

A church to imitate and a danger to avoid

The story is told of a man who was a member of the London church where the great English preacher Charles Spurgeon was pastor. This man came to Spurgeon to tell him he wanted to leave the church. He had seen some weaknesses in the church. He was disappointed with the behavior of the church members and he had decided to leave it to go and find the perfect church. And Spurgeon would have said to him, "Sir, if you ever find the perfect church, leave it alone because if you start going to it, it won't be a perfect church anymore."

After studying the first 4 chapters of the book of Acts, we might be tempted to say that the nascent church in Jerusalem is the perfect church. It is a church that sees the Holy Spirit at work with power. The Word is proclaimed and thousands of people are saved. In the face of persecution, the Spirit strengthens believers to enable them to confidently speak the Word. This is such an encouraging description of this new church in Jerusalem. Men, women and children have their hearts deeply touched by the preached Word of God. The Spirit of God gives new life in Christ. We see lives transformed. Everything seems to be perfect. And then we see the first word of chapter 5. "But" It is a word that shatters any idea of a perfect church. "But" is a word that sounds the alarm bells. Everything seems to be perfect, "but".

This passage introduces us to the reality of the life of the Christian church. We see God at work. We see the fruit of the Spirit in evidence. We see a community of love, of grace, a merciful people. But there is always this "but". And there will always be this "but". In this fallen world, this side of the return of Jesus Christ, the church will always be a community, not perfect, but imperfect, a community where sin is present. And we're called to love this imperfect church, to serve in this imperfect church. We are not called to love imperfections, to love sin in the church. Far from it. But we are called to love one another, to love the church of Jesus Christ despite its imperfections. We are this imperfect church. It is only at the return of Christ, in the new heavens and the new earth, that the church will be truly perfect. We're going to take two weeks to study this passage. Today we will see a church to imitate. There are things we should want to imitate. There are things in the church in Jerusalem and we want those things to be true of us too. Here's what we'll be looking at today. And then next Sunday we will see a danger to be avoided.

Let's take a look at this church to imitate to see what God wants to teach us. We will see three things in verses 32-37: A united church, a compassionate church, and a witnessing church.

A united church

One of the things that Christians and the church are criticized for is that there is often conflict and disagreement between those who call themselves Christians. The history of the Church of Jesus Christ is marked by disputes. I recently spoke with a pastor friend and he told me that the current health crisis threatens to create a split in his church. On the one hand, there are those who want to follow government directives to the letter. On the other hand, there are those who reject state authority in church affairs and want to maintain all church activities as before. And this crisis, or rather the response to the crisis, risks disrupting the unity of the church. And you have to know that it doesn't take much to disrupt it. An inappropriate word, a simple oversight, a difference in taste, jealousy, the presence of a gossip in the church. Unity in a church is a precious gift, but it is a gift that is so fragile.

Considering all this, it is simply breathtaking to think about what Luke describes here in verse 32: "The multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul." The multitude is not 50 people. Not even 100, 200 people. We are talking about some 5,000 people, 5,000 new converts. 5000 people with their different backgrounds but Luke says of them, "They were of one heart and one soul." They are united in heart and soul. Despite all their differences, in the things that matter most, there is unity. What a powerful testimony to the world around. Here is a community of people united in their love for Christ and their love for one another. In chapter 2 we had already seen their unity in prayer, in the Word, in fellowship. These 5,000 people actively give themselves to praying together, to studying the Word together, to being encouraged in the faith. They all have the same desire to grow in Christ, to serve Christ, to enjoy fellowship with Christ. This is what unites them. This is what is in everyone's heart. This is what characterizes a united church. Isn't that also what Jesus prayed for in John 17:21? "So that all may be one, as you, Father, you are in me, and as I am in you, so that they too may be one in us." In a united church, the believers look at themselves and say, my identity is in Christ, in his body of which I am a part. The Christian, when he thinks of who he is, of his identity in Christ, he cannot see himself outside of his place in the body of Christ. This is how the New Testament describes us, saved by Christ to be part of the church of Christ. In Christ I have a new identity and I must not think about my identity in Christ without thinking of my place in the Church of Jesus Christ. This is what unites us. Unity in Christ is deep unity. It touches the depths of my being, my heart, my soul, who I am. It is my most fundamental identity, the same heart, the same soul. We are not united by the little finger, it is much, much deeper. Christ unites us. He gives us the same heart for God, for the Word, for prayer, for the lost world, for the brothers and sisters in Christ. This church to imitate is a united church.

A church full of compassion

In this church in Jerusalem, there is clearly compassion for the poor and needy. We read in verse 34: "For there was no needy person among them." And there are no needy because of the compassion of church members. What do we know about this compassion? I want to note 5 things.

Common compassion. - Verse 32 tells us that "no one said that his possessions belonged to him". Verse 34: "All who owned fields or houses." Compassion is in everyone's heart. It is contagious. They follow each other's example. There is a culture of compassion in the church. It's part of their DNA. And it is not surprising to see this compassion in them because they themselves had experienced the compassion of Christ. The disciples had seen firsthand Jesus' compassion for the needy and the poor. They had seen Jesus moved with compassion for the crowd of 5,000 people whom he then fed. They had seen the compassion of Jesus towards the poor, the sick, the blind. They experienced Jesus' compassion for themselves. In their compassion, they are imitators of Jesus. They are doing what Jesus did. Hear what two of the apostles have to say about compassion: James 2: 15-16 "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, keep warm and get your fill' without providing for their physical needs, what use is there in that?" 1 John 3:17 "If anyone who has the goods of this world sees his brother in need and closes his heart to him, how can the love of God abide in him?" It is a common compassion.

Selfless compassion - Look at the attitude of believers towards their property in verse 32: "No one said that his property was his own." We often see in children who have toys, they play quietly with one of their toys and then another child comes in and takes a toy that is in the closet, a toy that the first child has not played with in months. And all of a sudden, the first child snatches this toy out of the second child's hand, screaming "It's mine!" But that is not the attitude of believers in Jerusalem at all. No one says, "It's mine." They

look at their possessions and they say, it all belongs to Jesus. All I have, it's God who gave it to me so I give it back to him for the benefit of others. The Christian says: Jesus is my master, so all I have is his. He gives it to me to manage it, but it's all his. My house is his, my car, my food, my clothes, my toys, my time, my money - everything is his. All I am, all I have, belongs to Jesus. He's the master of my life.

Repeated and regular compassion - The tense of the verbs in these verses, the imperfect, tells us that this is not a one-off generosity. Whenever there is a need, there is a compassionate response. Their compassion is seen over and over and over again. The church in Jerusalem resists the danger of becoming weary of compassionate ministry. Often we start well. We are motivated but we forget, we lose interest. We have our own concerns. Paul writes in the Epistle to Galatians chapter 6: "Let us not tire of doing good. . . . while we have the opportunity, let us practice good towards all, and especially towards the brothers in the faith.". Compassion is a way of life for these Christians.

Generous and costly compassion - One reads these verses and one gets the impression that there is no limit to the compassion of church members. They don't hold back anything. V32 "They had everything in common". In verse 34 they sell houses or fields and give the money to the apostles to redistribute it. We are talking about large sums of money here, huge sacrifices to provide for the needs of others. We are given the example of Barnabas who sells a field and gives all the money to the apostles, but verse 34 tells us that "**all** those who owned fields or houses sold them."

Voluntary compassion - There is no obligation, no pressure. No one says, "To be a member of this church, you have to give your all to the church. They are Spirit-filled people. These are people saved by the grace shown to them and people marked by grace towards others. Their hearts are overflowing with love for God and for their brothers and sisters in Christ. It is just not possible for them to see their brothers and sisters in need and not react, not to give. It's spontaneous, extravagant. There is no suggestion that they give reluctantly. It is a pleasure, a privilege to be able to provide for the needs of others, to be able to show the compassion of Christ to others.

This morning, I cannot tell you that this passage requires that all of us, we sell our goods, our houses, our fields to provide for each other. There is no command here. "You have to sell all your possessions. What we have here is a description that is given to encourage us, to inspire us. Look at their compassion! Look at their generosity. Do you want to know what life in Christian community looks like? Here is the biblical model! A common, selfless, regular, generous and voluntary compassion. It's true that not all of us have houses or fields to sell. Those who have this world's goods should think about their special responsibility. But not everyone has this level of wealth. But we all have time to give. We can all show our compassion through words, words of encouragement, of gratitude, of comfort. We can all show compassion through simple actions. I look around this room and can think of your acts of compassion towards one another. In this church, we can all testify of the generosity and compassion of others towards us. We want there to be a culture of compassion in the church. Such a compassionate community is a powerful testimony in this world. Jesus said in John 13 that the world will know that you are my disciples "if you have love for one another". Many people, before hearing the gospel of grace, seek to see it lived in our lives. We experience it when we have compassion for each other.

A united church, a church full of compassion

A witnessing Church (V33)

It would be easy to walk away from here this morning saying that the biggest challenge for us is to be a compassionate church. This is where we spent the most time. And don't misunderstand what I mean. I want us to be a compassionate church. But these verses also show us that the church in Jerusalem which is our model, our example, is a church where the gospel is preached.

Despite all the threats that we saw at the beginning of chapter 4, despite the violence against them, the apostles continue to speak of Jesus and especially of his resurrection. Here is the subject which is sure to upset the Sadducees who do not believe in the resurrection. No question of watering down the message to make it more acceptable. There is no question of being silent because the religious leaders do not like their message. Certainly the apostles did not seek to offend for the sake of offending. But they don't change the message just to avoid offending. They themselves are respectful but that does not prevent them from telling people to repent and believe in Jesus.

Once again, the tense of the verb which is in the imperfect, tells us that the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is a regular, habitual activity. Day after day, week after week, they talk about Jesus. As Peter said in verse 20, they cannot but talk about Jesus. Did all believe? No. We will see that next Sunday. But Jesus never told them that all would believe. He had simply said to them: "You will be my witnesses".

Dear friends, let us not lose sight of this so important task that Jesus entrusts to his church. In the coming months we will be busy with a lot of things in our church: the new association, the election of elders and deacons, the building project. These are good things, necessary things. But in all of this activity, let us not forget that first and foremost we are witnesses of Jesus Christ. We are called to bear witness to him in a fallen world.

Isn't that what we want for the church, for our own, for all the churches in Nantes, for the church in France? We want to witness to Jesus. And the beauty of this passage is that every aspect of the life of the church in Jerusalem bears witness of Jesus. The unity of the church is a testimony. The compassion of the church is a testimony. What would the world say if they saw in us a church where there is conflict, arguing, where we fight among ourselves? What would the world say if we spoke of the compassion and love of Christ without providing for each other's most basic needs? Our message would be horribly lacking in credibility. The world would say: "They talk about the power of the resurrection, but there is no power at work in them. They speak of the love of Christ but they hate each other." We will never share the gospel with power if first there is no unity, if first we are not a community of compassion. May God, by his Spirit, work in us to make us a united church, a church full of compassion, and a church that testifies of Jesus. And may verse 33 be true of us: May great grace be upon us all.