

Sermon 19, A Word-and-Spirit Church, Acts 4:31-37

Proposition: A word-and-Spirit church is unified, generous, and apostolic.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, Luke loves to summarize. We are grateful for this, because we know that the life of the church is not the most exciting life from a historical point of view. If I were to write a history of the last five years of our congregation, noting who came and who left, what we talked about at each fellowship meal and prayer meeting, how the singing sounded on a particular Sunday, that summer when the air conditioner was broken, and so on, would we find that particularly edifying or even interesting? Of course not. The ubiquitous presence of movie cameras has taught us that scenes that are just fine when you live them are incredibly boring, tedious, even painful when you have to watch them again. For instance, my kids like to record a minute or two of daily conversation between my wife and me as we clean up after lunch. The conversation was good while we had it, but in the recording, it becomes lame and sounds dumb. Well, Luke avoids that recording of the banal and instead gives us some of the highlight moments from the early church — Peter's Pentecost sermon, the healing of the man born lame, Ananias and Sapphira (which we'll get to next week). But he collapses the daily and weekly life of the church into these summaries, for which we are all profoundly grateful. The summaries give us the major features of the church as it's supposed to be, and edify the body by presenting us with a glowing picture of a healthy church. We saw in the major summary in Acts 2 that word, sacrament, and membership are the church's "top three." This summary in Acts 4, rather than going over that same ground, covers another facet of a healthy church. It too includes the word and prayer, but focuses primarily on the financial life of a healthy congregation. If we are truly a church filled with the Spirit and really speaking/hearing the word, our finances will

reflect that. So will our unity and our dedication to following the apostles. Indeed, a word-and-spirit church is unified, generous, and apostolic.

I. The Basics, v. 31

Obviously, we looked at v. 31 last week. But I want to circle back for another pass, because though it clearly ends the previous section by summarizing God's answer to their prayer for strength under persecution, I think it's valuable to take the verse as also summarizing the preconditions for the wonderful attitudes and actions of vv. 32-37. In other words, we can all agree that the church ought to be unified, generous, and apostolic. But I believe that v. 31 gives us the foundation for those things. Unity, witness, sharing — none of those things cause themselves. They are all byproducts of something else. What? I would contend that they are byproducts, results, of the practices here in v. 31.

A. Prayer

The first of these is prayer. You don't become a unified, sharing, apostolic congregation without God's help. You just don't. And how do you get God's help? By asking for it. "When they had prayed." That's how our text begins. The unity, the generosity, the liquidation of real estate in order to give to the poor brothers and sisters — that did not come about just by hearing a sermon from Peter. That was a result of praying in the face of persecution.

Similarly, when our church gets used to going into God's presence in corporate prayer will be when our church becomes a powerful entity that truly changes lives and impacts our whole city. A prayerless church is a powerless church, because it is not in touch with the one to whom all power in heaven and earth belongs.

B. Being Filled with the Spirit

Now, having our meetinghouse shaken is not properly a foundational reality of the church. That was a sign. But the thing signified is incredibly important for the church. What is the thing signified? Simply this: The presence of the Spirit, filling God's people for worship and witness. That's what the shaking of the house meant, because Luke immediately follows his report of the shaking of the house with the statement that "they were all filled with the Spirit."

What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? It means to have the Holy Spirit present in your life and heart in such a way that your thought process, your decision-making, your attitude and habits and speech, are all shaped by Him. That's what it means. Fullness of the Spirit is equated with fullness of the word in Ephesians and Colossians. That is what the church needs, more than anything — to know God's word and be lived in and motivated by His Spirit. That was a reality for the early church that Luke describes here. Is it a reality for us? We will know that it is when we consistently do what pleases God because it pleases Him.

C. Speaking God's Word Boldly

The final basic practice of the church is speaking the word of God boldly, because it is the word of God and not because we have decided that it is likely to appeal to the person we're talking to. That is a particular challenge for me. I like to be liked, and I don't want to speak the word of God unless it seems that my interlocutor wants to hear it. But a healthy church is full of God's word, and church members speak it boldly. By the same token, we know that we are an unhealthy

church if we know God's word but are reluctant to say it, particularly to each other but even to outsiders. We are an incredibly unhealthy church if we don't even know God's word.

These are the basics. A good church is full of prayer, the Holy Spirit, and the word of God. If we are missing even one of these three, we are a less-than-healthy church. A church like ours, where only about one-third of the church ever attends prayer meeting, has the health of a 35-year-old trucker who takes less than 500 steps a day and has a beer gut so big he has to put the seat uncomfortably far back just to turn the steering wheel. We are not quite in the danger zone — we're not a 55-year-old trucker with that kind of exercise profile and gut health — but we're hardly headed the right direction. That can all change if those of you who aren't coming to prayer meeting are regularly and determinedly praying at home with your family. But if you aren't praying with any of God's people, ever? Then our church is in great danger. We're more like an 80-year-old trucker who's survived three heart attacks and smokes two packs a day.

II. The Byproducts, vv. 32-37

What happens when you have a word-and-Spirit church whose attitude overflows in prayer?

A. Unity in Heart and Soul, v. 32a

Luke tells us that the first byproduct is deeply close relationships in the church. The congregation, otherwise known as the believers (notice that the two terms are interchangeable in a healthy church; you don't have to ask "How many members of this congregation actually believe in Jesus?") were so unified with each other that they had one soul. They did not fight or disagree about what to do, how to behave, what to pray for or what kind of preaching and worship music they wanted. The Greeks had a proverb, something like "Two friends have one soul." Some commentators actually speculated that Luke added the word "heart" to this Greek proverb to make it sound more biblical. We can't know that for sure, of course. But we can know that a word-and-Spirit church is deeply unified. You won't get 10 different answers from 10 different church members. You'll hear the same thing from them all, see the same thing in them all.

B. Sharing Property, v. 32b

And that unity will spontaneously overflow into a radical voluntary sharing. It's sad but true: Human nature is to share more with those who are more like you. If I meet someone who thinks, acts, speaks, and lives nothing like me, I am not very inclined to make a financial contribution to him. By definition, his goals, and the use he will make of the money, are different from my goals and the way I would use the money. I believe in feeding my kids with my money; someone who is nothing like me would believe in purchasing video games with his money. I believe in supporting the church with my money; someone who is nothing like me would believe in supporting Planned Parenthood with his money. And so on. The more commonalities there are, the more comfortable you and I will be financially supporting someone or financially contributing to something. In other words, folks, this sharing was a byproduct of the unity generated by word, Spirit, and prayer. People were motivated to give absolutely anything they had to someone who needed it because they identified so strongly with the needy people in their church.

One of the commentators talked about a church with a genuine mixture of richer and poorer people in it. If your closest friends at church were a family that made a tenth of your salary each year, how would that change things for you? For instance, to be totally ridiculous, I just saw an ad for an electrically-powered golf bag carrier. It was \$800. Would that still seem like a necessity after you had had a conversation with the mom who is wondering how she's going to get her kids to school after her \$2500 van finishes dying? Or, to use a more realistic example, let's say that you make the median income for Gillette — around \$81k per year. And let's say that there is a family in this church that makes half that. That's actually nearly certain that there are families in this church like that. Anyway, I think you and I would consider it acceptable that you drive new cars and they drive 15-year-old cars. No real need to share. But what if they can't afford to eat meat more than twice a week? What if they are living in a two-bedroom house with five kids because they can't afford anything bigger? What if they are going to get evicted because they can't pay the rent increase their landlord wants? It's fine that their cars are older. But is it fine if they have nowhere to live?

We do not have any poor people in our church. Part of that is God's blessing on faithfulness; sure. But part of it is our own reluctance to get involved with poor people and their poor ways and their problems and show them what a word-and-Spirit church is really like.

I've let members of this congregation borrow my cars. I've let a number of you crash with me for extended periods of time. And it was a pain sometimes. Those of you who are saying "Well, what I have is definitely my own and I am not about to share it with lowlives" — I get it. The reason they shared was not because it's fun to share, nor even that it's rewarding to give (though it is). They shared because they were united around their shared love of Jesus, His word, and His Spirit, and they affirmed and nurtured that unity by praying together. A lot.

They shared their property because they were united in word and Spirit.

C. Powerful Apostolic Testimony about the Resurrection, v. 33a

Their church was also marked by powerful apostolic testimony about the resurrection. This testimony was unforgettable, undoubtable. If you heard it, you were convinced. That's what the text means by "power." Is that our church? As we read the word of God together, as I formally expound it to you, do you grow ever more convinced of the truth of the resurrection? That should mark our church every bit as much as sharing does. Indeed, if we are convinced about the truth of the resurrection, then we have every reason to share, and the more convinced we are, the more generous we'll be. If I think that dying with the most toys is most important, I won't want to give you my toys. But if I'm convinced that God will give me eternal life, and that no investment in the Kingdom will fail to pay dividends, I can't wait to share with you.

So pray for me as I declare the apostolic witness to the resurrection. Pray for all of us to grow in the power of our testimony to it.

D. Abundant Grace, v. 33b

Another feature of this church was the fullness of grace that was present in it. The commentators try to narrow down what specific kind of grace this was; I think that's a mistake. Every kind of grace was in the Jerusalem Church at this point. It began with God's unmerited favor toward

them. The whole church was awash in God's grace. Do we pray for that? Do we want to be greatly graced, loaded down with God's spiritual favor? I hope so. I pray so. And then that grace from God overflowed into how they treated each other.

The late Dallas Willard used to say that no Christian wants to go to Law Church; we all want to go to Grace Church. Brothers and sisters, is our church full of God's law? I hope so. I think that everyone in here wants to keep God's law; if you didn't, you wouldn't be here. But what about in our relationships with each other? Are they marked by the gratitude and generosity of grace, particularly in forgiveness — or by the iron rigor of the law that never forgives, never forgets, and always demands absolute perfection? Our church had better be Grace Church. If it's not, we will kill each other. Maybe not literally, but certainly spiritually. At Law Church, they are all full of bitterness and anger. They have long memories, and they don't much like each other. It doesn't take much probing to get a list of all the things so-and-so has done exactly wrong. But at Grace Church, they literally forget the times the others have sinned against them. If you ask a member of Grace Church what's so special about their congregation, they will say "That I am loved and accepted here, not because I'm perfect but because Jesus is perfect."

Are we going to be Grace Church? We can only do it by being a word-and-Spirit church that prays together.

E. Powerful Apostolic Leadership, 4:35, 37, 5:2

The church was full of grace; that might have been the first thing you encountered as you walked in its doors. But it wouldn't take you long to realize that the apostles really were calling the shots inside First Church Jerusalem. Notice how three times in a row we are told that people would bring money and lay it at the apostles' feet. What is this emphasizing? That the apostles headed up the distribution of resources. They unabashedly took charge of the finances and charitable expenditures of the church. They were not in the background letting the congregation do most of its own decision-making.

Historically, we Presbyterians have held the Session of Elders to be the supreme human judicial power in the local church. And that includes handing complete financial control over to them. We don't think that the elders are apostles. But we think that they are like the apostles in their task of shepherding the flock and making disciples of the nations.

Church leaders with no financial authority are certainly not what's portrayed here. Your elders rightly control the purse strings of this congregation. A church with weak elders, who let the pastor make all the decisions, or who force the congregation to make all the decisions, is not a church that will experience the blessings that attended the Jerusalem Church.

F. The Elimination of Poverty, v. 34-35

Indeed, the radical generosity of the members of this church, and the solid financial decision-making of the apostles, resulted in the total elimination of poverty within the church. That is something that is totally possible for the church if we actually live as a word-and-Spirit congregation. Already our church has gone far to eliminate poverty in the life of one friend of this congregation. When we met him, he was living in a hotel, a missed paycheck away from homelessness. We fronted him the deposit to rent a small single-family home here in town.

Someone in the church anonymously gave him \$500 to get his abscess fixed, and another family gave him a \$1500 compound bow. He also rented accommodations from one of us at a price less than half of what a hotel would have cost him. Brothers and sisters, this man is today no longer in severe poverty because of how generously our church shared with him.

Could that be replicated? Of course it could. When people call the church and ask for money, I invite them to come join us and tell them that we take care of our own. In the Jerusalem Church, this went to the point of liquidating real estate and giving the money to the church. I don't think that's common, but the point is not that it's common but that it's possible. When you are actually living for God, filled with the Spirit and speaking the word in regular corporate prayer, you might sell your home in order to give to the poor. You might care enough about your less-fortunate brothers and sisters that you take the financially risky step of liquidating your real property in order to make sure that your brother in Christ can get to work or that your sister in Christ can get some help with her tuition. Wow. That is the kind of people we become when, together, we pursue Jesus.

G. The Raising Up of Additional Leaders, vv. 36-37

The final scene Luke shows us is of Barnabas selling a field and laying the money at the apostles' feet. Here is a man who will travel with Paul and see many people converted and churches founded. He got his start in ministry through generous giving.

Do you want to be part of a church like First Church Jerusalem? Do you admire the power and grace and generosity that you see here? Brothers and sisters, this is within reach for our church. This is not an unattainable ideal. We are actually headed in this direction; let's continue to work toward it.

III. The Point: Persecution Actually Made the Church Stronger

Overall, we come away from this summary saying "Yes! We want to be a grace-filled, generous church that has powerful leadership and that really cares about the message of the resurrection." And the way to get there is by being a word-and-Spirit church that prays. The other thing this summary shows us is that persecution actually made the church stronger. The overnight jailing of Peter and John added resilience to the church's prayer life and strengthened the believers with yet more boldness to proclaim the name of Christ. It also enriched the church, as people began believing in the cause to such an extent that they were willing to liquidate the property to help their needy brothers and sisters.

Does this church attract you? Then get ready for persecution, because that's how the early church got here. And devote yourselves to the word and prayer, because that's how the early church stayed here. Above all, keep trusting the Lord who is gracious and generous and powerful and makes His bride like Himself. Amen.