

## THE AUTHORIZED VERSION OF CHURCH ACTS 4:32-35

I have entitled my message this morning, "The Authorized Version of Church." Please remember that when the New Testament speaks about church, it is not referring to a building, or a Sunday morning worship service, or an incorporated, non-profit organization. Church is an assembly of believers in Jesus who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and, as a result, express the life and love of Jesus to each other, to the community, and to the world.

The Church began on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came upon disciples of Jesus and enabled them to come under His influence. They spoke in foreign languages they had not learned, declaring God's praises in the languages of those who had come to Jerusalem from all over the world. They courageously and convincingly preached the good news about Jesus, proving from the Scriptures that He is the promised Messiah. They performed astounding miracles in the name of Jesus.

All these things fulfilled Jesus' promise that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. Therefore, what we have seen thus far in our study of Acts are the displays of the Holy Spirit's grace and love and power in and through the lives of Jesus' disciples. This is what it looks like to be under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Including the description of the church that is given in chapter 4, **verses 32-35**. *<sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> 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 <sup>35</sup> and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.*

Please note, this was not a mandated or legislated form of communism instituted by the apostles. The early believers were not *commanded* to sell their lands or possessions and share with those in need. This is simply an account of what was happening in the Jerusalem church. It describes how they related to one another, how they viewed themselves and their possessions in relationship to the whole group, how they responded to each other's needs, and what God was doing in their midst.

I want to explore each of these things because I believe they are descriptions of a Spirit filled, Spirit controlled church, and as such they depict an *ideal* or a *standard* of spiritual health and vitality for all churches, including ours.

Let's begin in **verse 32a**. *<sup>32</sup> Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul...* The full number of those who believed was several thousand, and Luke is telling us here that *all* of them were of one heart and soul. There wasn't any division or disunity.

When I read this, I cannot help but think that this is an answer to Jesus' prayer in John 17 just prior to His death. He said, *<sup>20</sup> "I [pray] for [all] those who will believe in me... <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. (17:20-23).*

Jesus was not merely praying that people who are called by His name get along with each other. He was not merely praying that people with different opinions agree to disagree, or that people from different backgrounds tolerate each other.

He prayed for a oneness that comes from being totally immersed in His life and in the lives of one another, a oneness that comes from our identities actually being merged with God Himself. Not that we become God, but that God is living in us, and we recognize His life and His nature *in* one another as we relate to each other.

And *this* is the basis for being of one heart and soul. Those who are in Christ now have a nature (an operating system) that is *not* divisive or combative, but a nature that is peaceful, gracious, loving, and considerate. It is *Christ in us* who makes us one.

And the reason I am emphasizing this so much is because the unity Jesus is praying for is not achieved by human effort or resolve. It does not come about because we try really, really hard to be one. "It is an outgrowth of the union Christians enjoy with Jesus Himself... a union born when the Father and the Son indwell the believers when they are given new birth" (Burge, *John*, p.468).

And this unity is so completely contrary to human nature that it cannot help but be noticed. Jesus says that the oneness we have with one another will convince unbelievers that he really is the Son of God. Not only that, it will also prove to the world that God loves *us* and that we are His people.

That is what was going on in Acts 4. The early Christian community was experiencing the oneness that Jesus prayed for in John 17.

You might be saying, "I see that, and I would like to have been there to experience it. But what I'd really like to know is, is this kind of oneness sustainable? I can imagine people being 'of one heart and soul' for a few days or a few weeks. But most of us have read the rest of the New Testament where the apostles have to deal with personality conflicts and doctrinal divisions and people reverting back to destructive patterns of relating. Given what we know about human nature, knowing what we know about our *own* shortcomings and tendencies, is it realistic to think that this kind of oneness can be sustained? Is it realistic to assume, for example, that our church can be 'of one heart and soul' until Jesus comes?"

That is a really good question. Because, let's face it, we still carry around some of the baggage from our old nature that can sabotage our relationships. We can still get bent out of shape. We can be stubborn at times. We can be judgmental and intolerant. We can jump to conclusions and hold grudges and ride hobbyhorses and get underneath each other's skin. Most of us have one or more of these tendencies. So, is real, sustainable oneness even possible?

Please understand, living in unity doesn't mean we never grate against each other or hurt each other's feelings or have serious conflicts. It means we have the resources and capabilities to work through those things until there is complete resolution. It means God has made provision for us to possess a love for each other—*His* love—that transcends our hurts and disappointments and compels us to move toward each other and be reconciled in spite of them.

Second, if Jesus prayed this then it was a prayer according to God's will, and it most certainly *is* possible. So, if it is God's will that we be one, then He has made provision for us to do exactly that.

Let's move on to the second part of **verse 32b**. "...*And no one said that any of the things that belonged to Him was His own, but they had everything in common.*" This verse is describing *true* fellowship. The root meaning of the Greek word for fellowship, *koinonia*, is "common." Typically, when we think of fellowship we think of our common beliefs or our common priorities, values, and goals. But *koinonia* has the meaning of *partnership* as well. True fellowship, Holy Spirit generated fellowship, includes the attitude, "what's mine is yours."

This is another evidence of being under the influence of the Holy Spirit because this is

not a *natural* attitude. You all know that one of the first words a child learns is “MINE!” And they grab the toy that is in proximity to their playmate, pull it away and guard it so he/she cannot touch it. *That’s* human nature!

And it is human nature to grow up with the attitude, “What’s mine is mine! If I want to keep it all for myself that’s my business, and if I want to give some of it away then *I’ll* determine how much.” We naturally guard our resources. We naturally accumulate possessions and only give them away when we get tired of them. We naturally view our money as a source of security, power, or freedom.

But when we are under the influence of the Spirit, He shows us just how flawed that kind of thinking is, and He sets us free from those natural propensities. He shows us that building our personal, private kingdoms pales in comparison with advancing the kingdom of Jesus. He lets us experience the truth that it is more blessed to give than to receive. He convinces us that far more important than our personal wealth is the well-being of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

He shows us that when we give up the things we *thought* we needed to God, we receive the things we *really* need from God—which is, among other things, freedom from a preoccupation with money and things, and freedom to love others like God loves us.

You might be saying, “That’s fine, but let’s be real. I’ve worked really hard for what I’ve got, and maybe those people who get to benefit from my resources have been lazy, maybe they’ve exercised poor judgment, or maybe they’ve squandered resources that God has given them. Why should I bail them out?”

It seems to me that there’s only one reason that would compel someone who has resources to generously give those resources away, even to people who haven’t proved that they deserve them. It’s that the generous person has had a profound, personal experience with God’s grace. He knows that he didn’t deserve God’s favor or God’s forgiveness or God’s gift of eternal life, but he got it anyway. And if God has been so generous with him, if God didn’t hold back anything from him, not even His own Son, how could he be stingy himself?

And speaking of God’s grace, look at **verse 33**. <sup>33</sup> *And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.* The great power with which the apostles were testifying about the resurrection of Jesus was the power of the Holy Spirit, which enabled them to speak courageously and convincingly, which enabled them to present and explain the gospel with great clarity and competence. Don’t forget, these are the same men who, prior to Pentecost, frequently fumbled their words or scattered like scared rabbits when push came to shove.

But not since Pentecost. Being under the Spirit’s influence changed everything for them. And as they obeyed the promptings of the Spirit and allowed Him to use them, *“great grace was upon them all.”*

This simply means that God was expressing His pleasure and favor in ways that everyone could feel and observe and experience. I suspect that this grace was manifest in their unconditional love for each other, in a deep, abiding joy, in a pervasive sense of the presence of God, in a clear vision of Jesus and His kingdom, in vibrant worship. This concentration of God’s grace upon them was as much of a taste of heaven as it’s possible to have on earth.

Which is why they were able to relate to each other in the ways they did, and why they viewed their possessions and resources the way they did. They really understood that they were citizens of heaven, not primarily citizens of earth. And so, **verses 34-35**. <sup>34</sup> *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* <sup>35</sup> *and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was*

*distributed to each as any had need.*

The phrase, “*as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them*” is most likely describing landlords—wealthier believers who voluntarily sold some of their properties so that the poor among them would be provided for.

History tells us that the Jerusalem church was comprised of many poor people. We also know that Jerusalem’s economy was in bad shape in the first century, having deteriorated through constant famines and shortages and political turmoil. The early church’s means of caring for these have-nots was through the sacrificial generosity of those who had, people like Barnabus who we read about in verses 36-37.

And the result was that there was not a needy person among them. The result was that the poor were treated with respect and dignity and were not made to feel like they were second-class citizens of the kingdom. The result was that all these believers, no matter what their economic status, no matter what their level of education, no matter what their heritage or hometown, were of one heart and mind.

It raises the question once again, “How was this possible?” The answer is very simple yet very significant. They could do this because they were under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit had given them the ability to see things from His perspective. He had given them the ability to set their hearts and minds on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God (Col. 3:1-3). And in so doing the things of this earth—money, land, possessions, houses—seemed inconsequential in comparison. They could let go of them because they were temporary.

Let me say it another way: The reason the early church did what they did is because they had turned their eyes upon Jesus and were looking full in His wonderful face, so that the things of earth grew strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.

So, what’s the application for us? I believe the application for us is to say, “Spirit, would you be pleased to fill us? Would you incinerate the remnants of that self-promoting old nature? Would you give us a constant and compelling vision of Jesus and His kingdom? Would you compel us to set our hearts and minds on things above? Would you give us your mind and heart, would you influence our faculties in such a way that we have your perspective, priorities, and passions?”

“And if we have an unhealthy attachment to money and things, would you cut those strings? Let us walk in your freedom. Let us experience everything you want to give us or do in us or do through us. And if it would please you, let us have the same impact upon our community that the Jerusalem church had on theirs.”

This is “the Authorized Version of Church.” An assembly of believers in Jesus who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and, as a result, express the love of Jesus to each other, to the community, and to the world.

## **The Authorized Version of Church**

### **Acts 4:32-35**

**Main Idea:** *When the Spirit has his way in a church everyone in whom he dwells expresses the love of Jesus in ways that produce radical displays of unity, selflessness, and generosity.*

Spirit induced fellowship (32)

A supernatural oneness (32a)

Permeating the entire community

Resulting from their union with Christ

A supernatural selflessness (32b)

Spirit empowered preaching (33a)

Enabled to speak courageously and convincingly

Empowered to teach with clarity and competence

Spirit imparted grace (33b-35)

Experienced by everyone (33b)

Manifested by extreme generosity (34-35)

Resulting in the eradication of poverty (34-35)

### **Application Questions**

#### **Acts 4:32-35**

Is the kind of community described in this passage desirable to you? Why or why not?

What would EBC look like if we had the same attitudes towards one another and our possessions as the early Christian community? Be specific.

What do you think the Holy Spirit would need to do in *your* life before *you* could have this attitude about your possessions and your brothers and sisters in Christ?

Is there anything you can do (or need to do) to let Him work this attitude in you?