

Gathering + Groups

March 12, 2023

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Acts 4:32-37

Session Outline

1. A Church Unified (Acts 4:32-33)
2. A Church that Serves (Acts 4:34-37)
3. A Church that Supports (1 Thessalonians 5:12-18)

Theological Theme

The early church provided a model for future bodies of believers. They continuously gathered and shared with one another while they engaged in prayer and learned through the apostles teaching, all under the leadership of the Holy Spirit.



Leader Guide




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Introduction

Think about the children's game "Follow the Leader." It can be such a fun game with a good leader. The goal is to do whatever the leader does and follow him or her with enthusiasm. Invariably there will be someone in the line who grumbles about what is happening or how the leader is leading. But the more involved everyone is the more fun is had.

As you have grown, you have likely changed in your views on leadership. Whether you read books on the subject, watch TED talks, or just learn from life experiences, you have developed your own opinions about what makes a good leader. The reality is everyone is a leader in some way, even if you are not "the boss." We all have people who follow us. Therefore, we are all leaders, and we all have influence.

Today we are talking about how the early church set an example we should follow today. They weren't perfect and had some struggles, but we can relate to what they went through because we deal with similar issues and our God is always the same. He gave instructions to help us be the leaders we are called to be as well as part of the body of believers we call the church. When we focus on our own role it will strengthen the body as whole.

-  What was your favorite part of "Follow the Leader" as a kid?
-  Where do you get your ideas of good leadership today?
-  Do you often think of yourself as a leader? Why or why not?

Session Summary

One of the first identifying marks of the early body of believers is they were unified. Unity does not mean the same in relation to culture, race, or even thoughts. These were not cookie cutter Christians, but they were a group of people who agreed on the important things and supported one another in many ways. This kind of unity is a direct result of the work of the Holy Spirit and affected everything that they did.

Another identifying characteristic of the early church was their generosity. Because of the great grace and power of God they experienced, they freely shared their resources and there was no one who lacked. This generosity was indicative of how God was working in and through them.

After this time, Paul also wrote specific instructions to Christians on how they should treat leaders that still apply to us today. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we should respect and encourage our leaders. We should esteem them highly in love for their work and commitment. Above all else we need to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and in everything give thanks. These things set us apart and prepare us to do the will of God.

1. A Church Unified (Acts 4:32-33)

This group of believers demonstrated the right attitude toward each other as well as their possessions. They placed value on the right things and were more concerned with people than material things. This is a challenging concept for many in today's world. Our culture tends to value money, wealth, and accumulating things to the detriment of the people around us. It seems as if the divide between the haves and have nots is growing ever wider. Consider what it would look like if our community placed more value on people than we do on things.



How do you see our culture valuing material things over people?

This group was described as having one heart and mind. This does not mean that they were alike in race, culture, or religious background. Rather, this unity was evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit among them because a wide variety of people came together around one goal and with one heart. Only God can unite people in such a powerful way.

This work of the Holy Spirit also led the people to share everything in common. This means they were not possessive and stingy over their material things. They recognized God owned everything, and they were just stewards of their resources. Because God had worked powerfully in their lives, they found it easy to share all their things in common. This view of material possessions enables us to hold them more loosely so that we can use them for God's purposes just as the early church did.



What does it mean to you to regard your possessions as everything in common? What has God given you which you can share with neighbors/friends?

Having your priorities in order is key to a life of faith. The early church was an example of what happens when God is first, people are second, and material things fall after that. They experienced great power and great grace as they gave witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you wonder why you aren't seeing great power and grace in your life, it could be because of mixed up priorities.

There are several key takeaways we see in the early church. First, they were unified and had all things in common. They had their priorities in the right place and kept God first and foremost. They made it their mission and central focus to continually preach and testify about the resurrection of Jesus. When we get these things right, we will also enjoy the grace of God among us. Scripture tells us God's grace was on them all. The early church enjoyed the favor of God, and it was evident everywhere.



Application: Where do you need to share about your relationship with God? As you share tools, recipes, etc.?

Barnabas

Joseph (aka Barnabas) led by example, selling his field and donating all the proceeds to the church. Such charitable acts inspired others to do good but also incited some to seek acclaim.

2. A Church that Serves (Acts 4:34-37)

These verses indicate not only was the early church generous with their possessions, but they were also generous with their homes and land. To sell all they had and use it for each other displayed radical generosity. God does not always demand or expect us to do the same, but He does call us to be willing to do whatever He asks. We should have the same attitude about our possessions. We will see our possessions differently when we acknowledge that God owns it all. When we are surrendered to the Holy Spirit and allow Him to guide our generosity, we will make choices and decisions in keeping with His will.



What stands out most to you regarding the level of generosity displayed in the early church? How do you think you would respond when you have the same opportunity?

The fact that many of the believers had moved from other places affected the way the early church worked. These people had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost, and when they responded to the coming of the Holy Spirit and the gospel message, they became part of the church and stayed. For those possessing nothing but what they had brought with them, the need was great.

But no one was forced into generosity—all gave freely as they felt led. Likewise, when we live under the authority and leadership of the Holy Spirit, we will know when and how He wants us to display generosity. The very generosity that set apart the church would also be taken advantage of when men began to listen to themselves more than they listened to the Spirit of God.



How would our lives and our world look different if we listened to the Holy Spirit more than we do to other people or ourselves?

The broken world we live in will always have those who are looking for an angle they can distort and manipulate for their own profit just as happened in the early church. It is not our job to judge the hearts of other people. When we trust the Holy Spirit, we can rely on His discernment and guidance. This removes pressure for anything except what God tells us to do.



Application: How does the example of the generosity and service of the early church inspire you to make changes in your daily activity?

3. A Church that Supports (1 Thessalonians 5:12-18)

First Thessalonians gives further guidance on healthy practices for the church. These are things all Christians should be actively engaged in doing. Most Christians are part of the congregation of the church and not staff leaders, but it is crucial for all people to recognize their responsibility to lead out in faith where they have influence and opportunity.

Paul called believers to highly esteem and respect the leaders of their church body. These verses describe these leaders in three ways. First, these are leaders who stand out by their service. Second, Paul these leaders “lead you in the Lord” (v. 12). These leaders act as shepherds over the sheep of God. Third, Paul described these leaders as those who admonish. To admonish means to caution or reprove gently. We all need those who love us enough to point out where we need to adjust in life. These acts of leadership are done in love and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the good of the body of Christ.



Who has God placed you around that could benefit from you leading? Have you prayed about hosting your own group of friends or neighbors?

We are called to esteem leaders in love and not only when they do as we desire. Too many people in the church spend time grumbling and complaining about leadership due to trivial things. Scripture is clear that we should esteem leaders highly and give love and recognition because of their service for the Lord. When we get this right, we will be at peace among ourselves. Peace within the body of Christ is crucial to the effectiveness of our ministry. The lost world watches to see how Christians relate to one another and if we are truly different as we claim to be. When we love and esteem our leaders while putting away arguments and discord, we show the world what a difference Christ makes in and through us.

How the church relates to its leaders is important, but Paul also gave instructions on dealing with difficult people. Where there are groups of people, there will be some who are difficult. As believers, our approach to others should always be patient and loving. We can practice patience and love as we warn against behaviors and attitudes that are counterproductive to what God is doing in the church. We are also to encourage and exhort to build up those with weaker faith. True Christianity is shown by its ability to love and help difficult people. The church is not a gathering place for perfect people. We all have issues that can be challenging, and we all need to be encouraged and built up in our faith at different times. The goal is to pursue what is good for all and not return evil for evil.

Lastly, Paul focused on other specifics the church should be engaged in. When these things happen, the body will flourish, and the witness of the church will be built up. Paul said to rejoice always. Our joy is not in circumstances but in our God. Our circumstances will change but our God never does. We are also called to pray without ceasing. We should live our days with a conversation flowing between us and God. There will also be times we stop and bow our heads and focus in on the conversation differently. Both are vital. Finally, Paul exhorted his readers to give thanks in all circumstances. We don't have to give thanks for all things but in all things. We can give thanks even when our situation is difficult because we know we are not alone, and we can trust God even when we don't understand what is happening. Living this way isn't easy but by the power of the Holy Spirit we can walk in God's will for us in Christ Jesus.



Application: What do you need to **start doing** because of what we discussed today?

Conclusion

The early church is a great example for the church today. They were unified and of one mind. We are called to focus and agree on the things that matter most over what has the potential to cause divisions. It is easy to be distracted by our own desires and agendas but putting the work of the Lord first adds to the health of the church.

Another characteristic of this body of believers is the way they served and loved one another. This group of people shared everything that they had and considered their possessions as belonging to God first. This perspective on possessions makes it possible to share and give generously. In a world that teaches us to seek after money and material things, it is

counter cultural to think in terms of radical generosity. Following God's way instead of the world's makes all the difference.

Providing further guidance on how to live as the church, in 1 Thessalonians Paul said to esteem and love our leaders. We are to support and encourage them because of their service for the Lord. We are also told to love, encourage, and warn those we fellowship with in the body of Christ. The key is to do this all out of love and with patience. Finally, Paul called believers to rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all things. These practices are foundational to living the Christian life and fulfilling the Will of God. When we get this right, the church will flourish and God will be glorified.

- ❓ What will you do to help promote unity in the body this week?
- ❓ How has God challenged your views on hosting your own group through today's discussion?
- ❓ Who can you pursue a gospel conversation with this week?
- ❓ Consider drawing your neighborhood or listing those who share your hobby to discover where God is leading you to have a conversation or start a group.

Prayer of Response

Thank God for showing you how to honor Him as a part of His body. Ask for wisdom to see where you need to make changes and the courage and power for what He calls you to do.

Additional Resources

- *The Message of Acts* by John Stott
- *The Treasure Principle* by Randy Alcorn
- *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians* by Mark Howell

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



DxD This Week

Call to Action

Challenge our congregations to embrace this lifestyle, asking the Holy Spirit to show us what next step each one of us should take to embody this passage.

Questions to Guide Your Group's Discussion

1. What does this passage say?
2. What did this passage mean to its original audience?
3. What does this passage tell us about God?
4. What does this passage tell us about man?
5. What does this passage demand of me?
6. How does this passage change the way I relate to people? (*How can you use this information this week at work or with friends and neighbors?*)
7. How does this passage prompt me to pray to God?

*Adapted from Seven Arrows by Matt Rogers pastor of The Church at Cherrydale, Greenville, SC

For Next Week

Session Title

- Awe and Admiration

Main Passages

- Acts 5:1-11

Session Outline

1. Holding Back (Acts 5:1-2)
2. Honest Confrontation (Acts 5:3-6)
3. Hard Consequences (Acts 5:7-11)

Memorize

Now the entire group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common. - Acts 4:32

Historical Context of Acts

Purpose

The book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels. Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world (1:8). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained acceptance everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

Author

The book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul (Col 4:14; 2Tm 4:11; Phm 24). As early as the second century AD, church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the “we” passages in Acts, five sections where the author changes from the third person (“he/she” and “they”) to first-person plural (“we”) as he narrates the action (16:10–17; 20:5–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–29; 28:1–16). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Setting

The date of composition of the book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul’s imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome (28:30–31). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul’s release.

Special Features

The book of Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca AD 30–63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ. It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Extended Commentary

Acts 4:32-37

4:32–33. In a paragraph reminiscent of Acts 2:43–47, Luke again emphasizes the unity of the church and, this time, adds a note about its generosity. What were these early Christians like? They were clearly united. They not only prayed together but were one in heart and mind—perhaps because of the way they prayed together! The witness to the resurrection continued. The Christians were neither a monastic order nor a closed society like some cults. Christianity contains clear-cut social implications, and sharing with others is one of them (John 13:35).

4:34–35. Not only were they united; they were unselfish. This passage shows us a distinctly Christian view of possessions which centers not in ownership, but stewardship; not in creed, but need; not in fad, but family. We have no other New Testament record of communal sharing, and we should not apply this passage universally to other groups of believers. God deemed it necessary at this time and place and laid down a general principle of sharing with others. Notice the result: There were no needy persons among them.

United, unselfish, and unafraid. Looking back at the prayer, we see its fulfillment in their power for witness and their clear focus of that witness—the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Unlike so many congregations today, these early Christians knew their identity and precisely what God expected of them. They moved forward with courage to achieve their goals.

4:36–37. We can almost feel Luke searching for an example to demonstrate the generosity and unity of the believers. He came up with exhibit A, Joseph a Levite from Cyprus. We call him Barnabas, a nickname he earned because of his encouraging spirit in the church at Jerusalem. He appears in Acts 4; 9; 11; 13; 14; and 15. Luke's clear-cut wording about the meaning of the name Barnabas has troubled scholars since the Bible was written. Bar clearly means “son” in Aramaic, but nabas has escaped scholarly explanation as an Aramaic or Semitic root related to paraklesis, the Greek word for encouragement. Such things are not our concern nor Luke's. We need to see Barnabas as Luke saw him, a positive demonstration of how courageous Christianity operated in the first century, giving of their resources and making other people feel better.¹

1 Thessalonians 5:12-18

5:12–13 To give recognition means respect for the authority and work of church leaders.

5:14 Brothers and sisters elsewhere in the letter refers to the whole church. So it likely does not refer only to the leaders here. All Christians are to warn ... comfort ... help and be patient.

5:15 Not to repay evil for evil but to pursue what is good reflects back on Jesus's teaching not to follow a retaliatory “eye for an eye” ethic but to give a blessing instead (Mt 5:38–42).

5:16 Verses 16–22 deal with religious duties as opposed to interpersonal behavior. Rejoicing has its source in God. This verse is parallel to Gl 5:22; Php 4:4; Jms 1:2. “To rejoice always is

to see the hand of God in whatever is happening and to remain certain of God's future salvation. Without such conviction joy would not be possible in the face of affliction, suffering, and death" (Charles A. Wanamaker).

5:17 To pray constantly does not mean continuous, uninterrupted prayer but humble submission to God in the details of life.

5:18 This verse is closely related to 5:16 (cp. Col 3:17).²

Author Bio

1. Kenneth O. Gangel, *Acts*, vol. 5, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 63–64.
2. James F. Davis, "1 Thessalonians," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 1908.

Author Bio

John Stott (The Message of Acts)

John R. W. Stott is known worldwide as a preacher, evangelist and communicator of Scripture. For many years he served as rector of All Souls Church in London, where he carried out an effective urban pastoral ministry. A leader among evangelicals in Britain, the United States and around the world, Stott was a principal framer of the landmark Lausanne Covenant (1974). His many books, including *Why I Am a Christian* and *The Cross of Christ*, have sold millions of copies around the world and in dozens of languages. Whether in the West or in the Two-Thirds World, a hallmark of Stott's ministry has been expository preaching that addresses the hearts and minds of contemporary men and women. Stott was honored by Time magazine in 2005 as one of the "100 Most Influential People in the World."

Randy Alcorn (The Treasure Principle)

Randy Alcorn is the founder and director of Eternal Perspective Ministries, a nonprofit organization dedicated to teaching biblical truth and drawing attention to the needy and how to help them. Alcorn is the author of over 40 books, including *Heaven; Money, Possessions and Eternity*; *Pro-Life Answers to Pro-Choice Arguments*; and *The Treasure Principle*. His novels include *Deadline*; *Dominion*; *Deception*; and *Safely Home*. Alcorn resides in Oregon with his wife, Nanci.

Mark Howell (Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Thessalonians)

Dr. Mark A. Howell has served as Senior Pastor at First Baptist, Daytona Beach, Florida since September 2011. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, TN. While at Carson-Newman he was privileged to play linebacker on the 1986 National Championship football team. He also holds both the Master of Divinity and Doctor of Philosophy degrees from the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina.

Dr. Howell has been in the ministry for more than twenty years and has served churches in Texas, North Carolina, Kentucky and Arkansas. Additionally, he served on the faculty of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky as Professor of Preaching and Pastoral Ministries. He also has served as an Adjunct Professor for Southwestern Baptist Seminary. He has a passion for taking the gospel to the nations and has been privileged to preach the gospel around the world. Dr. Howell has also led mission teams to Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Kenya, South Africa, India, Nepal, Argentina, Russia, Ukraine, China, Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore. He has served on the Executive Committees of both the Southern Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention. He is married to Carmen, who holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree in biblical counseling from the Criswell College in Dallas, Texas.