

# Church Re-Envisioned

As Roger shared from this week's passage, he highlighted the use of 'megas' or "great" in Acts 4:33: the superlative power with which the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and the "great grace" that was upon them all. When we watch people exercise great power, including strong political rhetoric, it is not normally linked with the exercise of grace, mercy and compassion. Roger worked through the ideas of unity, action and encouragement, as aspects of the early church community.

**GETTING STARTED:** One idea of leadership that is taught, particularly to pastors, is the image of 'servant leadership'. This does not mean that leaders are weak, lack opinions or lack courage. It does, though, expect that leaders will lead from the front, in demonstrating what service and sacrifice looks like. Think of a person who is a leader, but who also consistently demonstrates grace, compassion, practical service and encouragement? What inspires you about their example?

## READ: ACTS 4:32-37

🗣️ What did you notice/ what things stood out, as you just read the passage?

🗣️ What things did you take away from the sermon this week?

❗ In Acts 4, we are still reading about the early church in Jerusalem and it would be reasonable to assume that this church was primarily made up of believers who had a Jewish background. However, when the Holy Spirit was poured out in Acts 2, we read that there were people in Jerusalem for Pentecost, who had travelled from different parts of the Roman empire. The early church was not necessarily a homogenous group. This was a new household of people, learning to do life together, so we would expect there to be some friction as they worked through their relational dynamics and roles. Roger cited the following quote from AW Tozer's book, *The Pursuit of God*. Instead of being like an 'out of tune' orchestra, Luke tells us that this church was "of one heart and soul". (Acts 4:32).

*"Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshippers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become 'unity' conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship."*<sup>1</sup>

🗣️ Tozer highlights that unity is not something that can be contrived, but neither should unity – in and of itself - be the main aim of a church. What is the aim of 'fixing our eyes on Jesus' (Heb 12:1-3)? When we reflect on the life of Jesus and spend time in his presence, how does that shape us as people and sharpen the focus of our life and ministry?

❗ We are all human, so we all fail at some point. This can cause frustration and friction in relationships. We can choose to shut our mouths when something happens (and become bitter about it) – or might speak up about it, maybe in a sarcastic way. Both these responses can lead to negative outcomes. In Col 3:13, we read: "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive."

🗣️ Think of a situation in one of your relationships where there has been tension / friction. How have you addressed that situation, firmly, but graciously? In what way does being full of grace in our relationships, help us, not only in the way we deal with other people's failings / weaknesses and to resolve differences without conflict, but also in building people up? How do 'grace' and 'forgiveness' work together?

❗ Roger's second point was about 'Action': both practical action, by voluntarily sharing their belongings with those in need, so that no one went without, and spiritual action, in testifying to the resurrection of Jesus. Their action was in both word and deed. They put their faith into action. He commented that it wasn't 'Christian communism', especially as it was organic, not mandated. Roger also noted that, when we read the book of Acts, we should also take note of the genre: it is a historic account and is not prescribing a particular form of Christian community.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/369949-has-it-ever-occurred-to-you-that-one-hundred-pianos>

Over the years, different Christian groups have sought to live out the type of community model that we see in the early chapters of Acts, whether by forming a commune/ kibbutz-equivalent or by worshipping in a house church or simple church format. At the same time, there have been incidences, where groups have morphed into cults / sects, with dysfunctional leadership dynamics and/ or core Christian doctrines have been lost. What do we lose, by doing church in a traditional / western church format? In what ways can we compensate for that, in a large church?

In any church community, there are people who may have financial difficulties, marital problems, domestic violence or other sensitive situations. Some may just need practical help with gardening or transport to appointments. In what ways can we help those people in our church, in a practical way, without their confidentiality being breached?

ⓘ Roger talked about 3 x 'S' words that we see demonstrated in Acts 4: Servanthood (service to others), Selflessness (considering the needs of others above our own) and Sacrifice (giving up, to help others out of poverty). He also quoted John Henry Jowett, that "Ministry that costs nothing, accomplishes nothing." Jowett, however, slightly plagiarised King David's words from 2 Sam 24:24b, that "I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing." Jowett, a preacher, was highly disciplined with his time. He "began at 6 a.m. He told his New York congregation that if working people can rise at six in order to earn their daily bread, much more should a minister be at his desk at the same hour, because he is concerned with the bread of life."<sup>2</sup>

It's not so hard to 'give' when we have plenty. It's a lot harder, though, when we lack resources. What is the thing that you have the least of at the moment? Time? Money? Gifts / talents? Encouragement? Health / energy? How do you manage limited resources, so that you are able to serve and share with others?

ⓘ In this passage, Luke mentions a Cypriot guy called Joseph, a Levite, who sold his field. However, Levites weren't allowed to own land in Israel, so he would likely have sold an expensive field in Cyprus. Joseph was re-named by the apostles as Barnabas, or 'son of encouragement'. This guy is mentioned a number of times through the book of Acts, as a member of Paul's ministry team and as a support person for John-Mark.

My definition of 'encouragement' is 'to enable with courage', particularly helping a person act and move forward in the face of difficult situations. Think of a situation where someone has come alongside you and encouraged you. How did it motivate and mobilise you to action?

ⓘ In Acts 15:36-41, Paul and Barnabas disagreed over whether to include John-Mark on their ministry trip. It was a personal issue for Barnabas, as John-Mark was his cousin (Col 4:10) but it was a practical / logistical one for Paul. It does though, highlight that, even among ministry partners, differences of opinion and conflict can be painful. But, ultimately, Paul and Barnabas maintained a strong respect and supported each other's ministries. (1 Cor 9:6).

"Many of us may be a bit drawn to Barnabas when we reflect upon the fact that we too occasionally have needed a second chance. Over the long haul, the decision of Barnabas may have proved best – at least for John Mark. Years later, Paul finds the formerly useless Mark "useful," as revealed in the apostle's concluding epistle. "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministering" (2 Tim. 4:11). And in Colossians 4:10, one observes that the once-rejected young worker was commended, and the Colossian saints were asked to be receptive to him."<sup>3</sup>

**REFLECTION:** For many of us, failure can be fatal – not because we fall down – but because we just don't know how to get up and keep going. In 2017, there were incidents at both the Boston Marathon and London Marathon, where runners assisted exhausted competitors complete the final short distance to the finish line. Some questioned the legality of their actions, saying "Helping another across the finish line is disrespectful to the integrity of the competition." However, one event director commented "It's a simple story of one person helping another in their moment of need. Neither runner was trying to win the race. The marathon, above all mass participation events, is gruelling and involves determination, commitment, camaraderie and togetherness."<sup>4</sup> Look around you. Who do you need to extend grace to? Who needs to experience unity and inclusion? Who needs practical help / support? Who needs your encouragement?

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.preaching.com/articles/past-masters/john-henry-jowett-a-preacher-of-grace/> <https://www.preaching.com/articles/past-masters/john-henry-jowett-a-passion-for-preaching/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/813-the-separation-of-paul-and-barnabas>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.podiumrunner.com/events/finishing-race-power/>