

3 Vital Characteristics for Cottonwood Bible Church

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Date: 24 May 2015

Preacher: Jim Masters

[0:00] If you would take your Bibles and turn to the book of Acts, Acts chapter 4, if you're visiting with us, pull up that black Bible and chair in front of you and go towards the back to page 94, the very bottom I believe of page 94, you'll find Acts 4, and we're going to study just verses 32 to 37, short passage and yet jam-packed with much.

Acts 4, 32 to 37. Hopefully I won't be botching up in my words. That's just twice. I mean, now it's missing the reading of the scripture.

Sorry about that. Acts 4, 32 to 37, page 94 in that black Bible. I'm going to read and then we'll do our study. The congregation of those who believe were of one heart and soul.

And not one said that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them. And with great power the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus and abundant grace was upon them all.

For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles' feet and they would be distributed to each as any had need.

[1:36] And Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, was also called Barnabas by the apostles, which translated means son of encouragement, and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Quote, I'll have you know that as a child, my nursemaid would never prevent me from taking a walk in the park if I wanted to do so.

And as a man, Adolf Hitler certainly won't. End quote. That was spoken by Winston Churchill. 1940. Defying Germany's repeated bombings of London. Written, that quote, in William Manchester's book, The Last Lion. Actually a three volume set of his life.

Winston Churchill, known as the last lion. Why? Good question. Guess we should read the books, right? I haven't read them, so that's a good question.

[2:46] Why was he? He's known as the last lion. And that's how he's remembered. A monument in history. A major figure during that time period.

True, most of us won't make this kind of impression in history like Winston Churchill. Most of us won't be written down in history books.

We live in the mundane of life. But it doesn't go without asking this question. How will you be remembered?

How will people remember you? Spouse, kids, grandkids. A neighbor maybe. Uncle.

A nephew. How will they remember you? Another question. What about us as a church?

[3:51] How will people remember us as Cottonwood Bible Church? What will we be known as? As a church.

What should we be known as? As we're going through the book of Acts, which tells us just do it. Be who you are. Let God use you to fulfill his mission.

Today we're going to see from our passage, short as it is, yet jam-packed with three vital characteristics for Cottonwood Bible Church. And there's other things we can be a part of.

I understand that. I get that. But from our passage, here's three vital characteristics. For us, at Cottonwood Bible Church, and really, probably for any local church, these should be the top three. Not the only. Definitely vital and important to the church. Or I'll put it differently. Three vital characteristics that should embody us as a church.

[4:59] And I'm just going to give them to you right off the bat. One, we pledge unequivocally to our local assembly. Two, we proclaim powerfully the Lord Jesus Christ.

Three, we provide generously for other believers. Specifically, I'm talking about within the membership. We're focused, and we're caring for each other, providing generously for each other. Now, there's more. I understand that. But if we want to be remembered from this passage, which actually, it's like a reflection again, of what happened in chapter 2, verses 42 to 47.

Luke's bringing this up again, except in a different way. What was the church about? They were devoted to each other. They would proclaim the gospel.

They would provide for each other, within the local church. That's what they were known for.

There's another description, of the love believers have for each other, within God's new community.

[6:13] Again, another way that Luke describes it, he gave it to us in Acts 2, 42 to 47. He's describing it to us again, here in Acts 4, 32 to 37.

42 to 47, yeah, 42 to 47 was the first one, and this one, 32 to 37. Another way to put it, and if you don't get these down, I mean, we're going to go through one by one, so don't worry.

God's new community should be, a group of soul-unifying, Christian-loving, needs-meeting, Jesus-proclaiming people. That's who we should be. And there's, there's, there's the passage right there.

Soul-unifying, Christian-loving, needs-meeting, Jesus-proclaiming people. That's what we should be known as. That's what people should remember us as. Another display of believers, having such love for each other, within God's new community.

The generosity of early Christians, displayed toward each other. It's just phenomenal. And they weren't just like, good buddies. Like, let's go have a beer together, type stuff.

[7:27] It was a reflection of God Himself, of the very Gospel. God was so generous, to give to sinners, and save them, and that's how they display that to each other.

There was such a connection, and devotion, that they had to each other. As God gave Himself, so His people gave to each other. The sign of God's grace, at work in our lives, is the sharing of, material blessings with each other.

Generously giving, sharing so as to provide, the right care, for the needs of those in the community. Unity. You can even put it this way, three characteristics.

Unity, caring, and speaking. You can put it like that. Unity, care, and speak. You can put those three like that. So let's go through one by one.

We'll start first. We pledge unequivocally, to our local assembly. Or in other words, we're totally devoted to each other. Another way to put that. You gotta have all the P's, and all the LY's.

[8:31] Preachers, we do weird stuff like that. We have fun with stuff like that. Thesoruses are really fun to look through. Pledge unequivocally, to our local assembly. Verse 32, And the congregation of those, who believe, were of one heart and soul.

And not one said, that anything belonging to him, was his own. But all things were common property to them. God's new community, was deliberately, and intentionally, devoted and committed to each other.

Are we a church, where people can tell, we're truly devoted to each other, in care and love? Are we known for that? Community life was just thriving.

Because they were united together, in heart, and soul. They were thinking along the same lines. One mind.

One will. One purpose. Deliberate about this. Intentional about this. Intentionally committed, and devoted to each other.

[9:37] Are we a church like that? This unity, of heart, describes, real, true, genuine friendship, committed to each other.

True friendship. Genuine friendship. And the greatest proof, of this unity, the greatest proof, of this friendship, was in the sharing, of their resources.

They care for each other, to help other Christians, in need. That's how they showed their devotion. We're going to see that. That's point three. We'll see that in a moment, specifically. You see the word common.

All things were common property to them. The root word, comes from the word koinonia. In other words, they were sharing in something, with each other.

This is true fellowship. Partnering, sharing, connecting, joining. What shows the depth, of their connection together, was their absolute devotion, to each other.

[10:37] Now, mind you, some people say, this is the first, part of communism, in the Bible. This wasn't a, communistic, Marxist community.

In which people, are forced to give, and they're not allowed, to own land. That's not, what's going on here. Communistic, Marxism, socialism, that's limited, by governments, by legislation.

That's not, what you have here. Instead, they voluntarily, gave a great deal, of their possessions, for the use of all. It was a part, it was just their attitude. Just, this is how they, they acted, they thought. The new community, was concerned, about meeting, the needs, of their members. They didn't think, of the resources, as only to benefit themselves, but to benefit others. And the only way, they can do this, is by spending time, with each other, to find out needs.

Let me ask you, some tough questions. Members, how are we supposed, to know what others, needs are, if we're not around, or not involved?

[11:49] Or we come to, one service? See, this begs the fact, that the members, of a local church, are regularly, meeting together, in various forms, and functions.

Because they just, care about each other. I mean, like I said, we, we, we dove into that, in Acts 2, 42 to 47.

I mean, they were coming to the word, fellowshiping, praying. And we spoke about this, whereby you as members, need to reach out, to each other, in different forms, and functions, to connect with each other, in deeper relational ways.

We've given you two, Wednesdays and Sundays. Those are two ways. But you must know each other, in order to care for each other. And you can't do this, unless you're spending time, with each other.

Because that's how you're, going to know the needs, right? And that's what we should be known by. We should be known as a church, we pledge unequivocally, to each other.

[12:57] We're so devoted, to each other. Number two, we proclaim powerfully, the Lord Jesus Christ. We're known by sound doctrine.

We're known by the gospel. Verse 33, with great power, the apostles were giving witness, to the resurrection, of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace, was upon them all. Interesting, this is right in the middle of it.

I find that fascinating. Luke's talking about, they're devoted to each other. And then, at 34 to 37, he starts talking about them, giving generously.

But right in the middle, the apostles are proclaiming, the Lord Jesus Christ, powerfully. We are known, to proclaim the gospel to others.

It's part of our DNA. It's just what we do. The apostles, what were they doing? Testifying of the resurrection, of the Lord Jesus Christ, with great power.

[13:59] Great power and grace, was upon them. And God's grace, signified his presence, and enablement for them, to testify to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And the focus, is on their witness. The focus is not, on the miracles. The miracles simply authenticated, what they were speaking, was God revealing. But the focus here, is upon the fact, that they were powerfully, proclaiming the gospel.

It's interesting. So what is it, that motivated the early church, to the kind of generosity, that we're going to see, in the next couple of verses, is the powerful preaching, of the gospel.

It's not powerfully, preaching on money. It's not powerfully, preaching on giving. I think within the first year, that I was here, at that time, First Southern Baptist Church, one of the then deacons, said, you know, you should do a message, on giving.

I said, I'm not going to do that. Well you really need, to talk about giving. I said, if it's in the text, I'll talk about it in the text, but I'm not going to do, a message on giving. I'm not going to do that. It doesn't come, from a powerful message, on giving.

[15:11] It comes from, powerfully preaching, the gospel. It's because God's grace, gracious generosity, in the giving of his son, on behalf of sinners. I mean, does that not spur us, on to give?

The fact that God, has given to us, so much. God is the greatest, giver in the universe. Giving his eternal son, on behalf of sinners, to show he is, a giving generous God.

God is just, and righteous, in all that he does. He's our creator. And we stand before him, condemned. Everyone. People say, you believe homosexuals, go to hell?

I say, no, I believe everybody, should go to hell. We all, deserve hell. And yet, God is so gracious, and kind. He's so compassionate, that he sent his eternal son, who lived perfectly, was crucified, as a substitute for sinners.

God unleashed his anger, upon his son, in the place of sinners. And he was so satisfied, with that, that he resurrected him, from the dead.

[16 : 23] For all those, that turn away, from their sin, and put their trust, in Jesus alone. That's the gospel. That's your generous God. That's him. That's the generous God, we serve.

Are you here, today? And you're not, a follower of Jesus. God is gracious, and kind, to bring forgiveness, of sins, in the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord. He'll forgive you.

He's the only way, to have a relationship, with God. Come to the Lord, Jesus Christ, repent, and trust in him, and you will be saved. You will find out, that God, is not some huge, ogre.

God is like this, open his arms, and wide, to sinners. He says, now is the time, to come to me, and I will forgive you, and transform you, and you'll have, such satisfaction, of life.

That you've never, experienced before. So God, was showing his grace, to the apostles, as they were speaking, they were speaking, the gospel. And really, his grace, upon the whole community.

[17 : 27] Abundant grace, to the whole community. God was showing, his favor, to all his people, as they're proclaiming, the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be praised. So we, then, should be known, as a church, that is committed, to telling people, the gospel, the good news, of the Lord Jesus.

And this begs, teaching the right things, about the Lord Jesus Christ. That we will be a church, a local church, committed to sound doctrine. The sound teaching, of Jesus Christ.

That's what we should be about. That's what we should be known as. People know us, as what first, they know that, those people are just, they're so devoted, to each other.

But man, they sure do talk about, Jesus Christ. They speak about, the Lord Jesus Christ. They speak about his word. They speak about the Bible. All they bring about, the Bible, Bible, Bible, that's all they talk about.

That's what we should be known as. People should know us like that. And we're devoted, to each other. We powerfully preach, the gospel. And third, we provide generously, for other believers.

[18 : 36] And I say, specifically members, as a local church, because when you become a member, you're saying, I'm committed to this church. That's why membership is there. It's, I'm committed to this church, so when you're committed, we're providing generously, for other believers.

That's what it's known as. That's what we do. 34 to 35. There was not a needy person, among them. If all who were owners, of land or houses, would sell them, and bring the proceeds, of the sales, and lay them, at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed, to each as any, had need. God's favor, was being shown, as believers were caring, for each other. So much so, that there was no needy person, among them.

They pulled their resources, to meet the needs, of the community. Literally, no one lacked, in God's new community. Their needs were met. This shows their devotion, to God, and to each other.

They thought of each other, as true friends, family, blood. So, why was there, no needy person, among them?

[19 : 46] What did they do, specifically? Those who were, owners of land, or possessions, would sell, what they had, and bring the proceeds, to the apostles, who oversaw, the distribution, of those resources, to those in need.

Now, they weren't selling, everything all at once, necessarily. They gradually, sold stuff. But what if they were?

What if they were, selling everything, at one time? Either way, they truly cared, for each other. They showed it, by caring, for those needs. But why, were people in need?

Maybe, were probably poor. Some, some were probably, sticking around, after Pentecost, deciding to stay, in Jerusalem, so they didn't have, any jobs. Maybe, because, of persecution.

They were socially, isolated, they needed resources. Those are just, a couple of reasons. We're not told. Luke doesn't tell us, he didn't give us, those details. He just said, people were in need. And this is a big deal, too.

[20 : 52] So, anybody had land, would sell it, and bring the proceeds. Now, in the Greco-Roman world, ownership of land, was the main source, of wealth, and social standing. So, for someone to sell, that land, would be a major sacrifice, of future retirement, and social standing.

It's kind of, even similar today, right? I mean, if you have, if you're retiring, you know, if you, if you, the big deal, is to be able to pay off, what? The house, right?

The mortgage, you pay off the mortgage, you pay off the house, it's done. It's like, that's the retirement. So, if someone, they took that house, and they sold that, and said, hey, you know, here's the money, distribute to those, who anybody has need.

Wow. Wow. This is devotion. Again, it's not some communistic thing. Socialism, that's not what it is. They're voluntarily doing this. They would sell these things, giving control of the resources, the apostles. At first, the apostles were the one overseeing this.

[22:01] Later on, we're going to see in the book of Acts, that they would delegate the responsibility. So, when we reach out to others, we reach out to each other in these ways, we display the gospel to our community.

We love each other. Our love for each other displays Christ. It displays the Lord Jesus Christ. John 13, 34 and 35, a new commandment I will give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.

By this, all men will know that you're my disciples, if you have love for one another. By this, people will know that you're really, truly followers of Jesus, if you love each other. How can we be a testimony, to the city of Cottonwood, in our devotion to each other, generously giving to each other? It's trendy now, though. It's trendy now for churches to do, community projects. To try to make inroads, into their city, right?

A local church will paint a school building, decorate particular classrooms. They may get involved in city projects, like trash pickup. They may, as a church, volunteer to help the hungry, or feed the poor, or be involved in other types, of social justice causes.

[23:28] Now, these things are not bad. I mean, don't think of it as, bad versus good. Those things, it's not about bad versus good. It's about, these are good things, versus, what should we be known as, as a church?

I mean, what's our mission as a church? Is it to be involved in social justice? And it's not that we don't ever get involved, in these different causes.

What has happened, though, is that churches, churches, even Southern Baptist churches, have bought into the idea, that non-Christians will see our love for them, and the Lord Jesus, if we're involved in social justice?

The problem is, that's nowhere in the New Testament, specifically in the book of Acts. What's our mission, then? What are we supposed to be doing?

What should be our main focus, as a church, as a community, God's new community? I have a quote up here for you, from, what is the mission of the church, by Kevin DeYoung?

[24:40] Our mission, quote, go into the world, and make disciples, by declaring the gospel, of Jesus Christ, and the power of the spirit, and gathering these disciples, into churches, that they might worship the Lord, and obey his commands, now, and in eternity, through the glory, of God the Father.

That's our mission. That should be our focus. Unfortunately, churches, and again, it's not necessarily, bad or evil, although it can become that.

Churches get mixed up, into social justice. And what will happen is, the second point, that we looked at, proclaiming the Lord Jesus Christ, that begins, to fall by the wayside.

Because now, it's just about social justice, about doing some good things, for people. And yet, you can do really good things, for people, which are really good things, but if you don't tell them, the gospel, then they're still going to go to hell. And what makes us different, from the Episcopalian church, that totally blows off, the virgin birth, blows off, the resurrection of Jesus, blows off, anything having to do, with supernaturalism, what makes us different, from them, if all we're doing, is social justice.

Nothing. Nothing. We're just another church like that, that just, liberal church, that doesn't take the, the Bible, as the inerrant word of God, and proclaim to people, unless you repent, and turn to Jesus Christ, you will face, eternal judgment in hell.

[26:15] They don't speak that, and never will. Friends, we don't display, the love of the Lord Jesus, by painting a building, in a local school, doing community projects, or feeding the poor necessarily.

If we want to truly display, gospel love of the Lord Jesus, it will be shown, in our love for each other. That's what Jesus said. All men will know, that you're my disciples, if you have love for one another. If you really are caring, for each other. And Jesus was speaking, to his disciples. He said, if you guys love each other, and you guys are supposed, to be proclaiming Christ, and everybody's, they're going to listen, to your messages.

Those people, if you love each other, that's what they're going to know, you truly believe in me. That you follow me. And see, this is what was happening.

I mean, think about this. This is crazy. White people, sacrificing themselves, for African Americans. That'd be odd, wouldn't it, there in Georgia.

[27 : 29] Blacks, caring for whites. Israelis, taking care of Palestinians. Whoa, now come on, now, come on, now, that's, that's going too far.

See, that's what we're talking about. Christ, unifies us together, and when they see, this generosity, generous giving, of other members, within this local church, and that they're just, connected to each other, and, and saying, doing this for each other, I mean, that just tells the world, this is weird.

They're different. They would spend time, with each other, as well as, hold things in common, with each other, true, deep fellowship, mutual care, for each other, solid love, and compassion, by doing what they, can do, to generously fulfill, any material needs, as the needs would come up.

That's what they were known for. I mean, that's just weird. It's just odd. People don't do that. I mean, you do that for, oh yeah, you do that for the white guy, does it for the white guy, but, African Americans?

No. Now you're, now you're talking. Hispanics to Asians? Now you're talking, something different. Again, this passage, is not telling us, you shouldn't own land.

[28 : 48] This passage, is not telling you, a really good Christian, will sell their house. So please, don't say, I believe God, sold me, will sell my house. No, don't, don't do that. I mean, if he does, okay, that's up to you, but that's not what the passage, is talking about.

The idea is, those of wealth, or social standing, they should cross, social barriers, and benefit Christians, in need. That's what the passage, is talking about.

Three elements, were most important, to them, as the early church. Unity, mission, and each other. And those three elements, that's what draws, the unsaved.

That's attractive. Because you only scratch, my back, if I scratch yours, right? That's the way it is. That's the way they act.

That's the way they are. That's how they roll. But I'll scratch your back, even if you don't mind. That's different. It's different.

[29 : 53] And that's what shows, that we have a genuine relation, with God, and with each other. Is when there's, generous giving, to each other. Notice, what Luke does, in verse 36, he gives us an example.

Joseph, a Levite, Cyprian birth, also called Barabbas, by the apostles, means, son of encouragement. Levites were often wealthy, educated, though not all were priests.

But Levites, they often, they served in the temple, they kept watch over the gates, they policed the area, in the temple. They gave instruction, they would copy the Torah. So here you have Barnabas, probably wealthy.

Probably, obviously had land, so he had some money. His name meant, son of encouragement, which was a good summary, about how he would function, throughout the book, actually.

What the community was doing, Barnabas was doing, 37. He owned a track of land, sold it, brought the money, laid it at the apostles' feet. In the beginning, Barnabas here, he's known as one, who was very kind, and generous to others.

[31 : 12] And as the book of Acts, unfolds, you'll hear more about Barnabas, he would be mightily used, in other ways. But first, Barnabas's character, he gave out of his, thanksgiving to God, and concern for God's people.

And that's, what motivates us, to do this generous giving, is the very gospel, that we proclaim. That motivates me, to do this. That motivated Barnabas, to do this.

Interesting, it's vitally important, to have solid examples, to lead the people. Barnabas was an example, of a servant leader, who gave himself, on behalf of others. He was a disciple of Jesus, who displayed the very gospel, he proclaimed.

I mean, we couldn't even make this, a fourth point, servant leadership. We couldn't even have that, as a way for us, to be described as a church, known as a church, remembered as a church. Servant leadership.

So here you have, God's new community, united in heart and soul. They were committed, to each other, by voluntarily, pooling their resources together, to care for the needs, within the community. [32 : 25] They declared, God's word powerfully, and made sure, the basic needs were met. That's what they were about. As the Lord Jesus Christ, brings reconciliation, and relationship with God, God's community, we reflect these as well.

We're a reflection of that. We display this, by what God has done, in our own lives, we're displaying that to others. As God has given so much for us, we're giving that to each other. And people see this, and it's awkward to them.

Even going back to chapter 2, breaking bread from house to house, they're taking their meals together, with gladness, sincerity of heart, praising God, having favor with all the people. With one mind they're doing this.

Acts 2, 42 through 47. So God's new community, is committed to both mission, and each other. Committed to mission, and committed to each other. So, when we're dead and gone, hopefully Cottonwood Bible Church, will continue to be a lampstand, in this community.

[33 : 36] We will continue, keeping a lampstand here, in the city of Cottonwood. What will we be known as? Hopefully other things. But here's three vital characteristics.

Unequivocal loyalty to each other. We proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ, solid doctrine. And there's generous giving towards each other.

Generously giving to each other, and we display that love to each other, by just caring for one another. And we do that, because we're just getting to know each other, and just such relational bonds, that we have with each other. That's what we should be known as, as a church.

So what I'll let you do at this time, is to think, and to ponder, what we see in God's work. Let's have a few moments of silence, so you can consider, and pray, and think through, what we've seen in the book of Acts, here in chapter four.

Maybe things of, the Spirit of God has convicted you, you can confess that, and see ways where, where things can change your life, where God can transform you.

[34 : 49] We'll take a few moments of silence, for you to ponder what we've seen here, and then we'll do our time of giving. We'll sing our last two songs, in our closing prayer.

Let's sit, and let's think. Let's pray.