

Acts 4:31-37

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God answers the believers' prayer for boldness by filling them with the Holy Spirit. The church is united in heart and soul. The apostles continue to preach and perform miracles. The wealthier believers sell their land and properties, then bring money to the apostles to dole out to the neediest among them. One of these generous men was called Barnabas.

Amazingly, after the disciples and apostles *had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken*. God responds immediately by sending some kind of earthquake to show He had heard them, *and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness*. The disciples and apostles had prayed for confidence in the face of the threats they were receiving, and God answers their prayer right away by sending them *boldness*.

All believers receive the Holy Spirit when we first believe, being indwelt by the Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14; Galatians 5:17; 2 Corinthians 11:4). These believers had already received the Spirit, who had taken up residence within them. Possibly many of them could have experienced this on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). Therefore being *filled with the Holy Spirit* means something different from being indwelt by the Spirit as a permanent resident.

Being indwelt by the Holy Spirit is a permanent feature. But Ephesians 5 indicates that being filled with the Spirit is something that transpires when we meet together, so therefore would be something temporary:

“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.”
(Ephesians 5:18-19)

Since the opposing analogy in Ephesians 5 is to be drunk with wine (also temporary) it seems being filled with the Spirit is to be wholly “under the influence” of God in that moment. Just as alcohol can possess all our faculties, we can enter a time when God’s Spirit possesses all our faculties. The idea seems to be that when believers come together in one accord, they are filled with the Spirit. In this case the filling of the Spirit included beginning to speak the word of God with boldness as a manifestation.

The disciples in Acts were *gathered together*, as in Ephesians 5, and when they prayed together, they were *filled with the Spirit* at a point in time. The evidence of their filling was that they began to *speak the word of God with boldness*.

Luke concludes this chapter by summarizing how the church continued to minister and thrive, similar to the end of Acts 2: *And the Congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them.*

Having faced their first bout of persecution, the church is stronger than ever. Luke reports that *the Congregation* of believers were united. In the midst of everything that Satan is trying to do to destroy them, they unite with *one heart* and *one soul*.

They were so much this way that they did not claim *that anything belonging to them was his own*. This is interesting wording because there is an acknowledgment that each person continued to have things that belonged to them. At the same time, that person did not claim ownership, but rather considered all they owned to be property they stewarded for the benefit of everyone in the congregation.

How would this work practically? If everyone sold everything and gave it away, soon the entire group would be destitute. Rather, we will see that the congregation distributed to those in need. We know that biblically this would not be to support people who are lazy (2 Thessalonians 3:10). It may have been to support those who were being persecuted for their faith.

Peter and John do just what they promised the Sanhedrin they would do, in defiance of its commands against them (Acts 4:19-20), *giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus*. All of the *apostles, with great power*, persisted in teaching about Jesus's *resurrection*. It is not specified what *great power* the *apostles* were *giving testimony* with, but based on what Luke recorded in Acts it includes *great power* of speech and the boldness and confidence they had prayed for. Also, at the end of Acts 2, the apostles began performing miracles to attest to the truth of their preaching, so it's likely they continued to heal and cast out demons, which demonstrated that they were sent by God (Acts 2:43).

Due to the generosity of the believers and the apostles' teaching, *abundant grace was upon them all*. The Greek word translated as *grace* can also be translated "favor." Here, God continued to favor their actions, giving them boldness and success in winning more hearts over to belief in Jesus. The grace or favor God granted will lead to great persecution. But it is through this persecution that God's mission for the church will expand (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). It is also through this persecution that the disciples will gain their greatest reward (Romans 8:17b; Philippians 2:5-10).

It became important to the early church to take care of one another's practical needs: *For there was not a needy person among them, 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*.

Given what we have just witnessed, and what we will see in Acts 7, it seems likely that some Jewish believers experienced financial hardship as a result of coming to faith in Jesus. Some might have lost jobs, or been turned out of families. So the group of believers made sure that those who *had need* were aptly provided for. It is clear that this was not an obligatory wealth distribution program, because Peter makes clear that each person has full agency to decide for themselves what to do with their property (Acts 5:4). Rather, it was consistent with the biblical teaching regarding generosity, and God's love for those who are cheerful givers (2 Corinthians 9:7; 1 Timothy 6:18).

It is also clear that the *distribution* was based on *need*. The Apostle Paul (with whom Luke, the author of Acts, ministered) will tell the Thessalonian believers “For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to **eat**, either” (2 Thessalonians 3:10). This is consistent with the notion of caring for the poor from the Mosaic law, where the poor were allowed the dignity of working (Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22).

The wealthy, the *owners of land or houses* sold their property to make money, and then would *bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet*, entrusting the twelve to distribute these donations based on *need*, so that there would no longer be any poor or *needy person among the Congregation of believers*.

The believers have this unity that is so unique and so powerful, coming together as they see the apostles preaching the resurrection of Jesus through miracles and signs and wonders.

As a result of their hearts and their souls being united, the favor of God increases (*abundant grace*) toward them. The church is led by the Spirit to start sharing radically with each other. They give to whomever needed help, *each as any had need*.

This unified purpose and identity among the believers led them to tangible action. That they actually did something. It is the Holy Spirit leading them into this lifestyle of generosity and charity. The book of Acts is so-named because it is about the Acts of the apostles, but it could easily refer to the Acts of the Holy Spirit, because He is the Helper sent by God and Jesus to continue the work of salvation.

As the gospels were about the ministry of Jesus, the book of Acts is about the Holy Spirit’s ministry. We see Him move powerfully in this section. He removes from the believers any notion of wanting to hoard material wealth, and frees them up to give as they were seeking to live as servants. This would likely mean that for these who had been generous, their possessions did not control them. Because they were seeking to live as servants, they acted as stewards. When disciples live in stewardship, they do not consider their property or possessions as theirs, but as God’s. They are, therefore, not possessive. They do not hoard. They steward wisely, including being generous (1 Timothy 6:17-18).

They were following Jesus’s teaching, where He urged them to invest in eternal rewards, not temporary earthly gain:

“Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
(Luke 12:22-24)

Each believer can apply this admonition literally by “selling” their possessions to God, which results in no longer claiming that anything belonging to us is our own. When we become stewards, we no longer have anything to lose. But we also have everything to gain by being faithful stewards, as God rewards good stewardship (Matthew 25:21,23).

Luke, the author of Acts, gives an example of this charity by introducing *Barnabas*. an important figure in the early church: *Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

Barnabas goes on to become a great shepherd, missionary, and evangelist. He was a Levite, meaning he was born into the tribe of Levi, which was set apart by God to be priests and servants of the Temple in Israel (Deuteronomy 18:1-2). However he was of *Cyprian birth*, meaning he was born on Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean Sea, and a Roman province in those days. *Barnabas* brings Paul the Apostle into the fold of the church at Antioch, after the disciples in Jerusalem apparently declined to associate with him because of his former role in persecuting the church. But *Barnabas* advocated for Paul in front of the apostles (Acts 9:27).

Barnabas will join Paul on his first missionary journey, where they visit *Barnabas'* homeland of Cyprus (Acts 13:4). His conduct was so infectious that he is given a nickname by *the apostles*, no longer calling him *Joseph*, but *Barnabas*, which means *Son of Encouragement*. *Barnabas* was apparently someone who encouraged others, who served and spurred others to action. Our first encounter with him is that he *sold a tract of land* which he *owned* and *brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet*.

In the following chapter, a counter-example to *Barnabas'* generous spirit is revealed, concerning Ananias and Saphira. Though the early church was of *one heart and soul*, filled with *abundant grace* and incredible charity, sinfulness begins to threaten the unity of the *Congregation* from within, and God will deal with it definitively.

Biblical Text

31 And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness. 32 And the Congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all. 34 For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales 35 and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need. 36 Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), 37 and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.