

Main Idea: By this will men know that you are my disciples, Jesus said, by our love for one another. In Acts 4:32-37 we discover three evidences of this love in the church.

- I. There will be a partnership (32-33).
 - A. Unity occurs when we look up (32a).
 - B. Unity occurs when we look at each other (32b).
 1. The first church members were selfless.
 2. The first church members were gracious.
 - C. Unity occurs when we look out (33).
 1. There was great power.
 2. There was great grace.
- II. There will be participation (34-35).
 - A. The people gave gifts.
 - B. The leaders received the gifts.
 1. We must have a biblical view of authority.
 2. We must have a biblical view of accountability.
 - C. The church distributed the gifts.
 1. There was generosity.
 2. There was a guideline: they met needs, not wants.
- III. There will be pacesetters (36-37).
 - A. We learn who Barnabas was (36).
 - B. We learn what Barnabas did (37).
 1. He took action.
 2. He practiced submission.
 3. He developed a reputation.

Getting Intentional about Application: Two questions to consider...

1. What are some ways you have observed the Lord making Himself known in our church family recently?
2. What are some opportunities the Lord is setting before us to show our love for one another?

Scripture Reading: John 13:31-38

By this will men know that you are my disciples, Jesus said, by our love for one another.

Red Rover, Red Rover, send Johnny right over. Remember that game? I used to love to play it as a young child. You had two teams, situated in two lines with participants holding hands. When you heard your name, you left your team, ran as hard as you could toward the other team, and sought to break through their chain. If you succeeded, you took one of their team members with you back to your team. If you failed, you were captured by the opposing team. The game ended when all contestants had been held and formed one large team.

Red Rover, Red Rover is a fun game to play as a child. It's also a pretty decent illustration of how life works in the church.

The Lord places a premium on unity in His church. He calls us to lock arms and function as one. But Satan loves to attack the church's unity, to divide and conquer, and he is a master-mind at the task.

That's one of the reason Paul urged the divided church in Corinth to practice forgiveness, as 2 Corinthians 2:11 states, “In order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.”

We must not let Satan outwit us. That's the negative. Here's the positive. Love one another. Indeed, by this men will know you are mine, if you love one another.

When the Lord is real in a church, you'll see it in two primary ways. We saw the first last week in Acts 4:23-31. When He is real in a church, you'll see people who are serious about Him. Namely, it will be a praying church, as was the first church.

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this text, see the Acts series preached at WBC in 2001.

But there's a second way, and it has to do with the horizontal. If the Lord is real in a church, its members will not only be serious about God, but about *each other*. And that's exactly what we see when we move to the text before us.

There was love in the first church, and we see three evidences of it in Acts 4:32-37. We need this text. Everybody it seems talks about love. I think most people consider themselves to be pretty loving people. But in reality, we are not. We are sinners, and as such our default is not to love rather than to love.

This becomes apparent when we are confronted with the standard. For instance, I can say all I want that I'm good at playing the piano, but put me at the keys right after Joe Gulley plays and the truth will be apparent.

A church can say it's a loving church, but put it in the presence of a truly loving church and the truth will be apparent.

We need a standard, and the Spirit of God provided us with one in Acts 4. There are three evidences that we are loving one another, and here's the first.

I. There will be a partnership (32-33).

"All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all."

It almost sounds too good to be true. *All the believers were one in heart and mind*. It was kind of like heaven on earth. The believers were one in *heart*—that is, they had one purpose that knit them together with strong emotional ties. And they were one in *mind* [perhaps better translated "soul," from the Greek *psuka*]—they thought along the same lines, with a common theology that bonded them.

Unity is such a precious thing. The world doesn't understand what unity is, let alone have the ability to achieve it. But in the church, unity is not only possible but required.

The first church grew rapidly during the early months of its existence. It went from 120 to 3,000 on day one, the day of Pentecost. Not long after this the believers passed the 5,000 mark (Acts 4:4). Yet despite its size, the church was unified.

Luke says they were of "one heart and soul." Unity has little to do with size. Sometimes people will complain when a church begins to grow, "I just don't know everybody any more. We don't have the unity we used to."

Those are two different issues, knowing everybody and unity. I'm confident the believers in Acts 4 didn't "know everybody" (you can't know 5,000 people). But they did have unity.

How does that happen? How does a church experience unity? There are three perspectives that make unity a reality, as the church demonstrates in the text before us.

A. Unity occurs when we look up (32a). Dr. Luke records, "All the *believers* were one in heart and mind."

So here's where it starts. To belong to the church you must be a "believer." That's a key term. A "believer" is a Christian, and a Christian is a "believer." The terms are synonymous. The Greek term in verse 32 is *pisteusantone*. Luke refers to the church members as "believing ones," or "ones having faith," hence, *believers*. It could even be translated "faithful ones."

Don't miss this. In order to have unity, there must be a group of people who have done the same thing, namely, they've all *looked up*. They're not clones, but they've all humbled themselves before God, looked up, and put their total trust in Jesus Christ.

To have unity, you don't need to squeeze everybody into the same mold. Unity is not uniformity. Some say we need to get rid of denominations and "bring God's people

together.” Granted, we need to get rid of pettiness over non-biblical issues, but the basis for God-pleasing unity is what we *believe*.

James Boice offers this valuable insight, “The worst times in the history of the church have been when everyone has been part of one large organization... There are things that divide us—different points of view on secondary issues, for instance. We will always have those. We have different ministries, and there are different talents and different gifts. We work differently. There is nothing wrong with many of these differences. Indeed, they are given to us by God.”²

Kent Hughes offers a similar thought, “It is wrong to suppose, as sadly some do, that when believers dwell in unity they will carry the same Bible, read the same books, promote the same styles, educate their children the same way, have the same likes and dislikes—that they will become Christian clones. The fact is, the insistence that others be just like us is one of the most disunifying mind-sets a church can have because it instills a judgmental inflexibility that hurls people away from the church with lethal force. One of the wonders of Christ is that he honors our individuality while bringing us into unity.”³

Perhaps no one has said it better than A. W. Tozer did years ago, “Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow.”⁴

To experience biblical unity, then, we must look up. We look up to the One who saved us and seek His mind in every situation. What does He want? That’s the basis for true unity, whether in a church, or a friendship, or a marriage, or whatever.

B. Unity occurs when we look at each other (32b). This is the expression of true unity. Talk is often cheap, but action speaks volumes. When we look at verse 32, it’s pretty obvious that the first church members possessed two characteristics.

1. *The first church members were selfless.* “No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own.” I don’t need to remind you that this is a very *unnatural* perspective. The truth is, that’s a *supernatural* reality. According to God’s Word, if any person is in Christ, he is a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). So when these people came to know Christ, Christ turned them into something they weren’t previously and it showed up in the way they looked at their possessions. They became *selfless*.

2. *The first church members were gracious.* “No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.”

Some have suggested this was communism. That’s not true. According to Britannica Kids, “In a Communist system, individual people do not own land, factories, or machinery. Instead, the government or the whole community owns these things.”⁵ That’s not what happened in Acts 4. The church didn’t own people’s possessions. People just chose to share some of what they had.

We’re seeing *koinonia* in action, the Greek term for fellowship or partnership. *Koinonia* says, “What’s mine is yours; If you need it I’ll share it.”⁶

Isn’t it risky to share? Sure it is. When you share something it might not come back as when it left. Or it might not come back at all.

² James Boice, *Acts*, p. 92.

³ Kent Hughes, *Acts*, p. 69.

⁴ A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, p. 95.

⁵ “Communism is a type of government as well as an economic system (a way of creating and sharing wealth). In a Communist system, individual people do not own land, factories, or machinery. Instead, the government or the whole community owns these things.”

<https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/communism/352989>

⁶ William LaSor, *Church Alive*, p. 71.

What, then, would have motivated these believers to be so gracious? The very question indicates how quickly we forget. God has been gracious to us, hasn't He? When we were bankrupt spiritually, He gave something to us, didn't He? He didn't have to. He could have turned His back on us and let us go to the hell we deserve. But He gave us something.

He gave the most priceless gift He could give. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son (John 3:16)." And His Son gave too, for "When we were without strength, Christ died for the ungodly," says Romans 5:8. "You know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you, through His poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9)."

Friends, it's unthinkable that one receive God's gracious gift and remain in the stingy state one was in before receiving the gift. Grace received must lead to grace shared.

Indeed, if a person says he's been born again but lives the same selfish life as before his so-called conversion, that person is self-deceived. A person who has tasted the grace of God will exhibit what he now possesses, a new nature, a gracious nature.

Christ changed the way the first church members looked at each other. And that's the point. When we're in Christ, we don't see ourselves as owners, but stewards. And since the Owner taught us to share with those in need (Matt 25:34ff.), we look for ways to do that.

Unity occurs when we, first, look up, then *look at each other*.

C. Unity occurs when we look out (33). The early church was not ingrown. They looked beyond themselves and saw the world. Notice how the church lived in light of its mission in verse 33, "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all."

It was a strategic moment for the young church. The Sanhedrin had said, "Don't talk about Jesus any more." But the believers chose to obey God rather than man. Notice the word "great" appears twice in verse 33. The church's witness was characterized by two things.

1. *There was great power.* "With great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus," as the KJV states.

Didn't others preach, too? According to verse 31, yes, but the apostles led the way. They were eyewitnesses of the Risen Christ and testified boldly to the fact of His resurrection.

The doctrine of the resurrection is absolutely critical in our preaching. A dead Messiah can do nothing. But One that could conquer the grave can do anything, and the world needs to hear about Him. As the apostles preached there was great power.

2. *There was great grace.* "Much grace was upon them all." Not just grace, but *much* grace. There was mega-power, and there was mega-grace.

How can you tell if grace is *on you*? You see its effects. There will be loving relationships and bold evangelism.

Do you see the balance here between human responsibility and divine sovereignty? Our part is to witness. God's part is to give grace. We tell others about Christ. God in His grace opens eyes and changes lives.

Beloved, show me a group of people who are working together to reach their community for Christ, and I'll show you a unified church. If we want to experience true unity, we must *look up*—there can be no true unity between people unless they believe in the same Savior; we must *look at each other*—and be willing to get involved in each other's lives; and we must *look out*—there is a world of people who need the Savior, and it's our mission to tell them.

None of us can do it alone. It is *our* mission. There is the first evidence that we are loving one another, and thus, that the Lord is real in a church. There will be a partnership.

II. There will be participation (34-35).

“There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.”

Those first words in verse 34 are staggering, “There were *no needy persons* among them.” That’s amazing. Not *one* needy person among them. It doesn’t say *in the world*, but *among them*. They didn’t eliminate poverty from the world, but they did make sure every person in the church had their needs met.

How’d they do it? To be sure, they did more than just pray about it, as vital as prayer is. They took action in joint participation. Luke mentions three steps in the benevolent process.

A. Step #1: The people gave gifts. Verse 34, “From time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales.” Again, this wasn’t communism for the giving was voluntary, not legislated.

A real test of a Christian’s love is how much he’s willing to sacrifice financially. The apostle John put it bluntly, “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him (1 John 3:17)?”

We don’t have to be wealthy to give, either. Just willing. As the poor believers in Macedonia were. Paul holds them up as a role model in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5:

“And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will.”

In his book, *In Search of Unity*, Ed Dobson tells this story. Tonto and the Lone Ranger were riding through a canyon together when all of a sudden both sides were filled with Native American warriors on horses, dressed for battle. The Lone Ranger turned to Tonto and asked, "What are we going to do?" Tonto replied, "What you mean 'we,' White man?"⁷

That sort of epitomizes how things work in the world, every man for himself. It must not be so in the church. We are brothers and sisters, which means if you have a need I have a responsibility. Here’s how it worked in the first church. Step #1—the people gave gifts.

B. Step #2: The leaders received the gifts. Don’t miss what the church members did with their gifts. Verse 35 says they were “put at the apostles’ feet.” Why? Who were the apostles? They were the God-appointed leaders of the early church.

There are two key implications here for us when it comes to giving. If we’re going to give in a way that honors God, first of all...

1. *We must have a biblical view of authority.* Are all equal in the church? It depends what we mean by equal. In terms of worth? Certainly. In fact, we are all equally *unworthy!* But is there equality of function? No.

⁷ Edward Dobson, *In Search of Unity*, p. 20-27.

God has given delegated authority to certain positions in the church. The early church members recognized this. They put their gifts “at the apostles’ feet.” I read of one commentator who suggested the apostles sat on high chairs, the prototypes of later ecclesiastical thrones!⁸ That interpretation is certainly far-fetched, but the existence of delegated, biblical authority is not.

God has given His church leaders. In the first church, they were apostles. Then the mantle was passed to elders (see Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). The Lord holds leaders responsible to lead.

2. *We must have a biblical view of accountability.* Laying the money at the apostles’ feet was a safeguard against abuse. The church leaders could insure that no true need would be neglected, yet also that no abuse tolerated.

In fact, as time passed the benevolent ministries of the church mushroomed so much that the apostles became swamped. So as not to detract from their priority ministries in prayer and teaching the Word, the apostles delegated the direction of the compassion ministries to a team of spiritually qualified men (later to be known as deacons). We’ll see this in a future study when we come to Acts 6.

A comment by John MacArthur is helpful, “This passage illustrates an important pattern concerning giving in the local church. The donations are to be placed in the control of the spiritual leaders, who are then responsible before God for their use. Too often, people want to give only if they can specify how the money is to be used. That kind of self-serving giving fails to understand the delegated spiritual authority of God-ordained leaders and may often merely seek the applause of men. Giving is to be so selfless that Jesus said in Matthew 6:3-4, ‘When you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.’ Then He added, ‘Your Father who sees in secret will repay you.’”⁹

That brings us to the third step in the benevolent process. First, the people gave gifts. Second, the leaders received the gifts. Then...

C. Step #3: The church distributed the gifts. As verse 35 concludes, “And it was distributed to anyone as he had need.” Not hoarded, but distributed. Not indiscriminately, but to those in need.

Just who were these needy people anyway? Perhaps some of them were converted Jews who had come from other countries to Jerusalem for Pentecost. Once they came to know Christ, many naturally wanted to stick around and get grounded in the apostles’ teaching.

But they had no jobs in Jerusalem. So they needed help, at least temporarily. As did others who were residents of Jerusalem and *lost* their jobs when they became Christians. The persecution that began in Acts 4:3 only got worse as time passed.

The text doesn’t tell us who these needy people were, nor how they became needy. Instead it highlights how the church responded. The people gave, the leaders received, and then the church distributed.

A couple of things stand out regarding this benevolent ministry.

1. *There was generosity.* They gave “to anyone” in the church who had need. Not just family. Not just the popular. To anyone who had need. However...

2. *There was a guideline: they met needs, not wants.* Again, they gave to anyone *as he had need*. Not greed, but need. They met needs, not wants. And it was a beautiful thing to behold.

⁸ Stahlin, in I. H. Marshall, *Acts*, p. 109.

⁹ John MacArthur, *Acts*, p. 150.

Know this. When the Lord is real in a church, the people will love one another. And where there is love, there will be *participation*.

The older I get, the easier it's becoming to coast. I like my own little safe and comfortable world. I've noticed I'm not alone.

In his book, *The Official Rule Book for the New Church Game*, Ken Hemphill describes the problem: "Over half the people on the rolls of our churches are no longer active. Of those we consider to be active, we fully anticipate that nearly half of them will be absent on a given Sunday. Finally, the most disturbing statistic is that only 20 percent of those who attend regularly contribute in terms of money and time."¹⁰

I don't think the percentages hold at WBC. I watch this church family in action and I'm encouraged by the demonstrations of love that happen on a daily basis. Practical needs being met, to the glory of God.

Yet we certainly haven't arrived, so let's ask ourselves some questions. Do you have any possessions? Most of us have many, due to the kindness of God. How do you view them, as God's or yours? Have you shared anything you possess with a brother or sister in need in the past month?

You say, "I don't know of any brother or sister who needs what I have?"

Okay, this will help. Come to your community group later today. You'll be discussing together, what needs are there in our church, and how can we help?

Let give you a tangible one right now. Do you have a car? There are a couple of ladies who came to our new members class back in the fall who haven't been coming to our services since their car broke five months ago. Are you willing to get to know them and offer to bring them to church?

Here's another. Our missionaries Eric and Cheryl Elmer wrote us this week to tell us about a great challenge/opportunity the church in the CAR is facing right now. Due to civil war, thousands have lost their homes and are living in horrid conditions in refugee camps. Here's the opportunity. The churches there feel they could minister in those camps and be a more effective witness for Christ if they could give the refugees food, soap, blankets, and other necessities. BMM has set up an account to receive funds for this, and Pastor Pierre Goumba of the Center Church in Bambari has been delegated to oversee the distribution. Why not participate?

Friends, when we are loving one another as the first church did, there will be evidence. The first is partnership. The second is participation.

III. There will be pacesetters (36-37).

Like the man we meet in verses 36-37, "Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet."

It's been said there are four main bones in every organization. The wish-bones: Wishing somebody would do something about the problem. The jaw-bones: Doing all the talking but very little else. The knuckle-bones: Those who knock everything. The back-bones: Those who carry the brunt of the load and do most of the work.¹¹

Barnabas was a backbone kind of guy, a *pacesetter*.

A. We learn who Barnabas was (36). He was a Jew from the tribe of Levi. He was also a native of the island of Cyprus. Apparently, there was a sizeable Jewish population at Cyprus. Later, Barnabas and Paul would go there on the first missionary journey.

¹⁰ Ken Hemphill, *The Official Rule Book for the New Church Game*, p. 28.

¹¹ *Bits & Pieces*, October 15, 1992, pp. 16-17.

Though his birth name was Joseph, for some reason the apostles called him *Barnabas*. The Living Bible calls him, “Barny the Preacher.” Actually, the nickname meant “Son of Encouragement.” That gives us a pretty good idea the kind of person Barnabas was.

We’ll be seeing more of him later in Acts—Luke mentions him at least twenty-five times in the book—and we find his name another five times in the epistles. Barnabas was the kind of person every church needs. Anybody can talk. The godly will walk. Barnabas certainly did.

B. We learn what Barnabas did (37). Three things...

1. *He took action.* How? He sold a piece of property and put the proceeds at the apostles’ feet. In so doing, secondly...

2. *He practiced submission.* F. F. Bruce comments, “We do not know whether Barnabas’s property was a farm or merely a burial-ground [the word used here is *argos*, which appears nowhere else in Acts]; whatever it was, he sold it and gave the purchase-price to the apostles for the use of the community.”¹²

Later in Acts Barnabas will function as a leader, but first he demonstrated he knew how to follow. So vital. Indeed, to be a leader one must first function as a loyal follower.

3. *He developed a reputation.* Barnabas was a giver. He took His relationship with the Lord so seriously that he gave sacrificially.

There are lots of ways we can give. Money is just one way. We can give our time, our possessions, even our attention to show love to people. When we invite a family or two to our home for a meal, we’re doing what Barnabas did. We’re using our resources for the glory of God and the good of His people.

To put it simply, in Barnabas we see Jesus, don’t we? Jesus gave His life for us, and now we who know Him are rich. He didn’t give us what we deserve. He gave according to His grace.

When there is love in a church, there will be pacesetters like Barnabas leading the way. Will you avail yourself today?

By this will all men know we are His disciples. By the way we love one another. Let’s give the world a clear picture that we are His. We’ve just seen the standard. The early church functioned as a partnership, exhibited participation, and had pacesetters like Barnabas.

Getting Intentional about Application: Two questions we’ll be discussing in our community groups today...

1. *What are some ways you have observed the Lord making Himself known in our church family recently?*

2. *What are some opportunities the Lord is setting before us to show our love for one another?*

¹² F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, p. 109.