

Acts Series Part 11

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 August 2009

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] Thank you. Today feels a bit like the start of year two at Bon Accord for us as a family, and for me particularly.

Although we haven't been here quite a year, or serving as minister for quite a year, with the fairly prolonged break that has just concluded, this feels like the beginning of the second year, and it almost is.

And I think that was in mind, perhaps subconsciously, in the background as I approach the passage in Acts, which has been waiting patiently for us to consider in Acts chapter 4.

We had got as far as verse 31 of Acts chapter 4, and this evening we'll be considering the final section of that chapter, or a part of it.

And as I was considering these verses, actually from verse 31 to verse 35, there was one verse in particular that caught my attention, partly because of the content of the verse, and partly from a sense that it didn't seem to fit in this small section.

[1 : 26] Well, let's read the verses, and then hopefully things will become a little clearer. Acts chapter 4, and we'll read from verse 31 to the end of the chapter, though we'll actually just be considering to verse 35.

Acts chapter 4 from verse 31, it's on page 1096 of our Bibles. 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.

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.

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.

[2 : 48] Now the verse in question that caught my attention was verse 33. And before commenting on what I mean by saying that it didn't seem to fit in this section, let's just think a little bit about the content of the verse.

And we can read the verse again. With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.

In a way, this verse is a simple statement, but one that I trust and believe eloquently expresses what we desire to experience here in Bon Accord and indeed across the free church, and indeed wherever the gospel is faithfully proclaimed.

That these words would describe that proclamation with great power. The apostles, the preachers, continue to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace be upon us all.

This is what we look for. This is what we hope for. This is what we aspire to, that the good news would be announced and proclaimed to those who have never heard.

[4 : 11] It's very clear in the context of this passage that when reference is made to the apostles continuing to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, they are doing so to those who knew little or nothing concerning that resurrection.

Perhaps some who had heard something about it, but most of the audience would have been those who did not know concerning these things, or certainly were not persuaded concerning them.

And yet here the apostles testify, proclaim, bear witness to this great truth concerning the resurrection of Jesus.

They announce with great power this good news. And what is this good news that they proclaim? Well, that Jesus is alive. This is at the heart of our Christian faith.

This is at the heart of the message we proclaim, that Jesus Christ, who was crucified for us, crucified and died for sinners, rose again triumphant on the third day.

[5 : 15] And the apostles were testifying to this truth and explaining the implications and the significance of this truth. They were proclaiming also that this Jesus, who had resurrected, who had been raised again, was Lord of all.

They testified to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, the one who had the authority and government over all. This is the one of whom they spoke. This is the one of whom they testified.

And this is what we would seek to do today, here, as we announce this same message. But not only was this message proclaimed, not only did the apostles testify to these things, but we are told that they did so with great power.

With great power. And this is also what we long to experience, that the proclamation of the good news would be with great power.

Now, what does that look like? What does that imply? What does it mean to state that the proclamation was with great power? Well, again, as we've been considering these chapters, we are conscious and we recognize that one of the features of the proclamation in these early days of the Christian church was that it was accompanied with signs and wonders, and that it was one feature of the powerful accompaniment to this testimony.

[6 : 46] We have no doubt that the manner of the delivery of Peter and the apostles was a very powerful delivery, a very passionate delivery.

And no doubt that that also is referred to when a reference is made that it was with great power that the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

But I would like to suggest that perhaps a principal element in these words or what is implied in these words that it was with great power that the apostles continued to testify relates to the manner of the response.

Those who heard were moved. Those who heard believed. Those who heard responded. Those who heard were converted. They were brought to faith in Jesus. And this is a fundamental element of what is being described here.

With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection. The proclamation was owned of God. The Spirit of God was at work and was moving amongst those who were hearing the message and they heard and they understood and they believed.

[8 : 01] And that is something that we long to see and experience in our own day and situation. The verse also speaks of the manner in which the community of faith were blessed by the grace of God amongst them.

We read there at the end of the verse, And much grace was upon them all that we would know and experience and see and sense the evident grace of God upon us.

And I think we do well to pose the question. Maybe even as we've been briefly describing the content of this verse, maybe it is something that leads us to compare and contrast with our own day and our own circumstances.

And I think there is profit in asking the question, is this verse, this verse 33, is it a description of things as they are currently in our own day and in our own congregation?

Now, while in a sense you could say that it's not for me to proffer an opinion, I'll do so anyway. And my opinion would be that no, this verse doesn't describe our life as a congregation and the manner in which the good news is proclaimed today.

[9 : 24] What we experience and witness is different to what is described here with great power. The apostles continue to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting that in our own congregation or city or indeed in our own church across Scotland, all preaching is devoid of power, devoid of any evidence or demonstration of a great power.

That is not what I am saying. But it does seem to me reasonable to argue that the overall picture in our day is not as described in this verse.

If we think of our own city and the gospel cause in Aberdeen. Aberdeen in 2009 is far from looking like Jerusalem in 30-something A.D.

as described here. With great power, the apostles continue to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and much grace was upon them all. Now, if that is a fair comparison and if it is a fair conclusion to say that today our circumstances could not really be described in the manner that the church in Jerusalem is described in our passage, it leads to the question, it begs the question, why is that?

[10:51] What do we need to do so that we might testify with great power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus? Or put another way, in what kind of church do you get powerful preaching?

Now, maybe that question is a suggestive one that can make you think in your own mind even now what your answer to that would be. In what kind of church will you find powerful preaching?

I wonder if you have any ideas. I'm sure if we had the opportunity to dialogue about it, there would be different ideas and thoughts on that question. I wonder, is it a case of identifying who the powerful preachers are?

And hey, presto, once you have identified who they are, then where they are, the proclamation will be with great power, almost independently of the church or congregation where the preacher happens to be in.

So, the crucial element in this answer would be, well, who are powerful preachers? And where there are powerful preachers, well, there there will be powerful preaching. With great power, the message will be proclaimed.

[12:09] Or perhaps some would respond to this question, in what kind of church do you get powerful preaching? And particularly, as I've emphasized the importance of the manner in which the congregation or the audience respond as being an element of this evidence of power, some might respond and say, well, is this really something in our hands at all?

Is testifying or preaching with great power, as it is described here, particularly in regard to the impact on the hearer, a matter entirely in the hands of the sovereign movement of the Spirit of God? And it is not something that we can influence in any way at all. I think the answer to the question that we've posed in what kind of church do you get powerful preaching?

I think the answer to the question, or in any case, part of the answer, lies in exploring the second matter I commented on regarding this verse that it seems out of place in this section of the chapter. The section that we've read, and particularly as it's divided in our Bibles from verse 32 to 37, would seem to have one clear theme. We've read the passage and it's familiar to us.

[13:33] And the theme would seem to be, I think we could go beyond saying it would seem to be, the theme is a description of the way in which the believers shared their possessions and in that way were able to attend to the needs of the poor.

It is a clearly presented description of the community life of the church there in Jerusalem. And given that that is the theme, verse 34, where we read there were no needy persons among them, would seem to follow more naturally immediately from verse 32.

So it would seem to be a more natural flow to read 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. There were no needy persons among them.

There's a connection between these two verses and verse 33 seems to have been introduced or seems to not bear any immediate connection with what is before and what follows.

Wonderful as the content is, it doesn't seem to be immediately connected to what has come before, immediately come before, and what has followed. Indeed, we might imagine, or at least in my mind, it would seem that verse 33 would more naturally follow on from verse 31.

[14:55] The summary of the consequences of the believers' prayer 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.

With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and much grace was upon them all. As I was doing some reading on the different commentaries that comment on this passage, I was intrigued and I think somewhat reassured to discover that I was not alone in my, I would say, moderate bemusement at the location of this verse.

Indeed, some are so bold as to suggest that not only does it seem to be in the wrong place, but it is in the wrong place and I certainly would not make that claim at all, but some suggest that.

Now, what is the importance of this? And it's not a significant in a sense or a very significant point, but as we try and pull it together with what we've been already presenting as our concern to answer

the question in what kind of church is the preaching with great power?

Is there powerful preaching? And as we seek to tie these things in together, I think the answer to our concern lies at the end of verse 33 where we're told not only that the testimony was with great power, but then we read, and much grace was upon them all.

[16 : 33] And what we want to do is identify who the all are that is referred to here. To whom is the reference? And much grace was upon them all.

Now, the verse begins speaking explicitly about the apostles. With great power, the apostles continued to testify. And so, in the first instance, it would seem that if in the same sentence there is a reference to them all, the reference could be to the apostles.

And yet, as we read the verse, the suggestion, the implication would seem to be another. That rather, that when it states, and much grace was upon them all, the reference is to the whole community.

To all the believers who made up this community of faith in Jerusalem. It was the apostles who were responsible for this public proclamation. But this grace that is referred to was upon them all would seem to refer rather to the whole community of faith.

And this, if I've been able to present my thinking clearly, and I fear that maybe I haven't, but I think this is the key to our question concerning preaching with power.

[17 : 45] Such preaching is necessarily and intricately connected to the community of faith from which it is born. What is described in verse 32, with great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

What is described there doesn't happen in a vacuum. It's not just about finding a powerful preacher and putting him behind the pulpit and hey presto, you have powerful preaching.

No, powerful preaching, preaching with great power, preaching that is accompanied by the impact and the results that were true here in Jerusalem, is preaching that is born in a community of faith and forms part of that community of faith.

It happens in the context of a church or congregation with certain identifiable characteristics. And we have those characteristics described for us in these verses that we have read.

Verse 32 is at the heart of this section, if you wish, because the activity described is at the heart of a living and vital Christian community.

[19 : 02] This testifying to the resurrection of Jesus Christ with great power is something that is done in the context of a living, vital community of faith.

And so again, I ask the question, in what kind of church will you find powerful preaching in this kind of church as it is described for us here in the passage that we have read.

Well, let's explore some of these characteristics. I want to mention, and I'll mention them briefly, five characteristics of the church in Jerusalem as presented to us in verses 31 to 35 and then comment on them one by one.

The characteristics of a church where you can reasonably expect to find preaching that is accompanied by the blessing of God, preaching as described here with great power.

A church, in the first instance, where all are full of the Holy Spirit. We read that there in verse 31. A church where all speak boldly.

[20 : 08] Again, this is referred to in verse 31. A church where all are of one heart and mind. There in verse 32, all the believers were one in heart and mind.

A church where all love to give. Really a summary description of all that is described concerning the community life of the church in Jerusalem.

And finally, a church where all are provided for and a consequence of that love that there was to give. Now, before thinking briefly on each of these things, I just want to make a brief reference to this word all.

And how is it to be understood? The word repeats itself on several occasions in this very short passage. We're told that all were filled with the Holy Spirit.

We're told that all the believers were one in heart and mind. We're told that much grace was upon them all. And the question that I pose, and it may seem a rather what would be the word inappropriate question, does it really mean all?

[21 : 17] Now, you might say, well, that's what it says. But maybe if I could pose the question another way, does it mean all without exception? Let's remember that the church in Jerusalem at this point is now several thousand strong.

It's not a small band of believers. There are several thousand people who make up this community of faith. Are we to understand that each and every one of them without exception shared in these characteristics?

I remember reading a bumper sticker on the back of a car in the States and it said something like this. The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it. And it appealed to maybe my simple way of thinking.

And on the basis of that principle you say, well, if it says all, then it is all. And there's no argument. But there is a problem. What about Ananias and Sapphira? You see, Ananias and Sapphira, though they're mentioned in chapter 5, this isn't something in terms of time sequence subsequent to what has been described here.

In actual fact, what would seem to be happening is that Luke describes the life of the believers up to verse 35 and then he goes on to give two examples of that life. A positive example, Barnabas, and a negative example, Ananias and Sapphira.

[22 : 37] So really you have the same passage. And so, while this church is described in this way, all were filled with the Holy Spirit. All were of one heart and mind. All were enjoying the grace of God upon them.

Where do Ananias and Sapphira fit in? I think on the basis of that concern, it seems reasonable to conclude that the all does not mean all without exception, but rather describes the totality of the Christian community or congregation.

All the congregation. All the believers where I think reasonably we could presume that that would have involved the vast majority of them. Now, this is maybe a detail, but I think it's important because otherwise the all, as we would apply it to our own situation and our own congregation, it almost becomes utopian and potentially disheartening.

We're saying, well, while it isn't true that every single person is on board, every single person without exception can be described in this way, then we can't hope for this declaration of the good news with great power.

And I don't think that is what is being said. The all here is a reference to the totality of the believing community and does not necessarily imply all without exception.

[23 : 59] Well, enough of that small detail that I wanted to just comment on. In what kind of church, then, can you reasonably expect to find? In what kind of church will you get powerful preaching?

The first thing that we mention in a church where all are full of the Holy Spirit. After they prayed, verse 31, the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.

Verse 31 is crucial to what follows in verse 32 in that section. Only believers full of God, full of His Spirit, behave in this way.

Only those who are filled with the Spirit of God will share in common their possessions. Only such will be willing to give as generously and as sacrificially as is described here.

But what does it mean to be filled with the Holy Spirit as the believers are described here? Is it something we have any participation in other than as passive recipients?

[25 : 09] Well, we can note the context in which the believers are described in this way. In verse 31, after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit.

that the activity of the believers in seeking after God and in praying to God is presented to us as we might call it a necessary requirement or certainly a contributing element to this experience that they enjoyed of being filled with the Holy Spirit.

The believers were not passive. They were praying. They were seeking after God. They were hungering after God. And they were satisfied by God as they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

They sought God and they were filled by God. They hungered for God and they were satisfied by God. And I think we can say and we must say that to be filled by the Spirit of God is the normal and predictable experience of those who humbly and urgently seek God.

It should not be seen as something out of the ordinary but rather I repeat the normal and predictable experience of those who humbly and urgently seek God.

[26 : 23] Not some extraordinary mystical experience of the few. And while this is true of us individually as Christians it is also true and can be applied to us together corporately as a congregation.

Do we as a body seek after God and hunger and thirst for Him? Because if we do not then it ought not to surprise us if He does not respond by filling us with Himself.

In such a church the preaching is with great power all filled with the Holy Spirit. But we also noted that such preaching will be found in a church where all speak boldly.

Verse 31 goes on to say that having been filled with the Spirit they spoke the Word of God boldly. And here clearly the reference is on all those who had been filled.

Not just the apostles but the totality of believers engaged in communicating the Word of God in this fashion boldly. For the preacher to preach boldly it is needful for the people to speak boldly.

[27 : 40] Now this is true at the very practical level of securing an audience in the measure that all speak boldly and witness to friends and neighbors in the measure that all engage winsomely and creatively with those who have never heard of Jesus as the one who is risen and Lord in that measure such will come to listen to the Word preached.

Now this has always been so but very particularly today when people simply don't come to church as a matter of habit or social convention it is even more crucial today.

Any audience must be secured and it will be secured when all speak boldly for Jesus. If we aspire to if our desire is that in this place there would be testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus that there would be an audience of those who do not know these things to be true and who will hear this message and will respond to this message if that is what we desire then it is necessary that all speak the Word of God boldly in such a church that preaching is with great power.

But also we noted that preaching with great power will be found in a church where all are of one heart and mind. We read in verse 32 all the believers were one in heart and mind.

Unity is the quiet yet necessary backdrop to blessed preaching. In the words of the psalmist there the blessing God commands.

[29 : 22] Where? Well we know the psalm we will sing it at the close. Where the brethren dwell in unity there the blessing God commands. And I think we ought to be thankful to God for the measure of unity that we enjoy.

And yet this is a matter that we must work at. When we speak of a united congregation it's not simply a case of recognizing an absence of conflict or an absence of divided and competing groups within a congregation.

We certainly don't want that and I think that we do not have that and we thank God for it. But a united congregation will also find expression in practical day to day working together supporting one another praying for each other.

And there's much that we can and must work on in this regard. In a church we're all out of one heart and mind. In such a church the preaching is with great power.

But also in a church where all love to give. Then in verse 32 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.

[30 : 38] Now much has been said of the community life described in these verses and very similar words that we've already commented on not in any great depth but in chapter 2 and verses 44 and 45 where a very similar description is found.

Some have sought to present this community life as a necessary or prescriptive model. While others at the other extreme we might say have sought to assure us that we need not fear.

This radical behavior of holding all things in common may have been a feature at that time on that occasion but we don't need to go to such extremes today.

Now for our purposes this evening I simply want to stress this point that the Christians here in Jerusalem loved to give. They enjoyed giving.

It is abundantly clear and very clear that their behavior was entirely and spontaneously voluntary and from the heart. Mention is made of how they would share and sell their possessions.

[31 : 52] No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own. There's no questioning that they were the owners of these things. There was no requirement for a common ownership. No.

Each owned their own possessions and voluntarily they chose to place them at the disposal of others. This was a voluntary act on the part of the believers.

It's also clear that when it came to selling land and property and homes they weren't leaving themselves devoid of somewhere to live.

We find that the reference is to those who had lands and houses in the Pluto. There in verse 34, for from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them and brought the money from the

sales.

There doesn't seem to be any suggestion that somebody who had one house where they lived with their family were selling that house and then seeing where they would survive in the absence of owning that property.

[32 : 54] No, this was something that those who were in a position to do so, those who desired to do so, voluntarily did so, driven by and motivated by love.

And while it was entirely voluntary, there was, I imagine, and I think the example, the negative example of Ananias and Sapphira confirms this, there was no doubt a certain contagious effect for the generosity of some, stimulated and maybe in a sense, pressurized others, provoked the generosity of others, but it remained an entirely voluntary and love-driven act on the part of the believers.

This was a church where all loved to give. Why did they love to give? Why did they enjoy giving? Well, grace engenders grace.

We're told that much grace was upon them, much loved and conscious of being much loved, and so they loved much. In such a church, the preaching is with great power.

In such a church, the testimony concerning Jesus Christ and Him resurrected is with great power.

But then one other characteristic that we've commented on, and the final one.

[34 : 16] In a church where all are provided for, in such a church, the preaching is with great power. Verses 34 and 35, there were no needy persons among them.

And then we've read of how properties were sold and the money brought to the disciples and distributed to anyone as he had need. This generosity had as its purpose that all would be provided for, that none would suffer, that none would lack food or a roof over their heads, that none would lack care when sick or infirm or aged.

The gospel eliminated poverty in this community, this believing community in Jerusalem. And this elimination of poverty, it was a tangible, visible, palpable, dramatic demonstration to all who were looking on of the power of the gospel.

What about us in our context? context, where maybe we consider, perhaps wrongly, but we consider that material needs are less evident amongst us as a community of faith.

But there are many needs that go beyond the material. The need for friendship, the need for company, the need for counsel, the need for love and security, for a helping hand and a listening ear are such needs provided for in our fellowship.

[35 : 42] Can it be said upon accord that there were no needy persons among them? In such a church, the preaching is with great power.

And so as we draw things to a close, we pose once again the question that has been posed on more than one occasion. In what kind of church, in what kind of congregation do you get?

Will you find powerful preaching? Preaching that is owned of God and that results in those who hear responding, believing and trusting in Jesus Christ.

Well, in such a church as described in this passage. And, very significantly and crucially, the one described, and we might say in a measure prophesied in the Old Testament in the passage that we read in Deuteronomy, where the crucial verse that forms part of that chapter in Deuteronomy chapter 15, and I would be so bold as to say it is quoted here, is this verse, there should be no poor among you.

This was God's intention for His covenant community as it is described in Deuteronomy, that there should be no poor among you. And here in this covenant community, this new covenant community, we are told there were no needy persons among them.

[37 : 07] A glorious fulfillment fulfillment of God's purposes for His people. And something that I'm sure Jewish readers and Jewish observers would have noted as being significant.

Here is the true covenant community, not in the temple, not among those who claim to be the, have a monopoly on God's purposes. No, in this new community, there is evidence, palpable, dramatic evidence, that here God is amongst them.

Because as God intended, so it is here. There were no needy persons among them. This ideal described in Deuteronomy finds concrete fulfillment and living reality in the new covenant community in Jerusalem.

And the very life of the community serves as a confirmation of the truth claims being made by the apostles. And so again, we see this intimate connection between the life of the community and the

declaration of the truth going together.

The life of the community gives substance and credence and authority to the truth claims being made by the apostles. This testimony to the truth that Jesus is alive and that He is Lord.

[38 : 23] With great power, the apostles, the preachers, continue to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And much grace was upon them all.

Is this what we desire for our community of faith? Then we have much work to do. Let us pray.