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THE LOOKOUT

OCTOBER 2023

Unit: Acts (Part 1)

Theme: The Church Begins

Overview: Since the creation of Adam and Eve, God has always had a people, but he has not always had a church. Even though the church was envisioned in the great commission of the Old Testament (Genesis 12:1-3), predicted by the prophets during a locust plague (Joel 2:28-32), and promised to the apostles at Caesarea Philippi (Matthew 16:13-20), she was not actually born until the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-41). But after her birth, the church spread like fire across the Roman Empire. In this first part of our study of Acts, students will learn about that birth, how the early disciples shared their possessions with any who had need (especially widows), and how Philip the evangelist and Peter the apostle stretched that early church to be more inclusive.

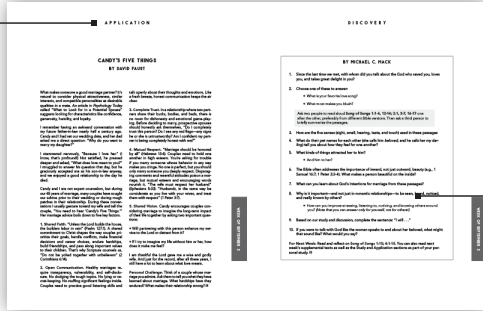
HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF OCTOBER 8, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Be genuine
in your generosity.**

UNIT: Acts (Part 1)

THEME: The Church Begins

LESSON TEXT: Acts 4:32–5:16

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Matthew 6:1-4, 19-24; 2 Corinthians 9:6-12

SHARING AND PRETENDING

BY MARK SCOTT

At times, people can do all the right things with all the wrong motives. Youth groups can visit the residents in a nursing home (good thing), but they might hate every minute of it (wrong motive). Jesus spoke of how the religious leaders of his day (he called them “hypocrites”) carried out good actions (giving to the needy, prayer, and fasting) with disingenuous motives (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16). It is always best to unite motive with manner and attitude with action.

Sharing Makes the Church a Generous Place*Acts 4:32-37*

Acts 4:32-37 is the second summary section of the book of Acts—the first one being Acts 2:42-47. Luke does this every so often (e.g., Acts 5:12-16; 6:7; 9:31). He pushes pause and succinctly summarizes many activities of the church. This section concludes the two chapters covering the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple and the consequences of that miracle for Peter and John in particular. These men had received threats from the Sanhedrin, but they had also received boldness from the Holy Spirit, a boldness that other believers later received in answer to their prayer (Acts 4:31).

Unity characterized the earliest days of the church. All the members were on the same page. This showed up in their care for one another. One is struck by the unity reflected in the church’s being *one in heart and mind*. There is no substitute for that. Three attitudes characterize people in general: what’s yours is mine, and I will take it (thief); what’s mine is mine and I will keep it (narcissist); what’s mine is yours, and I will share it (Christ follower). Possessions were intended to be shared—not retained. The phrase, *there were no needy persons among them*, shows the remarkable impact of the believers’ generosity.

Great power (evident in their preaching of the resurrection) and the powerful working of *God’s grace* (evident in their lavish generosity) was what caused the members to share their goods and lay them *at the apostles’ feet*. The apostles, who oversaw the contributions, made the distributions as needs dictated.

One such generous example is highlighted. *Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus*, whose nickname was *Barnabas*, sold a piece of property and gave the proceeds to the church. Questions about the parcel’s location and why a Levite owned property are not answered in the text. But the author (Luke) clearly approves of the example. This noteworthy action stands in stark contrast with the sinister ones immediately following.

Pretending Makes the Church a Dangerous Place*Acts 5:1-11*

Barnabas might have received “good press” for his generosity. Contextually speaking, Ananias and Sapphira perhaps wanted similar press. Something must have motivated their pride. They sold a piece of property, as had Barnabas, but they conspired to “keep back” some of the proceeds. (That same phrase, “keep back,” appears in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, in Joshua 7:1 to describe what Achan did with “devoted things” from the defeat of Jericho.) It amounted to embezzlement.

Retaining a percentage of the proceeds from the sale was not the problem. Pretending to have given everything was the problem. Peter, who confronted both husband and wife, accused them of lying to the Holy Spirit and to God, as well as testing the Spirit of the Lord. It was a very serious sin that resulted in terrible consequences (i.e., death). We might consider this couple’s death as an overly harsh punishment for a little lie. Or was it? The integrity of the Christian community was at stake. Just as Achan’s sin had the potential of disrupting the progress made in conquering Canaan, Ananias and Sapphira’s sin risked disrupting the progress of the church in fulfilling its God-ordained mission.

Luke records the immediate burials of Ananias, then Sapphira. It is hard to imagine Sapphira not hearing about her husband’s passing in the *three hours* after his death (Acts 5:7). We are left to wonder. They were buried *beside* each other. Great power and great grace made for a generous church. Great fear made for a dangerous church.

Miracles Make for a Healing Church*Acts 5:12-16*

The sudden deaths of Ananias and Sapphira were no doubt miraculous. But the apostles worked many other miracles. *Many signs and wonders* were performed, which gave credence to the message the apostles preached. *Crowds brought sick and demon-possessed people, and all of them were healed*. Even Peter’s shadow healed some.

Thus, the church was considered by onlookers not only as a dangerous place but also a desired place. The church grew so much that the large gatherings had to be held in a part of the temple known as *Solomon’s Colonnade*. The Lord kept adding men and women to the number of the saved. The church was looked upon with fear but also treated with great respect and admiration. ■

APPLICATION

CUT IT OUT AND GIVE IT UP

BY DAVID FAUST

I take a lot of photos with my cellphone. You probably do, too. Because I'm not a skilled photographer, I appreciate my phone's "Edit" function. If the picture contains unnecessary details or distractions, I can trim them out with a flick of my fingers.

Authors and journalists value a different kind of editing. Do you want to improve your writing? Then you should brighten up your verbs, shorten your sentences, and delete unneeded words. Like sculptors carving marble statues, skilled writers understand: What you cut matters as much as what you keep.

The same principle applies with finances. Someone quipped, "Due to budget cuts, the light at the end of the tunnel has been turned off." But the fact is, if we cut unnecessary expenses, we can have more and give more. There are only a few things we can do with money: save it, spend it, invest it, or give it. Budget cuts require courage and willpower; but by making strategic lifestyle edits and choosing to live more simply, we free up more funds to invest in the Lord's work and meet the needs of others.

Lessons in Generosity

The first-century church has a lot to teach us about financial stewardship. In the book of Acts, there was a link between unity and generosity. Giving flowed naturally because the believers "were one in heart and mind" (Acts 4:32). They were excited about their shared purpose. Do you want to increase your church's financial impact? Cut out disunity! Conflict and distrust stifle generosity, but it's amazing what like-minded people can accomplish when they band together and give according to their ability.

Among the early disciples, "No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own" (v. 32). No arm-twisting was required. No one was forced to give. After selling their property, believers cheerfully placed the proceeds

"at the apostles' feet" (vv. 35, 37, 5:2), releasing their donations with no strings attached. And notice—the plural possessive word "apostles'" highlights an important layer of accountability. Multiple leaders saw the funds, ensuring the money would be used for the right purpose, not misused for personal gain.

Do you want to increase your church's financial impact? Cut out dishonesty and selfishness! Increase transparency and accountability. The Lord's judgment against Ananias and Sapphira might seem harsh, but lying to the Holy Spirit is a serious offense. Deception, greed, and self-centeredness discourage generosity, while transparency and accountability fan it into flame.

The first-century disciples gave sacrificially to help the poor, but they didn't neglect the Great Commission. They met physical needs without ignoring spiritual needs. "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 4:33), but at the same time, "there were no needy persons among them" (v. 34). I've heard Christians argue whether we should focus on preaching the gospel or caring for the poor. My recommendation? Cut out needless debates and do both!

Give It Up

Sincere, generous giving provides tangible evidence that the Messiah came "to proclaim good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). It's a practical way to love God, love our neighbors, and obey Jesus who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

Are we weakening the church by our disunity, dishonesty, greediness, and needless debates? It's time to cut it out—and give the Lord what he deserves.

Personal Challenge: Make an over-and-above gift to a mission or nonprofit organization, and include an encouraging note to thank them for their service. **L**

DISCOVERY

BY DOUG REDFORD

1. In what way or ways did the Holy Spirit help you in your walk with the Lord during the previous week?
2. Tell about an act of generous giving you recently saw that genuinely touched you. (NOTE: This should be something you saw in "real time," not something you saw on TV or in a movie.)

Ask two people to read aloud **Acts 4:32—5:16** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

3. "All the members [of the church described in Acts 4] were on the same page," writes Mark Scott.
 - What would this look like in terms of what those within a congregation believe?
 - What would this look like in terms of attitudes and conduct?
 - How would this affect how conflict within the congregation is handled?
4. Barnabas is highlighted in the book of Acts as an example of true generosity.
 - Who have you known whom would you highlight as someone who has shown you such generosity?
 - If that person is still living, have you thanked them for their kindness? (If the person is no longer living, take time to thank God for their example.)
5. What are the risks of being known as a giving person? What are the blessings of being known as such a person?
 - Replace the word "person" in the above two questions with the word "church." Are the answers similar? How might they be different?
6. What can you learn about God's desires for giving from this passage?
7. What influences in today's cultural climate can keep people from being as generous as they might otherwise be?
8. Acts 5:14 says that in spite of what happened to Ananias and Sapphira, more and more individuals "believed in the Lord and were added" to the church. What makes a church the kind of place where people desire to be a part of it?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. Acts 4:33 describes God's grace as "powerfully at work" among all the Christians. Keep a record in the coming week (in writing or digitally) in which you record how God's grace is being demonstrated in your daily life.

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Acts 2:44-47; 6:1-7**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. **L**