas station. On its outskirts is the rubble of a Nazi concentration camp. There, 60 years ago sadistic bigots performed torturous experiments on human beings and killed them by the thousands.

Camps like Auschwitz and Dachau have been restored and turned into museums. But there is little left of this camp except for a few markers. Oh yes, there is a faded wreath there with a hand-scrawled note which says simply, “Please forgive us for our silence.” And then it’s signed simply, “The Christians.”

A year after Hitler came to power, he called Germany’s pastors together for a briefing on his “realignment program.” In an ominous warning masquerading as a speech, the Fuhrer warned the pastors to stick with teaching the Bible and praying, and let the government run the nation. A WW1 U-boat commander turned pastor, Martin Niemoller strode to the platform and standing toe to toe with Hitler said, “Sir, we are concerned about the church indeed, but we are also concerned about the soul of the nation.”

Hitler retorted, “You look after the church; We will look after the soul of the nation.” Duly chastised, most pastors returned to their pulpits and quietly left Hitler market Germany’s soul to the devil. Who gladly helped Hitler kill over 20 million noncombatants.

There is a time to be silent; but there is also a time to speak.