

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

The Church Alive – What God Expects in a Church Acts 4:32-37

32 And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. 34 For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales 35 and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need. 36 Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), 37 and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Let me begin our time this morning with a poem; a poem written by Charles Osgood (a news commentator and writer) with whom some of you might be familiar. The poem is entitled, "A Poem About Responsibility" and it goes as follows:

There was a most important job that needed to be done,
And no reason not to do it, there was absolutely none.
But in vital matters such as this, the thing you have to ask
Is who exactly will it be who'll carry out the task?

Anybody could have told you that everybody knew
That this was something somebody would surely have to do.
Nobody was unwilling; anybody had the ability.
But nobody believed that it was their responsibility.

It seemed to be a job that anybody could have done,
If anybody thought he was supposed to be the one.
But since everybody recognized that anybody could,
Everybody took for granted that somebody would.

But nobody told anybody that we are aware of,
That he would be in charge of seeing it was taken care of.
And nobody took it on himself to follow through,
And do what everybody thought that somebody would do.
When what everybody needed so did not get done at all,
Everybody was complaining that somebody dropped the ball.
Anybody then could see it was an awful crying shame,
And everybody looked around for somebody to blame.

Somebody should have done the job,
And Everybody should have,
But in the end Nobody did
What Anybody could have.

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

This poem may be entitled, "A Poem About Responsibility", but it also covers the issues of delegation and perhaps, more to my concern this morning, the issue of expectation. We all have expectations – those things we anticipate will happen. And we all have expectations upon others. We all expect people to act a certain way, to do certain things, to take care of what we believe to be their responsibilities. Sometimes our expectations upon one another are right and realistic; my wife has a right expectation that I will love her, care for her, and provide for her. Yet often times, we can expect more from others than we expect from ourselves, as described in the poem I read. In all of this however, let me remind you that God has also expectations; and His expectations are always right, always realistic, and always to be our goal.

So, what are God's expectations for a church? What are the qualities or traits that God develops and therefore expects from His people? Our text this morning provides us the answers to such a question. To put it in a phrase, God expects His people to rightly relate to each other. For where God is at work in a church, then not only will the members be serious about God (as we saw back in Acts 4:23-31 where the people committed themselves to prayer), but they will also be serious and committed to one another. Our text this morning presents us with three things that demonstrate God is at work in His church; three things God is developing in His church; three things that God expects from His people in the church as expressed toward one another.

In typical fashion, I had visions of presenting all three of these expectations to you in one message, at least to begin with. But as I delved into each of these three expectations, I found them to be so deep and profound, that to not dig in thoroughly to each one so as to expose and explain and then to exhort you in the better practice of them would be to do us a disservice. So this morning I present to you the first of three expectations of God on His people from Acts 4:32-37.

I. Expectation #1: We are to be bound by a unified purpose (32-33)

32 And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.

This text starts off with something extraordinary when you stop to think about it. It almost seem impossible, or too good to be true. We read that the whole **"congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul..."** This is a fancy way of saying that everyone was on the same page; everyone was onboard. It was a slice of heaven on earth. These believers were one in *heart*, meaning they had one purpose that knit them together with strong emotional ties. This was family; they loved as family. But, they were also of one *soul*, meaning they pursued the same thinking, that is that they had a common theology that bonded them. In a phrase, they were unified in purpose.

While we speak of unity a lot in a variety of settings, unity itself is actually a most rare and precious jewel. Undeified unity may be likened to the Hope diamond, something many people have heard of; something that many have seen pictures of, but something that no ever expects to truly possess for himself. The world, by virtue of being lost in sin, cannot understand what unity is; nor does it have the ability to achieve it. However, the church, you and I, not only have the possibility of possessing unity, we are actually expected to pursue it and practice it. We read of this in Ephesians 4:1-3

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Let me put this Acts 4 text into perspective. The early church had grown quickly in just a few months. In one day, it went from 120 people to 3,000 people (Acts 2:41). Then, according to Acts 4:4, just a few days or weeks later, the number of men, not including then women and children, had grown to over 5,000. Yet according to Acts 4:32, this church, in spite of its size, was unified; that is, they were of one heart and soul.

This oneness of heart and of soul means that they were melted into one another. Yes, they all had different temperaments; different backgrounds, different upbringings, and some of them even had different languages. They differed in almost every imaginable way, yet they had all melted into one extraordinary unity; of one heart and one soul.

This principle of the unity of believers is one of the most important truths taught in the New Testament. No wonder then it is so often revealed to us in the early church. In John 17:21, Jesus prayed, **"that they may all be one; even 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 sent Me."** We see this unity expressed multiple times in the book of Acts. In Acts 1:6 we see that the disciples **"had come together"** to speak to Jesus. In Acts 1:14, after the ascension of Jesus into heaven, we read that **"these all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer..."** In Acts 2:1 we read that the disciples were **"all together in one place."** In Acts 2:46, after the great ingathering of believers, we read this, **"day by day continuing with one mind in the Temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart..."** In Acts 4:24, after Peter and John had been released from questioning before the Sanhedrin reread of the church that **"they lifted their voices to God with one accord..."** So then, already in the first four chapters of the book of Acts, there have been five clear references to the unity of the early church. We are being reminded that the church of Jesus Christ, when she functions truly as the church, is the greatest phenomenon the world has ever known, it is the only thing that can ever unite people. And this beloved, is God's expectation of His church. Not only of the early church, but also of Hope Community Bible Church.

As we look to this world all we see is disunity we see class warfare, we see gender warfare, we see distinctions being made on the basis of race, and the truth is, this is the best that the world can offer. Colossians 3:11 reminds us that, **"there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all and in all."** In contrast to the world, and as evidenced in our text, the early church, and indeed the church of every generation, is to stand in stark contrast being a picture of unity in Christ Jesus. This is God's expectation of the church. In the church we are all one. We are of one heart and one soul, melted into Christ Jesus. This is astounding, extraordinary, and is to be a light to the world. Our text reveals a picture of what the world will be like when Christ comes to reign, having conquered all of his enemies, and having set up his glorious kingdom; then we shall be purely of one heart and of one's soul.

The Church Alive

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

The unity of the church is to be a foretaste, the budding flower of the rule of Christ on earth. We know that the day is coming when all wars shall cease. But this will not be the result of the United Nations, nor the result of some superpower nation. Only Christ will put an end to all war, all hostility, and all animosity. The time will come when He will rain from shore to shore. And to all of this we say, even so Lord Jesus, and quickly.

The early church experienced this unity, this oneness of heart and of soul. This reminds us that unity has nothing to do with size. We must not think that a small church can be better unified than a large church. Just because you might not know a lot of people in a larger church, does not mean that church cannot be unified; for unity and knowing everyone are two separate issues. I can promise you that not everyone in early church knew one another. Yet, we are told they all had unity. The question for us is how? How is it that this church that was both very young and very large, could experience such unity. Let us look to our text and note three things this early church did that brought to them unity; a unity expected by God. Of course then the point is that we might practice these things ourselves.

A. The believers looked up (32a)

And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul...

If a church, a congregation, this gathering of people, is to experience unity, it begins as they all look up. Notice with me from verse 32 a word that qualifies what it means to be a part of this congregation, or literally, this large throng or company of people. It is not just a gathering of people, but a gathering of **"those who believed"**. To truly and rightly belong to the church you must be a "believer." This is the key to everything, for a "believer" is a Christian, and a Christian is a "believer." These are synonymous terms. The Greek word literally speaks of "the believing ones." But we might ask what did they believe? Their belief is upon one person, the Lord Jesus Christ. But, let us be more specific as to what it means to believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ.

To believe on the Lord Jesus Christ means knowing oneself to be a sinner, and Christ to have died for sinners; it means abandoning all self-righteousness and self-confidence, and casting oneself wholly upon Him for pardon and peace; and exchanging one's natural hostility and rebellion against God for spirit of grateful submission to the will of Christ through the renewing of one's heart by the Holy Spirit. As indicated in our text, these were not only those who had believed at some point in the past, but continue to believe and to look up to Jesus. To believe then, means to look to Christ, to speak to Christ, to cry to Christ, just as you are. To believe means to confess your sin, your unbelief, and to cast yourself on His mercy; asking Him to give you a new heart, to work in you true repentance and firm faith, and to ask Him to take away your evil heart of unbelief and to write His law within you, that you may never again stray from Him. To believe means to turn to Him and to trust Him as best you can, and to pray for grace to turn and to trust more thoroughly. To believe on Jesus is to use the means of grace expectantly, looking to Christ to draw to you as you seek to draw near to Him. To believe is to watch, to pray, to read, and to hear God's word, to worship and to commune with God's people, and so continue until you know in yourself, beyond doubt, that you are indeed a changed being, a penitent believer, and the new heart which you desired has been put within you.¹

¹ This paragraph is adapted material from J.I. Packer's introductory essay to John Owen's, "The Death of Death in the Death of Christ."

The Church Alive

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

How did the early church, this great gathering of different peoples, come to experience this corporate unity? Corporate oneness of heart and soul begins with each individual heart being singularly committed to Jesus Christ. Then, each unit becomes unified with one another. The most remarkable thing about the gospel and one of the greatest characteristics of the Christian life is the unity that Jesus brings to that life. For when you come to Christ, think about this, one of the main effects is that your life is unified you have become single in your focus, that focus being on pleasing, following, obeying the Lord Jesus Christ. Before you come to Christ, you have double vision. You cannot see things correctly. All aspects of an individual's life is this unified. But in Christ, all life is seen as a whole. It does not matter whether I am single, or I am married. It does not matter whether I have a job, or I am retired. It does not matter whether I am young, or if I am old. Being in Christ, believing in Jesus, is to bring every aspect of your life into unity, into conformity with the will and purpose of Jesus. This beloved, is what it means to believe.

This is what it means to believe and such a belief leads to unity of heart and soul. To have unity, a gathering of people must be committed to the same thing, and the same thing the early church committed to was that they looked up to Jesus. This does not mean they were clones, all looking the same, but they all looked up to the same person as they all humbled themselves before God and believed in Jesus Christ. Let me say it again, unity is not uniformity. To have unity in a church is not to make everyone look the same, but it is to have everyone look up to the same Jesus. For the basis of true unity and fellowship is what we *believe*; and for believers, that is a person and His work on the cross, Jesus Christ. And, as we believe, that will bring us together, not to all perform the same thing in the same way at that same time; but to worship the same Savior who guides and directs us all.

I love the illustration that A. W. Tozer gave saying, "Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow." If we are to experience biblical unity and fulfill the expectation of God, we must look up to Jesus; to be of one heart and one soul concerning the person and perfections of Jesus. But there is more than just looking up in our text. Next...

B. The believers looked in (32b)

...and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them.

I know that we sometimes speak of the ills of being inward focused. And it is true, if we are only inwardly focused upon the church that we will not have much of an impact on the world. Yet, to have an impact on the world, we must be rightly focused inwardly. This is an expression of true unity. We can talk all we want about unity, but, as the old proverb states, "the proof of the pudding is in the eating" – meaning that if the pudding is any good, then it will be eaten; there will be action. And in verse 32, we find two such actions that proved a right focus on one another. First...

1. Believers are to be selfless.

...and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own...

Let us be honest and clear here; that selflessness is not *natural* to any of us. We do not tend toward selflessness but toward selfishness. And so, what we see here in verse 32 is something

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

supernatural. If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature according to 2 Corinthians 5:17. What we see them doing here is supernatural as Jesus changed the way they looked at their possessions. They became *selfless* and such selflessness breeds unity. Next...

2. Believers are to be gracious.

...but all things were common property to them.

I have heard some call what was taking place here in Acts 4 as a kind of Christian communism. This would not be very accurate. For communism teaches that what ever the people have or produce belongs to the government. In Acts 4, we do not have communism but rather, fellowship, or in the Greek, *koinonia*. The word for "*common*" here speaks of an attitude among the believers that said, "What's mine is yours; if you need it I'll share it." These believers were gracious to one another, offering of all they had to help one another.

How do you feel about sharing? It can be kind of scary to share, right? If you share of something you own, it might not come back in the same condition as when it left. Maybe you have shared something only to have it not come back at all! Yet we see the early Christians being incredibly gracious and giving? What motivated them to be this way? [pause]

We should not have to even ask the question, for in asking the question as to why these believers were so gracious, we are reminded how quickly we forget how gracious God has been to us. God gave us something extraordinary when we had nothing to offer Him but our sick, sin-filled selves. We forget that God had every right to withhold every good gift, every blessing, including salvation from us. Yet God was gracious to us. And God did not give to sinful humanity some pitiful pittance of blessing; rather He has given the most priceless of blessing along with every spiritual blessing in Jesus Christ. Paul gets after such thoughts in Romans where we read in Romans 5:8 (6-10),

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

And then along further in Romans 8:31-32 we read:

31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? 32 He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?

Beloved, how can we who have become the recipients of God's gracious gift ever consider remaining as stingy as we were before receiving that gift of grace? Does it not stand to reason that a person who has received the greatest expression of grace, would become by definition a gracious person? Christ changed the way the believers here in the early looked at each other. They saw one another as opportunities to manifest the grace of God; the graciousness of God; the very giving nature of God. And so, what have you given to others? Are you a giving, gracious person? What can you give to other believers this week? It might be time, it might be encouragement, it might be something physical, but we ought to look to one another and be selfless and gracious. God expects unity and unity develops as we *look at each other* instead of ourselves. So, believers are to look up to Jesus, look in to one another, but finally...

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

C. The believers looked out (33)

And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all.

And here is the balance, for while we must look in to one another, we must also look out to world. The early church lived in light of the commission given by Jesus, to make learners of Jesus Christ, to bear witness of the truth that Jesus died for sin, yet rose again to give life. Remember earlier in Acts 4:17-18, the Sanhedrin, those Jewish leaders ordered Peter and John not to speak of or teach in the name of Jesus. But believers will chose to obey God rather than man. In the Greek text, there is a word used twice in this verse, the word "*megas*" from which we get our word "mega" or great. We see first of "great" power and then of "abundant" or great grace. In effect, we see then that church's witness was characterized by two "great" things.

1. There was great power.

And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus

We know that the whole church was involved with proclaiming the resurrection of Christ, but it was the apostles who led the way. They were eyewitnesses of the Risen Christ and the first to testify boldly to the fact of His resurrection. This reminds us that the truth of the resurrection is absolutely essential in our sharing of Jesus. A dead Savior can do nothing and is nothing. But a Savior who has conquered the grave can do anything, and the world needs to hear about this Risen Savior! As the apostles preached there was great power, a power that spread throughout the church.

2. There was great grace.

and abundant grace was upon them all.

Notice that this is not just grace upon them, but "great" or abundant grace. In the preaching of the resurrection there is mega-power; and in obedience to this mission there is mega-grace upon the people of God. How can we know if God is developing unity among His people in a church? We will see the effects, there will be loving, unified relationships and bold evangelism. Let us pray for this. Let us long for this.

And in this expression of great things we find a balance here between human responsibility and divine sovereignty. We are called to give testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. This is our part. And as we do this, God gives abundant grace. Our part is give witness. God's part is to give grace. We open up the truth about Jesus to others; and God in His grace opens spiritual eyes and changes lives.

Beloved, over the next weeks and months, we are going to be challenged and stretched in order to reach Northwest Arkansas for Christ. And I can tell you this, that as we work together to reach people for Christ, we will find ourselves increasingly unified. So, if we desire to experience true unity, we must *look up*—for there is not unity among people unless they believe in the same Savior; we must *look in*—being willing to get involved in one another's lives; and we must *look out*—remembering there is a world among us who need the Savior, and it is our mission to mission to tell them about Him.

The Church Alive

"...about all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:3).

There is not one of us who can do this alone. Remember the poem we opened with?

Somebody should have done the job,
And Everybody should have,
But in the end Nobody did
What Anybody could have.

This is a mission for everybody, not just somebody else; and anybody in Christ can and must do it. The best way to make sure that nobody does nothing is to begin with yourself and do something. This is *our* mission and God's expectation is that we be unified behind this purpose to His glory.

Soli Deo Gloria

Copyright © 2012 Edward K. Godfrey. *This message is the sole property of the copyright holder and may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this message must contain the above copyright notice. This message may not be copied in part (except for small quotations used with citation of source), edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of the copyright holder. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Edward K. Godfrey, Pastor, Hope Community Bible Church, and 2300 South 13th Street, Rogers, AR 72758.*