

## **APOSTOLIC ACTIVITIES**

### **Acts 4**

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We've been taking some weeks to look at the Book of Acts. We haven't covered a whole lot of ground, quite frankly. But that's ok, because we haven't tried to speed through it.

We have so far looked at Acts 1:1 through Acts 4:31, in the first of six divisions of the Book of Acts, the first division being the birth of the church. Under that major division, which goes from chapter 1 through chapter 7, we have looked at these sub-areas. First of all, chapters 1, the Resurrection to Pentecost, then the second dimension was the Day of Pentecost, chapter 2. Then the third part that we have looked at is a healing and its results, chapters 3 and chapter 4:1–31.

As we leave that particular section, I just want you to note a couple of phrases in Acts 4 that I did not pick up much on the last time I taught from Acts. That is Acts 4:8, "Then Peter filled with the Holy Spirit said..." Then also verse 31, "After they prayed the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit." These references in Acts 4:8 and Acts 4:31 constitute the third time in the Book of Acts that the phrase has specifically been used "they were filled with the Holy Spirit." The first case is Acts 2:4. I would simply point out to you that in Acts 2:4 Peter was one of the ones who was filled with the Spirit. But he is also described in Acts 4:8 as again being filled with the Spirit. And he's described, once more, in Acts 4:31 as being filled with the Spirit. Thus, there are three specific occasions where we know he was one of a company that was filled with the Spirit.

What is happening here in the text? And what does this term, "filled with the Spirit," really mean? The term "filling with the Spirit," as used in the Book of Acts, has two fundamental references. One, it is the synonym for the "baptism in the Holy Spirit." That is told in Acts 2:4,

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where the whole company of believers, in response to God, praise and worship and begin speaking to the Lord in languages they did not understand. But the filling of the Spirit goes beyond that. As someone has said, there is one baptism and many fillings. The fact is, the Holy Spirit always fills us to the level of our then present capacity. But since He is infinite and we are expandable, we are capable of receiving more and He is capable of giving more.

Therefore, when we turn to Acts 4:8, we find that Peter is at a moment in his life in which he has been expanded. When he is being called upon to develop a new capacity of forward thrust and vitality in God. Never before had he faced an experience so painfully acute. He had run away from the captors of Christ and had been unwilling and unable to face that group when they had seized Jesus. Now he himself has fallen into their hands—Acts 4:8. It's a threatening situation. He doesn't have the personal resources, reserve, or power to deal with it. Even though he has the baptism in the Spirit, this is a new occasion and it is calling forth more from him than he has ever needed before. God fills him up to the level of his capacity. God fills him up to the level of his need. That is what is meant here by the "filling of the Spirit." Because, as we venture along in life, we find that we are stretchable people and that experiences stretch us out or, as the kids say, "grow us to the max." For that new stretch capacity, we need the present infusion of the Spirit. That's why I've always been uncomfortable, and I believe it's a biblically inappropriate phrase to ever ask anyone, "Were you filled with the Spirit?" That is not the biblical question. The biblical question is "Are you filled with the Spirit?" Because yesterday's filling will not carry you through today's need, it simply won't. One must maintain a fresh supply of the Spirit. Just like the water. If you drank last week, while it was good for last week, is not sufficient for today. If you haven't had any water between last week and today, you are in severe trouble. You are

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physically dehydrated. And if you haven't had a new drink of the Spirit in the last week, you're spiritually dehydrated.

Acts 4:31 tells us that the step beyond that was, again, a new emergency that this time faced all the apostles. Their lives were threatened, more than just simply the threat of imprisonment, but now a very present danger. They'd been told that they were to quit preaching the name of Jesus. Once again, however, we find them being filled with the Spirit. We will continue to find that phrase throughout the Book of Acts, because God's people must stay in ever-present dependence upon Him.

Tonight, as we look at the text of Acts, under the main section, the birth of the church, we come to the fourth major section in these early chapters of Acts, which constitutes Acts 4:31 through Acts 5. We will simply call that section "Apostolic Activities." It's sort of an "etcetera section," where a number of different things are happening.

Four things are being presented to us in this particular part of God's Word. The four things are this: the unity of the church, the purity of the church, the power of the church, and the suffering of the church. I'm convinced that in a very real measure the index of a church's vitality is probably measured by whether or not these things are present. Whether there is unity, whether there is spiritual power and authority flowing through the body of Christ, whether, in addition to that, there is purity and beyond that, whether there is a "being counted worthy to suffer for His name" kind of an attitude, a willingness to suffer for Christ.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

#### **I. The matter of unity is put forward for us in Acts 4:32 through 4:37.**

It refers back to Acts 2:45, where we found these early Christians' experience in what might be called communism with a small "c." That is, they had all things in common. "Selling their

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possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.” They met daily in the temple courts. They were disposing of properties. Acts 4:32 tells us what they were doing in more detail. For example, all the believers were one in heart and in mind. Here again is that essential principle of unity. We’re to get along as the people of God. We have to lay aside unessential differences and simply agree to submerge distinctive personalities and to, even at times, submerge distinctive ideas. (It’s like a cartoon I saw in reading an article on a church committee that was planning a new church. They were split on whether to call it “The United Community Church” or “The Community United Church.” There was no unity on the name.) We, as Christians, have this great tendency to divide up on nonessentials. “All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need” (Acts 4:32-36, NIV). There are some who get very uncomfortable with this and say, is this a matter of practice that all Christians everywhere are to engage in? This matter of selling of property to care for the needs of others?

Let me put it this way. One of the things we reach for in studying the Book of Acts is to look at the distinction between what is unique in the Book of Acts, and therefore not necessarily a part of all Christian experience, and what is normative in the Book of Acts, that is meant to be a pattern for all the church. When we look at this disposal of assets and sharing to meet the common need, we find that what happened in the Jerusalem church was, so far as we know, not precisely repeated in any other New Testament church. However, the spirit of what the New

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Testament church is reaching for, namely that the Body has an obligation to meet the needs of its own, is repeated throughout the New Testament. The particular form of meeting that need may change. But the underlying meeting of the need has remained the same.

Some look at this text and say that what we have is a severe mistake on the part of the Early Church; they should not have been selling their property at this point for a number of good reasons. One is that they were depressing the market by putting their property all up for sale at the same time, thereby driving down values and not having enough to share. If they had had a more staggered sales approach, they could have reaped better dividends, they were not being good business people. Then the second criticism that is sometimes launched against the Early Church here is that by so disposing of their assets, they deprived themselves of capital funds that were needed to finance the later needs that will emerge in the Jerusalem church. In other words, they got so happy spending money on one another; they quickly ran out of assets. And indeed, it isn't long until we find Paul taking an offering for the Jerusalem saints. We look around and say, "He wouldn't have had to take the offering if those people hadn't just, right at the beginning, sold all their material assets and spent the money like there was no tomorrow. Then the other churches wouldn't have had to pitch in and help out."

However, such a view needs to be reexamined for several reasons. Number one, I'm sure that God was very pleased with this voluntary self-effort on the part of the Jerusalem church to simply look out for the needy. I think it is commendable that, when we look at our lives as an individual steward, we look at those areas of our financial households that are things that we really don't need. Someone in the church was telling me, "I just find it inconsistent that I should be living with something I absolutely don't need and there be people in the Body living with grave needs. I've got some disposable things that I could get along and be happy the rest of my

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life without. And they don't have the basic essential needs." They were feeling the painful injustice of that within the body of Christ. I think perhaps one of the things we need to do in capital rich Orange County is look again at what we're doing in regard to the handling of material things. God is pleased with generosity in His people. I think, on the one hand, God was so delighted that people were being generous with one another that He simply allowed it to continue. Even though, perhaps, they could have used a director of the stewardship campaign to help them more adequately liquidate their assets and provide long-range investments and mutual funds that didn't go down in the stock market and things like that. But anyway, be that as it may, people sometimes falsely try to divide the material from the spiritual and say, "If you're spiritual, you're not thinking about material things." Yet, if we're truly spiritual, one of the things we immediately start looking at is what we carry in our wallet and what we're doing with our checkbook. My spirituality is gauged, to a great extent, by how I handle this little ledger in my checkbook. For it tells me, in a much greater way than by singing of hymns on a Sunday morning, where my heart is and where my priorities are. The Early Church had this commonsense approach to spirituality that involved financial assets.

We know, by the way, that no one was coerced into doing this and there was not in the Early Church an edict that everybody join in. And therefore, we don't have any pattern that Christian socialism was to be practiced as a common thing throughout the body of Christ. In fact, when Ananias and Sapphira come later to bring a gift, Peter specifically says to them in Acts 5:3, "You've lied to the Holy Spirit and kept for yourselves some of the money you received for the land. Didn't it belong to you before it was sold and after it was sold wasn't the money at your disposal?" In other words, there was perfect freedom to do with the capital as he would. The gift was not a mandated gift. No one passed a bylaw that said, "Anyone who wants to be a member

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of this church has to get rid of their unused assets.” We also know that there was evidently no stewardship director for the campaign. It was very voluntary. And the selling of assets also appears to not have been a selling of personal residence, where one was already residing. For as we later read on through the Book of Acts, we find the church meeting in homes, and obviously if everybody sold their homes there would be no homes left to meet in. So the possessions and goods appear to be those that were not being personally used by the people involved.

If we look at the common sense part of this, we realize later that the Jerusalem church had needs that the Gentile churches were beginning to address. We say they had this need because they were not careful here. They squandered all their funds right away. But if we take that vantage point, we fail to account for one very important thing. That is, the climate of Jerusalem quickly turned against these early believers. It wasn't long before they were feeling tremendous economic pinches because they were laid off from work. Also, people, because of their Christian faith, were having their properties confiscated. If you look at Hebrews 10:24 which is a letter written to Jewish Christian believers, you will find the specific phrase used which could have included these Jerusalem saints “You know what it's like to have your property confiscated.” And the Holy Spirit, in His wisdom, was letting people dump their assets to have them bless one another while they could still have them, rather than having those assets confiscated and go to someone else, and never get to use them anyway.

How many people, for example, who were Christians before the stock market crashed in October, if they had known it was going to crash, would have pulled many things out and put it into the Lord's work? But we didn't know it was going to crash, so the money got eaten up. If the day before a crash somebody had come in and said, “I'm concerned about missions, I'm concerned about the needy in the Body, and I'm concerned about the general welfare of the

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church, or whatever. I have this stock sitting around, which I'm not using, and here, give it to the Lord's work," and people would say, "Oh, you're crazy to give that much." But the next day, it wasn't there. The Early Church was being sovereignly led by the Lord to dump its assets before they were confiscated. So their later financial trouble may not have been at all owed to the fact that they spent their resources early, but it was probably owed to the change in the economic and political conditions that surrounded them.

We also know in this, having all things in common or unity, a unity that was marked by real care for one another, manifested practical Christianity. Practical Christianity, as James says, is not saying to a person in need, "I'm going to pray for you," and then walking away and not doing anything about it. It's putting legs to our prayers. The Early Church was practicing this. But they were not practicing a kind of form of meeting needs which allowed a person to individually designate who they were going to help. The Early Church, right away, recognized that in order to help the needy, one needed some kind of form of administration. Because not everybody who says they are needy are actually needy. Some have real needs and would never make those known. There has to be some kind of equity or fairness in the Body. So right away, there's an administration set up and people are giving the assets from their properties to a common fund. They are not writing on an offering envelope, designating it to "brother so and so." That is acceptable within this church. Instead of each of them being led by the Lord concerning whom they should give money to, the leadership of the church worked with people on a daily basis. They knew who was in need. They would know how to administer the goods equably. So the money was being brought and laid at the apostles' feet. People were giving to a common fund. That's what we do when we give our offerings to the church. We're saying to the leadership of the body, "You in leadership pray about these things. You monitor the body. You see where the

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needs are. We trust you with the dispersal of these assets. We're going to leave that up to your judgment." The early church brings this money and lays it at the apostles' feet.

What does this have to do with the principle, by the way, of giving in secret where you're not supposed to let your left hand know what your right hand's doing? What's this matter of bringing bags and laying them at the apostles' feet? The reason for laying them at the apostles' feet is the apostles had to have some time to receive this stuff. They are financially concerned enough for their reputations that they know better than to allow people to come up on an individual basis and put a bag of money in their hands. Then somebody could start a rumor like, "We gave Thomas a bag of silver. I wonder if it ever made it into the general fund." They were so busy with their ministry responsibility that evidently they just set a time, "At such and such an hour of the day, we're going to be right there. We're all going to be together. People can see what's being brought in." There is accountability. They couldn't just write checks so it had to be brought in bags. Everything was in coinage—no paper money and no checks. Just bring the bags. If you want to give your offering that way, that's fine, cash it all into silver dollar bills and just bring it down here on Sunday morning. We will be glad to receive it all in bags. We have a slightly better monetary banking system than they had, so we can do it in a more quiet way, silent offerings. They needed the bags. They did it in such a way that there was no suspicion about the integrity of those involving the finances and there was thorough accountability and thorough trust by the Body in those who were administering the funds.

As we go along through Acts, we will see, by the way, that quickly there is a need for more enhanced administrative processes, because the apostles simply get overloaded with this matter of handling the funds and are going to have to find someone else to adequately take care of it.

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But right from the beginning, the church is concerned about meeting needs within the Body. I'm so glad, in this church body, that I see that same spirit everywhere. It's amazing how during the course of a year, people will come to me and say, "Look, here's some extra money for those that are in need." Or they'll have a burden for somebody in the congregation that they know specifically about. "I don't care if I get tax credit or not, see if you can get it to them." This kind of thing just happens on an ongoing basis. We're not in a position, obviously, to take the place (in our particular government we all pay taxes to pay social security and we have an undergirding welfare system) of the country's welfare system that helps absorb some of this. Yet in the body of Christ, we find that, from time to time, there's such acute need. God's people are meant to help minister to one another and we're to be bonded together. When we see a brother in need, we do something about it.

The specific incident of giving that is noted in the text of Acts is a man named Joseph, who was from the island of Cyprus, a Levite, a Jew of the Diaspora or the dispersion. He comes and, right away, he's renamed, which brings a question to mind. If you come into the body of Christ, you come into this church with your given name that your parents gave you and you were to spend the time in this body, what kind of activity are you doing that merits a new name being given to you? What would it be that other people would call you for your service in the body of Christ? In Joseph's case, everybody said to him, "Your name, Joseph, really doesn't fit you. You're a son of encouragement." That's what Barnabas means, and that's what they called him. His introduction to us in the pages of Scripture shows this generous spirit. And what a person does with his financial assets is often a mark of the generosity they will have toward people. Barnabas was this wonderful person in Scripture who was willing to play a subordinate role and yet be an enabler and helper of others to achieve their finest potential in ministry, a potential that will go

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far beyond his own. He developed this attribute of giving. His selfless giving is in direct contrast to the giving of a couple that is introduced to us in the pages of Acts 5:1–11, Ananias and Sapphira.

The first trait of this Early Church we looked at tonight is that they were an uncommon fellowship in their unity to one another and that unity reached to their financial care for one another.

A word to us, to look at what our assets are in life and to see if we've simply got things sitting around that are never going to do us or anyone else any good, that we could dispose of and use strategically with God's people or for God's work. It's always an important question for us in our lives.

### **II. The second thing that we see in this apostolic activity section is the incident with**

#### **Ananias and Sapphira, one that really causes us lots of problems, doesn't it?**

As we read the text, we find these two people, a husband and wife, who hold a joint property. They decide to sell it and they're noticing that it's a wonderfully approved activity in the church for people to join in this kind of giving toward one another, towards others in the body. They evidently are going to enhance their reputation by an act of giving. Only, they decide to keep back part of it for themselves. Right away, Peter picks up on it. This text of Acts does not tell us whether he had direct knowledge of the real estate transaction—by someone coming and saying to him, “Wow did you hear about Ananias and Sapphira? They had their property down on Dolorosa Street up for sale and they made a killing on it. They got a hundred and eighty thousand shekels.” It was possible that a real estate agent had already come in and told them that. Then Ananias and Sapphira came in and said, “Here are our ninety thousand shekels we're giving to the Lord.” Peter looked at them and he knew that wasn't the truth. Or it was possible,

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and we often approach the text this way, that he had a direct word of knowledge from the Lord. The text itself doesn't say how he got his facts, whether it was direct revelation or it was inside information. But whatever the case, what he knew was true. They were fudging with the figures. He said to them, "You haven't lied to me, you've lied to the Holy Spirit. They're going to carry you out for this."

That raises a question in the body of Christ, doesn't it? A question about purity and the fact that whenever we sing a gospel song, it's only the grace of God that we're not all carried out dead. "I surrender all, all to Jesus, I surrender all. Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold. I'm so happy and here's the reason why....(I'm so depressed and here's the reason why)." We say all these wonderful things and yet God doesn't strike us the same way. We look at this text here and we say, "What in the world is going on here?" And by the way, notice the burial customs. I think culture shouldn't escape us here. If somebody dropped dead in this church, do you know what would happen? This has never happened to us and may never happen. The coroner's office would be involved. But in the Early Church, there was a group of people called "the young men." They evidently were the buriers. They don't do embalming in the Near East. The idea was that when a person died, you buried them right away. So there were young people in the church whose job it was to prepare people for burial. Already the church was taking care, from the cradle to the grave. The church is this very flexible organization that God has placed within society to minister to us at whatever life station we're at. Even though the resurrection of Jesus Christ had happened, there were still people in the Early Church beginning to die. And there was a cadet corps of the burial workers that were assigned to carry the dead out and bury them. So the young men knew what to do. They grabbed the body, wrapped it up, took it out and buried it. No notifying of the widow, no funeral, no nothing, just take it out and bury it.

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And Ananias is in the ground, and three hours later, his wife strolls in thinking, “He’s probably out shopping or doing something,” but he’s in the ground. No coroner’s inquest or anything. She walks in and bald-faced, lies and simply says, “What my husband says is true.” And Peter says, “The same people who carried your husband out are now going to carry you out.” Bang! She falls over and is gone.

We look at that and say, “Wow! What’s happening here?” and we don’t understand it.

Let me try to help explore and understand it. First of all, we need to ask, is it unique or normative? Was this meant to be a pattern so that any time when anybody lied in the Christian church or carried on any kind of deception, they would immediately be carried out? Obviously, if it were meant to be normative, there would be a lot more dead people on a normal basis in the church, so evidently it’s not normative. It’s rather unique. And it really says to us two things:

The first thing it says to us is that God is responsible for the manner in which He judges our sin.

1 Timothy 5:24 says that some people’s sins precede them to the judgment and other’s their sins follow after them. Which is a way of saying, “Someday, all of the secrets of our life will be revealed. For some, their secrets, which are sinful, are revealed in this life and it is apparent for all to see. But there will be some who unlike Ananias and Sapphira will not be caught in deception. Their judgment will become clear on that day. God will sooner or later get to it. If He doesn’t get to it now, He will get to it ultimately.

In Ananias and Sapphira’s case, He chose to move His judgment into the present, so that it was manifest to all, as a clear warning to the church, to walk in purity. The normal process of church discipline, by the way, was suspended by a direct intervention of God. The normal process of church discipline is when something like that has happened, in Matthew 18 someone is to go to them and talk with them. If they don’t repent, they take another person with them. If they don’t

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repent, they tell it to the whole church. Then 1 Corinthians 5 spells out the process for how that's to happen. That God can summarily and unilaterally and sovereignly act to administer justice and discipline His church. The contemporary church has very little discipline. For one thing, we're scared crazy by the courts as to even how to administer discipline by the threat of getting a lawsuit on our hands. But God is concerned for discipline in His Body and in our lives individually. He's concerned for purity in His church.

This brings us to the second thing we ought to look at, from this text. Not only the fact that this is the manifestation that some people's sins are judged now in the present time and don't wait for the judgment to be seen and obvious, but the second reason for the carrying out of this order against them, I think, has to do with the credibility of the Christian witness. The very essence of Christianity is the claim that Jesus has risen from the dead. That's clear through all the pages of the New Testament. Here, where we're located, in the first chapters of Acts, we are at the very threshold of the church, we are at the birth of the church, and the whole credibility of the Christian message falls upon the witness of the Apostles and those who are saying, "We eye-witnessed Jesus. We saw Him. Everybody saw Him crucified, but we saw Him after He has risen from the dead. Believe our testimony." And your integrity or your credibility is about all you've got going for you. Here, in Ananias and Sapphira, we have a deception occurring in the Early Church.

What is being said through this event is that God regards truth as something He holds very dearly and seriously. If He will move in judgment against someone who is only prevaricating in what we would call a minor sense—fudging the figures—if God will move in such tremendous and direct fashion on someone who tells a "half truth," can you imagine what God will do to someone who is directly misrepresenting His character and saying that Jesus of Nazareth rose

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from the dead when He did not? If God will act in judgment against Ananias and Sapphira for telling a mistruth, would He not act in greater judgment on the apostles if they had been lying about the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth? So this whole thing of their death comes back to a fundamental issue of, are the witnesses to Jesus' resurrection credible witnesses? Are they telling the truth? And the New Testament is saying that God takes truth so seriously that He holds accountable those who fudge on their donations to the church. That's how seriously He takes it. It was a strong shot of credibility in the Early Church and manifested the truth to the community. That is why verse 11 is able to say, "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events." Great fear because they knew instinctively that God was affirming the apostles' preaching of the Resurrection and was moving dramatically against deception in the body. So the church is called upon to walk in unity and the church is called upon to walk in purity.

**III. Then the third section of tonight's Scripture on Apostolic Activities has to do with the church walking in power.**

A church cannot manufacture miracles. But it can have an atmosphere of faith and worship and belief, where God can perform His acts more easily among us.

In verse 12, the Apostles—again it wasn't every believer, but that power to perform miraculous signs and wonders resided in the apostles—were being supported by all the believers gathering together. This was so important. And we've missed this in the church because we miss the whole idea of solidarity. We regard involvement in the body of Christ as somewhat elective, at our disposal and dependent upon how we're going to use our leisure time. One of the things that happens when there's any dynamic advance of the church of Jesus Christ is that every individual believer senses a responsibility to be present in the community. It seems to me, as I look at the Book of Acts, that there is a commitment to be present when the community meets in its large

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meetings and there's a commitment to be present when the community meets in its smaller home group cells. And every believer of the thousands of believers added to the church, through Acts 1–4, every one of them had these two commitments in terms of their personal participation. They gathered when the whole church gathered together. They met out of doors in Solomon's Colonnade, which was a beautiful section of the temple where thousands of people could gather together in the open air. They were faithful to that, so they created through their presence a solidarity as a witness to the world. It became easier to join in with that group and hear what was going on because there was such a mass of people present. And masses of people attract masses of people. They didn't say, "There's going to be a big crowd there. I don't like big crowds. I'm going to stay home." There was a sense of "We've got to be there, because it's important that every one of us feel our responsibility to be a collective witness of Jesus Christ in this world." Then we also know they were devoted to meeting together in homes. So whenever those kinds of commitments are ongoing in a body, it's incredible what is happening. And it was happening in the Early Church.

There's a strange phrase in verse 13, "No one else dared joined them even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number." But, "no one else dared joined them" is a reference, evidently, to the Apostles. No one else dared joined the apostles. There was such a phenomenal display of miraculous power that was occurring that nobody else presumed to belong in that company. Yet the unbelievers were being attracted to join the Body as a whole. That's why more and more of them were being added.

One of the apostles, in fact, has a phenomenal ministry that is so powerful that his shadow falls on the sick that are laid down and, as he passes by, they're being healed. There are occasions in

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the body of Christ where singular, unique miracle ministries happen through God's servants. They're not duplicable in somebody else. They're not programmable. They cannot be copied. I've looked at this text many times and wondered to myself—having been in the ministry or a minister's kid, I've been in it all my life; and knowing how ministers get together and talk about one another and think of one another and compare figures and all this kind of thing—how the other eleven apostles felt about Peter. I can hear the conversation, if it were a carnal preachers' group! "That Peter over there, moving out isn't he? He seems to have gotten ahead of us. He's been drawing bigger crowds, more miracles. God doesn't seem to be using us like him. I wonder when he is going to do a seminar on the 'shadow' ministry. He'll communicate to us the techniques to develop the 'shadow' ministry. Boy, it would be great if we could have the 'shadow' ministry in our church. Wow, we'd pack the place. Do you think that we are not doing God's will because we don't have the 'shadow' ministry? You know when we preach, people still get saved, blessed, edified and all that. I mean, wouldn't it be wonderful to have the 'shadow' ministry?" When you get in that kind of mode, you start discounting yourself and the unique ministry gifts that God has given you—when you're trying so hard to be like somebody else. There are all kinds of people I'd rather be. I could name a whole list. But I have to be who God's called me to be. I can't be anybody else. I can start looking at all these wonderful five-starred people in the body of Christ and ruin what talents God has given me by saying, "But I'm not like somebody else."

I think one of the things about a maturing person, a maturing body of Christ, is they are willing to set people free to be whatever God's called them to be. And go as high and as far and as deep as the Spirit of God is going to enable them and gift them to get. The Early Church wasn't sitting around, stewing in its juices because one person had the "shadow" ministry, the other eleven

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didn't have a "shadow" ministry, and thought, "There must be something wrong with us." They were grateful to God for what He was doing; saying, "Isn't it wonderful that the Lord's using our brother Peter?" They set him free to be himself and they kept on doing what they were supposed to do.

Maybe God hasn't given you a great ministry of prayer, but He's given you a great ministry of making quilts for the needy. Wouldn't it have been awful if Dorcas, in Acts 9, was making quilts and things for people if somebody came to her and said, "You know, Dorcas, you're always so busy making things. But if you'd spend more time praying and reading the Bible, you'd be more spiritual." Then she'd say, "I've got to quit making things. I need to go to more prayer meetings than I'm going to." But the Early Church set people free to be what God had gifted and graced them to be. There's a star-spangled quality in the Body when people can develop the multiplicity of gifts that the Holy Spirit intends to pour out on the Body. So Peter was operating with that unique gift of faith that God had given him. It's a powerful gift. No one else in the history of the church had that "shadow" ministry. It's singular and unique. There have been all kinds of other ministries, pushing-down ministries, oil-in-the-hands ministries and all other kinds, but no "shadow" ministry. I think God may have intended it just for him. Maybe somebody in some age or era has had it, or will have it, but it was special.

God was doing great things. Crowds gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick. Notice how the gospel is starting to get out of Jerusalem. This is going to be a movement we are going to especially see accelerated as we go through Acts and we'll look at all the pains that are associated with that.

The last aspect of the text tonight has to do with, not only the church united and the church pure and the church powerful, but also...

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#### IV. The church suffering.

Because of all the activity that's going on, the Sanhedrin is giving problems again. The Early Church does not handle the Sanhedrin with kid gloves. They directly say that their motivations were always evil and incorrect. They were a hanging jury on Jesus of Nazareth. They acted with malice, not only that, but here their actions against the apostles are ones that are filled with envy and jealousy. So they have all the apostles arrested. This time, not just Peter and John, as was earlier in chapter 3, but the whole shebang. But there's a supernatural release (verse 19), "During the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out."

I've gone through the Book of Acts and there are thirteen times where God's people, namely leaders, are imprisoned or in some way have circumstances upon them that limit and restrict their personal freedom—thirteen occasions. Out of those thirteen occasions, there are only three specific occasions (this being one of them) where supernatural release is given. I say that because sometimes we think that when we get into a jam, God is under some kind of obligation to always open prison doors or always provide a supernatural form of release. I'm simply saying, on the basis of the data in the Book of Acts, ten out of thirteen times God let the situation continue and the individual Christian leader that is involved has to work through his emotions and feelings and let the whole process come to a natural conclusion. Whether the natural conclusion is the pelting of rocks of Stephen or whether it is five years of imprisonment for Paul.

The more common pattern in the Book of Acts is the kind of thing we saw at the close of the last section, in Acts 4, where the Early Church gathers together and prays, not for the Lord to make the circumstances easier, but to make them more powerful in the circumstances. "Give us great boldness to bear witness to You," they're praying. "Oh, God, do something in us," they're asking.

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So here is a special release. But it isn't a release to go to Palm Springs on vacation. It's a release to go straight back to work and do the things that got them in trouble in the first place, and that is preaching in the temple. They go straight back at daybreak and there's this almost comic moment where Luke describes the panic in the Sanhedrin when they send the guards to bring out the apostles and they can't find them, and finally somebody brings back the report that they're out preaching in the temple and nobody knows how they got there. So they bring them before the Sanhedrin and Peter gives this great text on civil disobedience (verse 29). Whenever a Christian is confronted with a command of government, that is, in violation of his God-given conscience, Peter's words apply: "We must obey God rather than men." Period. "The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted Him to His own right hand as Prince and Savior that He might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him." When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death" (Acts 5:29-33, NIV). What the apostles were saying is, "What you guys just did was kill the author of life." We can understand that if a person isn't repentant, he's going to be furious with words like that.

A cool head in the Sanhedrin prevailed that day. His name was Gamaliel. He's a famous Jewish teacher. Not only is he noted in the Book of Acts, but also in the Jewish tradition, as a great rabbi. He was a disciple of the conservative rabbi Hillel, who was alive about a century before Christ. He reflects a typical pharisaic attitude. The Pharisees had a great faith in the sovereignty of God. The good ones especially had that faith. Gamaliel stood up and said, "Well, why are we getting so upset?" He recounts two other instances where a guy named Thudeas and another person named Judas the Galilean both were pretending messiahs that had arisen for a while and

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yet nothing remained of what they had done. He said, “If this thing’s of God, you can’t stop it. If it’s not of God, it’s going to fall of its own weight.” And he called everybody down. What they did instead of killing them is, “They ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they’d been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name” (Acts 5:40-41).

Often, by the way, we accept Gamaliel’s words as Bible in a sense that we look at a cult or group or a new teaching in the church and we take this attitude. I’ve seen that people do that regarding Kingdom Now teaching or Positive Confession teaching. “If it’s of God, it’ll prosper and if it’s not of God, it’s going to fall of its own weight. So why do we need to do anything about it?” They’ll cite Gamaliel as their reference.

I would remind you that when Gamaliel speaks, he is not speaking Scripture. He’s speaking Gamaliel’s opinion. There’s a significant difference. It’s one of the important things we need to do when we bring eyes to Scripture.

For example, I was just reviewing some texts someone had asked me to review. They were preparing a position paper on some contemporary issues. They were proof texting their view. As I traced one of the proof texts, I found that one that they were quoting on the nature of God came from the words of Elihu in the Book of Job. What the Scripture does is give us, by inspiration, what Elihu actually said. But it never endorses Elihu’s speech. In fact, the whole essence of the Book of Job is to countermand what Elihu had said and to disagree with it. So you can’t cite Elihu if you’re trying to back up something about God that you’re trying to assert. You’ve got to know whom you’re quoting, and see if when they were speaking, they were speaking under inspiration or if their words were simply in the Bible to show that this was an accurate report of what was said.

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To cite the fact that Gamaliel's advice is always good advice, look at all the things that continue to be around which obviously aren't true: Buddhism, Islam, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Jehovah Witnesses, Christian Science. You look at the cults and other religious groups and they've been around a long, long time. And they don't look like they're disappearing. Some of them, in fact, are getting stronger and stronger. So if we apply Gamaliel's advice across the board, we simply say, "It's not our responsibility to ever question anyone or challenge anybody doctrinally, because if it's of God, it's going to prosper, if it's not, it'll fall of it's own weight." It's to disagree with the clear word of an apostle that says, "Earnestly contend for the faith that was once delivered to the saints," (Jude 1:3) which is different advice than Gamaliel was giving. Thank God Gamaliel gave that advice, because it got people off the apostles' back. But I don't think it's in the Scripture to give us an enduring word on how we ought to always treat a false group. Sometimes it is true, we need to let something alone. One of my favorite stories of leaving things alone, and I've told this before in this church, is the story of Joe Gutel's dad. Joe is now with the Lord and he taught at SEC, and his wife Maxine is in our church. Joe's father was a deacon in the Assemblies of God church in Storm Lake, Iowa, which produced a great many distinguished missionaries and ministers in the Assemblies of God, including people like Dick Dresselhaus. A small rural church, but a powerful church for God. Joe Gutel Sr., a deacon in that church, was cleaning his barn one day with another deacon, and they were talking, as deacons, about what to do regarding church problems. This one deacon said, "You know Joe, about this one problem we had in the church a couple years ago? I don't ever remember that we got to the root of that, although it seems to have died down. I don't hear about it anymore." He said, "You know, I think it would be good—it's been two years, but I think if we went back and got to the root of that, so it would never come up again." Old Joe Gutel looked at him with his Iowa farmer

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wisdom and said, “Well, I reckon some problems are like the manure on this barn floor here. It don’t smell near half as bad if you don’t dig them up.” Some things we do well to leave alone altogether. But there are many things we can’t leave alone altogether and we must contend for the truth.

But if we contend for the truth, we must remember the Word of Scripture, “All those who desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will endure persecution or suffering” (2 Timothy 3:12). It will exact a toll or cost from us. The Early Church was prepared for that kind of suffering for the cause of Christ. They rejoiced that they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the name.

“They went on day after day in the temple courts and from house to house” (Acts 5:42). Notice again their commitment to two forms of gathering. I don’t know if this is going to happen before I die or not in this church. We have tried everything in the last seventeen years to get the body of Christ to commit itself to smaller groups in the body. We are having some success in the last year or so with the Friendship Groups and with Sunday School classes. I want you to know, as pastor of this church, I really feel that your own Christian faith is half-formed and incomplete if your spiritual experience is limited only to meeting in a larger group such as this. The dynamic of growth and Christian experience comes when we sit down together within a context in which we can share with one another, share testimonies together, share burdens together, encourage one another, and bear one another’s burdens. Unless that is happening, we are missing a key and vital dimension of the Christian faith. I wonder sometimes if there isn’t something satanic in our culture which seems to prohibit this kind of thing from happening. I look at what has happened in Seoul, Korea, in the church of five hundred thousand people. Every single person is in a cell group, which gets no larger than about twenty people. We say, “It’s obviously explainable in

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terms of oriental culture, people follow orders more easily and they stand in line better.”

Americans are all doing their own thing. People come back, and have tried to use the Seoul, Korea, grid on Southern California churches. We’ve tried to do that in this church. We have said everyone in this geographic sector is going to belong to a small group in that zone. That went over like a lead balloon! I don’t know the solutions. One of the things I feel about the Book of Acts is that nobody programmed anything. People sensed instinctively, “If we’re going to grow, we have to be committed to meeting house to house and we have to be committed to the church as a whole.” So they carried these commitments out in their relationships. Tremendous things happened as a result.

I’m not able to share all the deeper needs of my own life with a large group, just because of the need for confidentiality and protection and the like. But when I get together with a small group of guys I meet regularly with for prayer, I’m able to share, “Here’s how you can help me pray on a deeper, more personal level.” It’s a powerful encouragement and stimulus for my life. I would just encourage you, if you’re not involved in that kind of relationship with another believer, to try to find it. Find it in a Sunday School class or make your own home a Bible study center, invite some of your friends over and say, “We’re going to have a Bible study every other Friday night (or Tuesday night, or whatever). We’re going to meet together; we’re going to do this house-to-house thing the Scriptures talk about. It is when we’re doing this that we’re on the cutting-edge of spiritual growth, when we’re really being honest in our spiritual development. Here again before us is an example of a really powerful church, a church that is growing in the grace of the Lord. A church that has unity and where unity shows in their allocation of personal assets. A church that has purity. That shows the seriousness with which they take the credibility of the gospel witness. A church which is moving in power, which comes as a result of God’s

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sovereign activity, coupled with people's faith, and a church which is also willing to be inconvenienced for the cause of Christ. Maybe that's our way of suffering, a willingness to be inconvenienced for the cause of Jesus Christ. It is those kinds of dynamics that make the body of Christ thoroughly alive and a brilliant light in a darkened world.

### **Closing Prayer**

Our Lord, we come to You again this evening, so grateful that You've given us the Scripture as a true plumb line of where we need to be as individual people and as a church. We want to simply offer ourselves up again as people, both personally and corporately, to be all that we can be for You. We realize that, unless the Lord builds the house, they who labor, labor in vain. We look to You to do that among us which none of us can do by ourselves. But there are lots of things, Lord, that You do call us to do, that are within our power. A commitment of devotion to You, to one another. A commitment to care, not to treat one another as strangers in a faceless group of people, but to seek roots of fellowship and relationship and identity. To come out of our isolation and loneliness of life and assume the joy of being part of Your community. Help us, Lord, with ever-increasing skill, to be that kind of people. People who love and laugh together. People who cry together. People who pray together. And people with whom we're a witness to You in this world. Do it again, Lord. What You did in the Early Church, do among us. May the news of the generosity we have toward one another, toward the poor and the needy, become a great banner of witness to Your name in this whole community. May it sweep over us with Your power and Your Spirit and Your help and Your cleansing. We pray for anyone who is here this evening who is especially needy in their own life. Whether it be a financial need or an emotional need. Some of us, Lord, may not have much financial things to give, but we have time to give to others. There are those among us who could use a friend, a listening ear and a caring heart. May we give

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that, Lord, if that's what we can give. We pray especially for those who come with needs in their life this evening. We know Lord, that You care for us. We pray that, in these moments of continued worship, we can open our hearts to one another, to You. To ask You to bless and move upon our lives. We seek this, Lord, in Your name. Amen.