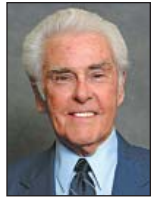


Return to unity

It had been a momentous time for the disciples. Jesus had left them to return to the Father. On the Day of Pentecost, “all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to



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speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:4).

Peter addressed the crowd that had gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost about Jesus and more than 3,000 converts were

added to their number. Peter then healed a crippled beggar, which created a reactionary response among the rulers, elders and teachers of the law. They commanded the disciples “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” but the disciples refused (Acts 4:8). However, the leaders did allow Peter and John to go ahead because of their fear that the crowd would erupt in anger because they were so amazed at the healing.

When released, Peter and John went back to their own fellowship and reported what had happened. This led to the powerful prayer meeting of rejoicing of God’s power being demonstrated through them. Luke records that “after they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God fully” (4:31).

This was not the same thing as had happened on the Day of Pentecost because they already had the Spirit, but this was a “fresh filling, a renewed awareness of the Spirit’s power and presence in their life and witness” (John B. Polhill, “Acts, The New American Commentary,” p. 150).

Unity characterized the young church (Acts 4:32-33). In W.O. Carver’s commentary on Acts, he gave this interpretation of verse 32: “Of the multitudes of those that believed there was heart and soul” (p. 52), which captured the unity being described.

The perpetuation of that unity is best characterized by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (4:3).

Through the Spirit’s leadership among the new members of the church, some were willing to sell property that they owned in order to give the income to the needy in the fellowship (Acts 2:43). This was not a form of communal living since all sharing was individually voluntary to meet expressed need.

One example of this sharing to meet need was the gift of Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus. At that time he could own private land even as a member of the priestly tribe and he was willing to share the income from selling it with the church leadership. The disciples nicknamed him ‘Barnabas,’ which means “son of consolation or comfort” because of his generosity.

Unity remained a common purpose of the church but selling shared possessions dropped out of the biblical record (Acts 4:34-35). It is obvious from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians that unity was taught as essential to the life of the church. God’s calling of leaders was “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12-13).

The failure to meet these challenges is exemplified by Ananias and Sapphira, who also sold a piece of property and brought a portion of their sale price to Peter as a gift for ministry. Unfortunately for both of them, Peter uncovered their deceit and confronted them individually, and both died from the shock of being exposed.

During my 39 years of full-time teaching at Midwestern Baptist

Bible Studies for Life

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Scripture: Acts 4:31-37

Theological Seminary, I was interim pastor of more than 19 churches. The most prevalent issue that I faced in several of these churches was failure to deal honestly with the challenges facing their churches. Sometimes the dishonesty was of church members, but in other cases it was the problem of pastors or other staff members.

With such dishonesty the body of Christ will be split instead of growing in mature unity. If those who failed in these churches received the punishment that Ananias and Sapphira faced, the funeral business would pick up!

Unity is an expression of agape love (Col. 3:12,14). The importance of unity in the fellowship such as Barnabas expressed is emphasized in Paul’s letter to Colossians: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience... And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

Lewis B. Smedes has a powerful study of love. “Love...is a power that moves us only to regret evil — anywhere, in any form, by any cause.... But love rejoices only when evil is destroyed. In some delicate sense, then pure agapic love would be glad to be needed no more” (“Love Within Limits,” 79, 80).

Unity happens when in our love we are willing to sacrifice for each other. This kind of love bonds us together when needs are great and offerings can be given to meet those needs.

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