

The Mission of the Apostles and the Mission of the Church

Acts 4:29-37

Turn to Acts 4 please. The main business of the church is how we live with one another and care for one another. You have heard quite a few sermons from me on this theme. I feel a bit sorry for you, because there are many other teachings in the Bible, and recently you've gotten less of that from me. This is why:

Our covid years made unity a challenge, and one way or another unity challenges will come back to us, so it's good to have a foundation in Scripture that urges us to unity. Also, I am trying to write a book to say that in the New Testament, the central mark of the church is the "one another" emphasis, the center is not outreach, it is loving one another. That is not the only call to us, not the only call, but it is the strongest call. These sermons are the raw material for that book.

Also, we have our church covenant Sunday in two months, and these sermons set the stage for that. And if you are tired of this, the good news is that we will do one more, Acts 6 next week, and then we'll branch out.

The sermon today is about two different missions. The mission of the apostles is to preach the word, preach the gospel, and witness to the resurrection of Jesus. The mission of the church is to be the people of God, to be one in heart and mind, and take care of each other.

Turn to Acts 4:33, for this is as clear in that verse as anywhere. Today we will begin in v33, which is the middle of today's text.

The Spirit Produces Two Missions – 4:33-34a

With great power the apostles gave their witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them.

God's great power and grace takes his people in two different directions. God's great help leads the apostles speak the gospel openly, and to do signs and wonders. God's great help leads the church body to be unified and take care of each other.

God's helping presence takes these two different forms among his people. Verse 33 does not mention the Holy Spirit, but the miraculous energy of the Holy Spirit is all through this. When the Holy Spirit is powerfully present, how do we think that will look? What will happen?

One, the apostles will preach the word boldly, and they will perform signs and wonders. This makes sense to us, we expect the power of the Holy Spirit to look like that.

Two, the body of believers will be heart and soul one, and they will take care of each other. And we say, “no, that is not the power of the Holy Spirit, not in the same way.” But it is the same miraculous Spirit power in one as in the other. That’s the whole reason Luke sets up v33 the way he does. Great power on the apostles to witness, great grace on the church to take care of each other.

In both cases, the word “great” means “miraculous help from the Holy Spirit,” and that’s the only real explanation for either one. The apostles aren’t that wonderful, the Gospels taught us that, the church isn’t that wonderful either, just more ordinary people. What the apostles do and what the church does comes from the wonderful Holy Spirit.

That’s the center of our text today, the two missions. Here’s the story around that center.

The Bigger Story – Acts 3 – 4

In Acts 3:1, Peter and John went to the temple for the daily prayers, and on the way in, they met a lame man whom they healed. *“He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. All the people saw him walking and praising God.”*

So a crowd came around, and wanted to know what happened. Peter said, “don’t look at us as if we were anything special. We’re just like you. This happened by the power of Jesus, whom you handed over to be crucified by Pilate, but God raised from the dead. That why this man walks.”

Peter preached Christ, and I love the last line of his sermon, the last line of Acts 3: “God sent his servant Jesus to you, to bless you, by turning you from your evil ways.” God sent his servant Jesus also to us, to bless us too, by turning us from our evil ways. That blessing sticks with me.

But the high priests and the rulers came up then and arrested Peter and John. So Peter preached the same things to the priests and rulers. They didn’t like it, but the healed man was right there, and they didn’t know what to do.

So they put Peter and John out of the room and discussed this, and decided that they could not punish this, but they could command the apostles not to speak like this any more, and they could promise all kinds of punishment if the apostles kept preaching about Jesus this way. So they brought the two apostles back and said this to them. Peter said, “we have to obey God rather than people. We’re not quitting.” So the rulers made more threats, and let them go.

So Peter and John went back and got together with the other ten apostles, and the twelve prayed together in 4:23-31. They prayed that God would hear the threats of the rulers, and that God would make the apostles bold. Because they were scared. And this brings up a scholarly debate, something that sermons should not have, but once in a while it’s necessary.

Who Prays Together in Acts 4:23-31?

Most of your Bibles will have a heading above Acts 4:23 that says “The Believers Pray.” I am convinced it should be, “The Apostles Pray” rather than “The Believers Pray.” You have a right to an explanation about that.

Scholars are divided on this. Good scholars say that 4:23-31 describe the *church* praying together, and other good scholars say it is just the *apostles* praying together. Verse 23 opens with Peter and John going back to their own people, and “their own people” could mean either the rest of the apostles or the rest of the church. “Their own people” leaves it open.

But I’m sure these verses tell us about the *apostles* praying together because of how it ends. It ends this way: “*they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.*” Until Acts 6, the apostles are the only ones preaching of the gospel, the only ones speaking “the word,” as Acts calls it. After Acts 6, the Lord calls more people to preach the word, Stephen and Phillip and Paul, but not before that. Even after that, all believers are not filled to speak the word.

In Acts 6, we read about the widows in the church that were being neglected in the daily food distribution. In that story, the twelve spoke to all the believers and said, “it is not right for us to leave *the word of God* to wait on tables. You pick seven to wait on tables, and we will devote ourselves to *the ministry of the word.*”

That’s in Acts 6. If already in Acts 4, all the believers were speaking the word of God boldly, Peter’s words about the twelve needing to preach the word, in Acts 6, make no sense. It only works if in Acts 6, the twelve are still the only ones preaching the word of God. That means the prayer for boldness, in Acts 4, comes from the twelve. The heading in your Bible above Acts 4:23 should say, “The Apostles Pray for Boldness.”

Now we’ll read verses 29-37, to show more clearly how Acts carefully goes back and forth between the apostles and the church, to show the mission of the apostles and contrast it with the mission of the church.

Mission of the Apostles - 4:29-31

Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. That’s the apostles.

Mission of the Church – Acts 4:32

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.

Now Luke gives us both sides again, just to be completely clear.

Mission of the Apostles Again (4:33a):

With great power the apostles gave their witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Mission of the Church Again (4:33b – 37):

And great grace was at work in them all so that there were no needy persons among them. For, from time to time, those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

The Purpose of the Book of Acts: The Gospel Creates the New People of God

In Rev 7, John sees a great crowd that no one can number, a multitude from every nation and tribe and people and language, all praising God and the Lamb. Acts tells us how that happened, how the gospel spread from Jerusalem, by the work of the Holy Spirit, to include more and more of the world's nations and peoples.

When Acts describes the church, it does not speak about more witnesses and more missionaries. It speaks about the new people of God, the new nation, the new society, and how they are unified and love one another. All of this just echoes how Moses taught Israelites to live with each other.

The mission of the church is to be this new holy people, this new holy nation, the salt of the earth, the light of the world, the city on a hill. They will know we are his disciples, if we love one another. Acts teaches us that the gospel of Christ brings this new people of God into existence. The gospel spreads so that will happen.

At this early stage of Acts the apostles are preaching the gospel, but that did not take them out of local church life. They would not wait on tables, they had a different service than that. But the people brought their money to the feet of the apostles. The apostles were involved in that church and knew who had the real needs.

The apostles were involved enough to be impressed with that Levite from Cyprus, whose name was Joseph. The apostles saw that consolation poured out of this man onto other believers, and called him "Barnabas," "son of consolation." Those called to service outside the local church stayed involved in local churches. This was consistent in the New Testament, though sadly it is not always true now.

We're the Church

So, people, our church business before God, our mission, is to be his people. We cannot treat our life with each other as optional or an accessory to Christian life. Jesus was not much interested in love for God that did not show itself in our love for one another. This is a real challenge in our individualistic society, with our endless distractions, and our lives that are already so busy.

On the other hand, with God's great help, much of this happens here. I see much, and I just see a fraction of what happens. God has been pulling us this way, and that shows in this body.

The only question to ask is, "what works for me?" Don't worry about what others do that does not work for you. We all have limitations, based on who we are, and our situation. Right now, almost every household in this church carries significant difficulty or painful trouble. Almost every household. That's our situation. Yet the Lord brings us together again, and we worship and pray, we eat the bread and we drink from the cup.

What works for you? Some of us serve the body regularly, and some once in a while. That's all good, it is the Holy Spirit at work. Some of us do things at the front, and some do things no one sees. That's the Holy Spirit at work. What feels like something *you* could do that builds unity and serves others? Don't ask me what you should do. I don't know, I have my hands full sorting out what I should do. What shows up at your door?

God has done us a great kindness by showing us what direction the Spirit wants to take the church, and that's what Acts 4 has given us.

All of this already happens here. I am only saying what you already do in a hundred ways, and have been for years. We all have limitations, and church life has never been any different than that. The Holy Spirit is not limited by our limitations. Five loaves and two fish can go a long way. We have a mission, and every week the Holy Spirit's power carries it along. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord, you said that the fields were ripe but the workers were few, and we should pray to you to send more workers into your fields. Lord of the harvest, there are not enough workers in those fields. There are people out there ready to turn to you. Send people out with the good news, fill them with the Spirit and send them out.

And Lord, fill us with your Holy Spirit, so that we can be heart and soul one, and so we can serve one another and care for one another. We want to bring glory to your name. We want to live like your people. Have mercy on us, and fill us with your Spirit for this. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us a spirit of unity among ourselves as we follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.