

Horizontal Relationships

Acts 4:32-37

I have had the privilege of pastoring five different churches over the past 39 years, and although there are similarities with each of them, each one was also quite different. I wrote in the church newsletter last month a brief description of each of those churches, and if you haven't received a copy of that newsletter I would encourage you to do so. It's a personal reflection, and gives you a glimpse into my past that I might not ordinarily express so publicly.

One of those churches had a series of pictures of all their previous pastors framed and hung up on the wall of the basement fellowship hall. On many occasions, I was given the verbal tour and explanation by various members, going from picture to picture with an often lively commentary about each man, both good and bad. I never wanted to hear they might have said about me after I left! Yet, at this point, I could do something of the same thing with those churches I have served, giving a brief analysis and running commentary evaluating each one. But that is not my purpose here. However, I say all of that in order to comment upon the church as it was just beginning to be established in Jerusalem those early days following Pentecost, as we read about in Acts 4.

For the past several sermons, we have focused upon that church in terms of the preaching of the gospel—the declaration of the gospel which God so richly blessed, and Acts 4:4 notes that “the number of the men [who believed the word] came to be about five thousand.” We looked at the persecution faced by the apostles and their courage and boldness in the face of that opposition. And we ended last week with the evidence of the power of God among them,

Acts 4:31 “And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.”

This morning we shift from those descriptions characteristic of the relationship between God and his people to what people today would call horizontal relationships—our relationships with one another. And what we read is so very encouraging. And so very descriptive of the sorts of relationships that should always characterize God's people in every church in every day.

I might add, for your encouragement, that much of what we will see today is present among us here, in our own church, and I will continually mention how much that is an encouragement to me as well. We are far from perfect and I'm not blind to our weaknesses and shortcomings as a church, nor my own individually, but still, as we look at these descriptions today, I am not doing so with any sense of rebuke or chastisement. Encouragement to do more? Certainly! Challenge to be even more diligent and faithful? Absolutely. But am I discouraged as a pastor or troubled by who we are? Definitely not. So may these words as I preach be reinforced by a sense of God's grace and work among us already, that we might be stirred up all the more to bring about in our own existence as a church that which we read as a description of that very early church in Jerusalem. And so we read,

I. A DESCRIPTION OF A HEALTHY CHURCH.

v.32 “Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.”

In preparing for this sermon this week, I was struck by those

beginning words. I am certainly familiar with this passage. I've taught on it often, referred to it frequently, and will freely emphasize the nature of the church in caring for one another's needs. I am also quick to note how different this description is from any sort of governmentally imposed system of socialism or communism. Yet the words are striking, "neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common." But those weren't the words that struck me in a fresh kind of way this week, but rather the words that precede them.

v.32 "Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul..."

In my own mind, the focus of my memory had been upon the outward actions, the behavior. It was so good, so encouraging as well as challenging, such a model and example for everyone to follow. No one said "that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common." But that's not what stood out to me this week as I began to study this text. It was the words that came before.

v.32 "Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul..."

And there is where the good behavior begins! In one sense, it is easy to imitate good behavior. And it is easy to focus upon that good behavior, but the real emphasis in these verses is in the description of the church inwardly. The real emphasis is not something that could be measured with money, or evaluated based upon mere outward actions. Oh, it was good for everyone to be generous in providing for one another, having "all things in common." But let me stress this morning, as I linger on this point for emphasis, that that good behavior began in the heart, in began in the inward motives and intentions of the heart. Specifically, they were,

A. One heart and one soul.

Now, I often use those two words as synonyms, and I won't try to distinguish them here. They refer to the same thing, two words, two synonyms used for emphasis. The heart is, I believe, the most comprehensive biblical description of the inner man. It is the most frequent word used to describe the inner man, by contrast to the outer man, which is, for lack of better words, our flesh and bones. Our physical body.

Human beings are composed to two elements, two parts, the physical and the non-physical. The outer and the inner. The body, flesh and bones, the outward appearance. And then there is the soul, or the heart. The outward, physical man, of course, is mortal, ever since the fall. It is corruptible. And death, human death, is very well defined as the separation of the body and the soul,

Gen. 3:19 "In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return."

But it is with the body that we act, we do things, good or bad, godly or wicked. But all that we do outwardly comes from the heart.

Mat. 11:34 "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. 35 A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good things, and an evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth evil things."

So what Luke describes for us in Acts 4 is, first of all, that which is of the heart, that which comes from the heart of the multitude of God's people. And what comes from their heart is this great sense of being one. "Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul."

I think you see the challenge, and encouragement to us, that we ourselves would seek to be of one heart. To be of one soul. Sometimes we speak of good friends as kindred spirits, and that is the same idea. We are to nurture that sort of relationship with one another. And so we read things like this,

Rom.15 “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. 16 Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.”

This is no small matter, for the same idea is repeated in, 2 Cor. 13:11 “Finally, brethren, farewell. Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.”

Then also, 1 Peter 3:8 “Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; 9 not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling.”

All of those verses give further explanation of how we go about achieving this lofty goal of being of one heart and one soul. The references are to aspects of humility, or as I just read, being tenderhearted and courteous. And in a fuller description we read,

Eph. 4:1 “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

Being of one heart and one soul requires long-suffering,

doesn't it? Bearing with one another in love. It requires lowliness and gentleness. And all of that is absolutely essential to emphasize before we begin to talk about outward behavior. And this is what a church is supposed to look like. Not just outward things. Not just outward programs or even ministries. Not the outward appearance, but your heart and soul.

1 Sam. 16:7 “But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

So I leave this lofty goal and challenge before us this morning, that you be of one heart and one soul, that you be kindred spirits, members of one another, giving all proper attention to your heart and soul. And then, to the outward actions that such a heart will produce.

v.32 “...neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.”

In other words,

B. Life shared together.

They shared their lives together. In as tangible and practical ways as possible—they shared together the things of this world, even their material sustenance. We'll look a bit more closely next week at just how that is different from the political system of communism, but essentially, it is this, that it was entirely voluntary and willing, not under compulsion. It was the natural result of having one heart and one soul, for that is the case, then it follows very naturally, “what's mine is yours...”. Life is shared together, the whole of life.

And because of that, we see God's blessing.

II. God's blessing upon a healthy church.

v.33

Again, words stuck out to me as I prepared for this sermon, and here were the words “great grace.” I just love that expression.

A. The evidence of great grace.

Luke is describing the church, he is praising the church, he is identifying the praiseworthy behavior of the church, and he summarizes all of that with that great expression, “great grace was upon them all.”

Now, in a literal sense, there is no other kind of grace! God's grace is always great. But the words have such a sweet sound and such a profound emphasis. It isn't just that God's grace was evident, but it is called great grace! Much grace! Much evidence of grace. And that's when you know a church is healthy. Not by measuring or counting the attendance. Not by increasing the budget. A big or a new facility doesn't make a church healthy. And certainly not a pastor. A church isn't great because they have a great pastor or a large congregation or a nice building. A church is great when “great grace” is upon them.

And then, related to that, what we see in our text is,

B. The display of great power as a witness of Jesus.

So here is the outward evidence of greatness.

v.33 “And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.”

A couple interesting thoughts about that. First, note the emphasis upon the resurrection. They gave witness to the resurrection. It is the resurrection that becomes the focal point of

the supernatural power of God proclaimed in the gospel. And so it is the resurrection which becomes the conclusive summary of all that Jesus came to earth to accomplish, representing it all. So a witness to the resurrection means first of all, a witness to the incarnation, Jesus becoming a man, taking to himself a human nature. A witness to the resurrection means a witness to his life, his perfect life of perfect obedience; it is a witness to his suffering for our sins upon the cross and to his death, all of which is necessary to recognize as you witness to his resurrection! Then, even after the resurrection, his ascension after 40 days, and ultimately his session—being seated at the right hand of his father in the position of all authority and power over all heaven and earth.

And the greatness of this early church, the evidence of God's blessing upon this great church, was the power with which “the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.” I should note here in our text that the immediate reference to this witness is that of the apostles, and they, literally, historically, were witnesses of Jesus. That was their fundamental qualification for apostleship, and that's why that word “witness” is still used today for what we do in evangelism. Following the foundational example of the apostles, we, too, are witnesses, of the resurrection. That is our calling as a church, and that is our identity, as Jesus spoke to his disciples before he ascended,

Acts 1:8 “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Pray for such a blessing, even for us and for our church. Pray for opportunities to be such a witness. Pray for the witness of word as it is preached among you. Pray for new believers in our midst, for those who hear the gospel, and believe, unto their

eternal salvation. Pray for that sort of greatness, and don't settle for anything less in your prayers or in your effort and commitment to work for the building of the church.

And then, of course, put all of this into practice, so that the example of Acts 4 becomes the model to which we aspire.

III. THE PRACTICE OF A HEALTHY CHURCH.

So we read,

v.34 "Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need. 36 And Joses, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated Son of Encouragement), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, 37 having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet."

The emphasis of that description is the...

A. Practical devotion to needs of others.

It is the practical application of the gospel! As James would put it,

James 2:14 "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? 15 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, 16 and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? 17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead."

John says it just as clearly,

1 John 3:16 "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the

brethren. 17 But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? 18 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth."

Practical devotion...as practical as it could possibly be! We read that "Barnabas...having land, sold it, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet." He had extra. He had an excess, more than he needed, so he sold it and gave the money for the benefit of those who had need. Again, James.

James 1:27 "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world."

True religion, the true exercise of Christian faith, is taking care of widows, representing all those who have need, all those who are needy. Such that those needs are met, those needs are satisfied. Because the multitude of those in the church were on one heart and one soul. They shared their lives together, including their abundance of this world's goods.

Let me note also, to build on this and to introduce what we will be studying in chapter 6, that this practical devotion to the needs of others would become the particular focus of those men who would later be ordained in the office of deacon. As the New Testament church develops during the time of the apostles, there are numerous references, especially from Paul, with regard to both elders and deacons. Two offices within the church, one an office of rule and responsibility. The other an office of service and ministry. And the beginning of that more formal office of deacon begins with what we read in,

Acts 6:1 "Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a complaint against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected

in the daily distribution. 2 Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, “It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. 3 Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; 4 but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” 5 And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, 6 whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them.”

I don’t believe there was any intentional slight to the Greek widows, but they were being missed. Slipping through the cracks as we would say. The church was providing meals for the widows in need. And it was important! So it couldn’t be neglected, and the apostles made sure that it wouldn’t be! So they appointed and ordained Stephen and six other deacons.

Here in our text, before those first deacons were ordained, we simply read that,

v.34 “...all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles’ feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.”

So this practical devotion to the needs of one another requires the...

B. Trusted oversight of faithful leaders.

The money was brought to the church, “laid at the apostles’ feet.” There was trust in that, trust in the oversight and leadership the apostles brought to the church. And the action is more than

symbolic. In the language of the Old Testament,

Mal 3:10 “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, That there may be food in My house, And try Me now in this,” Says the LORD of hosts, “If I will not open for you the windows of heaven And pour out for you such blessing That there will not be room enough to receive it.”

Bring it all into the storehouse! Bring it to the church, the whole church. Bring it to the apostles. Or now, after the end of the age of the apostles, bring it to the elders. And where there are faithful deacons overseeing this ministry, bring it to the deacons. Bring it to the church, with a confident trust that the faithful leaders of the church will manage the distribution of the money well.

I should emphasize for our own experience that we have a specific deacons’ fund, with an offering every first Sunday of the month. We distribute money to those who have need, with a priority to those within the church but also to those in need who come to us from outside the church. And that is just a small tip of the iceberg for this essential work of a healthy church.

As you study these verses this morning, let these words be of great encouragement. And challenge. That God’s blessing upon the church at Jerusalem might be a blessing we would experience for the same reasons, that we would be “of one heart and one soul,” that no one among us might act as if “any of the things he possessed was his own, but [hold] all things in common.” And may we always know the great grace of God upon us.