

"...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.

When a person is asked "to mind his manners" or "to watch his behavior," he is told to watch his P's and Q's. If traveling in Mexico, however, when a person takes a bath or shower, he needs to watch his H's and C's as well. An "H" on the faucet means helado -- cold. A "C" means caliente -- hot. A miscalculation in this may bring about a shocking result. This reminds us that we all have expectations, be it as simple as thinking a "H" on the facet means "hot" all the way to how we think others should treat us or even how we should treat others.

Something that might easily be overlooked when reading through the Scriptures is that our God has expectations for us. There are attitudes and behaviors that He expects to be developed in those who have received the gift of eternal life by believing upon His Son for their salvation. Of the many passages I might site, I think of the familiar little passage tucked away in the book of Micah. In Micah 6:8 we read,

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Three simply stated expectations, easy enough to understand, but they are also a substantial task to undergo. The first, expectation is that we are to act justly in everything we do and every decision we make. The second is to love kindness, or mercy, embracing compassion and forgiveness for everyone we meet. Lastly, is to walk humbly, lifting up our heavenly Father and serving others. Micah talks about the useless sacrifices we offer to God and asks the reader non-rhetorical questions of what types of sacrifices the Lord is pleased with. He simply states that it is not what we bring to God, but it is how we interact with God. God expected Israel, and He expects believers in Christ to live out the faith by our actions, showing the validity of our testimony and proclaiming how God has changed our lives.

As we come back to Acts 4:32-37, we are noting this continued theme of God's expectations, only they are revealed to us here in the context of the church; God's expectations of His church. What is it that God both develops and then expects from His people, from us, as they gather, worship and serve Him together? And, in light of these expectations, how are you doing and what are you doing in pursuit of such things?

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Last week we explored the first of three expectations from this text, namely that God expects us to be bound by a unified purpose. We read in Acts 4:32-33,

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.

We noted that as believers, we are to look up to Christ and be those who believe, unified in our understanding that we are great sinners but Jesus is a great Savior. We also noted that believers are to look in; being selfless and gracious, willing to share with one another to meet one another's need. And finally we noted that we are to look out, following the example of the apostles, we are to be **"giving testimony to the resurrection of Jesus Christ..."**

As we pursue this unified purpose of looking up; looking in and looking out, then we can experience both the great power of God, as well as the great grace of God. This brings us to see now the remaining two expectations of God on His church, on us, on you and me, as revealed in our text.

II. Expectation #2: We are to be bound in an uncommon participation (34-35)

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.

As amazing as it is to begin verse 32 with the statement that the whole church was of one mind and soul, unified in purpose, the words of verse 34 are equally astounding as it says, **"For there was not a needy person among them..."** This congregation of believers was so connected, so selfless and so gracious that there was not *one* needy person among them. Notice that we are not told there was not one needy person in *the world*, but *among them*. The church did not and could not eliminate poverty from the world, but they did make it their aim that every person in the church had his or her needs met.

The question is, "How?" How was it that this church met one another's needs? Did they just pray about it or did they put feet to those prayers? Beloved, they took action and expressed an uncommon participation in one another's lives. They had a fellowship, a partnership, an involvement with one another that caused the folks in Jerusalem to take notice. I desire that kind of living among us here at Hope. There was a love, and specifically a benevolence, a giving spirit that characterized the church; an attitude that God continues to expect in and from His church today.

So how was this benevolence and love expressed? How did they do it? What were the principles they practiced that we might also put into greater practice? What was the process by which the church's benevolence was realized? Note with me the three phases of this process that is recorded by Luke.

A. Phase #1: The believers brought gifts (34b)

...for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales.

The Church Alive

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

In keeping with the gracious attitude noted in verse 32, we see voluntary and substantial gift giving. There was nothing demanded here, simply that the people were so unified in purpose that their hearts desire was to meet needs. Do you know that a biblical test of a Christian's love is how much he or she is willing to sacrifice materially and or financially? Consider the words of 1 John 3:17 carefully,

But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?

I am so glad that we do not have to be rich in order to give. The only requirement is that we be willing; willing to share, whether that be out of much or out of little. This is proven to us by the example of the Macedonian Christians as pointed to by Paul in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 where we read,

1 Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, 2 that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. 3 For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, 4 begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, 5 and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.

Beloved, we must purpose to be uncommonly benevolent, uncommonly gracious and uncommonly giving to one another. Our culture and therefore our tendency is to think about ourselves first. The story is told of Tonto and the Lone Ranger riding through a canyon together when all of a sudden both sides were filled with Indian warriors on horses, dressed for battle. The Lone Ranger turned to Tonto and asked, “What are we going to do?” Tonto replied, “What you mean ‘we,’ white man?” The world says, “every man for himself”, but in the church it must be “all for one and one for all.” As brothers and sisters in Christ, if I see a need in your life, I have a responsibility to participate with you sharing that burden. Here in the early church, those who were able gave gifts to meet the needs. That is phase #1, now for phase #2...

B. Phase #2: The leaders received the gifts (35a) *and lay them at the apostles' feet*

It is interesting to me that these gifts were not given directly to one another in the church; they were first given to the leaders of the church. They ***“lay them at the apostles’ feet.”*** Why did they do it this way? Is it wrong simply to meet the need of people in the church without involving church leaders? No, it is not wrong, and at times that might be appropriate, but it seems that the most general practice is to make it a church effort not an individual effort. The gifts were given to God's appointed leaders of the early church. Why? Let me give you at least two reasons why such gifts were given this way and how this actually honors God.

1. God expects us to have a biblical view of church authority

Someone might protest saying that we are all equal and one in the church; that the only authority in the church is Christ. Is that not true? Certainly, Christ is the authority in the church,

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but when it comes to how we function in the church, that word "equal" needs to be defined. By measure of worthy, yes, we are all equal; equally unworthy of God's grace, salvation and blessings. But by way of functioning together, we are not all equal. God has clearly given delegated authority to certain positions in the church. The early church practiced this, laying their gifts at the feet of the apostles. The New Testament letters are full of statements and exhortations concerning church leadership. God gives leaders to His church and He holds leaders responsible to lead. And equally God holds non-leaders responsible to support.

2. God expects us to have a biblical view of accountability.

But in addition to having a biblical view of authority, this practice also reveals a biblical view of accountability. By laying the proceeds at the apostles' feet there was safeguard against abuse or misuse of funds. The church leaders were to make sure that no true need was neglected, but also that no one was taking inappropriate advantage of the graciousness of those who offered the gifts. It has happened at various times in our church where a person might take advantage of the generosity of others to their own selfish gain. Without the involvement of the elders, such a person may never be rightly challenged to do what was necessary to provide for him or herself.

It is interesting to note that as the church expanded here in Acts, the benevolent ministries of the church swelled to such an extent that the apostles became overwhelmed with the responsibility. And so, as we will come to see later in Acts 6, so as not to neglect their priority ministries in prayer and teaching the Word, the apostles delegated the execution of the compassion ministries to a team of spiritually qualified men (later to be known as deacons).

Let me share an insight from John MacArthur at this point. He wrote, *"This passage illustrates an important pattern concerning giving in the local church. The donations are to be placed in the control of the spiritual leaders, who are then responsible before God for their use. Too often, people want to give only if they can specify how the money is to be used. That kind of self-serving giving fails to understand the delegated spiritual authority of God ordained leaders and may often merely seek the applause of men. Giving is to be so selfless that Jesus said in Matthew 6:3-4, 'When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.' Then He added, 'Your Father who sees in secret will repay you.'"*

So, phase #1, gifts were given; phase #2, the leaders received the gifts; and then we see phase #3...

C. Phase #3: The church distributed the gifts (35b)

...and they would be distributed to each as any had need.

It is obvious that there were people in the early church who had needs. Who were these people? It would seem that many of them were converted Jews who had come from other countries to Jerusalem for Pentecost. Remember in Acts 2:5 where we were told, **"Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven."** These were the first to come to know Christ and rather than immediately returning home, they wanted to stay in Jerusalem in order be grounded in the apostles' teaching. So, here you have conservatively speaking, upwards of 250,000 or more Jews in a town that normally had about 30,000 people. There would be very few if any jobs available and so these new converts needed help, food and shelter. Some of these new converts who already had jobs no doubt lost their jobs when they

The Church Alive

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became Christians. The persecution that began in Acts 4:3 only worsen as time passed. Whoever these needy were, we are told specifically how the church responded. The believers gave. The leaders received. The church distributed. And notice what is said about this distribution, something for us to keep in mind as we have opportunity to share.

1. There was generosity.

Our text says that they gave to **"to each as any had need."** Anyone in the church who had need was helped. There was generosity.

2. There was a guideline: they met needs, not wants.

Yes, the church gave to each *as any had need*. What is a "need"? The provision of basic food and shelter along with opportunities to be in fellowship with other believers. I wonder how many of their fellowship meals may have been nothing more than a little bread and some fish; yet no one was hungry. The church met needs, not wants and the people were satisfied.

Beloved, God expects an uncommon participation of His people, with His people in the church. It is too easy to play "church." It is a sad commentary that so many who profess to know Christ have a low view the body of Christ, the church for whom He died. As a pastor I am always interested in church surveys that reveal what people think about God, the Bible, Jesus and the church. A recent survey I read revealed that there is an increasing belief in the deity of Jesus among people; some 84% believe Jesus is divine. But only 44% of that same group believed that that the church has any relevance today. If people outside the church do not see that the people inside the church have an uncommon participation with one another, why would they ever come to church?

May I ask you some pointed questions? How are you uncommonly participating in the lives of the people of your church? Do you pray regularly for specific issues and concerns of others in the church? Do you seek to meet needs, material, emotional and spiritual of others in the church? Who do you meet with in the church? Who is coming into your home, into your life? Who are you seeking to impact? Are you waiting for others to do this for you? Pray for grace to be the pursuer, not the seeker; the doer, not the waiter!

Here is the problem we face. Generally speaking, surveys tell us that over half the people on the membership roll of churches are not active. Of those who are supposedly "active" – we are told that nearly half of them will be absent on a given Sunday. And then, the reality is that only about 20 percent of those who attend regularly contribute in terms of time, effort and money. Beloved, do not be a statistic. Be a participant; an uncommon participate that causes the world to look twice at your faith and at the church. So then, the expectation that God has is that we be bound by a unified purpose; the second expectation is that we be bound to an uncommon participation; and not finally...

III. Expectation #3: We are to be bound to be unashamed pacesetters (36-37)

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.

It has been said that there are four main bones in every group. The wish-bones: Wishing somebody would do something about the problem. The jaw-bones: Doing all the talking but very

The Church Alive

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little doing. The knuckle-bones: Those who knock everything and what others are doing. And, the back-bones: Those who carry the burden and perform most of the work. Let me introduce you to Barnabas, a backbone kind of person; a true pacesetter. What do we learn about Barnabas here?

A. We learn who Barnabas was (36)

Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement),

Barnabas was a Jew from the tribe of Levi. We know that he was also a native of the island of Cyprus. It is interesting that Barnabas and Paul would later go to Cyprus on the first missionary journey.

His birth name was Joseph, but for some reason the apostles called him *Barnabas*, a name that means "Son of Encouragement." This is a man that was an encourager; he sought to do what he could to; say what he could say; be where he could be and be available. We will see this later about Barnabas as Luke mentions him some twenty-five times in the book of Acts. Barnabas was the kind of person every church needs about nine of for every ten people. Most churches might settle for one of every ten people; but then, I do not like to settle. Beloved, anyone can talk.; anyone can sit on the sidelines. But the godly are pacesetters; they strive to walk the talk. Will you be a Barnabas for Hope? Will you be a Barnabas for someone or for some ones in the fellowship?

B. We learn what Barnabas did (37)

...and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

In applying what we have learned from verses 32-36, we find Barnabas setting the pace in three ways...

1. He was a man of great action.

How? He just did something; he sold a piece of property and put the proceeds at the apostles' feet. He did not wait, he acted. And in so doing, he revealed secondly that...

2. He was man of genuine submission.

I have no doubt, from what we learn about Barnabas later, that he was a strong, uncompromising leader. This property that was sold may have been an entire farm, yet he sold it and gave the entire purchase-price to the apostles for the use of the community of the saints. He was willing to submit his own leadership, his own opinions, and his own preferences to the collective leadership of the church at the time. Barnabas was a leader that demonstrated he also knew how to follow. Beloved, there is no place for maverick Christians in the church. As we read in Ephesians 5:21, we are called to **"be subject to one another in the fear of Christ."**

3. He was man of godly character.

Barnabas reveals his character as a giver. And one way in which Christians are to give that sets them apart from the world is that they are to give sacrificially. And do not think that money is the only thing there is to give. All that we have is from God and so we can give our time, our possessions, and even our attention to show love to people.

The Church Alive

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Beloved, when you have others into your home for a meal and fellowship, you are expressing the character of Barnabas. Will you use all that you have for the glory of God and the good of His people. In a sense, we see Jesus in the life and action of Barnabas. Jesus gave His life for us, and now we are the ones blessed. Jesus did not give us what we deserve, but He gave us according to His grace. Oh that we would be like Barnabas, a pacesetter, revealing the gracious nature of God to others. Will you seek to be like Barnabas?

So, if we would be a church seeking to honor God by striving to fulfill His expectations of us; we will be bound by a unified purpose; our belief and profession of Jesus Christ; bound by an uncommon participation; revealing to one another and to the world an care and commitment to one other that far surpasses anything this world knows; and bound by being unashamed pacesetter; giving our all and encouraging others to do likewise for the glory of God, the good of the church, and the reaching of the lost for Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria

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