

Church 1.0
Acts 4:32-35
“The Church as a Community”

1. California’s giant redwood trees are an amazing sight. They are considered some of the largest living things on earth, and they are the tallest trees in the world. They can reach up to three hundred feet high, and they can be upwards of 2,500 years old.

2. A surprising fact about the redwood tree is that it has a very shallow root system. The only way that the redwoods are able to stand against the winds and storms is because they grow in groves together, and their shallow roots actually intertwine and interlock.

3. In other words, the strength of the redwoods is found in their closeness and connection to one another.

4. The same is true of the church. The strength of a church is not found in the size of her budgets, or the grandeur of her buildings. It is not the excellence of preaching, or the abundance of programs that makes a church strong and successful.

5. The church is not somewhere you go; it is something you are. Being a part of a church is not just going to a location; it is sharing in a life. That life in which the members of a church share is the community that truly defines what a church is.

6. At the close of Acts chapter 4, we are given a glimpse into the community life of the first church. How these early Christians lived and interacted together is a wonderful example of the type of community our church family should seek to be today.

7. Vance Havner once said, “Our greatest hindrance in the church today is within our own ranks. We can’t get to the goal for stumbling over our own team.”¹

8. Rather than stumbling over one another, or striving against one another, the church that becomes a community, such as we find in the book of Acts, will be a church where saints are blessed and the kingdom is built.

9. As we look at this text, there are some truths about this community of believers that ought to be true of our church family as well. First of all, this passage reminds us that the church should be a community where:

I. THE MINDSET IS UNUSUAL

1. Many churches in our day are desperately trying to connect with the society and culture around them. Relevance is their motto, and in an effort to be relevant,

they are trying to make their churches more and more like the society in which they live.

2. The mentality is that the church must mimic the world in order to reach it. As a result, many services have become Hollywood style productions, and entertainment is the new evangelism.

3. It is interesting, however, when we study the Word of God, we find that the church is called to counter the culture; not conform to it. The Apostle Peter said, "*But ye are...a peculiar people...*" (I Peter 2:9)

4. When we turn to our text, one of the first things we note about this church is **not** how it *fit in* with its culture; but rather how it *stuck out* from the culture.

5. When we read verse 32, we find that the whole mindset of this church was unusual for that day, or for *any* day. Verse 32 says, "*And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.*"

6. As we think of the uniqueness of this church and its mindset, notice a couple of things about this group of believers. Notice first of all:

A. Their agreement

1. The Bible tells us that within this first community of Christians, the whole multitude (which probably numbered close to 10,000), were "of one heart and of one soul".

2. The word translated "heart" speaks of emotions and desires. The word translated "soul" speaks of the life or the mind.

3. The idea is that all of these people shared a common passion and mentality. Though there was a diversity of people, there was unity of spirit.

4. While they were not all alike, they were all aligned. Different people, from different places, and different backgrounds had come together and agreed about the person and work of Jesus Christ!

5. While there was not uniformity, there was unanimity. This group of people had gathered into a community, and they were all agreed.

6. How unusual is this kind of community? The world is full of competing countries and conflicting views. War and strife fills the story of the human race. Over the last 4,000 years of human history, there have been only 268 years of peace.

7. History has proven that when enough people come together, it is almost inevitable that someone is going to disagree, and a schism will arise.
8. Yet here is an unusual group in which the people are unified in heart and soul. Their agreement is unusual in the midst of a world that so often disagrees.
9. This church speaks to us today and reminds us that a peaceful, unified community of believers is a powerful testimony to a world in conflict.
10. The mindset of this community was unusual not only because of their agreement, but notice also:

B. Their attitude

1. Look again at verse 32 in our text. It says, “...*neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.*”
2. This is the second time in the book of Acts where we are told that this early church had “all things in common.” We saw this same phrase earlier in chapter two (2:44).
3. Now, we see it again, and here we find the reason why these people were able to share with one another so willingly and completely. It is their attitude. None of them said that what they possessed was their own.
4. What a strange attitude to find among a group of people! Self-interest had been put aside for something that these people viewed to be much more important.
5. In the minds of these first church members, the Kingdom of Christ, and His Church, were more important than the accumulation of possessions. There was no object in their life that they would not part with in order to further the cause of Christ or to help His church achieve His will.
6. One of the earliest words we learn as a child is the word “mine”. As early as the nursery, we learn to lay claim to what is ours, and to defend it with tooth and nail if need be.
7. Unfortunately, some people never move beyond that toddler selfishness. Still today, many people live everyday to lay claim to something else, and to protect what they already have.

8. However, when we realize the eternal implications of the gospel, and we see the body of Christ as something infinitely more valuable than our selfish interests, it should affect how we hold on to this world, and the things that are in it.

9. The mindset of the people in a church community should be different from the mindset of the selfish, sinful world in which we live. We should agree about the surpassing importance of the gospel, and we should be willing to put aside ourselves for the sake of our church family.

10. There is a second truth we draw from this text with regard to the church as a community. This first church reminds us not only that the church is a community where *the mindset is unusual*, but also where:

II. THE MISSION IS UNCHANGING

1. This past week, a newspaper reported that the old Reformed Church in a small community near Schenectady, NY, is now an Arts Center. Though the church still owns the facilities, they have turned them over to a musician and artist named Scott Adams.

2. Adams said, "We've changed the sanctuary into a theater space..." He went on to say, "...it is a beautiful old building, and when we are done fixing it up, it will be a great arts center."

3. An article telling about the change at the church opened with this line: "Fire and brimstone never made any sense to Scott Adams. Art and music did."ⁱⁱ

4. As we look at the first church in the book of Acts, it is not hard to "make sense" of their mission. Verse 33 in our text says, "*And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all.*"

5. While many churches in our day are changing directions, and shifting priorities, this original community of believers speaks to us, and reminds us that our mission in this world has not changed. Notice a couple of things about our mission. First of all, it is:

A. To proclaim the gospel we've believed

1. Verse 33 says that with "great power" the apostles continued to testify to the truth of Christ's resurrection. This, in spite of the fact that they had recently been warned not to preach or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

2. There is something very interesting in the language of this text. Notice the word "gave" in verse 33. It is translated from a word that literally means "to pay back". It speaks of doing something you are obligated to do.

3. In other words, the Apostles were duty bound to testify to their world about the fact that Jesus had risen from dead, and was the only hope for the salvation of mankind.

4. Nothing has changed for the community of the church today. Proclaiming the gospel of a risen Savior is not a choice; it is a charge! It is not something we might do; it is something we must do!

5. The church family that does not witness to its world about the truth of the gospel is a church that is failing to keep its obligations to its Founder and Head – the Lord Jesus.

6. A church that does not give witness to the gospel it claims to believe is like a restaurant that serves no food, a hotel that has no beds, a hospital that offers no medicine, and an army that will not fight.

7. Jesus Christ ascended into heaven, leaving His church on earth that they might fulfill their mission – the primary of which is the proclamation of the gospel they have believed themselves.

8. Notice something further about the unchanging mission of the church. This first church reminds us not only that the mission is to proclaim the gospel we've believed, but also:

B. To portray the grace we've received

1. Look again at verse 33. It says, "...and great grace was upon them all." Part of the power of the apostolic witness was the lives of those who had been converted to Christ through that witness.

2. One thing that was clear about this first community of believers was that all of them had been clearly touched by the grace of God!

3. As the apostles preached about the power of the gospel, it was verified as lost people could see that God had truly done a work in the lives of the people that made up this first church.

4. Is this not still the mission of the church today? As we preach the gospel with our lips, we are to prove it with our lives as well!

5. In Matthew 5:16, Jesus said, "*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*"

6. In Philippians 2:15, Paul said, "*That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world.*"

7. Too many churches are declaring a message on Sunday that their members aren't displaying on Monday. They are pitching a product their own employees don't seem to have ever used.

8. The mission of the church has not changed since Christ founded it and commissioned in the first century. We are to proclaim the saving grace of God, while portraying that same grace as we live our lives from day to day.

9. There is a third truth we draw from this text and this first church community. They teach us not only that the church is a community where *the mindset is unusual*, and *the mission in unchanging*, but also, they teach us that the church is a community where:

III. THE MEMBERSHIP IS UNSELFISH

1. When Karl Marx formed his communist doctrine he took its foundational principle from the early church community in the book of Acts. The communist mantra is, "From every man as he is able, to every man as he has need."

2. Look back at the text in verse 34 and 35. It says, "*Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.*"

3. While Marxism drew from this text for its failed ideologies, there is a great difference in political communism, and the community life of this early church.

4. One writer explains the difference this way. He writes, "The early Christians shared their possessions, not because they were communists or socialists – not because they were forced to share their things – but for a far better reason. They shared their goods because they were generous, and they were generous because they had learned generosity from God."ⁱⁱⁱ

5. The community of believers that made up the first church consisted of a group of people who gave to one another and to the work of the Lord with a remarkable unselfishness.

6. The people of the first church speak to us today and remind us that the church is not a place where you simply take and receive. The church is place where Christ's people give and contribute unselfishly.

7. Notice with me a couple of things about their giving. Notice first of all that:

A. Their giving was sacrificial

1. Look back at our text, and notice again what it says in verse 34. It says, “...as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold.”
2. Now this does not mean that everybody sold everything they owned. The tense of the verbs in the original language indicates that this was something people did as it was needed.
3. What I want you to see is the obvious sacrificial nature of their giving. They did more than drop a 20 in the plate. These people sold houses and properties, and gave the entire proceeds to the work of the Lord.
4. Recently, George Barna released some interesting findings about churches and their giving. He found that during the last quarter of 2008, 1 out of 5 families adjusted to the economic troubles by decreasing their giving to the church.
5. The survey goes on to predict that churches will see 3 to 5 billion dollars less in the coming year, as people reduce what they are giving to the Lord.
6. The most striking statistic I saw in the entire article was that by far the most common adjustment people had made in their finances was to reduce their giving to churches and charity.^{iv}
7. In other words, before people will cut back the cable bill, reduce their cell minutes, eat meals at home, or cut some other non-essential from their lives, they will reduce their giving to the Lord. They will take from God so they can keep more for themselves.
8. Contrast that with the unselfish, sacrificial giving of the people who made up the first church. They would rather give up their property than see their church do without.
9. Their giving was not only sacrificial, but notice also that because of their unselfishness:

B. Their giving was sufficient

1. We find no record in this text of Peter preaching a sermon on stewardship. There is no evidence of a capitol campaign, or fundraising efforts on the part of the Apostles.
2. What we do find is this amazing statement in verse 32. It says, “Neither was there any among them that lacked...”

3. Think about that! People gave what they could, and got what they needed. The needs within the church were met by generosity and service of the members within that church.

4. This first church community leaves for us an important example, and it speaks to us about so much more than just money and material needs.

5. This church community reminds our church community that if we will each give what we can, we will each have what we need.

6. What this says to us is that if there is a need within our congregation that is not being met, a ministry that is not being fulfilled, a service that is not being offered, it is because someone is not doing their part.

7. If a church falls short of meeting the needs it faces, the blame cannot be laid at the feet of just one person. Every member of a church community is responsible for the life and health of that community.

8. When we give sacrificially, we find that God has given everything we need within our church family to sufficiently meet all of our needs.

1. I once read about a young, energetic pastor who came to an old, struggling, aging, dying church in a small rural community. He tried every idea and strategy he had learned in seminary, but nothing seemed to motivate the lifeless congregation.

2. The numbers continued to decline, and the church continued its spiral. Finally, one week, the young pastor decided to try one last thing. He placed an add in the local paper, announcing that the church had died, and on the upcoming Sunday, a funeral service was going to be held at the church in memory of the church.

3. This caught the attention of the town, and on that Sunday, the building was full. When they people walked in, it was quiet, and all eyes were focused on a casket that sat at the front of the building.

4. As the service began, a funeral hymn was sung, and then the young preacher rose and preached a eulogy over the church, recounting its history, and its recent demise.

5. At the end of the service, the pastor invited the people, row by row, to file by the casket and look inside. As each person passed, it was obvious that the pastor's message had gotten across to them.

6. As they looked into the coffin, what they saw was themselves. The pastor had placed a mirror inside the open coffin.

7. The church is not building; it's a body. That body is a community of believers, brought together by Jesus Christ and His gospel. The health and life of a church is therefore dependent upon the health and life of that community.

8. The first church speaks to us today, and reminds us that we are unique people, called to proclaim and portray the gospel, while giving to and caring for one another.

9. Let us not be just a religious club. Let us be a spiritual community, where each member does their part to see that cause of Jesus is achieved, and the church of Jesus is advanced.

ⁱ Hester, Dennis, The Vance Havner Quote Book, (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1986), p. 43

ⁱⁱ Buell, Bill, Reformed church set to reopen as Boght Arts Center, 5/15/09, *dailygazette.com*, accessed 5/16/09, http://www.dailygazette.com/news/2009/may/15/0515_boght/

ⁱⁱⁱ Boice, James Montgomery, Acts, (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997), p. 60

^{iv} Barna, George, Churches Stand to Lose Billions of Dollars in Lost Donations, 12/1/08, *The Barna Group*, accessed 5/16/09, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/20-donorscause/9-churches-stand-to-lose-several-billion-dollars-in-lost-donations-due-to-economic-downturn>