

A Picture of a Great Church

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Turning the World Upside Down / Church; Jesus gives the great commission; Love; Care; Share; Faithfulness / Acts 4:32-37

The picture of a great church in Acts 4:32-37 shows us that the church was faithful in two key areas.

Introduction

When you think of a great church, what comes to mind?

We live in a day in which there is a lot of confusion over this question.

Many churches are a reflection of our society which has become satiated with entertainment.

Neil Postman, in his profound book titled, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, wrote:

Toward the end of the nineteenth century... the Age of Exposition began to pass, and the early signs of its replacement could be discerned. Its replacement was to be the Age of Show Business (Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* [New York: Penguin, 1985], 63).

In show business, truth is irrelevant; what matters is whether we are entertained.

Substance counts for little; style is everything.

In the words of Marshall McLuhan, “The medium is the message.”

Unfortunately, that kind of thinking now rules the church as surely as it does the world.

One of the most bizarre examples of a well-known church confused about its role in the world came from a May 13, 1991 article in *The Wall Street Journal*.

The article described the church’s attempt “to perk up attendance at Sunday evening services”:

The church staged a wrestling match, featuring church employees. To train for the event, 10 game employees got lessons from Tugboat Taylor, a former professional wrestler, in pulling hair, kicking shins, and tossing bodies around without doing real harm (R. Gustav Niebuhr, “Mighty Fortresses: Megachurches Strive to Be All Things to All Parishioners,” *The Wall Street Journal* [13 May 1991], A6).

Seriously? The staff members may not have been harmed. But what kind of harm was done to the church of Jesus Christ?

I don’t know the name of the church that pulled this disgraceful stunt.

One is tempted to think that it took place in a church with only a handful of people in attendance.

However, this stunt took place in one of the five largest churches in America at a Sunday evening service.

Sadly, far too many evangelical churches in the United States find less than biblical ways to enhance attendance at their services.

Some assert that so long as the Bible is preached, then the medium does not matter.

That is utter nonsense.

As John MacArthur aptly notes:

If an entertaining medium is the key to winning people, why not go all out? Why not have a real carnival? A tattooed acrobat on a high wire could juggle chainsaws and shout Bible verses while a trick dog balanced on his head. That would draw a crowd. And the *content* of the message would still be biblical. It’s a bizarre scenario, but one that illustrates how the medium can cheapen and corrupt the message (John F. MacArthur Jr., *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993], 69).

Too many church leaders believe that to win the lost one must attract them with some form of entertainment.

Dr. Harry Reeder used to say, “If you win people by entertainment, then you are going to have to keep them with entertainment.”

I could go on with other examples, but I must stop.

What does a great church look like?

That's the question I would like to answer today.

I suggest that we find a picture of a great church in [Acts 4:32-37](#).

Now, this was not a perfect church, for in the next pericope which we shall study next time, we shall see that there was sin even in that church.

Nevertheless, Luke, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has given us a picture of a great church in [Acts 4:32-37](#).

Luke told us that the first-century Christians were turning the world upside down (see [Acts 17:6](#)).

The first-century church was exploding with growth.

Three thousand people were converted on the Day of Pentecost and added to the church ([Acts 2:41](#)).

Within two or three months, according to most commentators, that number had swelled to at least five thousand people ([Acts 4:4](#)).

God was blessing the church with extraordinary growth.

What was the reason for the growth?

Scripture

Let's read [Acts 4:32-37](#):

³² Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of

encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus,³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Lesson

The extraordinary growth of the first-century church was fundamentally a fulfillment of Jesus' own words, in which he stated, "I will build my church" ([Matthew 16:18](#)).

Moreover, the first-century church continued "with all that Jesus began to do and teach" ([Acts 1:1](#)).

The growth of the church, then, was not due to the apostles' ability and the believers' ingenuity but, rather, was due to the sovereign will of God.

Although Jesus was building the church for which he died, the apostles and believers nevertheless were faithful to him and his calling on their lives.

The picture of a great church in [Acts 4:32-37](#) shows us that the church was faithful in two key areas.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Church Was Faithful in Its Commitment to the Great Commandment (4:32; 34-37)
2. The Church Was Faithful in Its Commitment to the Great Commission (4:33)

I. The Church Was Faithful in Its Commitment to the Great Commandment (4:32; 34-37)

First, the church was faithful in its commitment to the Great Commandment.

The religious leaders in Jesus' day often tried to trip him up. Jesus was frequently in conflict with them.

One day, hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" In other words, he

wanted to know which commandment summarized the entire canon of Scripture.

Jesus replied: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets” ([Matthew 22:34-40](#)).

For three years Jesus taught the people the meaning of these two commandments.

Then he went to the cross and died for his people. He died so that God’s love could be poured into the hearts of the people for which he died.

In response, believers were then enabled to love God and one another.

Luke’s picture of the church in [Acts 4:32-37](#) is a beautiful expression of the commandment to love one another.

Luke said in verse 32, **“Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.”**

He continued in verses 34-35 by saying, **“There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”**

This incredible expression of love was then illustrated in verses 36-36, where we read, **“Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.”**

Although Luke did not state it, the believers clearly loved God.

The apostle John wrote in [1 John 4:20](#), “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”

The tangible, demonstrable expression of the believers’ love for one another was a clear indication that they also loved God.

Brothers and sisters, one reason for the first-century church's greatness was because it had a great commitment to the Great Commandment.

And did you notice how radical the believer's love for one another was?

Luke said that **“they had everything in common.”** The *NIV* says that “they shared everything they had.”

Their love for one another was so great that **“there was not a needy person among them.”** They went so far as to sell their lands or houses and give the money to the apostles.

Why?

Luke said that **“it was distributed to each as any had need.”**

Their love for one another was as remarkable as it was radical.

Chuck Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship, illustrates this kind of radical love. He wrote some years ago:

“The Lord has been with me.”

“Praise you, Lord.”

“Hallelujah!”

“Thank you, Jesus.”

Sound like a church service? A good rousing Pentecostal one at that!

No, if you tuned into NBC's *Dateline* last week, you heard these words on television.

It was a rare instance, and I mean rare, of Christians NOT being portrayed as hypocrites—as poor, ignorant, and easy to command.

Instead, millions of Americans watched one of the most powerful stories of Christian love and sacrifice that I've ever seen.

The *Dateline* story was about Toni Whatley of Cleveland, Ohio, a black woman who has been on dialysis for five years.

To continue living a normal life, Whatley needed a kidney transplant.

But it would take a miracle for her to get one.

Dateline then introduced us to Diana Harrill, a white woman who belongs to the same church Toni belongs to—First Assembly of God in Cleveland.

Diana knew Toni because both sang in the choir.

About a year ago Diana took part in a 40-day church fast, which included intense prayer.

To her surprise, she told *Dateline*, “Toni’s name came very strongly into my mind.”

Diana questioned Toni about her condition and began to understand how much suffering Toni had endured.

As Diana subsequently told *Dateline*, “As I was driving one day to work, the thought just came to my mind, ‘Would you be willing to be a part of the answer for Toni?’ By the fourth time that the thought came to my mind, I began to think, ‘Lord? Is this you speaking to me?’ ”

Donating a kidney is no small thing. It involves undergoing great pain and putting one’s life at risk.

But as Diana explained to *Dateline*’s incredulous reporters, she was willing to donate a kidney to Toni—a woman she barely knew—because “she’s my sister in the Lord.”

Diana shared what she believed to be God’s leading with Toni, who was stunned at the gift Diana was offering.

Months of testing and preparation followed.

Finally, more than a year after Diana began praying for Toni, the transplant operation took place.

The entire congregation rallied behind the two women, praying for the success of the surgery.

Dateline even showed church members in the hospital waiting room, praying and singing and praising the Lord as the surgeries proceeded.

Both operations were a complete success.

Toni's two children told *Dateline* how much they love Diana for what she did for their mother, and *Dateline's* reporter, Rob Stafford, ended the program by saying, "It's been a lesson in just how powerful love can be."

Can this kind of love be at work in our church?

Can the expression of love seen in the first-century church be experienced here at the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church today?

Can a great commitment to the Great Commandment be known at the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church?

I say, "Yes!"

You say, "How?"

Here's how.

We must first recognize that "we love because he [that is, God] first loved us" ([1 John 4:19](#)). We are enabled to love because we have been recipients of the amazing grace and love of God in Jesus Christ.

Practically, we learn how to love in the words of [1 John 3:16-18](#), "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth."

Brothers and sisters, love is not merely verbal but it is active, tangible, and demonstrable.

It is not claiming possessions as our own.

It is sharing material possessions with those in need.

It is selling assets, if need be, to meet needs.

It is giving a kidney.

It is laying down our lives.

Do you know what hindrance you and I face in loving one another?

We wait until we *feel* loving toward each other.

Listen to this: love is an act of the will, not the result of a feeling!

God never tells us to love those we *feel* like loving.

God *commands* us to love one another, and the command is aimed at the will and not the emotions.

Remember this: biblically speaking, feelings must always follow the will, never the other way around.

But what do we do if we don't love one another?

We must go back to the cross. We meditate upon the love of God for us.

We think about our sins. We realize what great sinners we are. We understand that Jesus died for our sins.

We remember that had he not taken our place on the cross, we would have to bear the penalty for our sins ourselves.

We are amazed at the grace of God in extending pardon to us.

And as we realize the amazing grace and incredible love of God toward us, how then can we not love one another?

Brothers and sisters, God is calling each one of us to be faithful in our commitment to the Great Commandment.

II. The Church Was Faithful in Its Commitment to the Great Commission (4:33)

And second, the church was faithful in its commitment to the Great Commission.

Just before his ascension into heaven, Jesus gave his disciples important instructions. Because these instructions were among the last statements made by Jesus to his disciples, they are extremely important.

One such instruction is known as the Great Commission in [Matthew 28:19-20a](#), "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

For two millennia the church of Jesus has seen the making of disciples as its primary purpose.

The chief means of making disciples is through the preaching of the gospel.

Luke tells us in [Acts 4:33](#), **“And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”**

John Calvin maintains that Luke is employing synecdoche, that is, the use of a part in place of the whole.

In other words, the apostles preached the whole gospel, the central feature of which was the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

And in so doing, they were fulfilling the Great Commission.

As men and women were changed by the gospel, they were filled with love for God and one another. And they could not help telling others the good news that Jesus changes lives.

To this day, Jesus continues to build his church.

Christians, committed to the Great Commission, are seeing more and more non-Christians become believers.

Dr. David Barrett, supplied these statistics, indicating the ratio of Bible-believing, or evangelical Christians, to the total number of people in the world:

“One to ninety-nine by 1430; one to forty-nine by 1790; one to thirty-two by 1940; one to twenty-four by 1960; one to nineteen by 1970; one to sixteen by 1980; one to thirteen by 1983; one to eleven by 1986; one to ten by 1989; one to nine by 1993.”

Great churches are always actively committed to the Great Commission.

You can participate in the Great Commission in several ways.

Tell others about how you became a Christian.

Invite family, friends, neighbors, and even strangers to a worship service.

Serve in a ministry in the church. You may not be skilled at sharing the gospel but you may be great in other ways, like making refreshments or taking care of children.

God is calling each one of us to be faithful in our commitment to the Great Commission.

Conclusion

The passage in [Acts 4:32-37](#) gives us a wonderful picture of the first-century church.

This church had two great commitments.

They had a great commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Jesus is still building his church.

He is the Master Builder. And we are the laborers. Our task is to be faithful to his calling.

He calls us to be faithful in our commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

Will you pray for the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church?

Pray that God will give us all a great commitment to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission so that this church can be a great church to his glory. Amen.