

The Book of Acts

Characteristics of the Early Church

Acts 4:32 – 5:11

Teaching Summary

The Believers Share Their Possessions

Acts 4: 32 “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales³⁵ and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”),³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.”

As we continue to look at the characteristics of the early church we see that they were first of all believers. This essential characteristic of the church is that it is made up of those who are believers in Christ, (cf. v.32). They are saved, born again people who are following Christ as Lord and Savior. That does not mean that there are not unbelievers hanging around –but unbelievers are not the church –only believers are.

The next characteristic we see listed here is that they were one in heart and mind (union, unity, fellowship) (cf. v.32). This is how Jesus describes his relationship with his Father. The Father and the Son were one with each another –in union of fellowship, having the same mind. He prayed that his followers would be in the same union with him and with one another (in the same way).

The fellowship of believers held no claim to their possessions but shared with those in the fellowship as there was need. Please don’t misunderstand –this was not some form of communism. People still had possessions at their disposal but they held lightly to them and shared with others in need. We will see later that they shared sacrificially – even out of their own poverty they gave to the needy among them.

The culture that most of us grew up in has an opposite philosophy even in what we call the church. Notice how many times the word “my or mine” is used in our conversations. We might hear statements like, “My house, my truck, my friends, my job, my ministry and my life.” This was not characteristic of the early church. There was no “my” among them. There was only common fellowship. Everything was given by the Lord and belonged to the Lord. Even today we are only stewards of what God has given. We must be ready and willing to lay our possessions down when the Lord calls for them. This obviously requires great faith. This kind of great faith is common and normal in the fellowship of God’s people.

An obvious question is: What hinders us from such faith? Fear, doubt and unbelief are certainly an enemy of faith. A fear that God will not provide! This kind of fear results in a lack of true fellowship with God and with his people. When this happens people begin to withdraw and isolate not only from God but from his people. The “my” mentality begins to increase isolation. A “hoarding effect” begins to develop in the heart of those who live in a state of non-fellowship, or mediocre fellowship and isolation. As we will see shortly this gives Satan an opportunity to deceive the heart.

In the early church the Apostles (preachers/teachers of the faith) spoke the gospel (the death, burial and resurrection of Christ) which powerful conviction (cf.v33). It was a proclamation that was dynamic (GK, *dunamis*), powerful bold without fear of man, with conviction, and not ashamed or timid. Acts 1:8 states, “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.”

Verse 33 states that God’s grace (power, presence and provision) was powerfully at work within them all. To what effect? God’s grace was so active among them that no one was in need. God’s grace moved in the hearts of the believers so that they “graced” those among them that had need. God’s grace spilled over into the entire fellowship. So much so that many who had possessions sold them to give the proceeds to those in need. This was a powerful demonstration of the love and grace of God that lived in their hearts. They gave not out of compulsion, law or duty -- they gave because they knew how much grace and love God had given to them. A great example of this was Barnabus (v.36), who was known as a great encourager of the believers. How encouraging it must have been to see believers lay down their lives for the fellowship.

Now we come to chapter 5 and see that something changed dramatically in the fellowship.

Ananias and Sapphira

Acts 5:1 “Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ²With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet. ³Then Peter said, “Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴Didn’t it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn’t the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God.” ⁵When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

⁷About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter asked her, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?” “Yes,” she said, “that is the price.” ⁹Peter said to her, “How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.” ¹⁰At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.”

In this chapter we see a couple who followed what others were doing in selling possessions yet their hearts (motives) were not pure. We know by reading the whole account that they obviously made a pledge (oath) before God and man to sell some property and give the entire proceeds to the fellowship for the needy. However, instead of giving the entire amount like they promised they held back a portion. The problem is that they had made an oath and then lied when asked if they gave the whole amount. The Scripture is clear that they did not have to sell the land or give any specific amount. The problem was the broken pledge and the lie.

When each was asked about the amount given they lied and each one of them died on the spot. God's judgment was severe, direct and swift! The two charges brought against them were: 1. You "lied to the Holy Spirit," and 2. You conspired "to test the Spirit of the Lord," (v. 3, 9).

Let there be a warning here for us all. It is said to them that "Satan has filled your heart," (v. 3). This happens when a person is out of fellowship –out of oneness and unity with the fellowship. Ananias and Sapphira began to think independently from God and the fellowship of believers. When this happened they were out of step with the Holy Spirit and thus out of step with the fellowship. When they stepped out of fellowship they were isolated from the grace of God which protects and empowers. Remember what God said to Cain, "If you do not do what is right, sin [Satan] is crouching at your door: it desires to have you, but you must master (overcome) it," (Genesis 4: 7b). Satan is always looking for those he can devour (cf. 1 Peter 5:8). When Satan finds one who is isolated away from the group they become easy targets for the enemy. Satan found this couple of people wandering out of fellowship and he deceived them and filled their hearts with greed, envy and a lying tongue (cf. Acts 5:3). They were no longer walking in the light of Christ for they had wandered out of fellowship into the darkness.

It is important for us to stay in fellowship not only for our sake but for the sake of others. We must stay sober minded and in fellowship with the Lord to be aware of Satan's schemes as he crouches at the door. Having others around us is added grace. Having others around us helps us to watch, especially in times that we are weak.

Some would ask, "Have we lost the fear of God in our assemblies?" It often appears that way. Hearts have been so compromised by the world and many openly mock God by living for the world and self during the week and then acting as if all is well on the day of assembly with believers. Sadly many of our assemblies are filled with non-believers -- People who have not been born again –whose hearts have not been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. I will leave it up to God's judgment to deal with unbelievers. We are not to look at the guy next to us –his master will judge him.

For those who are born again we are called to examine our hearts continually. That should be no exception when we meet for assembly. The Scripture clearly warns us that

God cannot be mocked. He will discipline those who are his. For example look at the instructions given to us regarding the Lord's Supper.

1 Corinthians 11:27 "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. 28 Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. 29 For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. 30 That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. 31 But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. 32 Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world."

We are instructed to examine ourselves before we partake of the covenant. We are warned about trying to deceive the Spirit of God. We are warned that God will deal harshly with those who lie to God and try to deceive the Holy Spirit. We are called to come before God with a sincere heart that is in unity with him. Not holding back anything. Our hearts must be clean to enter into that fellowship. That cleansing is only a work of regeneration. God will cleanse us of all unrighteousness if we are willing to come into agreement with his standards (his mind and heart), being cleansed by the blood of the Lamb through the Holy Spirit of God.