

Chapter 11: One Heart, One Mind, One Body

Acts 4:32–37

That the church is the body of Christ, made up of many members, is a major theme within several of Paul's letters (Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 6:15; 12:12–27; Eph. 1:22–23; 2:16; 3:6; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:22–33; Col. 1:18, 24; 2:19; 3:15). In Acts 4:32–37, Luke does not explicitly invoke “body” imagery; however, he tells us that the “full number” of believers “were of one heart and soul,” thus depicting the church as many members united as one body together. This theme would fit a number of places in the Book of Acts, but following on the heels of the “boldness” (Acts 4:31) of the church, we see a picture of the church that is bold inwardly, just as much as they are outwardly. Here, we see that *the Holy Spirit unites the church in one heart, one mind, and one body*.

One Heart (Acts 4:32)

After the apostles were arrested—but ultimately released—for teaching and preaching the resurrection from the dead in Jesus (Acts 4:2), and after the church prayed to speak God's word with boldness (Acts 4:29–31), we might expect to hear a story about boldness in the *outreach* ministries of the early church. It is interesting, then, that the first thing we read after Luke's statement that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” focuses on bold living *within* the church: “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” (v. 32). The “full number” included at least 5,000 men and an unreported number of women and children (Acts 4:4), all of whom were united as those “who believed.”¹ In the previous passage, they had prayed with “one impulse” (ESV: “together”; Acts 4:24), but this unity has extended beyond their prayer meeting into the many needs that arose in the church.

Thus, Luke tells us that these believers “were of one heart and soul.” Within the wider context, we must see this “inward unity of minds” as the “root” of the “fruit” of generosity that we will read in the rest of the passage.² In other words, while much of the passage focuses on the generosity of the church as a whole, and the specific generosity of Barnabas (especially in contrast to Ananias and Sapphira), that generosity is the outflow of the unity that the church enjoys. The picture is of a single body, with one heart beating and one soul animating the energy, thoughts, and intentions of that body.³ Thus, as the feet of a body might run from danger that the eyes see, or as the hands of a

¹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 185–86.

² Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:190–91.

³ “As in a living body only one heart beats, and as it is animated by only one ψυχή [*psuchē*; ‘soul’], so it was true of this great body of believers. The Greek word for the heart designates the center of the personality, the seat of thought, feeling, and volition; in English the word heart connotes chiefly the feeling. The Greek ψυχή characterizes the soul in so far as it animates the body, it is the “life” of the body. Luke presents the fact that this

body might apply a bandage to a wound on the legs, the different members of the body do not see themselves here as separated or isolated. Rather, they see themselves as the individual members of a whole.

Out of this unity, then, “no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.” As we read this, we should be careful neither to read too much into it as though this were a prescriptive law for all ages, nor to explain away the challenging example of the early church. Polhill notes that the first expression retains some sense of ownership, so that the people did not insist on using their belongings for their own good alone. Perhaps a relevant analogy would be to the description of Jesus that appears in Philippians 2:6: “who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.” In other words, the eternal Son of God *possessed* the divine nature by his eternal preexistence. The significant thing, then, is not that he gave up the right to the privileges of his divine nature, but that he did not insist on exploiting them. By analogy, these believers followed the example of Christ: though the property remained theirs, they did not count their property a thing to be grasped for their own enjoyment and enrichment. The second expression, then, insists that what they had, they treated as common to all. Importantly, then, Polhill concludes that “Taken by itself, this [second expression] could refer to shared ownership; but in conjunction with the first expression, it also refers to a practice of freely sharing one’s goods with another.”⁴

The point here is not so much to establish some kind of socialism or communism, but to show the outworking of the internal sense of unity. The church went beyond warm feelings for one another, but they acted in ways that demonstrated their unity: “in vain do we boast of a right affection, unless there appear some testimony thereof in external offices.”⁵ If the church so freely met the needs of one another by sharing their belongings, how much more would they have shared a common unity with one another in all the other matters of the church? As Lenski writes, “In this regard the mother congregation of Christendom serves as a model for all time, a rebuke to all her daughters who followed heresies and errors and caused rents in the church, and a rebuke likewise to all members in any congregation that cause strife and disturbance; but a shining example for all congregations that hold in unity to the one faith and doctrine (2:42) and in one mind to the things that make for peace.”⁶

One Mind (Acts 4:33)

What Luke writes next stands out within this context, since it does not focus on meeting benevolent needs within the church: “And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all” (v. 33). Why, then, does Luke include this statement here? To begin, the unity of the church was the unity of “those who *believed*” (v. 32)—that is, a unity of faith built on the resurrection of Jesus. Furthermore, Calvin is

great outward body of the congregation had one living personality in it.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 186.)

⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 151.

⁵ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:191.

⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 187.

likely correct that Luke intends this statement as a synecdoche, where the part (the doctrine of the resurrection) stands for the whole (the entirety of the gospel of Jesus Christ).⁷ Indeed, there can be no resurrection if Jesus Christ had not been born, lived, and died on the cross. Further, we should note that their testimony was of the “resurrection of the *Lord* Jesus,” and the Book of Acts has associated the Lordship of Jesus with his ascension into heaven (e.g., Acts 2:36). So, we have here a summary statement of the entirety of the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus who reigns as Lord in heaven. *This* was the teaching that united the whole church. Thus, we see the work of the apostles to preach and teach in the middle of seeing the whole church rise up to meet the material needs of the believers in their midst.

The broader reason for including this statement here, then, is to reflect that the church’s attention had not drifted to merely material needs. The preaching and teaching of the resurrection of Christ remained central to all that they did; however, the meeting of material needs was an external marker that the gospel of Christ was transforming the whole church so that they all acted with one mind. Within this broad reason, then, Luke is anticipating the scene we will discover in Acts 6: “The apostles as early overseers of this community are at the center of its activity. As the operation grows in complexity and problems arise, a new arrangement for relief will surface (Acts 6:1–17). Such sociological flexibility is necessary to manage the community’s growth and commitment to each other.”⁸ When the day comes that the apostles can no longer manage the benevolence ministries of the church (see v. 35), they call new officers to take care of those details so that they can commit themselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. We see in this that the gospel remains the first priority of the church; however, we also see that the implications of the gospel that unite believers as one body in Christ flow as the necessary outworking of faith in the gospel of Jesus.

Polhill observes that these two verses (vv. 32–33) “are almost identical with 2:43–44, only in reverse order.”⁹ If so, then there may be a parallel between the “great grace” that was upon the whole church and the “many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles” (Acts 2:43). Yet, Bock is probably more accurate to acknowledge that miracles may have been part of what Luke had in view, but that “the ongoing character of the powerful witness [of the apostles about the resurrection of Jesus] is the more dominant point rather than miracles.”¹⁰

One Body (Acts 4:34–37)

Immediately after stating that the apostles were at work bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus, then, Luke returns to the theme of alleviating the needs of the church: “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 and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need” (vv. 34–35). The language of “not a needy person among them” echoes an Old Testament promise: “But there will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess—if only you will strictly obey the voice

⁷ Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 1:191.

⁸ Bock, *Acts*, 214.

⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, 151.

¹⁰ Bock, *Acts*, 214.

of the LORD your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today” (Deut. 15:4–5).¹¹

In v. 35, we see the explicit description of the role of the apostles in benevolence ministries, as the apostles are the ones who are managing the proceeds of the sales of property and belongings and distributing to those who had needs. Again, this will change when the details of administering these funds become too burdensome for the apostles to continue to manage without taking time away from prayer and the ministry of the word. We should also see in vv. 34–35 that we have a clarification of *how* the people considered all their goods in common: each person’s property remained his own, but they willingly and eagerly sold those properties to contribute the proceeds of those sales when necessary to meet the needs of those in the church. Polhill thus provides several reasons why we should not understand the example here as some kind of communistic society:

First, there was no transfer of ownership, no control of production or income, no requirement to surrender one’s property to the community. The voluntary nature of the Christian practice is evidenced by the consistent use of the iterative imperfect tense throughout vv. 34b–35. This is how they “used to” do it. They “would sell” their property and bring it to the apostles as needs arose.

Second is the example of Barnabas in vv. 36–37. His sale of property would hardly be a sterling example if surrender of property were obligatory.

Third, in the example of Ananias and Sapphira, Peter clarified for Ananias that his sin was in lying about his charity. The land remained his to do with as he pleased; he was under no obligation to give the proceeds to the church (5:4).

Fourth, the picture of the central fund for the widows in 6:1–6 is clearly not an apportioning of each one’s lot from a common fund but a charity fund for the needy.

Finally, there is the example of Mary in 12:12f. She still owned a home and had a maid. The Christians enjoyed the hospitality of her home. This was clearly no experiment in common ownership.¹²

This story is a call to sacrifice what we own for the good of others; it is not a call to obliterate the notion of private property altogether.

This, then, brings us to the example of Barnabas: “Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (vv. 36–37). Unlike the Levite in Jesus’ parable who refused to help the injured man on the road (leaving the job to a Samaritan who passed by; Luke 10:32), Luke holds up Barnabas as an “illustration” and an example to the early church about what generosity should look like—and especially as a stark contrast to the

¹¹ “The Christians saw themselves as the people of God of the final times (cf. 2:17), they were experiencing God’s blessing (4:33), and they were striving to realize the ideal of a people of God with no poor among them.” (Polhill, *Acts*, 152.)

¹² Polhill, *Acts*, 153.

example of Ananias and Sapphira in the next passage.¹³ Polhill also notes that “Luke had a way of taking characters who played a major role later in the book and introducing them early, but only briefly and in passing, as is the case with Barnabas here.”¹⁴ Thus, we are getting an early glimpse into the character of a man who will do much with Paul on missionary journeys.

Discussion Questions

1. What might we have expected to see following the description of the Holy-Spirit-filled “boldness” of the early church (Acts 4:31)? What kind of bold living do we see in v. 32? What do the biblical writers mean by “heart”? What do biblical writers mean by “soul”? What were the attitudes of the believers about their own personal possessions and property? How was their generosity an example of bold living after the example of Christ?
2. What do we see the apostles doing in v. 33? Where does the teaching and preaching of Jesus Christ as crucified, resurrected, and ascended as “Lord” fit in with the benevolent mercy ministries of the church? How are the apostles involved in the distribution of benevolent funds (vv. 35, 37)? How does the preaching ministry of the apostles relate to their benevolent ministries? Why must the apostles ultimately adapt their administration of benevolent funds (Acts 6:1–7)?
3. What is the result of the benevolent ministry of the church (v. 34)? How do we know that the members of the early church retained personal possession of their property? How do the members relate to their own personal property? How do the members relate to other members in need? What animates this concern for the other members of the body of Christ? How does this benevolence relate to the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus (v. 33)?
4. How do you relate to your own personal property? How do you relate to the body of Christ? How is Christ the Lord of your finances? Is the strength of your connection to the other members of the body of Christ as strong as what we see in the passage? If not, why do you think that is? How might you grow in your love for and commitment to meeting the needs of the body of Christ from this passage?

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles*, 190.

¹⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, 154.