

ACTS

OF THE APOSTLES

NOTES 16

ACTS 4:32–37

FORMER ADVENTIST FELLOWSHIP BIBLE STUDY

This chapter of Acts ends similarly to chapter 2: with a summary statement of how the believers “were of one heart and soul” and “all things were common property to them”. This idea of God’s people living united in heart and soul is not new in Acts, although the details may be different.

2 Chronicles 29-30 describes King Hezekiah restoring the temple service in Jerusalem early in his reign as king of Judah. The nation was already divided, with the ten northern tribes having become a separate nation with their own kings. Hezekiah realized that his people needed to return to God, and he cleansed the temple, restored the Levites and priests to their sacred service along with the sacrifices and temple service.

Chapter 30 describes Hezekiah deciding to celebrate Passover and inviting all Israel, the northern kingdom, to meet in Jerusalem to celebrate this feast which had not been observed for years. Hezekiah sent couriers throughout Judah and Israel, delivering the invitation. Verses 10-12 say, “So the couriers went from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh, and as far as Zebulun, but they laughed them to scorn and mocked them. However, some men of Asher, of Manasseh, and of Zebulun humbled themselves and came to Jerusalem. The hand of God was also on Judah to give them one heart to do what the king and the princes commanded by the word of the LORD.”

Many of the tribes refused to come, but others did. Hezekiah succeeded in partially uniting the people of Israel and Judah around the worship of God—a success that surpassed all military efforts. The people’s willingness to do what the king commanded with the authority of God’s word was a willingness that God worked in their hearts. Only God could humble human hearts enough for them to set aside their adversarial stance and meet their brothers with a unity of purpose. Those who would not humble their hearts mocked the couriers and refused to come.

Humility is possible only when God is allowed access to one’s heart, and people do not unite peacefully and fruitfully around any “cause” except the worship of God. Other causes may bring people together, but unless the goal is honoring God

and being there for His glory, competitiveness and self-advancement color the effort.

Ezekiel 11:19-20 records God’s promise that He would do a new thing in His people. The passage says, “And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God.”

The promise of the new covenant foretold that God would give His people “one heart”. This united heart would be the product of the “new spirit” He would put in them. God promised to remove the natural, unrepentant hearts people have from conception and replace those hard hearts with soft hearts that desire to obey and honor God. This new heart, therefore, would bring two things to God’s people: unity and mutual worship of God and the honoring of His will and word.

Only the Holy Spirit—the power of God—can effect “one heart” among anyone, even people from the same families. Only the Holy Spirit can excise one’s natural self-centeredness and cause people to care about another as for him or herself. Only the Holy Spirit makes a person desire to serve and honor God.

Paul also wrote about God’s people having one spirit in Philippians 1:27-28: “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.”

This passage states an amazing truth: when God’s people stand firm “in one spirit, with one mind” for the sake of the gospel, unafraid of those who oppose them, this unity is a sign of judgment on the opponents. When people are indwelt by God’s Spirit and are thus unified, both desiring and intentionally committing to live for the gospel and to work together by supporting and caring for one another in the work God prepared in advance for them to do, this unity is not “human”. It

is demonstrated in humanity, but it is a gift from God who indwells them. This divine unity and purpose of Christ's body terrifies and enrages those who are opposed to the gospel. They may rail against it and try to impugn God's people, but in reality this unity convicts them of their own lost state. They deeply sense that this unity is not human, and it triggers doubt and internal dissonance in the unbelievers.

The Holy Spirit in God's people uses the unity of those who are born again as a powerful sign of judgment and destruction to those who are resisting knowing truth.

POWER RECEIVED

Jesus had told His disciples not to leave Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon them. He promised that they would be His witnesses, that they would proclaim Him and His death, burial, and resurrection and call people to repentance and forgiveness in Jesus' name. They were going to witness first in Jerusalem—the center of Judaism and the very place where all the religious and civil authorities knew Jesus and what happened to Him. They would declare Jesus in the very place where He had been condemned just weeks before.

Luke 24:45-49 tells us that, before His ascension, Jesus taught His disciples the Scriptures—the Old Testament—and explained them, showing them how they had foretold His suffering, death, and resurrection on the third day. At the same time, He both promised them that they would be His witnesses, and He instructed them to stay in Jerusalem “until you are clothed with power from on high.”

Acts 1:8 continues the record Luke began in his gospel. Just before Jesus was taken up into heaven, He stood on the Mt. of Olives with his disciples and said to them, “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.”

Jesus gave them the instructions for what would happen next. They were to stay in Jerusalem and wait for the Holy Spirit. When He came, then they would begin in Jerusalem and preach the gospel, moving outward from Jerusalem into the whole land of Judea, then going into Samaria where the people were a syncretistic and racial mix of the dispersed northern tribes of Israelites and the indigenous Canaanites, and finally preaching the Lord Jesus to the whole earth. Gentiles would come to His light!

Interestingly, God chose Luke, a gentile, to write the account of the birth of the church in the book of Acts.

While the disciples were waiting for the Holy Spirit, they selected a replacement for the unfaithful Judas. The criteria to be an apostle were clearly articulated: “So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.”

In our passage in Acts 4, the apostles are now acting out the fulfillment of these last instructions and promises from the

Lord Jesus before He ascended. They waited for the Holy Spirit. They selected a twelfth apostle who had been with them during Jesus' ministry, who had witnessed everything from His baptism to His ascension. Mathias had followed Jesus, knew His teaching, and had seen the risen Christ.

Moreover, the apostles received the power of God in them and also His authority to speak the gospel with boldness, and from those first days of the formation of Christ's body, they did what He commissioned them to do. Without retreating or wavering, they gave testimony to the resurrection.

TESTIFYING TO THE RESURRECTION

It is significant that Acts tells us the disciples were giving powerful witness to the resurrection. The cross is the central act of atonement in human history, yet it is the resurrection that gave the disciples their life-changing witness. Many of us heard of the resurrection as a miracle that proves we'll be resurrected as well. Yet the true power of the resurrection was never made clear to us.

Romans 5:9-11 says, “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

This verse states that Christ's death reconciled us to God, but it clearly says “shall we be saved by his life”. The resurrection paid for human sin; the resurrection, however, is what eternally undid the curse of death. By rising from death, Jesus returned to mankind the gift of Life—of being spiritually born again and made alive with the literal presence and life of God.

Romans 6:4 says, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

This verse is not stating that baptism is what changes our spiritual nature, but it is stating that baptism is the ritual by which we act out our death to our natural condition (spiritual death—Eph. 1:1-3) and our spiritual resurrection into “newness of life”, or the new birth. The comparison in this verse is that we are brought to walk in newness of life just as Christ was raised from the dead by God's glory.

Jesus' resurrection was not just a physical phenomenon, a dead body being made able to breathe again. He received God's glory, God's power and life—the power that was already in Him as the second person of the Trinity—and this eternal life and power of God not only was the source of Jesus' spiritual life and righteousness but also brought His dead body to life.

Romans 8:1-2 explains further: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of

the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”

When we receive Christ and are in Him, there is no more condemnation for us. We are born condemned (Jn. 3:18); we are made alive by the eternal life of Jesus and credited with His eternal righteousness. Because we have been covered by Jesus and credited with His own personal perfection, we have been set free from the law of sin and death.

The law of sin and death is the truth God told Adam in the garden: if he sinned, he would die. Death is the curse we all inherit from Adam; we are born into Adam’s sin and spiritual death; in Christ, we are transferred out of death into God’s kingdom of His Son (Col 1:13). When we are in Christ Jesus, the “law of the Spirit of life” sets us free from our natural situation of being born under the law of sin and death. We receive Life—the Lord Jesus Himself, indwelt by His Spirit, and He Himself brings our spirits to life and sets us free from ourselves: our natural state of spiritual death.

Not only are we spiritually set free and credited in God’s eyes with the very righteousness and perfection of the Lord Jesus, but we receive the ability to surrender to Him our “lusts of the flesh”, our mortal bodies which still have sin genetically and habitually programmed into us. We now have the ability to surrender our temptations and urges to Him before we act on them.

Romans 8:11 says, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.”

Once we are made alive by the Spirit, we begin to experience His power changing our desires and giving us the ability to surrender our habits and temptations to Him. We begin to experience the power of His life in our bodies. His resurrection, which broke the natural curse of death on humanity, breaks the curse of death on our spirits as well as on our bodies, making us able to experience divine power releasing us from the sins and addictions and self-destructive habits that bound us absolutely. Our life from the Spirit because of Jesus’ resurrection releases us from the otherwise unavoidable power of our own bodies’ desires for sin and self-soothing.

Jesus’ resurrection returns life to humanity, and when we receive the Lord Jesus and are hidden in Him, we no longer have any legitimate claim against us. The Lord Jesus is now interceding for us, and no one, not Satan, not any other human—not even God—will condemn us. God will not entertain any claims against us. Moreover, not only are we free from blame because of Jesus, but also we are eternally secure in His love. Nothing at all—no power in heaven or on earth or in any part of creation can ever accuse us and separate us from God’s love which we receive in Christ Jesus. The Father’s love for His Son Jesus is the Father’s love for us when we are in Jesus (Rom. 8:34-39).

The writer of Hebrews explains this phenomenon further by elaborating on the nature and identity of the Lord Jesus. Jesus is qualified to intercede eternally for us, forever guaranteeing

our connection with God’s love and life, because He is different from earthly priests who became priests on the basis of their inheritance as sons of Levi. Jesus, on the other hand, had a different Source of life. As a man, He nevertheless possessed “an indestructible life”: “For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. This becomes even more evident when another priest arises in the likeness of Melchizedek, who has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of an indestructible life” (Heb. 7:14-16).

This chapter of Hebrews continues to explain further: “The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself” (Heb. 7:23-27).

He alone is qualified to intercede for us not because He managed as a sinful man, to overcome sin and keep the law, but because He Himself “lives forever” and “continues forever”. There never was a time, even during His time on earth when He was incarnated into a mortal body, when death had any power over Him. His death on the cross was not a murder, an event of someone robbing Him of life—or even the natural consequence of His being human, possessing a mortal body.

His innate Life trumped the death of His body. He was alive from conception, having been conceived by the Holy Spirit. Even as a man there was never any danger that He would not succeed in His mission or fail to complete the work the Father sent Him to do. His mortal flesh was never in danger of decay (Psalm 16:10) because His life was the eternal, spiritual life of God which governs not only the human spirit but also the human body.

Thus, when the disciples preached the resurrection with power, they were not ignoring the cross—but they were preaching the consequences of the cross. The Lord Jesus’ death as a man paid the price for human sin—a price that only a human could pay. Angels could not pay for human sin. Only humans are dead in their sin; no other creature could pay for us. After Jesus paid the price for human sin, His own Life broke the power of death over humanity. Again, Jesus’ resurrection did not break the power of death for angels; it was not angels He came to help (Heb. 2:16).

Because Jesus shed human blood for human sin, His life could be restored to humanity—the life which had been separated from them the moment Adam and Eve ate the fruit. Jesus paid the outstanding debt, and because of His blood, His life undid human death and restored Life to humans, empowering

even their mortal bodies to submit to the Father and giving them spiritual life, an eternal reality from which we cannot be detached when we have received the Lord Jesus as our Savior.

LIVING IN COMMUNITY

Over time different people have interpreted Acts 4:32-35 to mean that the early church lived communally, that they ceased to own personal property and instead lived together, sharing resources and assets. The context of the rest of Scripture, however, does not support this conclusion. It does, however, support the fact that those who are united in their loyalty to God and His Christ will care for one another as family, seeing their resources as gifts from God for the support of one another.

Acts 5:4, in the story of Ananias and Sapphira, clarifies that the first Christians were not expected to give up their possessions for common use. To be sure, many were selling their possessions for the cause of the gospel, but they were not expected to become “property-less”. When Peter confronted Ananias about his lie in which he sold some land, privately kept some of the profit back, but gave the rest to the apostles with the explanation that the gift was the entire amount they gained from the sale, he said to him: “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.”

Peter made it clear that the sale was voluntary, and moreover, the amount they gave was voluntary as well. There was no expectation that they would or should give the entire value of the land to the apostles. The problem was, Ananias and his wife told Peter that the gift was the full amount of the sale. They kept what they wanted for themselves but tried to appear generous, gaining for themselves a reputation for giving significant gifts. They lied to the Holy Spirit in the process of lying to the church—His temple.

Deuteronomy gave instructions for providing for the poor among the community of Israel. In fact, God’s intention was that Israel would be so prosperous because of their honoring Him and His blessing them, that they would not only have no poor among them, but they would also lend to other nations. Deuteronomy 15:4-11 says, “

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 of the LORD your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today. For the LORD your God will bless you, as he promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow, and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you.

“If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall

open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. Take care lest there be an unworthy

thought in your heart and you say, ‘The seventh year, the year of release is near,’ and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the LORD against you, and you be guilty of sin. You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’”

God’s instructions were that the Israelites were to be generous with those among themselves that might become poor. They were to lend and provide for them without grudging hearts. Moreover, they were to provide for the poor who were not Israelites, and God assured them that there would always be people who are poor so Israel would always have needy people to stimulate them to be generous.

Leviticus 25:35-38 emphasizes the same instructions and also stresses that Israelites were not to charge interest from their fellow Israelites nor to charge a profit if they sold food to their brothers.

In his first epistle John says this about Christians who do not care for their brothers and sisters in the body of Christ: “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 Jn. 3:17-18).

And James says this: “If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?” (Jas. 2:15-16).

We are called to see one another in the body of Christ as part of ourselves, family members who share a Father and a Savior. We are called to provide for those in need, but we are not called to live communally.

BARNABAS

In verse 36 we meet Barnabas for the first time. We learn several details about Barnabas just from verses 36-37. He was a Levite—from the priestly tribe—who was born on the island of Cyprus. His given name was Joseph, but the apostles called him “Barnabas”, a word which means “son of encouragement”. We also learn that he owned a tract of land which he sold for the benefit of the fledgling church, and he gave the proceeds to the apostles.

According to Levitical law, priests (Levites) were not supposed to own land (Josh. 14:4). Instead, levites and priests were given places to live within certain cities that lay within the lands given to the rest of the tribes. We are not told why Barnabas owned land, but there are several possibilities. One is that Levites who did not live in the Holy Land did not observe the levitical laws about land ownership. Cyprus is an island in the Mediterranean Sea, and it was not part of the land God gave to Israel. Nevertheless, Jews have settled in Cyprus since

the time of the Maccabeans. Since Cyprus was not part of Israel, however, there would have been no cities there which would have been assigned to the levites.

Another possibility is that the prohibition against levites owning land may no longer have been practiced. After Israel's return from Babylon, during the intertestamental period, many practices evolved which were not mandated in the Torah. One such practice was the establishment of the synagogues. Moreover, Israel was always under the control of a dominating empire, and at the time the church was founded, Rome owned and ruled the nation.

Still another possibility is that Barnabas's wife may have owned this piece of land, and they may have sold it together as a gift to the church.

Barnabas became a significant leader in the early church, and we find references to him throughout the book of Acts. Acts 9:26-28 tells us about Barnabas's role in helping the newly born-again Saul/Paul become integrated into fellowship. Paul came to Jerusalem after his experience and tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him. Barnabas, however, took Paul to the apostles and told them the story of Paul's meeting Jesus on the road to Damascus. He further told them how Paul had been preaching boldly at Damascus. After Barnabas's introduction, Paul was welcomed into the disciples' circles and continued preaching boldly in Jerusalem.

In Acts 11:19-26 we find one of Barnabas's significant assignments. After Stephen's stoning, persecution arose toward the Jewish Christians began to spread, and they began to scatter to the surrounding countries. Some went as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch. Most of these scattered believers taught the gospel to other Jews when they arrived. But a few, "men of Cyprus and Cyrene", who, when they came to Antioch, preached the gospel to Greeks. "And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord."

News of these gentile conversions reached the apostles in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to check on it. He got there and rejoiced when he saw the grace of God spreading among the new gentile believers. He exhorted them to be faithful, and he was "full of the Holy Spirit and of faith." Many more people came to faith. The conversions were increasing dramatically, so Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and together they went back to Antioch. "For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians."

We meet Barnabas again in Acts 13:1-5. There were prophets and teachers in the Antioch church by then, and Barnabas, Simeon (called Niger), Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (a friend of Herod the tetrarch), and Saul. They were worshipping the Lord and fasting, and the Holy Spirit instructed them, "'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I

have called them.'" Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off."

So Barnabas and Saul went to Cyprus, Barnabas' homeland, and in the city of Salamis, they "proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues to the Jews. And they had John to assist them."

Barnabas was involved significantly in the early ministry of Paul and in the gospel beginning to spread among the gentiles. In Acts 15:36-41 we learn that God worked through a disagreement between Paul and Barnabas, however—and this divine intervention resulted in the gospel going to more places and reaching more people than if the two of them had not disagreed.

Paul wanted to go back to every city where they had preached and see how the believers were doing. Barnabas was willing to go, but he wanted to take John Mark with them as an assistant. John Mark, however, had left them earlier when they had been in Pamphylia. He had been afraid to continue and had returned home.

Paul thought it would be best not to take someone who had followed through earlier, and the two of them had "a sharp disagreement". It was such a heated disagreement, in fact, that the two of them separated. Barnabas took Mark, and the two of them sailed to Cyprus, but Paul chose to travel with Silas. Commended by the apostles to the grace of God, Paul and Silas "went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches." Because of the disagreement that separated Paul and Barnabas, the gospel travelled to more cities and spread that much more quickly.

Here in Acts 4, Luke first introduces us to Barnabas in a particular way that lets us see his generous heart and his love for the brothers: he is singled out and identified as one who sold a tract of land and laid the money at the apostles' feet.

MEDITATE

As one who have been born of the Spirit, you have been baptized into the body of Christ. Your now-living spirit is giving you a new way of seeing life, and new reality. God is asking you to embrace this new family into which He has brought you, and He is giving you His work to do within the body. All that you have is His now, not merely yours. He gives you His provision for the sake of supporting His work in the world and within your local body.

Ask God to show you how He wants you to care for your brothers and sisters in Him. Ask Him to teach you what is real and true, and surrender to Him all the blessings He has showered onto you. He will glorify Himself in and through you and transform your blessings into miracles of provision and life for others whom He is also bringing into His body. †

ACTS

OF THE APOSTLES

STUDY 16

ACTS 4:32-37

FORMER ADVENTIST FELLOWSHIP BIBLE STUDY

After the joyful release of Peter and John from prison and the subsequent outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the believers as they praised God, they began to speak the word of God with boldness. As with chapter two, chapter four concludes with a summary statement of how this fledgling body of Christ lived and witnessed together, sharing and giving what they had for the good of the body.

1. What does Luke mean (and what doesn't he mean) when he says the congregation of believers "were of one heart and soul" and "all things were common property to them"? Where else in Scripture do we find this heart and soul unity described?

2 Chronicles 30:10-12 _____

Ezekiel 11:19-20 _____

Philippians 1:27-28 _____

2. How are the apostles fulfilling Jesus' promise and instructions to them as they testify "with great power" to the resurrection?

Acts 1:8 _____

Acts 1:21-22 _____

Luke 24:45-49 _____

3. Why were the apostles especially giving witness to the resurrection as opposed to Christ's death on the cross?

Romans 5:9-11 _____

Romans 6:4 _____

Romans 8:1,2 _____

Romans 8:11 _____

Romans 8:34-36 _____

Romans 8:37-39 _____

Hebrews 7:14-16 _____

Hebrews 7:23-27 _____

4. How do we know that the sale of lands and houses mentioned in verses 34-37 was not compulsory or an evidence of communal living, and what is the principle these first Christians modeled?

Acts 5:4 _____

Deuteronomy 15:4-11 _____

Leviticus 25:35-38 _____

1 John 3:17-18 _____

James 2:15-16 _____

5. Verse 36 introduces us to Joseph called Barnabas for the first time. What details do we know of him just from this passage?

6. What detail about Barnabas seems out of compliance with Old Testament law?

Joshua 14:4 _____

7. How was Barnabas significant, and why did Luke specifically introduce him here?

Acts 13:1-5 _____

Acts 9:26-28 _____

Acts 11:19-26 _____

Acts 15:36-41 _____

MEDITATE

How do you function in the body of Christ? How has your attitude toward things and money changed since you have been born again? How is God nudging you to support and contribute to the needs within the body of Christ?

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” 1 Peter 2:24-25, NIV