



Sunday School Lesson for September 11, 2005.
Released on September 7, 2005.

"The Fellowship of the Believers"

Printed Text: **Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-35.**
Devotional Reading: **Romans 8:9-17.**
Background Scripture: **Acts 2:41-47; 4:32-37.**

Time: A.D. 30
Place: Jerusalem

Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-35

43 And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.

44 And all that believed were together, and had all things common;

45 And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need.

46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,

47 Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

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32 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.

33 And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all.

34 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,

35 And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need.

Today's Aim

Facts: to present a portrait of the character of Christian fellowship within the early church.

Principle: to explain how God's Word, Christian love, and corporate worship give the church a strong foundation.

Application: to stimulate modern Christians to emulate the depth of fellowship experienced by the early church in Jerusalem.

Introduction

Since Christ said that "the poor always ye have with you" (John 12:8; cf. Deut. 15:11), some have concluded that it does little good to try to alleviate such a pervasive problem as human poverty. But if Christians took that approach, we would never attempt to help the hurting, comfort the grieving, or aid the sick, either.

Both the Old and New Testaments reveal that God's people are to have a special concern for those in need. We should have this concern because God shares this concern. "He doth execute the judgment of the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment" (Deut. 10:18). James likewise said that "to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction" (James 1:27) was evidence of "pure religion."

Taking their cue from the Lord Jesus Christ, the first Christians had a special concern for the needy among them. The Master Himself had reached out to the hurting and helpless during His ministry, and the newly formed church of Christ did likewise. In fact, the Master taught that how we treat the needy will impact our eternal reward (Matt. 25:31-46).

Lesson Background

As last week's lesson ended, we learned that the Day of Pentecost resulted in three thousand people accepting Christ and being baptized (Acts 2:41). These new believers devoted themselves to learning, fellowship, and worship (v. 42). Now we learn some additional details concerning this newly formed congregation. We will see the great unity enjoyed by the very first church. This will be a lesson in how we can succeed as they did.

Empowered Church (Acts 2:43-47)

1. Why did "fear" come "upon every soul"? What "wonders and signs" were performed (Acts 2:43)?

We first discover that "fear came upon every soul" (v. 43). This was a reverential awe that pervaded the body of believers. "The conviction of sin that followed Peter's preaching was no momentary panic, but filled the people with a long-lasting sense of awe" (Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Eerdmans).

This fear was also due to the fact that "many wonders and signs were done by the apostles." Those who had been selected by Christ as His apostles (Luke 6:13) were given special powers whereby they could perform miracles (Matt. 10:8; Heb. 2:4). While there were others besides the Twelve who were endowed with such powers (Acts 6:8), most of the miracles were performed by the apostles. Indeed, such miraculous demonstrations were an identifying mark of a true apostle of Christ (Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12).

2. Where did the earliest Christians meet (v. 44)?

That the believers "were together" (v. 44) does not mean they were living in some kind of communal arrangement. In all likelihood, their gathering occurred in the temple courts, where there was plenty of room to accommodate large crowds.

The fact that these earliest Christians have *all things common* indicates that they share their possessions by going so far as to sell property and give as everyone has "need" (v. 45). This is well illustrated in Acts 4:32-37 (in which we will discuss later in this lesson).

This is the generosity that marks the early church. It is not mandatory, however. Peter makes it clear to Ananias in Acts 5:4 that the property he owned was his to do with as he pleased. Today, various forms of government require that people give up some (or all) of what they have so that the state can redistribute it. The early Christians love one another so much that they want to help those in need. No sacrifice is too great for this.

God helps the needy, and Christians must be like-minded (1 John 3:17). This is one of the first lessons that the early Christians learn, and they learn it quite well. They really do love one another!

3. One of the marks of the Lord's church is the concern expressed toward one another, especially to those in need. How can we more effectively meet needs of other believers in church and others in general?

One of the most effective things a church can do is simply to keep its eyes and ears open to signs of those who are hurting and in need. Establishing a functioning benevolence committee that oversees this task can be beneficial.

Food pantries and clothes closets, where such items are gathered and held for specific needs, make the church ready to respond in times of crisis (e.g. recent Hurricane Katrina). As God has blessed us with homes and automobiles, we can use these to minister to others by providing housing to those in times of devastation or transportation to those who are not able to drive. What we do in the name of Jesus shows others His love.

4. What does it mean to be "with one accord" (v. 46)?

At least one key ingredient for maintaining unity is to realize that *unity* is not the same as *uniformity*. Being one in heart and mind in putting Christ first does not require us all to think exactly alike on every issue, which would be uniformity.

These early Christians are so excited about their newfound faith in Jesus Christ that they cannot stay apart from one another. They are motivated by love to come together for worship and fellowship. There was no problem with meeting regularly in the temple courts. This they did "daily" along with "breaking bread from house to house."

Sadly, people sometimes let the things of this world and the responsibilities of life crowd worship and fellowship from their schedules. They lose that excitement that they had when they first became Christians. They feel no great loss when they skip church, having lost the wonder and joy of Christianity. In his book *Recapture the Wonder*, Ravi Zacharias notes that, "Wonder enriches you when you take time to reflect and ponder the greatness of our faith in Jesus Christ" and that "Wonder is retained by pondering." Unfortunately, he observes, "Thinking is a dying discipline in a society that throbs with activity."

Deliberately scheduling Bible study—the kind that really makes us think—helps us recapture the wonder of those feelings we had when we first came to Christ. In addition to Sunday school Bible enrichment programs, some churches offer small-group studies during the week. Christians can value these opportunities.

5. What does it mean that the believers had "favour with all the people" (v. 47)?

The old saying "You can't please everyone" is true, but these Christians impress their community as a whole. It will be clear in the next two chapters, however, that not everyone is truly pleased with them. "Not all Jews received the witness to the Messiahship of the resurrected Jesus" (Pfeiffer and Harrison, Wycliffe Bible Commentary, Moody).

The religious leaders will arrest Peter and John and threaten them. However, when people are helping, sharing, loving, and caring for one another, even the hardest sinners in the community have to take notice and be impressed. This favor with *all the people* must make many unbelievers listen again to the gospel message as more and more respond to it.

God rewarded the believers' worship and fellowship by adding to their numbers. Instead of gaining an occasional convert, the Jerusalem church was growing daily (v. 47).

6. Why is it significant to understand that it is the Lord who adds to the church? How should this fact affect the life of the church?

People have a tendency to look on the outward aspects of others to determine who is (or who should be) part of the church. But God looks inward; see 1 Samuel 16:7. Whereas we may look on the fulfillment of certain rituals as making a person part of the church, the Lord knows the heart. It is God's grace, not human work, that saves and adds people to the church.

Since it is God's church, and He is the one who does the adding, this means that there is no place for judgmental attitudes and feelings of superiority in the life of the church. (See Romans 14.) This is all the more true when we think of how Jesus emptied himself, even to death on a cross.

Successful Church (Acts 4:32-35)

7. What is the meaning of "of one heart and of one soul" (Acts 4:32)?

"The multitude of them that believed" was another way of describing the saved, or the church (2:47). Pentecost had witnessed an ingathering of some three thousand souls, but now the "number of the men was about five thousand" (4:4). Add to that the number of women and young people who had likely come to Christ, and it could be said that we have the first megachurch.

In spite of their large numbers, though, this congregation was "of one heart and of one soul" (v. 32). This indicates that the Jerusalem church was living in harmony and unity. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity" (Psalm 133:1).

Although unity is the exception rather than the rule in many churches today, the Jerusalem church was fulfilling the prayer of Jesus "that they all may be one; . . . that the world may believe" (John 17:21). Perhaps one reason we see few converts in some churches today involves constant division and infighting. We cannot expect the world to pay a lot of attention to people who proclaim the love of God but do not love one another (1 John 4:20-21).

As a direct result of their unity and love for one another, these saints recognized that even their possessions needed to be shared. Just as many possessions are shared in an earthly family, so it was in the family of God in Jerusalem. The fact that the kind of common life that was experienced in Jerusalem is never alluded to elsewhere in the New Testament indicates that this was a temporary arrangement designed to meet a specific need. Indeed, these thousands of new converts would soon be dispersed elsewhere (Acts 8:1).

8. Why is preaching the resurrection important (v. 33)?

Christians watch out for the physical needs of one another, but the church's primary mission is to provide witness to "the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" to the world. "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures: and that he was seen of

Cephas, then of the twelve: after that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once" (1 Corinthians 15:3-6a).

Paul calls the gospel "the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16). The power of God's *great grace* is a healing force. Everyone in the city of Jerusalem in A.D. 30 knows that Jesus had been crucified. But when God raised Jesus from the dead, God proved "with power" that Jesus is His Son (Romans 1:4). The message of the resurrection is proclaimed with great power by the apostles. They even faced confrontations with the Sadducees over the preaching of the risen Lord (Acts 4:1-2). Thousands find this eyewitness testimony irresistible. As a result, their lives are changed for all eternity.

Surely God's great grace is poured out upon the church! God's continuing blessing is seen in the way the first-century church grows numerically, in the way that He answers prayers, and in the way that Christians grow spiritually in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus. Churches that fulfill the royal law of loving one another (James 2:8) will find God blessing them with the riches of His grace.

9. What two new things do we learn about the early church's generosity (vs. 34,35)?

Again, Luke (the author of the book of Acts) refers to great acts of generosity. Two new things are here mentioned. First, no Christian lacks for the necessities of life. No member of this great congregation of believers can tolerate seeing a fellow believer lack food, clothes, or shelter.

Again, this does not mean that the Christians are selling absolutely all that they own because of the simple fact that they are still meeting in their homes and breaking bread from house to house. God expects people to take care of their own households. So God would not expect a person to move his own family out onto the street. In fact, Paul writes that anyone who does not take care of his immediate family has "denied the faith" (see 1 Timothy 5:8). So we see a balance by combining these ideas. Immediate family comes first, but not to the point that our own selfishness means that others lack basic necessities. (The rich young ruler was told to "sell all" in Luke 18:22 because of a problem that was specific to him.)

The other thing we learn is that when people sell property and give the proceeds to the church, they allow the leadership to make distribution to the ones in need. As the church grows, other people will be selected to oversee this task and accomplish it efficiently (Acts 6:1-6). The Scriptures also tell us that the first-century church maintains a list of widows to help (see 1 Timothy 5:9,10). God expects His people to take care of their own family members first. But when someone has no family, or when a family is destitute or has some special need, then Christians will do what they can to assist.

Many Christians today miss out on an important way of glorifying God when they believe that the government will always step in to help. Have we Christians lost our powerful witness to the community by failing to help others? Have Christians forgotten that the Lord taught that "it is more blessed to give than to receive"? (See Acts 20:35.) Think what an impact the church would have on the world if it sought to recapture this spirit of love and unity that permeated the earliest church!

Conclusion

Strength Through Love and Unity

Reproducing the doctrine and message of the first-century church in the twenty-first century is a worthy goal. Many congregations strive to restore the worship and teaching of those early believers. While that is good, such efforts fall short if Christians do not reproduce the heart and love of those early Christians as well. Unfortunately, the congregations of the first century would find themselves challenged in this regard all too soon (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:10; 11:17-22; Galatians 5:15; Titus 3:10).

The case of the church at Ephesus proves that resisting false doctrine isn't enough (see Revelation 2:1-7). Jesus prayed for the unity of believers (John 17). The apostles encouraged it (Ephesians 4:3). The first-century church at Jerusalem lived it. A key to this unity is mutual love expressed through action (1 John 3:16-18). No wonder the earliest church was a thing of great power that brought new life to an entire city! Churches today must realize that such unity will continue to empower the church and will cause it to enjoy the favor of God.

Prayer

Father, thank You for the church founded by Your Son. Please keep our hearts filled with love for one another. Bind us together in a spirit of great unity. Melt away those sinful attitudes that often tear us apart. May Your church today be a powerful witness of Your love and mercy and grace. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember

"Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:16).

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

Signs and wonders authenticated the apostles' ministry. Next week's lesson deals with Peter and John's healing of a lame man recorded in Acts 3:1-16.

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**Let us continue to pray for those affected by Hurricane Katrina.
If you have not already, please help those affected by this tragedy by
supporting rescue and relief efforts.**