**FIVE QUESTIONS EVERYONE SHOULD ANSWER**

Brentwood Campus | Summer Series 2023

When we adopted our current mission statement and vision frame, the leadership team made an important decision. While most churches measure “mission metrics” to gauge ministry effectiveness, we instead developed five questions that every growing disciple should be able to answer. We spend the month of July asking ourselves these important questions.

**July 16 | When and where are you experiencing life-giving biblical community?
Acts 4:32-37**

The earliest Christians could not rely on money, cultural power, or worldly influence but they had the Holy Spirit and a fierce commitment to one another. In Acts 4, we see the early church threatened but unified by praying together.

**Our unity as brothers and sisters should be established in the gospel, empowered by our testimonies, and experienced through generosity.**

*How did your upbringing impact your understanding of community? Of Sharing your God-story? About giving?*

*When and where are you experiencing life-giving biblical community?*

God has given us so much in Christ: forgiveness, salvation, and our sanctification as we grow into the image and likeness of Christ. God has all the resources He needs to reach the world with the gospel, but He expects His people’s generosity, sharing of our life-in-Christ story and living in biblical community to be a key part of accomplishing that mission.

**UNDERSTANDING**

**Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.**

Have a volunteer read Acts 4:32-35.

*According to verse 32, what was the attitude of the early church toward each other?*

Acts 4 records the events and growth of the early church soon after it formed. This was a time of intense persecution; as they depended on God, they also depended upon one another. They rightly understood that God owns everything and therefore had no issues sharing with each other. The early church was known for its unity and extravagant generosity. The church was held together by a common purpose and bond.

*Can you recall a time when you experienced this kind of community?*

Have a volunteer read Acts 4:36-37.

Here we meet a major character in Acts, Barnabas, for the first time. How is Barnabas described?

*How did Barnabas show he was part of a life-giving biblical community?*

Barnabas did not have to sell his land and give away the proceeds. The selling of land and giving away all of the money was not compulsory. These gifts were given freely by those who were concerned with the well-being of their brothers and sisters. Barnabas’s gift served as a practical example and encouragement for other people. Those who had needs were encouraged by knowing he really cared about them. Those who had resources were encouraged to follow his example and give of their resources to meet others’ needs. We also can be inspired and motivated by Barnabas’s example as we understand that one way we can model biblical community is by meeting people’s needs with our time, finances, and stuff.

Barnabas sold a field that would have been of some value to him. *Is there anything that is “off limits” for you to give to the Lord or share with a friend?*

*What are the benefits of living in unity, having a common purpose?*

Barnabas was not concerned with building a kingdom for himself, but with building God’s kingdom. Barnabas went on to become a pillar of the early church and a traveling companion of Paul. But as we see here, Barnabas was committed to the church with his wallet as well as his life. As a result, God was able to use him to do incredible things.

**APPLICATION**

**Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.**

***Our unity as brothers and sisters should be established in the gospel, empowered by our testimonies, and experienced through generosity.***

*How does our Group show generosity to one another and to a lost world?*

*What can you do to help establish more unity in our Group?*

*Who are you praying for that needs to experience the unity and community of our Group?*

**PRAYER**

Pray that God would bless us so we could be a blessing to others through our common purpose. Ask that God would show you a few concrete ways you can share more of your stuff, hobby, and interests for the growth of the kingdom.

**COMMENTARY**

Acts 4:32–5:2

4:32-33. The opening two verses are almost identical with 2:43-44, only in reverse order. Together they characterize the community life as marked by four things: their unity in mind and heart (v. 32a), their sharing of their possessions (v. 32b), the power and witness of the apostles (v. 33a), and the grace of God, which rested upon them (v. 33b). The overarching concept was their unity, their being “one in heart and mind,” their fellowship in the Spirit. This served as the basis of their sharing of their possessions. The latter is described in two ways. First, “no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own.” The picture is one of unqualified sharing, of not claiming owner’s rights, of saying “what’s mine is yours.” The second expression is “they shared everything they had.” The Greek literally reads “everything was in common with them.” Taken by itself, this could refer to shared ownership; but in conjunction with the first expression, it also refers to a practice of freely sharing one’s goods with another.

Many interpreters have seen Luke’s description of the Christian practice here as reflecting Greek ideals, particularly in such phrases as “one mind” and “all in common.” The Greeks shared a common myth that in primitive times people lived in an ideal state in which there was no ownership but everything was held in common. Some attributed such a practice to the Pythagoreans, and Plato envisioned his ideal republic as one devoid of all private ownership. It is doubtful such a utopian ideal was ever realized among the Greeks, but for some Greeks communal ownership was a major part of their dream of a “Golden Age.”

More common than this myth was the Greek ideal of friendship according to which true friends held everything in common and were of “one mind.” Aristotle is reputed to have defined a friend as “one soul dwelling in two bodies.” Such expressions became commonplace and are found in Roman writers such as Cicero as well as the Hellenistic Jew Philo. Luke’s description would have evoked an immediate response in his Gentile readers. What they esteemed as an ideal had become a reality in the young Christian community. They were of one mind, for they shared freely with one another, truly common both in soul and in means. The main business of the community was, of course, the witness for Jesus; and this the apostles continued to do “with great power.” This power likely refers to their continuing performance of miracles, a further testimony to God’s answering their prayer (v. 30; cf. 5:12-16). “Much grace was upon them all,” primarily in God’s blessing on their lives and witness. On this note Luke’s general summary of the Christian life together ends. He then turned to a more thorough discussion of one particular aspect of their common life—their sharing of goods.

4:34-35. If verse 32 depicted the Christian sharing in terms of Greek ideals, verse 34a sets forth the Old Testament ideal: “There were no needy persons among them.” This is the ideal God established for Israel. According to Deut 15:4f., Israel was to keep God’s commands; and God would bless them; there would be no poor among them. There is evidence that in New Testament times the text of Deut 15:4 was seen as a reference to the ideal final times when Israel would be fully faithful to the law and there would be no poverty in the land. The Christians saw themselves as the people of God of the final times (cf. 2:17), they were experiencing God’s blessing (4:33), and they were striving to realize the ideal of a people of God with no poor among them.

Verses 34b-35 depict the means by which they sought to realize this ideal. Those who had lands or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds, and lay them at the apostles’ feet. The proceeds were then distributed to the needy among them. But what of the practice of laying the proceeds at the apostles’ feet? The gesture was one of submission to another. At this point the Twelve were the representatives appointed by Christ as the foundation of the true people of God. The submission was not to them but to the one they represented. To lay one’s gift at their feet was to offer it to Christ. The apostles certainly did not consider this an enviable role. They were all too glad to turn the responsibility over to others (cf. 6:2).

4:36-37. Luke concluded his treatment of the early Christian sharing with two specific examples—one to be followed (Barnabas) and one to be avoided (Ananias and Sapphira). Barnabas sold a field and placed all the receipts at the apostles’ feet. Of more interest to us are the little details told about Barnabas here. Luke had a way of taking characters who played a major role later in the book and introducing them early, but only briefly and in passing, as is the case with Barnabas here. His name was Joseph, and he was given the nickname Barnabas by the apostles. This was not insignificant in itself because the granting of a nickname was often seen as a sign of respect. (Compare Jesus giving Simon the nickname of Peter/Rock.) He was the encourager, the advocate, the paraklete par excellence of all the characters in Acts. When the Christians in Jerusalem shied away from Paul after his conversion, Barnabas interceded and introduced him to them (9:26f.). When Paul refused to take Mark on his second missionary journey, Barnabas took up for Mark (15:36-39). When the Christians of Jerusalem became concerned over the orthodoxy of the Antiochene Christians in their witness to Greeks, Barnabas again served as intercessor, saw the gracious work of the Antiochene Christians, and encouraged them (11:20-23). Indeed, 11:24 well sums up the portrait of this “Son of Encouragement”: “He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.”

We also learn that Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus. Levites were officials in the temple cultus, subordinate in rank to the priests. Prohibited from offering sacrifices and barred entrance to the holy place, they served in such capacities as policing the temple grounds, keeping the gates, and providing the music at sacrifices and on ceremonial occasions. According to ancient provisions (Deut 10:9; Num 18:20, 24), Levites were not supposed to own land, but that no longer seemed to apply in Barnabas’s day.

We are not told where the field was located, whether in Judea or his native Cyprus. Nothing was made of Barnabas’s Levitical status in Acts. He may never have served as a Levite. Such service was in no way compulsory for one of Levitical lineage. Just how strong were Barnabas’s Cypriot roots we also are not told. Luke simply said here that he was a Cypriot by birth. His family may have moved to Jerusalem when he was quite young, and it is in and around Jerusalem where we find Barnabas active in the early chapters of Acts. On the other hand, it is probably not by chance that Paul and Barnabas’s mission work together began on the island of Cyprus.