

Acts 4:32-5:11 (Part I)

Introduction

In Acts chapter 2, we heard Peter's "Pentecost sermon" and saw the response of the people as they received Peter's word about Jesus the Messiah and were baptized—"and that day there were added about three thousand souls" (2:41). The pouring out of the eschatological Spirit of Christ (the Messiah) has now created a brand-new eschatological (end-times) people—the "true" "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16; cf. the necessity of a replacement for Judas to bring the number of the apostles back to twelve as the number representing the new Israel; 1:15-26). So Luke concludes his "Pentecost account" in chapter 2 by giving us this summary description life in this "end-times" community. It will be important to keep this summary description in mind.

- Acts 2:43–47 — And fear came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were dividing them up with all, as anyone might have need. And daily devoting themselves with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number daily those who were being saved.

In chapter 3, we continue to see in Luke's account of the healing of the lame man—and in Peter's sermon in response to the amazement of the people—the reality that the promised eschatological age has now arrived in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Just like Peter did in his first "Pentecost sermon," so now he calls the people to repent and turn to Jesus as the promised Messiah. Peter warns his Jewish audience that if they refuse to "listen" to Jesus, the prophet "like Moses," then they will find themselves utterly cut off from God's "true," New Covenant Israel (Acts 3:22-23; cf. the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70).

Luke then describes how: "many of those who had heard the message believed, and the number of the men came to be about five thousand" (Acts 4:4). We remember that Luke's emphasis on numbers is an emphasis on the growth of a new and visibly identifiable covenant people—a separate and distinct people who have repented and been baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. These are no longer a "hidden" remnant within the covenant people, but rather they are, themselves, the growing, New Covenant people of God—a people that can be numbered and counted. It's in contrast to this "new Israel" that we hear Peter say in the very next verse: "Now it happened that on the next day, *their* [autos] rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem..." (Acts 4:5). Luke is continually highlighting and developing this distinction—and also the continuity—between the Old Covenant Israel marked only in the flesh and now the New Covenant Israel created in the Spirit. In fact, it's the leadership of the *Old Covenant Israel* who, in Acts 4, arrested and placed on trial the leadership of the *New Covenant Israel*.

We saw last week how, having been commanded not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus, Peter and John were released after being further threatened. And then Luke says: "So when they

were released, they went to *their own* [people; *tous idiots*]... (4:23).” Again, we see the distinction and the contrast.

After Peter and John had reported to “their own people,” they all lifted their voice to God and prayed that God would grant them the courage and boldness to continue doing the very thing that they knew would result in suffering, and that could even result, for some of them, in death. It’s immediately after this initial confrontation with the leadership of the Old Covenant Israel and the threat of further suffering and persecution that Luke gives us again a summary description of life in the “end-times,” New Covenant Israel.

I. Acts 4:32–35 — And the **plethos** of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and not one was saying that any of his possessions was his own, but, for **them** [*autois*], everything was common. And with great power the apostles were bearing witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon **them all** [*pantas autous*]. For there was not a needy person **among them** [*en autois*], for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.

Did you notice that this summary description is, in many ways, a duplicate of the summary description that we read earlier at the end of the Pentecost account? I took this “duplicate” passage into account when I preached the parallel passage in Acts 2. The only question I want to ask now is why Luke repeats here (in part, verbatim) what he already said in chapter two. Why does Luke choose to re-emphasize the realities of life in this New Covenant Israel immediately following this first sign that the disciples will be ostracized and even persecuted by their Jewish countrymen. Can we see the answer in the asking of the question?

For those being “disowned” by their own countrymen, and particularly by those who once constituted God’s covenant people, it was essential to grasp both the reality of, and the awesome privilege of belonging to, the eschatological, New Covenant Israel — the true “Israel of God.” It was essential that they be deeply and joyfully convinced of this reality—that it was not they who were being cut off from “Israel” (the “people of God”), but rather the unbelieving Jews who were being cut off from the true “Israel.” While they were being ostracized and even persecuted by the Old Covenant Israel (the Israel to which they had once belonged and in which they had once found a great part of their identity), they could now boast and glory in the privilege of belonging to this new Israel — the “end times” community of the Messiah’s seed and therefore the true seed of Abraham (cf. Rom. 9:6-8). Obviously, this isn’t just about an ethnic or national or cultural sense of identity and belonging. This is about something far greater and far more wonderful. So Luke begins his duplicate “summary description” in verse 32:

II. Acts 4:32a — “And the plethos of those who believed were of one heart and soul...”

The word, *plethos*, is elsewhere almost *always* translated “multitude” (the verbal form is *plethyno*: “to multiply/increase”). So we could translate here: “The multitude of those who believed...” In and of itself, there’s nothing “special” about this word (cf. Acts 2:6; 5:16; 14:4; 19:9; 28:3; 21:36; 25:24). But in the present context, we can hear this word carrying redemptive-historical weight. God said to Abraham in Genesis chapters 17 and 22:

- Genesis 17:1–4; 22:7 (LES; Exod. 32:13; Deut. 1:10; 10:22; Heb. 11:12) — “I will establish my covenant between me and between you, and I will **multiply [plethyno]** you exceedingly... behold, my covenant is with you, and you will be a father of a **multitude [plethos]** of nations... **multiplying [plethyno]**, I will **multiply [plethyno]** your offspring like the stars of heaven and like the sand from the shore of the sea...”

In Genesis 26, God said to Isaac:

- Genesis 26:4, 24 (LES) — “I will **multiply [plethyno]** your offspring like the stars of the heaven... I am the God of Abraham, your father. Do not fear, for I am with you, and I will bless you, and I will **multiply [plethyno]** your offspring because of Abraham, your father.”

In Genesis chapters 32 and 35, we learn that God said to Jacob:

- Genesis 32:12; 35:11 (LES; cf. 48:4, 16, 19) — “I will make your offspring like the sand of the sea, which will not be counted because of the **multitude [plethos]** of it... I am your God. Increase and **be multiplied [plethyno]**.”

We see this word especially emphasized in Exodus chapter one:

- Exodus 1:6–10 (LES; cf. Deut. 26:5; Acts 7:17) — The descendants of Israel increased and **multiplied [plethyno]** and became numerous and grew strong, exceedingly much, and the land was **filled [plethyno]** with them. Then a different king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, “Look, the offspring of the children of Israel are a great **multitude [plethos]**, and they are mightier than we. Come, therefore, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they **multiply [plethyno]**...”

If, in Exodus 1, Moses was emphasizing the fulfillment of God’s promise in the multiplication of the seed of Abraham “according to the flesh” (cf. Rom. 9:6-8), here in Acts we can hear Luke emphasizing the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise in the multiplication of the true, spiritual seed of Abraham (“Now the multitude of those who believed...”). In Acts 5, Luke will write:

- Acts 5:14 (cf. 14:1; 17:4) — And more than ever believers in the Lord were added to their number, **multitudes [plethos]** of men and women...

And in Acts 9:

- Acts 9:31 — So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria was having peace, being built up. And going on in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it continued to **multiply [plethyno]**.

The implication of this word (*plethos*) in Acts 4 is not just the increasing number of the disciples, but the identity of these disciples as the promised seed of Abraham. Today, we are “the multitude”!

While *plethos* is usually translated “multitude” (with an emphasis on large numbers in “a casual non-membership group of people” [Louw-Nida]), at times it can also be translated “congregation” or “assembly” with the emphasis being on a defined group with a defined membership (cf. Exod. 12:6 [LES]; 2 Mac. 11:16; Lk. 23:1; Acts 23:7; 25:24). So Luke writes in Acts 6:

- Acts 6:1–2, 5, 7 — Now in those days, while the disciples were **multiplying** [*plethyno*] in number, there was grumbling from the Hellenists against the Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. So the twelve summoned the **congregation** [*plethos*; **multitude?**; **the ESV translates “full number”**] *of the disciples* and said, “It is not pleasing to God for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables... And this word pleased the *whole* [*pas*] **congregation** [*plethos*; **multitude?**]... And the word of God kept on spreading, and the number of the disciples continued to **multiply** [*plethyno*] greatly in Jerusalem.

And then in Acts 15:

- Acts 15:30 — [T]hey went down to Antioch; and having **gathered** the **congregation** [*plethos*; **the multitude?**] together, they delivered the letter.

The immediate context shows that the emphasis is on the defined membership of a New Covenant Israel: “the **congregation** *of those who believed*.” The larger context of Acts and the context of God’s covenant indicates that Luke’s emphasis is also on the related theme of the numerous seed promised to Abraham as these disciples are now following in the steps of the faith that Abraham had (cf. Rom. 4:12, 16): “the **multitude** *of those who believed*.”

Once again, Luke is emphasizing (or at least assuming) redemptive-historical continuity and fulfillment as a way of emphasizing at the same time the real distinction between the obsolete *Old Covenant Israel* marked only in the flesh and now the eschatological *New Covenant Israel* created in the Spirit. If the disciples are going to be ostracized and even persecuted by the Old Covenant Israel, then they can—and they must—boast and glory in the fact that through faith in the promised Messiah, they belong now to the end-times, New Covenant “congregation” as the true “multiplied” seed of Abraham. Indeed, at the end of this section in Acts, Luke will conclude:

III. Acts 5:11 — And great fear came over the whole church [*holos ekklesia*], and over all who heard these things.

This is the first time that Luke uses the word *ekklesia* (“church”). Have you ever wondered how “the church” got its name? Have you ever wondered how “this” came to be called “the church”? Well, therein lies a “problem.”

“Etymologists generally agree that the English word church is derived from the Middle English and Old English forms [*circe* or *cyrce*], which in turn were derived from other Germanic/Indo-European languages [the Dutch *kerk* and German *kirche*]. Ultimately, the etymology of the word church is a transliteration... of the Greek adjective *kuriakos*, which means of (or belonging to) the Lord. The Greek word *kuriakos* is found [only] two times [in the New Testament].”

- 1 Corinthians 11:20 — Therefore when you meet together in the same place, it is not to eat the **Lord's** [*kuriakos*] Supper...
- Revelation 1:10 — I was in the Spirit on the **Lord's** [*kuriakos*] day...

“The Greek word *kuriakos* in [these verses]... is not a noun signifying the body of Christ, but an adjective identifying “the *Lord's* supper” and “the *Lord's* day” [contrast: “the *church's* supper” and “the *church's* day”]. [The *noun*, church, then, is the transliteration of a Greek *adjective* that means “of the Lord”—an adjective that appears only two times in the New Testament (and never in the Greek Old Testament), and that has nothing whatsoever to do with the meanings that we generally associate with the word church.] [And yet] when[ever] [we] encounter the word church in [our] English translations of the New Testament, the Greek word behind it is *not* the adjective *kuriakos* (which it transliterates) but rather the Greek noun *ekklesia*, which occurs 114 times in the... New Testament.” (<https://www.larryoverton.com/my-faith/articles/the-origin-of-the-word-church-part-i/>)

Are you seeing the “problem”? Instead of transliterating *ekklesia* (cf. ecclesiology/ecclesiastical/ecclesial) or even translating the meaning of *ekklesia* (cf. assembly), “church” is the transliteration of a Greek word that has absolutely nothing to do with “*ekklesia*”—the word that it “translates.” Basically, “church” is an arbitrarily invented word. But is this really a “problem”? At one level, no. So long as we assign to the English word “church” all the rich meaning that the Greek word *ekklesia* comes to have in the New Testament, then “church” can do just fine as an arbitrarily assigned name for this New Covenant community of God’s people. Given the history of the word, “church,” in our English language and specifically in our English Bibles, “church” has come to be a beautiful word for us English-speaking people—a word that we love. Nevertheless, at another level, the word, “church,” is a very real—and even a very serious—problem which we have to work to overcome.

The problem is that when we hear the word, “church,” we think only “New Testament” because we never see the word “church” in our English Old Testaments. But the case would have been entirely different for the Greek speaking Jewish Christians. For them, *ekklesia* (“church”) was everywhere in their Greek “Old Testament.” In fact, even if they could read the “Old Testament” in the original Hebrew, they still would have seen the *ekklesia* everywhere in the “Old” Testament because “*ekklesia*” (assembly) simply translates the meaning of the Hebrew word, *qahal* (assembly; whereas “church” doesn’t translate the meaning of any Greek or Hebrew word). But let’s take one step back for a moment.

In the Old Testament, there were two main Hebrew words that were used to refer to the people of Israel as a community in covenant together with God. The first word was *edah* (the “congregation”) and this Hebrew word was translated in the Jewish Christians’ Greek “Old Testament” with *synagoge* (the “congregation”). If the New Covenant Israel was to be seen as the fulfillment of Old Covenant Israel, then “*synagoge*” (or the transliterated “synagogue”) could have been the perfect name for it. We “could” have been called “the synagogue” rather than “the church.” At one level, this would have made a lot more sense. The only problem is that this word had already come to be used (beginning sometime in the post-exilic period) by the Jews for their “synagogue” worship. While the first Jewish Christians were found in the synagogues (Acts 9:2; 22:19; 26:11), they were ultimately ostracized and “put out” of the synagogue (Jn. 16:2) as the

synagogue came to be one of the fiercest enemies of Christianity (“synagogue of Satan,” Rev. 2:9; 3:9; “they will... flog you in their synagogues,” Mat. 10:17; cf. 23:34). Obviously, then, *synagoge* (or “synagogue”), just wouldn’t have worked as a name for the eschatological, New Covenant Israel. So, is there any other available “Old Testament” word that would still reflect the reality that this New Covenant Israel is the fulfillment of Old Covenant Israel? What are we going to *call* this new reality?

The second Hebrew word that was used to refer to the people of Israel as a community in covenant together with God was *qahal* (the “assembly”), and this word was translated in the Jewish Christian’s Greek “Old Testament” with *ekklesia* (the “assembly”; [60x’s]). So the first Jewish Christians would have read in their Greek “Old Testament” about “the *ekklesia*/assembly (“church”) of the Lord” (cf. Acts 7:38).

- Deuteronomy 23:3 (23:1, 8; 1 Chron. 28:8; Mic. 2:5; cf. Lam. 1:10; Acts 7:38) — Neither Ammonite nor Moabite shall enter into **the *ekklesia*/assembly [“church”] of the Lord**; even as far as the tenth generation, he shall not enter into **the *ekklesia*/assembly [“church”] of the Lord...**

They would have read about “the *ekklesia*/assembly (“church”) of Israel.”

- 1 Kings 8:14, 22 (Josh. 9:8; 1 Kings 8:14, 22, 55; 1 Chron. 13:2; 2 Chron. 6:3, 12, 13; cf. 1 Sam. 17:47; 1 Kings 8:65 1 Chron. 13:4; 28:2; 29:1, 10, 20; 2 Chron. 1:3, 5; 2 Chron. 7:8; 10:3; 28:14) — The king turned his face, and the king blessed all Israel. All **the *ekklesia*/assembly [“church”] of Israel** stood... Solomon stood up in front of the altar of the Lord before all **the *ekklesia*/assembly [“church”] of Israel** and spread out his hands to heaven...

Ekklesia (“church”) was the word used in the Jewish Christians’ Greek “Old Testament” especially for the religious “assembly” of Israel. So Moses writes in Deuteronomy:

- Deuteronomy 9:10 (cf. 4:10; 18:16) — And the Lord gave me the two tablets of stone written by the finger of God, and on them he wrote all the words that the Lord spoke to you at the mountain, **the day of [the] *ekklesia*/assembly [“church”]**.

And the psalmist writes:

- Psalm 21:23, 26 — I will set out in detail your name to my brothers. In the midst of **the *ekklesia*/assembly [“church”]** I will sing of you... From you is my praise in **the great *ekklesia*/assembly [“church”]**. I will render my prayers before those who fear him.

(Cf. Deut. 31:30; Judg. 20:2; Judg. 21:5, 8; 2 Chron. 20:5, 14; 23:3; 29:23, 28, 31-32; 30:2, 4, 13, 17, 23-25; Ps. [LXX numbering] 21:23, 26; 25:12; 34:18; 39:10; 67:27; 106:32; 149:1)

The Old Testament word, “*ekklesia*,” then (or the Hebrew *qahal* translated into Greek), was the word that came to be used throughout the New Testament for the New Covenant Israel as the fulfillment of Old Covenant Israel. The New Testament *ekklesia*/assembly (“church”) is the

fulfillment of the Old Testament *ekklesia*/assembly (“church”). However, for us this reality literally gets “lost in translation.” If I were to say that the New Testament church is the fulfillment of the Old Testament church, you might say: That’s impossible because there is no church in the Old Testament. And therein lies the very serious problem with the English word “church.” It hides the redemptive-historical relationship and continuity between the old and the new—between the Old Covenant Israel and the New Covenant Israel.

But for all this continuity between the old and the new, there’s also a fundamental *discontinuity*. After all, the one *ekklesia* (“church”) is “old” (even obsolete), and the other *ekklesia* (“church”) is “new”! *Ekklesia* “church” in the New Testament, is invested with a richer, deeper, and fuller eschatological weight of meaning. So, in Matthew chapter 16 Jesus said to Peter:

- Matthew 16:18 — “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My *ekklesia*/assembly [“church”]; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”

What’s new here is not the word, *ekklesia*, or even the concept of “the *ekklesia*”—as if that word, of what it stands for, just came out of nowhere. It’s not at all as if Jesus was inventing a new word or idea. As a reference to the people of Israel as a community in covenant together with God, *ekklesia* had already appeared some 60 times in the Jewish Christians’ Greek “Old Testament.” What’s new here is Jesus’ expression, “**My** *ekklesia*/assembly [**My** church]”: “...upon this rock **I** will build **My** *ekklesia* /assembly [**My** church].” What Jesus is going to build is His own Messianic *ekklesia*/assembly (“church”), which will be the fulfillment, and therefore ultimately the “replacement,” of the Old Covenant *ekklesia*/assembly (“church”). What does Jesus say?—“You are Peter [*petros*], and upon this rock [*petra*] [upon you as one of the twelve apostles (cf. the twelve tribes of Israel)] I will build My *ekklesia*/assembly [“church”]; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” This New Covenant *ekklesia* (“church”), then, will be the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:12; Col. 1:18, 24), the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:25-28; Rev. 21:2, 9), and the temple whose foundation and cornerstone is Christ (1 Cor. 3:10-17; Eph. 2:19-22). Do we see, now, in the midst of the continuity, the fundamental “newness?” Do we see how in the New Testament, the “old” word “*ekklesia*/assembly” (“church”) is invested with a richer, deeper, and fuller, eschatological weight of meaning?

Conclusion

When Luke refers for the very first time to the “*ekklesia*/assembly [‘church’]” in Acts 5:11, we feel the redemptive-historical weight and glory of this word. It’s only three verses later that Luke writes:

- Acts 5:14 — And more than ever believers in the Lord were added to their number, **multitudes** [*plethos*] of men and women...

And how did Luke begin this section?—He began by referring to “the multitude (the *plethos*) of those who believed” (4:32).

For those being ostracized and disowned by their own countrymen, and particularly by those who once constituted God’s covenant people, it was essential to grasp both the reality of, and the

awesome privilege of belonging to, the eschatological, New Covenant Israel — the true “Israel of God.” It was essential to understand, and to be deeply and joyfully convinced of this reality—that it was not they who were being cut off from “Israel” (the “people of God”), but rather the unbelieving Jews who were being cut off from the true “Israel.” Can you see how important the *ekklesia*/assembly/church was to these first Jewish Christians? And why was it so important to them? Because they understood that it was only within the church (the *ekklesia*) that the blessings of salvation in covenant with God were to be found. It is against *the church* that the gates of Hades will not prevail. (This is different from saying that salvation is only found in the hierarchy and sacramentalism of the Roman Catholic church.) They understood that belonging to the Messiah (Jesus) was wrapped up with their belonging to the messianic *ekklesia*/assembly (the church) that He had promised to build, and against which He had promised the gates of Hades would never prevail.

Today, we can find it difficult to convince Christians of the importance of the church! But in fact, none of us will ever be committed and devoted to the church in the way that we should be until we can see the church in the full light of redemptive-history and the eschatological fulfillment that has come in Christ. Once we have seen this—and the more we learn to see this, then we’ll truly be able to “give to the church a place in our affections, prayers, and services above every institution of human origin.” Then we will boast and glory in the privilege of belonging to the Messiah’s *ekklesia* as the true seed of Abraham.

Only now are we ready to understand the Ananias and Sapphira story that’s sandwiched between Luke’s references to “the *plethos*/multitude of those who believed” (4:32; cf. 5:14) and “the whole *ekklesia*/church” (5:11). Only now are we in a position to see the rightness—and even the beauty and the goodness—of the story of Ananias and Sapphira, and “fear” as we ought to “fear.” Why did Ananias and Sapphira die? What is that powerful, and wonderful, and beautiful reality that their death (as sad and terrible as that was) points to in the church? This is what we’ll come back to next week.