

Acts

Acts 4:32 to 5:11 - Spirit-filled or fake?

In **Acts 4:31** "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit," a phrase used twice in Acts already - in Acts 2:4 and 4:8. And when Peter addressed the crowd on Pentecost in Acts 2:17-18 he quoted Joel saying, "I will pour out my Spirit" twice too. In Acts 2:38 Peter also talked about "the gift of the Holy Spirit" promised to the repentant, and in Acts 4:25 Peter quotes King David who "spoke by the Holy Spirit" in Psalm 2:1-2.

So in Acts we're really getting an earful about the Holy Spirit - past, present and future. We discover in the **past**, for instance, that the Holy Spirit spoke through "the mouth of David," which David himself knew because he begged God not to take the Spirit from him in Psalm 51:11. And we see what happens in the **present** too, in the real life stories Luke tells when people are "baptized with the Spirit" as Jesus promised in Acts 1:7. We also hear Jesus' prophecy about the Holy Spirit in the **future**, that the apostles would "receive power when the Holy Spirit comes" to enable them to be visible and super effective "witnesses" to the resurrected Jesus' continuing ministry.

And so far in Acts everything about the Holy Spirit has been dramatic - the Spirit's arrival with a gale force wind and fire, followed by thousands responding to the apostles' message, followed by the healing of the man crippled from birth, followed by Peter standing up to the entire Jewish religious establishment, followed by the shaking of the building in response to the church's prayer in Acts 4:24-30, that God would power up the apostles to ignore threats, keep on preaching boldly about Jesus being resurrected, and do more "healing and miraculous signs and wonders."

And you realize, "Wow, this is the kind of power God gave to the church," and wishfully think, "If only that could happen today too. Would it ever wake people up to the resurrection of Jesus being real." But in the next few verses in Acts 4 and 5 there's something else being put into place by the Holy Spirit that's just as important as dramatic healings and buildings shaking, and just as effective in witnessing to Jesus being alive and what he's up to since his resurrection.

It's introduced in a sudden change of pace and scenery in **Acts 4:32**, when Luke tells us, "All the believers were **one in heart and mind.**"

There are two major threads being woven by the Holy Spirit through the book of Acts - the one already covered in dramatic fashion in **verse 33**, that “With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus,” - but right alongside that, in **verses 32 and 34**, we also get to see what was happening to those who responded to the apostles’ message.

In **verse 32**, “No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own (for) they shared everything they had,” so that, **verse 34**, “There were no needy persons among them.” So on the one hand we see power for bold preaching, but on the other hand softness and kindness toward each other in the church, and it’s these two threads running alongside each other that makes the church’s witness to the mind and heart of the resurrected Jesus so real.

So when Luke says “much grace was on them all” in **verse 33**, he’s including **both** parts of grace, as both power and kindness, because both are being brought to vivid and visible life by the Holy Spirit in the church.

The kindness part of grace really became “vivid and visible” in **verse 34**, because some in this newly hatched church “who owned lands or houses sold them” and “the money from the sales....was distributed to anyone as he had need.” In a culture where status and self-image were based on what you owned, and being wealthy was highly sought after, this was stunning. It displayed a totally different attitude to ownership and material possessions, that said, “People are more important than things.” Or put another way, “The value of what I own is in what it gives me to help and love other people.”

It was that kind of revolutionary thinking that provided clear witness to the heart and mind of Jesus that the Holy Spirit was now filling the church with. And in such **huge contrast to the culture** that it would have to be included in the “miraculous signs and wonders” the church had prayed for in **verse 30**. And here already that prayer was being answered in a big way.

Because no one was laying down a law here that “All Christians must sell what they own.” It was being done willingly and spontaneously. But what a bold move too, because imagine the shock rippling through the neighbourhood when people found out what you were selling up for. You were totally flouting the norm, because who in their right mind would give up the things they hold most dear, like security in money and property, for the sake of others?

Ah, but was it sensible selling up everything you owned in a great spontaneous act of generosity, because that would leave you in need too, then, wouldn’t it? Is this what it meant, though?

Well, this is where a peek at the Greek helps, because the Greek words in this verse lean toward a gradual liquidation of assets by those in a position to do so, which the NIV translation also recognizes in saying “From time to time” in **verse 34**. So bit by bit, or from time to time, money was trickling in, depending on which assets could be liquidated quickly or gradually. So this wasn’t throwing caution to the wind; it involved careful planning and wisdom.

So, again we get some insight into how the Holy Spirit operates in the church. There was no pressure or obligation here to give. It was being done cheerfully by those who could (as in 2 Corinthians 9:7). But there was some real sacrifice here too, because only the rich elite had total legal right to own land and houses. The rich, therefore, were the only ones who had security.

And being a rich Jew in Jerusalem meant you lived in the most desirable locations in the top city in the land. To be willing to give that up was like Jesus’ willingness to “empty” himself of all he had as the glorious Son of God in heaven. So this was HIS heart and mind at work in the church here, and a highly VISIBLE witness to it too, just as Jesus said would happen when the Holy Spirit came.

And “putting the money at the apostles’ feet” in **verse 35**, indicates a wonderful trust in the apostles too, that they wouldn’t siphon off a bit for themselves, or knock off 50% for administrative costs, or buy their own mansions. All the money coming in went to help those in the church in need, where everybody’s needs were known, no one had to beg for help. and there was joy in being able to help others out.

We see that joy in “Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus,” in **verse 36**, who was actually given the nickname “Barnabas, Son of Encouragement” by the apostles, because he was so concerned for people. It’s not surprising, then, that Barnabas was among those who “sold a field he owned” to meet the needs of others, **verse 37**, “and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.”

We see that same spirit of Barnabas in operation today too, in the “Barnabas Fund” which channels aid to Christians in over 50 countries. And it’s Christians to Christians too, just like it was in Acts 4. It’s important to note, then, that when it comes to charity the Holy Spirit’s priority is to **aid our fellow Christians**, not to solving social problems in the community. That’s not to say we shouldn’t help in the community if we can and want to, but, being man-made, charities are open to embezzlement and deceit. And deceit where money is involved is a powerful temptation, as we’re about to find out from the Holy Spirit in Chapter 5, in the story of **Ananias and his wife Sapphira**:

Because, “with his wife’s full knowledge,” Acts 5:1-2, Ananias sold a piece of their property, but “kept back part of the money for himself.” Somehow Peter got wind of it, so he asks Ananias in verse 3, “how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit?”

So instead of being filled with the Holy Spirit like Barnabas, here was a man in the church filled with the spirit of Satan instead, the visible evidence of which was deceit, the irony being that **there was actually no need for Ananias to be deceitful**. Because as Peter points out in verse 4, Ananias’ land belonged to him, and so did the money if he sold it. No one was putting any pressure on Ananias to sell, or making him feel guilty for not giving.

But Ananias wanted to **give the impression** he was such a giving person, by making it look like he was giving all the sale money to Peter. And now we learn the seriousness of such deceit, because right after being told by Peter in verse 4 that Ananias had “lied to God,” he “fell down and died,” verse 5. And three hours later the same thing happened to wife Sapphira too (verses 7-10). Not surprisingly, “Great fear seized the whole church” when they heard what had happened” (verses 5 and 11) - but what HAD happened, exactly?

It was **the first hint of a counterfeit Christianity**, that looks good but it’s a fake. Ananias tried to fake who he was in a show of religiosity, but the Holy Spirit was having none of it, because the minute we pretend to be something we’re not we’re just like the world, where dishonesty and misinformation destroy trust, and when trust is broken it’s the death of a community.

The Holy Spirit, meanwhile, was creating a group of people who were “one in heart and mind” to make them the one place on the planet where you could be utterly open and genuine, with no obligation or peer pressure to be someone you weren’t. Ananias, for instance, didn’t have to give any money if he didn’t want to, but he wanted to put on an **appearance** of spirituality - perhaps like we do when asked how we are and we say, “Fine,” even when we’re not fine, because what Christian wants to admit to having problems? So we carry on pretending to be somebody we aren’t.

Well, take a hint from Ananias dying, that it’s the death of a church if the people in it cannot be real and share each others’ true heart and mind. No wonder Christianity seems so dead to people, if all it presents to them is a show of religiosity to make it look good. But that, according to Peter, is exactly what being “filled with the spirit of Satan” does to people. And the Holy Spirit is making that known right off the bat here, because Ananias was just the first in all sorts of fakes coming up in the future too. But thanks to the Spirit in these verses, we’ve been equipped to recognize the difference....