

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

A Picture Of A Further Filled Church

December 4th, 2022

Acts 4:31-37

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 4:31-37. And, I know I’ve said this before, but I really mean it today, this message will make more sense to you with an actual open Bible in your lap because the correct interpretation and application of this passage requires us to note the sequence and the logical flow of the wider narrative. So humour the old man, and put your cell phone in your pocket or your purse or your man bag or whatever it is that you’ve got going for you today. If you need to make use of the pew Bible, the story we are looking at this morning is found on page 912.

Now, as you look that up you might notice that we are overlapping slightly with the passage covered by Pastor Rob last Sunday – and that is entirely intentional. What we are looking at today is THE RESULT of what Pastor Rob was talking about last week. Last week we were looking at how the church prayed when it began to face persecution. They prayed together, they prayed from the Scriptures and they prayed for POWER and the Lord heard that prayer; he answered that prayer and they were **all filled with the Holy Spirit**. And as I’m sure you would all agree, nobody walks away from something like that unchanged. If you get run over by a truck, your friends and neighbours are going to notice a change in your appearance, well so it is when you are FILLED with the Holy Spirit of God – and so the verses that we are going to read today are detailing the changes in the nature and appearance of this congregation. The Book of Acts is

filled with these pictures of the early church at the various stages of her growth and development. We had a picture of the church in her innocence and infancy in Acts 2:42-47, but now, as we've been talking about for the last couple of weeks, this church has been through some stuff. They had their first brush with persecution – they had a prayer meeting that shook the very foundations – there is some water under the bridge now and the church has taken a quantum leap forward. So this is another picture of the church at a particular stage in her development. If Acts 2 was a picture of the church in kindergarten, then we might say this is a picture of the church at her Grade 8 graduation.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 31.

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness. Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:31–37 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Now, there is a bit of a theological landmine for us at the headwaters of this text – maybe you spotted it. In verse 31 Luke tells us that these people:

were all filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:31 ESV)

And that's interesting, because according to Acts 2 these people were already filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. In Acts 2:4 it says:

“And **they were all filled with the Holy Spirit** and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (Acts 2:4 ESV)

So what’s going on here? Did these people leak? Did the Holy Spirit come in Acts 2, leave in Acts 3 and then return in Acts 4? What’s going on? Well, we talked about this back when we were looking at the story of Pentecost; I cited the Pillar Commentary there reminding us that:

“Someone who is already filled with or full of the Spirit can receive a further filling or enabling for a particular ministry”¹

So that CAN happen, and according to the Apostle Paul that SHOULD HAPPEN. Not just one more time, but ideally, aspirationally, on an ongoing basis. He says in Ephesians 5:18:

“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, **but be filled with the Spirit**” (Ephesians 5:18 ESV)

The Greek verb there is a present imperative so it literally means “BE EVER BEING FILLED with the Holy Spirit”; so what we are seeing here is supposed to be normative. Spirit filled people can and should expect to receive subsequent fillings of the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God!

Thus, what we have here is a picture of “Church 2.0”. The subsequent filling of the Holy Spirit changed the nature and appearance of the church in noticeable ways and Luke is describing that. He is showing us the marks or the characteristics of a filled and further filled church.

The Characteristics Of A Spirit Filled (And Further Filled) Church

The first thing we see in this depiction is a noticeable leap forward in terms of BOLD PROCLAMATION.

¹David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 133.

1. Bold proclamation

Look again at verse 31 where this first mark is described. Luke says:

And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to **speak** the word of God with **boldness**. (Acts 4:31 ESV)

The Greek word translated there as “speak” is *laleo* which means to speak, discourse, or even babble or gossip. So I think Luke is telling us that when the Spirit fell – it wasn’t just the sermons of the Apostles that got better it was the entire Gospel discourse of the church. Everyone – Apostles, pastors, parents and parishioners – everyone felt the help of the Holy Spirit in their conversations with friends and neighbours.

Have you ever felt that?

Have you ever fired up a prayer when you find yourself heading into an unexpected Gospel conversation and asked the Holy Spirit to give you the words to speak and to bring verses to mind and to help you communicate clearly about the salvation that is ours in Christ? Have you ever fired up an arrow prayer like that? And have you ever felt the help of the Holy Spirit descend on you like a blanket in that moment?

That’s what I think Luke is describing here. The help of the Holy Spirit in the Gospel discourse of the church. Listen to me friends, that’s an absolute game changer!!

Now, of course that doesn’t mean that these people stopped doing their homework. Peter didn’t just say to his people: “Pray for outpourings of the Holy Spirit so that you can be better evangelists” – no, he said to his people:

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15 NIV11)

He told his people to be prepared and to have a good attitude – so the Holy Spirit doesn't make preparation unnecessary, but when the Holy Spirit FALLS on your preparation, and aids in your preparation, and surrounds your prepared content, and opens up cracks in hard hearts for your prepared content to burrow into – that's when incredible things begins to happen.

And that's what was happening in this church. They took a giant leap forward in terms of their Gospel discourse.

The second thing that we see in this picture is an exponential increase in:

2. Family-like fellowship

Look at verse 32:

Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. (Acts 4:32 ESV)

To be clear, this text isn't saying that they were becoming COMMUNISTS – it is saying that there was an incredible UNITY among these people. They were one heart and soul – and they were beginning to think of themselves as a family.

That's a miracle!

That's a Spirit of God thing!

One of the marks of real revival is boundary crossing fellowship. You know that the Spirit of God has fallen when rich and poor sit together – and serve one another in the church. You know the

Spirit of God has fallen when your identity in Christ is more important than your race, your ethnicity, your social standing or your political affiliations.

Can I tell you something, brothers and sisters? I think that one of the surest signs that Christianity in North America is in GENERAL DECLINE is the fact that all of the sudden the church is RESPLINTERING along ethnic, racial and political lines. Have you been watching that development? Listen, when two people with the same theology are dividing from one another over POLITICS – then the Spirit has clearly left the building.

Because when the Spirit falls – you see the exact opposite. You see people sitting together and loving one another who would never interact in any other context. That's the point that Luke is making here. He is showing us that in the FILLED and SUBSEQUENTLY FILLED CHRISTIAN CHURCH – all of the sudden rich and poor people – which was the most significant divide in the ancient world – are beginning to think of each other as family.

Because in a family, all the money goes into the common pot. As a dad I understand this very well. Sometimes I look at my paycheque and then I look at my budget and I notice how little of my income is actually spent meeting MY NEEDS. It goes to glasses for this child, tuition for that child, food for the family as a WHOLE – that's what it means to be a dad – that what it means to be a parent – that's what it means to be a family. And that's what is going on in this story.

“There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.” (Acts 4:34–35 ESV)

That expression: “they laid it at the apostles' feet” implies formal transfer into the common purse that was overseen by the Apostles for the common good. Everybody's needs were everybody's concern now – that's something you only see in a Spirit filled – and subsequently filled – Christian church.

And of course they were only able to meet all of these needs because of the incredible generosity of the members. That's the third thing that Luke is drawing our attention to:

3. Remarkable generosity

We see that in verses 34-35:

for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus,³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:34–37 ESV)

We're told here that Barnabas sold a field that belonged to him – because there was a need in the church that he had the ability to meet. Luke tells us that Barnabas was a Levite – but obviously that doesn't matter anymore. All that matters now is that Barnabas is a Christian. He's not asking what tribe anyone is from, he's just asking who belongs to Christ – and if there is a need in the family of believers then Barnabas is happy to release a piece of his own personal property so as to meet that need.

Now, to be clear, no one was being forced to do this. In fact, in fact, in the follow up story, which we'll get into after the Christmas break, Peter says explicitly to Ananias about the property that he sold:

“While it remained unsold, **did it not remain your own?** And after it was sold, **was it not at your disposal?** (Acts 5:4 ESV)

Ananias was trying to DECEITFULLY MIMIC the gift made by Barnabas, but the point for our purposes here is that Peter makes it clear to Ananias that his property was his own. He can do with it whatever he wants. He is under no compulsion. The church has no interest in making AUTHORITARIAN CLAIMS upon the property of her members. Rather what we are seeing here is that when the Spirit falls – people want to give. When the Spirit falls, the values change. When

the Spirit falls your relationship with personal property changes. When the Spirit falls the church is your family and everybody's needs are your own.

Now, this passage doesn't tell us everything we'd like to know about the culture around giving in the early Christian church – these are snapshots, not creeds or epistles – all we're being told here is that when the Spirit falls, you might not even NEED a good THEOLOGY of giving. You certainly aren't going to need RULES about giving – because when the Spirit falls, people want to give. They give to the poor in the church as naturally as you give to the hungry children at your table. When I pay for groceries so that my kids can eat, my brain doesn't register that as an act of generosity – that's just me being a dad. I love those 5 kids more than I love myself. I'd feed them with my last 10 dollars and die of starvation with a smile on my face. That is not an act of discipline or charity – that is an instinct born of love.

And that's what is happening in this story.

Now are there principles around giving?

Sure.

And we'll get into those – but that's not what this text is about. This text is telling us that the principles don't matter when the Spirit falls because love goes so much further than the law.

When the Spirit falls LOVE becomes the rule, the instinct, the principle and the guide – thanks be to God!

Transition (Don't make this into a PP heading – this for me☺)

Alright – that's the essence of this picture. We've got three areas in the life of the church that take a quantum leap forward when they are subsequently filled with the Holy Spirit of God.

So what's our application?

What's your take home?

What's the implied imperative in this passage?

You see, that's why I wanted you to have your Bibles open in front of you today – because I want you to see the sequence in this story. I think if we don't see the sequence – if we don't see verse 31 before we read verses 32-37; if we don't remember Pastor Rob's sermon before we hear Pastor Paul's sermon, then I think we make a giant mess of this passage. I think if we just read verses 32-37, without paying attention to the wider context, we are going to think that this passage is telling us that if we preach powerfully and if we commit to unity and if we give generously, then the Spirit will fall.

But in addition to being a heresy, that is 100% NOT what happened in this story.

In this story, the Spirit fell FIRST and the FRUIT that we've been talking about was the RESULT of that further FILLING. So to get the correct application we actually have to broaden out our perspective. We have to ask the logically and sequentially prior question that this entire narrative suggests and that question is:

What Positions A Church To Receive Further Outpourings Of The Spirit?

Because THAT is the critical element in this story. That's why they were such a good looking church! The Spirit FELL and then the beauty and the power and the goodness happened – so how do we get that? Because you can't just DRUM THAT UP. You can't just yell at people and say: "Share the Gospel better! Make more converts!! Be more effective in gossiping the Gospel!" And you can't make fellowship happen, just by putting it on the calendar or sticking in the budget. And you can't make generosity happen just by showing videos of poor kids in Africa or by making up rules for how much, how often and who. None of that STUFF will get us there. Only

the Spirit of God will get us there. So how do we get more of that? How do we position ourselves for MORE of the Holy Spirit of God?

And for the theologically cautious among us – let me just remind you that it is not wrong for us to be asking that. It is not wrong for us to be wanting that! The Apostle Paul told his people to: “earnestly desire the spiritual gifts” (1 Corinthians 14:1 ESV), so there is SOLID WARRANT for us to be having this conversation today.

Now, I want to be clear, I understand, and I hope you understand, that we can't MAKE GOD pour out the Spirit, but maybe this story is suggesting a faithful path of pursuit for the Spirit-hungry people to be walking on. So with your Bibles open on your laps, let's just see if we can ZOOM OUT so as to backwards engineer how THIS CHURCH in Acts 4 – positioned ITSELF to receive a further filling of the Spirit.

What was unique about the position and posture of this church?

Well, I think the first thing we would want to remark upon is their overall health as a congregation.

1. Health

Flip back in your Bibles to Acts 2:42-47. We studied this passage about a month ago and we referred to it as a picture of a healthy church. I won't read it again, but I'll pick out a couple of highlights – they were hungry for the Word of the Lord – verse 42. They were beginning to think of the church as their family – verse 42 again. The Holy Spirit was alive and active among them – verse 43. They were regular in their spiritual devotion – verses 42 and 46. They were active in reaching out and folding in new converts – verse 47. That sounds for all the world like a very healthy church. The kind of church that one imagines God would be very happy to grow and bless.

There is an old saying: it is hard for God to bless a sinful people.

That's kind of the THEME of the entire Old Testament – and when you flip it on its head it is kind of the theme of this entire narrative that we've been reading for the last several weeks.

They were a healthy church – and as the story goes on we see that they were a faithful church.

2. Faithfulness

Pastor Matt made this point so beautifully in his sermon on Acts 3 – do you remember that? He said in his sermon:

“It is interesting that the FIREWORKS of Pentecost were followed by the ORDINARY routine of daily prayer. The INCREDIBLE event of Pentecost was followed by the FORMATIVE work of prayer.”²

Isn't that good? The church understood that FIREWORKS and FAITHFULNESS are intimately connected. The one should lead to the other and the other, often, leads back to the first. Think back to where this story started. We are at the end of a narrative that began in Acts 3:1 – remember, Peter and John heal the lame guy, the whole city is in an uproar, the Apostles get arrested, they are thrown in jail, Peter preaches to the Sanhedrin, the Gospel of Jesus is officially banned, the church calls an impromptu prayer meeting – and THEN the Spirit fell. It all goes back to Acts 3 verse 1 – and do you remember what they were doing in Acts 3 verse 1? The text says:

“Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour.” (Acts 3:1 ESV)

They were on their way to prayer meeting! The FIREWORKS trace back to the faithfulness. The REVOLUTION flowed out of their routine. You can't just do a rain dance and call down the

² Pastor Matt Stanton, *A Sign And A Sermon*, November 13th, 2022.

Spirit of God; that's paganism. The Spirit blows where he will – but as this story reminds us, he tends to blow in the direction of faithfulness.

The third thing we see here as we zoom out and consider this story as a whole is their:

3. Boldness

When the crowd gathered to find out what had happened to that lame brother in Acts 3 Peter spoke the truth and he pulled no punches; he said:

“you denied the Holy and Righteous One, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead.” (Acts 3:14–15 ESV)

That's not a very seeker sensitive sermon, is it? You denied God and killed your Messiah. That's the truth, Peter says, now what are you going to do about it?

Telling that truth is what got Peter and John arrested.

They were not arrested for being jerks. They were not arrested because of their political views. They were not arrested for being bad citizens. They were arrested for telling people the truth about Jesus. They were arrested for Holy boldness.

I find that interesting – because BOLDNESS in this story is both a cause and a result. Meaning, it does seem as if their boldness in chapter 3 is part of what was pleasing to the Lord such that he blesses them in chapter 4 – and the blessing he gives them in chapter 4 was, at least in part, further BOLDNESS. So one gets the impression that BOLDNESS matters. It is what God wants and it is what God gives.

And then the fourth thing we see in this narrative is, of course, the church at prayer.

4. Prayer

That was the message Pastor Rob preached last Sunday. How did the church in Acts 4 respond to persecution? Did they protest? Did they get angry? Did they go on a rampage?

No.

They committed themselves to corporate prayer. Acts 4:31:

“And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 4:31 ESV)

Are you seeing that brothers and sisters? This story is NOT SAYING – be generous, build community, preach powerfully – and then the Holy Spirit will fall. Rather it is saying, pursue health, be faithful, speak boldly, pray fervently – and should the Spirit fall expect to see EVER MORE powerful preaching, boundary breaking community and jaw dropping generosity – thanks be to God!

Let me pray for us.

“Our heavenly Father, we come to you now in need of further grace and desperate for subsequent filling. We want the church that only you can give. Spirit of the living God fall fresh on us today! Renew our strength, empower our proclamation, deepen our fellowship and alter our perspective. Make us new. Build us up. And send us out, O God we ask in Jesus’ name; amen.”