

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

(Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

The Family of God

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Acts: 4:32-37

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Good morning Redeemer! Please open up your Bibles with me to Acts 4:32.

Now as you are finding that in your Bibles, I want to ask, how many of you have ever been part of a big shakeup in a company that you worked for? Maybe the company was bought out by a bigger one or maybe there was a desire to streamline some areas of weakness? There were threats of restructure, downsizing, and the potential for many lost jobs. Those are the moments when people begin to question what the future holds. Those are the moments when we are given over to fear and worry. What do we do next? Will I lose my job? How will I provide for my family? Should I begin to look for another job?

That's what happens when the heat gets turned up isn't it? And the early Church, with the stakes INFINITELY HIGHER than a failed business, found themselves wondering what would happen next. They had seen the events of Pentecost when tongues of fire descended on the Church leading to the good news of Jesus Christ being proclaimed in many languages. They were experiencing tremendous growth as the Gospel went forth in tremendous power. They were seeing amazing healings. But then something changed.

They got their first taste of persecution didn't they? Peter and John were brought before the Jewish leaders and commanded to stop preaching about the so-called risen savior Jesus Christ. Now how does the church go about her ministry on the other side of that? How does she move

forward after real and heavy threats? Well what changed in their approach? NOTHING! They stayed the course and continued to do what their Savior commanded them to do!

Were there potential risks ahead? Of course. Were there unknowns ahead? Of course. But the Church knew that Jesus was the Lord of the Church and He would accomplish all that He had purposed for Her. So there was tremendous hope as the Church demonstrated a love and unity that should be sought after by every generation of God's people. And in our text this morning, we get a snapshot of the early Church persevering and thriving as they met the challenges that came their way.

Now with these things in mind, hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today. Acts 4:32-37:

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:32-37 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

If you were here a few weeks back, you heard as Pastor Levi walked us through Luke 2:42-47 which showcased the health and vitality of the early Church. Luke puts in these snapshot summaries throughout the book as the Church advances in her mission. Here, the Church is still in stage one in Jerusalem. And Luke's main purpose in these verses before us is to show the tremendous unity and love the Church had for one another. Simply put, we see the Church functioning as a big family. Matthew Henry, a famous bible commentator puts it this way:

We have a general idea given us in these verses, and it is a very beautiful one, of the spirit and state of this truly primitive church; a view of that age of infancy and innocence.¹

Now I hope you hear that *correctly*. For some of us, when we hear the words ‘infancy’ and ‘innocence’ we are quick to be dismissive. But there is no reason why we should assume Luke is painting a picture of a dumb or naïve Church. Instead, we see a Church that is to be held in high regard. A Church that is to be IMITATED. A church that is demonstrating what it is to be the family of God.

The Family of God

Now every family is marked by certain characteristics aren’t they? If you have a visit with the Szkarlat family, you’re going to hear A LOT of Lord of the Rings quotes. We love our movies. You’re also going to hear a lot of gentle jabs being thrown out because we love making fun of one another, in good loving fun of course!

Well, so it is with the family of God. The Church is called to be distinct. To stand out and be the light of the world, the salt of the earth, and the aroma of Christ to a dying world. That means that she would look, and taste, and smell different than the world. That’s what we’re seeing here. So, let’s consider some of these distinctive marks of the family of God. First, we see the family of God marked by:

1. Authentic Unity

Look with me to verse 32 to see this:

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one **heart and soul** (Acts 4:32 ESV)

The early Church was thriving because they were unified. They were of one heart and soul as Luke says. What does that mean? It means that they were singular in focus. They had one goal

¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Complete Commentary Series: The Acts of the Apostles*, accessed via Olive Tree Bible Software.

and objective: to glory in all that Jesus had done for them and to proclaim Him to the world! That was their mission and they were pursuing it as one. As G. Campbell Morgan puts it:

They were moved by one great impulse, one love mastered them; they had one outlook, one inward consciousness, one inspirational motive.²

Now I want to be clear, this is not something that we can just gloss over. Luke is not simply saying that *some* of the Church were unified. This wasn't just a *part* of the Church that was acting as a unified family. No. He says the FULL NUMBER OF THOSE WHO BELIEVED. Look again at the text with me:

³² Now **the full number** of those who believed were of one heart and soul (Acts 4:32 ESV)

That means the WHOLE GATHERED CHURCH was exemplifying this authentic unity. Do you remember how big the Church was at this point? It was made up of over 5000 people! So here, at this moment in the life of the Church you have 5000 plus people operating as one cohesive unit. That is pretty incredible is it not? I love how Matthew Henry captures the beauty of this unity. He says:

Though there were many, very many, of different ages, tempers, and conditions, in the world, who perhaps, before they believed, were perfect strangers to one another, yet, when they met in Christ, they were as intimately acquainted as if they had known one another many years. Perhaps they had been of different sects among the Jews, before their conversion, or had had discords upon civil accounts; but now these were all forgotten and laid aside, and they were unanimous in the faith of Christ, and, being all joined to the Lord, they were joined to one another in holy love.³

What was joining them together? It was the good news of Jesus Christ. They were one together because they had put their trust in the saving work of Jesus Christ. He was their rock, their cornerstone, their mighty foundation. This is what bound them in unity. Paul would later say to the Ephesians:

² G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 141.

³ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Complete Commentary Series: The Acts of the Apostles*, accessed via Olive Tree Bible Software.

⁴ **There is one body and one Spirit**—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4-6 ESV)

There's a lot of talk of unity and oneness in those few verses. That's because unity is meant to be something sought after and cherished. As the family of God, we are called to not merely believe the same things but to allow these things to transform us into ONE family.

Will there be moments of disagreements? Of course! In fact, the early Church would have their own questions and disagreements. Will we always agree on every single theological question? Probably not. But we will agree and hold onto the most important thing: that salvation is found in no one else but in Jesus Christ. That is what was keeping the early Church together. A.W. Tozer had this beautiful illustration to capture this. He said:

Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshippers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become "unity" conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship.⁴

If Christ is the center, if we keep His glory and gospel paramount, then we will see God's Church acting as the unified family of God. Is that wishful thinking? No, it's truth right from the Bible! This is why - as pastor Levi mentioned - we have to resist the urge to try to recreate all of our old favourite churches in this place. Because 100 different old churches are represented here! But, if we stop looking back and continue to look forward together to Christ, then we can trust that he will keep us on the straight and narrow road.

We have seen over the past few years how easy it is to divide didn't we? Brothers and sisters who once walked as friends, became enemies as they died on hills that were never meant to be battlefields.

⁴ A.W. Tozer as quoted in *Preaching the Word Commentary Series (40 Vols.)*, accessed via Olive Tree Bible Software.

I think it's a good time to ask ourselves, 'do we desire to see the unity of the Church?' Do we long and desire for peace in our midst? Do we pray for it to happen not only in our Church but in the churches around us? Are we quicker to point out the areas where we disagree rather than where we agree? Oh Lord forgive us for our proneness to divide rather than move towards unity.

This text before us both challenges us to strive to be at one with another and gives us hope that it is in fact possible as we, being filled with the Spirit, keep our eyes FIXED on our Savior.

And secondly, we see the family of God being marked by:

2. Powerful Proclamation

The early Church was walking as one together and they had one message to declare: the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As we saw, it was this that was keeping the 5000 plus member Church as one.

But the Church didn't stop trying to add to their number. Instead, they continued their bold Gospel proclamation. Look with me to verse 33 to see this:

³³ **And with great power** the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:33 ESV)

The early Church was characterized by bold preaching and POWERFUL LIVES. The early Church was marked by POWER. This was a group who was proclaiming their savior with courage and might as they were fuelled by the Holy Spirit. The same Holy Spirit who had empowered them at Pentecost was continuing to empower them to continue their mission now. Bold, courageous, clear gospel preaching, and CHANGED LIVES were characterizing this group. Spiritually dead people were coming alive! Men and women who had been suffering physically were being restored through mighty miracles. As the Church proclaimed the savior who rose from the dead after three days, so dead sinners were coming to life!

And remember, this was all on the heels of the Church's first bit of adversity as Peter and John had been brought before the council and charged to stop preaching this Gospel. But the Church

was not deterred. The reason? God had answered the prayer that the people had prayed in the verses before. They prayed this way:

And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all **boldness**,³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” (Acts 4:29-3 ESV)

God had ANSWERED their prayer! He had empowered the people to continue their mission despite the threats that had come their way. Wouldn't you agree that it would have been tempting to tamp down the Gospel proclamation? After all, 5000 plus people had been saved! Why not just lie low for a while and continue to take care of one another? Offering the Gospel only if asked? Have you ever thought of that?

Instead, the Church kept first things first and proclaimed Jesus Christ all the while knowing they would be persecuted for it. It is remarkable. Again, the early Church wasn't naïve. In his ministry, Jesus had preached saying to 'count the cost' before bowing in allegiance to him. And these early Christians had counted the cost, and found that Jesus was SUPREMELY WORTH IT. He was worth facing the threats, the real threats that came with preaching him to a hostile world. Why? Because Jesus is the ONLY WAY by which we can be saved. Jesus is the ONLY WAY that your spouse, your children, your neighbours and co-workers and you yourself can be saved. And because of that, the early Church, the family of God, continued in unity to powerfully proclaim that Jesus was the risen savior.

Friends, have you felt the temptation to tamp down your gospel conversations? Have we felt that as a Church? Let's be honest, wouldn't it be easier at times to simply function as a charity? Then no one would oppose our message! But charity doesn't save sinners. Only Jesus does. Therefore, let's resolve to continue to preach the Word even in the face of adversity.

Thirdly, we see the family of God characterized by:

3. Abounding Generosity

Families are supposed to take care of each other aren't they? They are supposed to be the first and last line of defense for us when we are faced with difficulties. And that is what was happening in the early Church. Look with me to verses 32, and 34-35 to see this:

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, **but they had everything in common.** (Acts 4:32 ESV)

And in verse 34-35 we read:

³⁴ **There was not a needy person among them,** for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:34-35 ESV)

This unity that the Church shared was not only in their beliefs but in their very possessions. As a family, they saw it as their responsibility to take care of one another. And the Church saw the opportunity to SERVE one another by sharing what they had in order to meet one another's needs. With famine, political unrest, and limited employment opportunities, the Church had many opportunities to share with those in need. And as the needs came up, the Church stepped up. This reminds me of Galatians 6:10:

So then, **as we have opportunity,** let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith. (Galatians 6:10 ESV)

The Church was characterized by abounding generosity for they saw it as their mandate to take care of their own. And the Church, just like the world, is made up of needy people. We are not exempt from job losses, failing health, broken appliances and broken cars are we? And here in this snapshot, there is a picture of those who had resources to spare, and instead of keeping them to themselves, they sold them in order to meet the needs of the Church community. The funds were then handed over the leaders of the Church and the funds were given out as needed. Look with me to verse 34-35 again:

³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4:34-35 ESV)

It was as though the more well-off members of the Church had their heads on swivels to ensure that those who were in need could be taken care of through their abundance. Isn't that incredible to think of? Again, this wasn't just one person out of the five thousand believers doing this but it appears that this was a pattern of the wealthy in the Church!

God was transforming hearts and it was evidenced by pocket books being emptied in order to serve the people of God. Generosity was abounding because the grace of God was abounding. Luke then proceeds to highlight a specific act of generosity done by Barnabas. Look with me to verses 36-37:

³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:36-37 ESV)

Barnabas, who as we will see throughout our time in Acts, exemplified this spirit of generosity along with countless others who we never got to hear about. The Church was taking seriously the call to love one another by abounding in generosity towards each other. Remember Jesus' words?

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:35 ESV)

The snapshot that Luke shows us here is the compelling, loving, and unified family of God. Does it seem too good to be true? Does it seem like it could never happen again? Well if we were left to our own devices the answer would of course be a no. Because just as one commentator puts it:

We must have Pentecost before we can have the condition of affairs described here.⁵

The SAME Holy Spirit who was at work in the early Church is at work in us today. He is at work in Redeemer City Church. He is at work in you and me. Therefore, as we see the early Church walking in unity, powerfully proclaiming the Gospel, and taking care of one another, we cannot just dismiss this beautiful picture but instead we MUST aim to emulate what we see here through the power of the Holy Spirit. For our good, for the lost world around us, to the glory of our great God. Thanks be to God.

⁵ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 138.

Now as we read about this generosity, we all have little bunny trails that we're chasing down in our minds, don't we? Maybe you're thinking, 'Matt, it's not as easy as that. The world is rarely black and white.' Well you are right. Generosity is complicated in a fallen world. So, with the time we have left, let's think carefully about generosity in a fallen world.

Generosity in a Fallen World

First:

1. Generosity should not enable sin

The generosity of the church was for the purpose of meeting legitimate need - not enabling laziness and sin. And because of that, when we are talking about generosity, we need to fence it with two important qualifiers. *First*, the early Church did in fact have their own individual possessions. They were not living in a big commune. They did not sell EVERYTHING they owned. They DID in fact have their own possessions. There were Christians who were very wealthy. I. Howard Marshall sums it up this way:

This way of putting the matter brings out the fact that the things which each person possessed evidently continued to be his own property **until it was found necessary** to sell them for the common good.⁶

This was NOT communism. And *secondly*, people had jobs and were working hard. The Church was not the place to gather if you didn't want to work. This wasn't the Church sharing possessions and goods so people could sleep in and mooch off someone else. A few decades after these early days of the Church, Paul would write this to the Thessalonians:

¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: **If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.** ¹¹ For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. ¹² Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12 ESV)

⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *TNTCS: The Acts of the Apostles*, accessed via Olive Tree Bible Software.

This was true in the first days of the Church just as it is for us today. The Bible does not commend laziness. Those who can work SHOULD work. And it means encouraging people to steward what they have, whether it be a little or a lot. Friends, we need wisdom here don't we? Because we don't ever want our generosity to lead to sin whether it be in the form of laziness or idleness. Our generosity should be aiming for reform and health in the ones we are seeking to help.

So maybe wise, godly, Spirit filled generosity will look like you helping a brother or a sister repair their car they can't afford to fix on their own. Or maybe it's offering a ride to the grocery store or Church to someone who is struggling to pay for transportation. Maybe it's you preparing a few meals for a family who is going through a crisis. Or maybe it's you helping someone find a job. Or maybe, it is you selling a possession of value, just like Barnabas in our text, and bringing it to the Church leaders to distribute to a brother or sister in need.

Friends, the point is not *how* we meet the needs of the Church, but IF we are. And yes, it will get messy sometimes. Lines will be blurred if we are not careful. Mistakes will happen and people will take advantage, so we will need to pray bold prayers asking for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to lead and direct us. And secondly:

2. Generosity should not be compulsory

The early Church wasn't exhibiting this generosity because they had a gun to their heads. They were not coerced into their decisions. They were giving of their *own* volition. In the cultural moment that we are in, authority is often questioned and often disrespected. Maybe some of you are questioning how *freely* these generous gifts were actually given out. But the text is clear, this was a group of unified believers who were not hoarding their possessions and only parting with them if they were pried from their hands. No. They were giving them freely because they WANTED TO.

As Pastor Levi alluded to last Sunday, in 2 Corinthians, one of the reasons Paul wrote this letter was to encourage the Corinthians to contribute to the Jerusalem offering. A famine had struck the

Church in Jerusalem and the Church was in need. Paul shared with the Corinthians how the Churches of Macedonia, who were themselves in need, BEGGED to take part in this offering. Paul tells us:

They gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴ **begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints**. (2 Corinthians 8:3-4 ESV)

Isn't that wonderful? Poor Christians BEGGING to help other poor Christians. The early Church wasn't coercing their people to give. On the contrary, they couldn't STOP THEM from giving! Why? Because the early Church believed these words:

The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, **not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver**. (2 Corinthians 9:6-7 ESV)

God loves a cheerful giver. Not one that has to have their goods pried from their fingers. So what does generosity look like in a fallen world? It looks like Christians having received the greatest gift they know they didn't deserve, eagerly giving up their wealth in order to further the kingdom of their great God. And this leads to our last point. In our fallen world:

3. Generosity should be motivated by the Gospel

These believers were giving up their wealth and possessions because their hearts had been TRANSFORMED. Their lives had been turned upside down and now they saw their goods not as their own but as God's. And this meant they were ultimately HIS to give out. And this meant that their riches were not solely for the bigger boat, faster car, or bigger house they wanted. They were for furthering the glory of their God just as Jesus taught us in Matthew 6. There He said:

¹⁹ "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust^[e] destroy and where thieves break in and steal, ²⁰ **but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven**, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. (Matthew 6:19-20 ESV)

These believers were taking Jesus' words seriously and acting in obedience. That's what was fuelling this generosity.

And friends, that's the kind of generosity the Gospel produces. It transforms people's affections from mere earthly desires to those that are of another world. Because when we have seen how Christ became poor so that we could come rich, how he left his glory so that we could share his, how could we not lay our treasures at his feet? How could we not part with earthly goods knowing we were trading them for eternal treasures? Oh Lord help us to see things as you do.

The early Church modelled what it was to be part of a good family didn't they? They strove for unity by fixing their gaze on Christ, they preached Him boldly, and they cared for one another as families are meant to. Do we want the Gospel to go forth in power? Do we want our families, neighbours, and our cities to bow in worship to our great God? Do we desire to see our God receiving the worship of all peoples? Then let's learn from the early Church and strive to be a compelling family standing on and united by Jesus Christ-our Cornerstone. To Him be the glory forever and ever. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray.