

Acts of the Apostles

Week 6: Acts 4:32-5:16

Acts 4:32-37 – The Believers Share Their Possessions

- This passage echoes the description of the church in 2:43-47. There the believers were all together and had everything in common, sold property to provide for those in need, and continued to worship in the Temple and in homes.
- In this passage the Spirit plays out in three main ways
 - o Even though the number of believers had grown into a large company, they remained of “one heart and mind” (4:32a).
 - o They also continued to practice a radical generosity toward one another (4:32b).
 - o The apostles continued to testify of the resurrection powerfully (4:33a).
- Luke describes the fact that there was no one needy among them as a sign of “God’s grace...powerfully at work in them all” (4:33-34).
 - o Most people lived on the edge of poverty in the first century.
 - Bock notes that in first century Rome, 4 to 7 percent of the people made up the upper class with the middle class only around 10 percent, and the remainder all being poor (215).
 - If some of the converted pilgrims decided to stay in Jerusalem, they would begin to have material needs very quickly.
 - o The willingness to share helps the church fulfill the standard set forth in Deuteronomy 15:4 of a land in which there are no poor people because all of the people’s needs are met by God riches.
 - o It becomes clear that the people are God’s riches – for in their generosity the needs of others are met.
- People practiced generosity by selling homes or land and placing the proceeds at the apostles’ feet (4:34-35).
 - o The picture is of upper- or middle-class people occasionally selling property to help care for the needy in the church.
 - o Laying the proceeds at the apostles’ feet is a sign that the gifts are seen as an offering to the Lord and not an ancient form of patronship. The recipients of these gifts would be indebted to God, not the giver of any particular gift.
 - o Emperor Julian (AD 361-63) wrote: “It is disgraceful that when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galileans (Christians) support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.”
- Luke presents Barnabas as an example of the larger pattern of behavior by the early believers.
 - o Barnabas shows up several times as an encourager to other believers (see Acts 9:26-27; 11:22-26; 15:37).

- Barnabas stands in contrast to both Judas (1:18) and Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11)

Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11)

- In contrast to Barnabas's positive example, which gets two verses of attention, Luke presents the negative example of Ananias and Sapphira over eleven verses.
 - Luke's attention to the matter highlights his concern over threats from within the congregation.
 - If Satan cannot damage the church with outside threats, he will gladly do so from within.
 - The church's unity, power, and example cannot be taken for granted.
- Ananias and Sapphira's actions echo Barnabas's almost exactly except for the fact that they withheld a portion of the proceeds for themselves.
 - The phrase "with full knowledge" (5:2) combined with Peter's accusation about lying to the Holy Spirit (5:3-4) indicates that the primary issue was not that they held some money back, but that they did so deceptively.
 - The giving of the money was optional.
 - The love of money and the desire for praise corrupted their souls.
- God took the offense so seriously that he judged Ananias by striking him dead (5:7).
 - The passage implies God gave Peter divine insight into the situation, not that the Apostles somehow figured the deceit out.
 - Peter did not condemn Ananias, rather, God acted.
- Three hours later, the scene is repeated with Sapphira.
 - Peter gives her a chance to repent (5:8).
 - Peter does announce the death sentence in this instance (5:9).
 - Again, the sin is described as one against the Holy Spirit (lie (5:3) / test (5:9)).
- In what feels like understatement, Luke twice notes that fear seized the church (5:5, 11).
 - The story is meant to evoke holy fear.
 - In the ancient world, vows, especially to deities, were considered dangerous business.
 - This story stresses both the power of God and the necessity of integrity among believers.
 - Believers are honest because they answer to a holy God.

The Apostles Heal Many (5:12-16).

- Far from interfering in the mission of the church, this instance of divine judgment seems to keep the momentum going. The apostles keep healing people, the believers keep meeting together for worship at the Temple (5:12).
- A paradox occurs. People are afraid to join the believers – people are dropping dead in their worship services! Still, more and more people are joining them day by day (5:13-14).
- Crowds of sick people seek healing from Peter and the apostles just as they did to Jesus (5:15-16).

Sources

Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

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I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 1980).