

B. Opposition Within the Church (4:32-5:11)

It was observed previously that Luke constructed his Acts narrative in a reciprocating manner. That is to say, his narrative alternates between passages addressing the Church's inward life and its outward mission. This approach is eminently appropriate since the goal of the book of Acts was to recount the origination and development of the New Covenant Church, specifically as its existence and mission fulfill scriptural promise.

- The Scriptures had promised the day when Yahweh would build Himself an everlasting sanctuary by dwelling in His people by His Spirit; not a temple of stone and wood, but a house composed of living stones. The Spirit would erect the divine dwelling place by forming a community of human beings built together on the Cornerstone as one unified, spiritual body through the renewing and transforming power of His indwelling presence.
- The Church, as “the dwelling of God in the Spirit,” is at the heart of scriptural fulfillment, and this everlasting sanctuary was further prophesied to consist of people drawn from every tribe, tongue and nation. By virtue of Messiah’s effectual self-offering, Zion would need to expand her curtains, lengthen her tent cords and strengthen her tent pegs in order to accommodate all who were to become her children (Isaiah 53-54).

Accordingly, Luke’s concern to attest the fulfillment of the Scriptures in Christ had him first looking *inward* to the believing community and to the source and substance of Christ’s Church as Yahweh’s new sanctuary (Acts 1-2). But from there he turned his attention *outward* to the Church’s mission in the world. The Church – being Abraham’s true covenant children – was to fulfill the Abrahamic mandate of mediating God’s blessing to all the earth, serving His intention to gather to Himself an innumerable multitude by the proclamation and power of His gospel.

Jesus had declared that His Father’s everlasting sanctuary was to have its foundation laid in Jerusalem in the persons of His apostles, and that they were to then commence the work of gathering in other “stones,” first in Jerusalem, then outward into Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:1-8; cf. Luke 24:44-49; also Ephesians 2:19-22). In accordance with His covenant with Abraham, God first directed the gospel of His Son to Abraham’s ethnic descendants; only then would it go out to the Gentiles in order to fulfill the patriarch’s destiny as the father of a multitude of nations (Genesis 17:1-7).

Luke understood this salvation-historical dynamic and composed his account accordingly. Beginning with Jesus’ departing promise and charge to His apostles, Luke quickly moved to the Pentecost event as the apex of Jesus’ redemptive work and the source of its renewing fruit. From there he recounted the Jewish mission in Jerusalem (3:1-4:31), which fulfilled the Scripture first by recovering to Yahweh a Jewish remnant as the prophets had predicted (ref. Isaiah 10:20-22, 11:1-16 within the larger context of chapters 7-11; also Jeremiah 23:1-8, 31:1-33:26), but also by initiating Jewish opposition to “the Lord and His Christ,” thereby setting the stage for the global witness to the Gentile world (ref. again Paul’s treatment in Romans 9-11). Israel’s rulers opposed Christ and His gospel, but they could not prevail; their hostile unbelief fulfilled the Scripture as perfectly as did the faith of the Israelite remnant. Yahweh’s house would be constructed and completed because it depended, not on might or power, but upon His Spirit (Zechariah 4:1-10).

And so, having addressed the outward apostolic mission to Israel and its two divergent responses of faith/restoration and unbelief/opposition, Luke again directed his narrative inward to consider the effect of this opposition on the household of faith. The prophets had promised the triumph of Yahweh's work of building Himself an everlasting sanctuary, and Jesus, the quintessential Prophet, had likewise affirmed this by declaring that He would most certainly build His Church; even death itself would not be able to prevail against it (Matthew 16:15-19).

The Lord's true sanctuary was now under construction, and the powers of hell and human enmity were assaulting it with all their resource, even as they had done its Cornerstone. But if these powers had merely understood the prophetic significance of the events and outcome associated with building the second temple (Ezra 1-6), they would have discerned the futility of their opposition. He who sits in the heavens laughs at such vain hubris; Yahweh has triumphantly and everlastingly enthroned His Son-King upon Zion and has given Him the nations for His inheritance and the ends of the earth for His everlasting possession.

Luke highlighted this dimension of messianic fulfillment in his account of Peter's appearance before the Sanhedrin, and it serves as the framework for his subsequent treatment of the saints' petition in light of that encounter. They sought boldness in their continuing proclamation, but also the Spirit's attendance, recognizing that the Spirit's power, and not their witness alone, would build the Lord's house. By a tangible manifestation of His Spirit, Yahweh affirmed that He had heard and would answer their prayer for courage and success in their witness: He would continue to fill them with His Spirit – first, to embolden and empower them for their verbal and supernatural testimony to Jesus' gospel, but secondly, to produce in them the fruit of Jesus' life, thereby enabling them to bear witness to Him as salt and light; as the testimony of a "city set on a hill." The Lord's granting of their petition is the subject of the next context (4:32-37).

1. The praying saints had asked for boldness to continue proclaiming the gospel of Christ crucified, resurrected, ascended and enthroned, and God indicated His consent to their plea by filling them with His Spirit at the close of their prayer. In the subsequent passage Luke recorded God's granting of what the Church had sought from Him that day: "*With great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all*" (4:33).
2. The Lord answered the prayers of His people, but beyond what they asked for. They sought courage and the Spirit's attendance in relation to their public proclamation of the gospel, but God recognized that their witness in Jerusalem extended beyond their words. As much as the apostles' preaching and teaching was vital to God's work in building His sanctuary, the *life witness* of the "living stones" was equally vital.

Thus Luke directed his attention from the Church's outreach to its internal life; the same power of the gospel that was bringing people to faith in Christ by the preached word was also perfecting His life and likeness in the community of faith (4:32, 34-37). Being Abraham's covenant seed, the Church has both the privilege and the responsibility of mediating God's blessing (in reconciliation and restoration) to all men; that work is accomplished not merely from spoken words, but also – perhaps primarily – through the compelling testimony of transformed lives and the production of a heavenly community.

The unity and mutuality of the Christian community bears witness to Christ's work of renewal and restoration, *but only when these dynamics are founded upon and ordered by specific principles*. Many considerations and priorities that are entirely natural act to form and order human communities, including nationality, ethnicity and family relationships, as well as cultural, social, political, and ideological concerns. The mere fact of a tight-knit and deeply committed group of people doesn't indicate a supernatural work of God; community *as such* doesn't testify to the new creation in Christ.

What does bear that testimony is a community formed and ordered by *love*. The reason is evident when love is understood as a divine attribute that exists in the human realm only in the context of renewal in Christ. John insisted that everyone who loves has been born of God, and this truth has two important implications for the present consideration:

- 1) First, it precludes the possibility of a *natural* human community founded upon love. If unregenerate men cannot love, they cannot form a truly loving community – one determined, defined, and ordered by love.
- 2) But for this very reason, a community that *is* characterized by authentic love testifies innately that it is not of this world; it is the product of a divine work – a work in which human beings are made to be what they are not in themselves.

The existence of just such a community in their midst testified to the sons of Israel that the prophesied messianic age of renewal and refreshing had come upon them. The healing of the lame man pointed to this fulfillment, but it was the transformation of human community as manifested in the Church that made it obvious and undeniable. The significance of this cannot be overstated: *The people living in and around Jerusalem (Gentiles and Jews alike) were witnessing a phenomenon never before experienced in the history of the world*; they weren't simply observing people caring for each other; they were witnessing the reality and power of the new creation. They were witnessing nothing less than heaven on earth, evident in Luke's almost surreal description of the Church.

The heart of that description is the otherworldly unity among the believers in Jerusalem. Luke went out of his way to indicate that these individuals were no longer marked by the self-referential self-concern that characterizes men in their fallen state.

- The outcome of Eden's calamity was a human race determined by comprehensive *alienation*, and such alienation leaves men isolated within a fractured self. Fallen human beings cannot love because love requires true intimacy, and alienation and isolation prevent intimacy. Indeed, people cannot even love themselves authentically as God intended, for they are estranged from their true selves.
- Adam's progeny can and do form social structures of various types, but structures that function according to the defining human principles of self-isolation and self-reference. Rather than the true mutuality of "*one heart and soul*" (4:32), all human communities and social structures are marked by *reciprocity*: interpersonal activity that is ultimately driven by self-interest.

In this fallen world, men care for and serve others, but never apart from a self-conscious, self-referential perspective. Their involvement with others may not take the crass form of overt self-interest (i.e., I'll do that for you only if you'll do this for me), but there will always be something of *themselves* in it. It may be the subtlety of simply bringing one's own disposition, ethic, or judgment into interpersonal relations, but no matter how selfless a person's attitudes and actions may appear, he is never free of himself.

In marked contrast to this dynamic of “natural” human social structures, Luke painted a portrait of a community in which people were liberated from self-interest (not perfectly or exhaustively, but truly), enabled by the life of Christ within them to relate to one another (and the world around them) in authentic love.

- a. It is notable that Luke's treatment of this life of love concentrates on the Church's perspective on and use of its material resources. The aptness of this approach is evident in the fact that, because love presupposes (and demands) liberation from self-enslavement, it will always express itself in liberation from *possessiveness*.

Again, all human beings in their fallen state have themselves as their point of reference and ultimate concern in all things. This doesn't imply that they have no thought or concern for anyone except themselves; it does mean that everything outside of themselves (whether things, people, circumstances, situations, etc.) is viewed, assessed and responded to on the basis of how they perceive the particular entity to pertain to them.

With respect to material things, people embrace or reject them based on their perceived personal benefit at that particular point in time (hence the truism, “one man's trash is another man's treasure”). This sense of benefit can take a myriad of forms, from practical usefulness to aesthetic value to a perceived contribution to self-image. But whatever a person believes to be the value of a thing, he always assigns that value relative to himself. The person and the thing are linked together such that the thing effectively becomes an extension of the person. *And as self-interest motivated the attachment in the first place, the same self-interest binds the person to the thing as long as the perceived benefit continues.* (This is the psychology behind “hoarding” as the inability to let go of material things.)

This means that people have no problem divesting themselves of possessions, but only when their perception of the personal benefit of those things is altered or eliminated. So, for instance, people will gladly give away a television set that is still *useful* – i.e., that stills works properly, but only when their attachment to it is broken. And that occurs only its perceived value disappears or is eclipsed, typically by being transferred to another television set.

In their fallen state, human beings do give, and often give generously; some – like Mother Teresa – relinquish everything for the sake of others. Nevertheless, all such giving is never from a heart of genuine love; it always has its ultimate reference point in the giver; it is never entirely divested of self-interest.

- b. Fallen human beings are *possessive* because they are enslaved to self-interest. Furthermore, this is as true of the person who is free of material entanglements as the one who is flagrantly materialistic. In the case of the former, the possessiveness of his self-interest simply assumes other forms, perhaps attachment to his “simple life” unfettered by the encumbrance of things and the distracting nuisance of a busy, complicated existence.

Whether a person has little or much, or whether he desires little or much, it remains that his life is marked by possessiveness because he is self-enslaved. Thus Luke’s focus on possessions in this passage looks beyond the matter of keeping something or giving it away; of supplying the need of another person or turning away from him. *Too often Christians (and commentators) focus on these surface issues and so fail to discern Luke’s point, often to great detriment.*

- Luke’s intention in adding this account to his narrative wasn’t to confront materialism in the Church or instruct Christians in the ethic of giving.
- Much less did he intend to exalt and promote a communal approach to the Christian life in which there is no private property. Tragically, passages such as this have been used to defend (if not prescribe) a communistic Christian social structure, whether at the level of small Christian communes or the social philosophy of Liberation Theology.

Luke’s concern in this context wasn’t with material things and how Christians use them; he meant his readers to look behind those considerations to how possessions and the Christian’s relation to them fit into his existence as a partaker in Christ’s new creation. In a word, **Luke’s concern was with possessiveness rather than possessions:** He was concerned with the profound distinction between the mind of the “natural man” and the mind of Christ – the mind of the “new man” ordered and governed by love.

- c. A closer examination of Luke’s language – especially within the larger context – makes this abundantly clear.
- 1) His first observation is overarching and provides the framework for understanding his subsequent statements: “*The congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul*” (4:32a). The Church’s perspective on possessions was the result, not of a particular philosophy of private property or a religious ethic of giving, but the recognition of an **essential unity** among its members. The saints recognized that they were one body by virtue of their *actual* union with Christ by His indwelling Spirit. Being bona fide members of Christ, they were members of one another.

The early Church didn’t come together to manufacture and enforce a philosophical, confessional or sectarian unity; they understood what it means to be a Christian – to be “in Christ,” and that informed their unity.

- 2) This perspective is further developed in Luke's two corollary statements: "*Not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them*" (4:32b). The early believers discerned their intrinsic oneness resulting from their mutual participation in Christ's life by His indwelling Spirit (John 17:13-21). This existential fact united them in "one heart and soul," which, in turn, expressed itself in the way they ordered their daily lives together. A more open rendering of Luke's language is illuminating: *Not one among them viewed anything of which his life consisted as being his own; each one regarded his life's substance as belonging to the community for the sake of its good.*

Luke wasn't indicating a social structure in the Church in which there was no private property (despite what some English versions may suggest). Again, the renunciation of personal goods is irrelevant to Luke's point; anyone can divest himself of his possessions (1 Corinthians 13:3). It wasn't their property as such that the saints held in common; **it was the very substance of their lives**. Notably, Luke's language is precisely that employed by Jesus when He spoke of the cost of following Him: "*No one of you can be My disciple who does not depart from all of which his life consists*" (ref. Luke 14:27-33; cf. also Matthew 16:24-25).

- 3) It was from this vantage point that the early Christians sold property and provided for the needs of one another (4:34-37). The believers' "community ethic" was nothing more than its practical conformity in all things to its true nature. *The Church was simply being the Church, and in that way it was bearing true witness to Christ.* This was Luke's meaning in this passage, and it is critical to understanding the subsequent context.

In summary, Luke was here highlighting the Church's authentic existence as Christ's Body – an existence defined by the true unity of "faith working through love." As he will show (5:1ff), love doesn't call a person to divest himself of all earthly possessions; it causes him to view every aspect of his life – not just his possessions – as a stewardship entrusted to him by God for His worship and service. This means employing all the substance of one's life for the sake of Christ's kingdom and its fruitfulness in the lives of men – those who don't know Him as well as those who do. In this regard, the Church's witness in the world extends beyond its proclamation of Christ's gospel to its living testimony; *it is in its life of love that the Christian community bears indisputable witness to the new creation Jesus has inaugurated and is perfecting by His Spirit.*

Thus this passage provides an important transition: The Church's witness to Christ was being threatened from the outside by Israel's religious establishment, and the saints sought boldness to stand fast in the face of it. But a threat to the Church's witness was also soon to arise *from within its own ranks* – not opposition to its proclamation, but a challenge to its living witness. In the present verses Luke showed that the Church's crucial witness as a "city set on a hill" is determined by its internal life, specifically the authenticity and vitality of its unity in mutual love (ref. John 13:35); in the next context he will address the threat to this aspect of its testimony.