

Rebuilding the Church

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[0 : 00] chapter 4. So, Acts chapter 4, beginning at verse 23.

Acts 4, beginning at verse 23. Now hear God's word. When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them.

And when they'd heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Spirit, Why did the Gentiles rage and the people's plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed. For truly in this city they were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak the word with all boldness. While you stretch out your hand to heal and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.

[1 : 49] And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

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.

And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. 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.

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.

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife's knowledge, he kept back for himself some of the proceeds, and brought only part of it, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

[3 : 18] But Peter said to Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it remain your own?

And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God.

When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last, and great fear came upon all who heard of it. The young men rose, wrapped him up, and carried him out, and buried him.

After an interval of about three hours, his wife came in, not knowing what had happened, and Peter said to her, tell me, whether you sold the land for so much?

And she said, yes, for so much. But Peter said to her, how is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.

[4 : 25] Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last, and when the young man came, they found her dead. And they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard these things.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Remember, the aim of every message is always to say what the Bible says, that the point of the message is actually the point of the passage that we just read.

As you're turning there, I've been thinking this week on what could be said after last week. You know, what could be proclaimed? What could be taught after our day of prayer? What would be appropriate this Sunday after last Sunday? What would be sensitive this Sunday to preach on after last Sunday's day of prayer and communion? What would be the most important thing for us to hear as a church this week after last week? And it seems as though, to find that message, we go to the very beginning of the church, where the church has its struggles with the world, but its unity within the fellowship and God protecting the fellowship.

[5 : 45] And I really do believe that after last Sunday evening, there was a tangible difference in the fellowship, that people knew and understood that this is new.

The old is gone, the new has come for the fellowship. I really believe that deep in my heart. And I hope you do too. And so the over or theme of this whole message is really under one heading. In a tough world, you need a great church. In a world that is difficult, the church needs to be a wonderful place to belong.

And the tougher the world gets, the strength of the church needs to be at its most powerful. Last week, we had a day of prayer, and we began by giving praise and thanksgiving, and we could have continued with that for the whole day.

But then we asked for forgiveness and reconciliation and repentance and restoration. We asked for blessing. We asked for the salvation of others. We asked God for unity and growth.

[6 : 57] And towards the end of the day, we broke bread with one another. And we affirmed that that was a line drawn in the sand. That everything up to that line previously is done with.

And everything from that line last Sunday evening forward is new for us as a fellowship. For those of you who are not here, we missed you.

But please understand, you belong to a new church. It's the same church, but it's a new church. We've repented. We've believed. We've prayed for restoration and blessing.

And we must treat what we have as just that. That we now belong to a new church. That's what restoration is about.

And so the calling here this morning is to, one, recognize that, and two, most importantly, keep it that way. I've got a temptation of that if I only ever buy brown shoes, you may have noticed, I just, yeah, perhaps a little bit of OCD creeping in.

[8 : 14] I'm not quite sure. But I've got a real bad habit that if I ever get Clark's vouchers, and I go out and buy a pair of shoes, they stay in the box for about a year. You know, because I'm just afraid of just wrecking them.

And then once they're wrecked, I don't mind after that. It's like notebooks. If I make a mistake on the first page, I just can't use the rest of the notebook. I mean, it's just, it's awful, really.

But the church is way more precious than a pair of shoes or a notebook. Your life is way more precious than a pair of shoes or a notebook. And so if we go to that extent to protect the things that we have that really don't mean anything, really, then how much further should we go to protect what God has given us?

In a tough world, the church needs to be a fantastic place, protected by the people who it's been given to.

So the church can't afford to be like the world, and it can't afford to be like the world for a couple of different reasons.

[9 : 23] You remember that when God did create the world, and sin entered into the world that God created into the Garden of Eden, he didn't do anything to the Garden of Eden as such as he did remove the people who were in it.

The place was meant for fellowship and for faithfulness, and they had broken that fellowship, and they had broken it by unfaithfulness, sin, and they were sent out of the Garden.

And you get a picture of that here with Ananias and Sapphira. And so in a difficult world, the church almost needs to be like the Garden of Eden.

It needs to be the place where faithfulness is upheld and fruitfulness happens. And the difficulties don't exist. Now that's an over-realization. The church is going to have its difficulties.

But at the same time, we don't need to make more of them. We need to endeavor to keep the unity that God has given us. And we can't afford the church to become ugly, because if the church becomes ugly, the world becomes attractive in comparison.

[10:30] Discipline doesn't work if, for instance, let's just say, for instance, you've got a few children, and you discipline them by sending them to their room, away from the table fellowship where you eat together.

Now if they enjoy their room more than they enjoy the fellowship, their room is not a discipline. And the table fellowship isn't that great because you don't mind missing it.

Well, the moment the church loses the table fellowship, the room becomes a more attractive place. The world becomes a place where it's more attractive than the church.

So we must know this and protect the fellowship. Endeavor to keep the unity that God has given us. And so in a tough world, the church needs to be great.

In a tough world, the church needs to be great. And everything that we say and everything that we do is always said and is always done before God. So I have three headings, and here they are.

[11:42] The first is this, boldness. The church pray for boldness to be witnesses of Jesus Christ. That is, we've just sung that, to have the desire to proclaim the kingdom of God, the boldness to proclaim the kingdom of God.

Secondly, the Spirit creates the type of fellowship, a particular type of fellowship. In other words, the gathering in here is totally different than a gathering that you might find in a park this afternoon somewhere, or in a shopping center.

It's a different type of gathering. It is filled with God and God's people, and it has certain purposes and plans that we're to fulfill. It's a fellowship. And then thirdly, the removal.

Where the Spirit deals with those who are not genuine, but who have the appearance of being genuine. And you'll notice the church doesn't deal with it. God deals with it.

So, number one, boldness. Peter and John have been preaching the gospel back in, you know, sort of the early parts of chapter 4. And they're told in verses 16 and 17 of chapter 4 that they're not to do it anymore.

[12:57] That you're not to proclaim the gospel. You're not to speak in the name of Jesus Christ. In fact, you're not to do anything in the name of Jesus Christ.

And they answer their critics, their opponents, with a question. And the question is, well, who would you obey? Should we obey you, or should we obey God?

Who would you obey? And they answer, verse 20, well, we're going to continue to speak. Whether it's right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must be the judge of that.

But, verse 20, we're going to carry on speaking about Jesus. In other words, the disciples understood absolutely that whatever they said and whatever they did, they were always saying and doing it before God.

Even if they were saying and doing it before other people, it was always before God. It was always evaluated and assessed and judged by God. And, of course, the same applies for us.

[14:00] That we're a church, and everything that we say and everything that we do is always before God. And that's why this church asked for boldness to keep doing it.

One of my favorite stories, which is a true story, is of Susanna Wesley. I actually have John Wesley's journals on my bookshelf, the complete set.

It was given to me as a present. And you ought to just read them, just to understand what ministry was like back in the day. And there's just some tremendous diary entries and stories and people. And, you know, one of John Wesley being on his deathbed. And, you know, the girl that he should have married, he didn't marry. And he married another girl that his brother said, here, marry this one.

And it just went wrong. And it just, you think, well, this is great. This is better than a soap opera. You know, it's just, and there's no doom, doom, doom at the end of it. I mean, it's just, you know, you can actually turn the page and you don't have to wait for the following day.

[15:04] You can just read on. Susanna Wesley was once told by those in her church, believe it or not, that she could no longer teach the children. And for some reason, God just seemed to open up the door and all the children came to her and she was just teaching and teaching and teaching.

And, you know, any efforts to try and stop this, the group just kind of grew. But the, it was, John Wesley had the same problem. He went out and preached the gospel in the fields and they got, they threw him at the Church of England.

You know, so there are consequences. Well, she said to the people who were asking her to stop, okay, I will. I'll stop.

But I'll stop on one condition. And the condition is this, that you explain to God on the day of judgment why you wanted me to stop.

Well, they let her continue. See, she understood that whatever she said and did, she was also always saying it and doing it before God.

[16:17] And that young Susanna Wesley continued to proclaim the gospel to those young children, despite the opposition that she faced.

She prayed for boldness, but she understood that someone had to give an account for every decision made on earth. Well, Peter and John have been threatened in much the same way, a little bit more fiercely.

And then notice what happens, verse 29. They go back to the church and they pray for boldness.

They pray for boldness that they will continue to speak the word of God, that they would continue to do the very thing that got them into trouble in the first place.

They ask for boldness. They got into trouble with the Jewish authorities for preaching the gospel.

And now they're praying for boldness to do the very thing that got them into trouble in the first place.

They don't even pray for the persecution to stop. They don't pray for those who are persecuting them to not persecute them anymore as people.

[17:25] They don't pray against the persecutors themselves. They pray for boldness. They pray for the boldness to continue to do what they were already doing as believers.

Proclaim the name of Jesus in a world that doesn't want you to. Proclaim the name of Jesus in a world that doesn't want you to.

That's effectively what the prayer of boldness is. We live in a tough world where people don't want to hear about Jesus naturally, and they pray for boldness to talk about the things of God in a world where the things of God are not talked about.

They pray to do what God wants to do in a world where everybody else is doing what they want to do. They're praying to do the opposite of everyone else.

And so in a tough world, you need boldness. In a tough world, you need the boldness of God to be given to you, to live the Christian life and to speak of Jesus.

[18:32] You know, as do I, how hard it is to speak of Jesus. Even with people we know and love and like, it's still difficult sometimes to get those moments where you can speak about Jesus with them.

Well, here it's in the face of opposition, not in friends, not the next door neighbor. And it gets much worse for them. And yet, do they stop? No.

They ask for the Spirit of God, and the Spirit of God comes, and the place is filled with the Spirit.

And they are filled with boldness to continue to do the very thing that they were doing that got them into trouble in the first place.

Because whatever we say and whatever we do, we're always doing it before God. Secondly then, the fellowship itself. If it's a tough world, what is the fellowship like?

And you'll notice verse 32, that the fellowship is full of number of those who are of one heart and one soul. And no one said that what they had belonged to themselves, but they had everything in common.

[19:46] I mean, that's really quite remarkable. They're of one heart, one soul. And we know how they got to the one heart, one soul, one mind, don't we?

If you remember Acts 2.42, how do you get the church to a place where they are united, where they don't destroy the unity that God has given? How do you get a church to that point?

And Acts 2.42 puts it like this. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, that is the Word of God. They devoted themselves to fellowship, the breaking of bread, and to prayers.

That's what we did last week. And that's what we're doing again this week, in many ways, but in a different way. And the defining mark of this church is that there was no longer a needy person in the church.

And how would you get to that stage where needy people are no longer needy in a church where there are needy people? Well, it's very simple, the apostle says. Those who have give to those who have not.

[20:54] It's a redistribution of wealth. That those who have give to those who have not. Very simple.

That those who don't have any needs give to those who do have needs so that the fellowship is no longer filled with people who have any need.

Well, this isn't a total redistribution of wealth that everyone is now on the same amount of money per year, or that they have the same furniture in their homes, or the same food on the table.

That's not what it's talking about. What it is talking about is that needs are met. And the needs of one person may be far less than a need of a family. And the need of a family could be, you never know, less than a need of one or two people.

But the point is here, is that every needy person is met by those who have, redistributing what they have to give to those who have not.

[21 : 57] How did it happen? Well, those who had possessions sold their possessions, and then the money from those possessions were laid at the apostles' feet. And then, verse 35, it was distributed to those who had need.

Why? Because whatever we do, and whatever we say, we're always saying it and doing it before God. Whatever we do and say, we're always saying and doing it before God.

One of the things that's always puzzled me, apart from why do people decorate the bedroom, you know, that's just a constant frustration for me, because you go to bed and you turn the light off, it just doesn't make any sense.

But the other frustration is, why is it that people always build extensions when the children have left home? It just, suddenly you've got a conservatory, and like, great for the grandkids, yeah, but what about the four children that you had?

Not that I'm looking for an extension, I'm not, I'm not, I'm simply drawing the picture of, why is that the case, that when you have more, you'd never give more.

[23 : 09] That's not the way we work. We tend to think that we live within our expenses, we don't, we live to our expenses. We live to our income, so if our income goes up, so does our life, trappings go up.

We tend to think we live inside of our expenses, we live within our income, but we don't, we never live within our income. We live to our income. And so if our income improves, so does what we have in the house improve.

And the reason why extensions are built when children leave home is because the money that was going in that direction is no longer going in that direction, it's now going in a conservatory direction. That's why we don't live within our expenses. We live, sorry, we don't live within our income, we live to our income. And what the early church here understood is that how far within our income can we live?

That's the defining mark of the fellowship here. How far within our income can we live? Nobody's living to their income here.

[24 : 22] Everyone is living within their income. And that, for a church to hear today, almost sounds foreign, but that's what the early church was like.

That's how far they were different, say perhaps, from us today. It's a church defined by people who lived within their income, not to their income.

And so, when you have a church where everything and everyone has everything in common, it doesn't mean that everyone's the same, clearly not. But everyone understands what are the priorities and what are not the priorities.

Everyone has, every need was met by everyone who had everything in common. Okay, remember that. every need was met by everyone who had everything in common.

Don't you find it so much easier when everyone thinks the same? When there's a feeling in the church, in the home, or in the workplace, where you're all of one mind and of one heart about a certain issue, it just flows, it just, well that's where this church is at.

[25 : 34] Remember, God gives us a unity and we can only do two things with it. We can either protect the unity, we can either endeavor to keep the unity that God has given us and protect it, or we can damage it.

We can damage the unity. We can't create a unity. God's given us the unity. We're united in Christ. We don't have to try and be united. We have to try and stop destroying the unity that God has given us.

And the way the church understood it here is that needs were met by those who had more. That we live within and not two.

Which is a radical shake-up for quite a lot of Christians. So thirdly, and finally, the removal. I always said that my great desire is that any fellowship that is a united fellowship needs to be like a bunch of greats rather than a bag of marbles.

When I was interviewed on that Monday night before I was appointed, Graham sat here and I sat here and the question was asked, well what is your desire?

[26 : 49] And I said, my desire for any church is that we be like a bunch of greats rather than a bag of marbles. Now, a bunch of grapes and a bag of marbles can be defined differently in this way.

That both are together but only one is united. The grapes are united by the common vine that flows to every single grape.

But a bag of marbles are just marbles found together in one place but not united. And too often, churches look like a bag of marbles rather than like a bunch of grapes.

And God created us to be like the grapes. Not only individual and not only together but united.

I've got a bag of marbles, they look the same. But chips are missing out of each one now because when you carry a bag of marbles around they bash up against each other and they're no longer satirical like they were before.

[27 : 56] But even grapes you've got to be careful with because they can bruise. Well Ananias and Sapphira had the appearance of having everything in common with everyone else but not the reality.

They were the marbles in a fellowship full of grapes. They had the appearance of being like everyone else but not the reality of being like everyone else.

They wanted the appearance of having given without actually giving. They wanted the appearance of having given like everybody else to people who have need to the very purposes of God in the church but they didn't actually want to give.

In fact, we tend to think that the issue here is the money. The money's actually got nothing to do with it. The real issue is not whether they gave or they didn't give. It's the fact that they wanted to appear as though that they were giving like everybody else.

That's the sin. The sin, which Peter highlights a couple of times, is the lie. And the lie comes in the form of an appearance. They wanted to be people who appeared that they had given without actually giving in the end.

[29 : 20] It was a terrible sin because the fellowship was abused by their deception. The purposes of God for the church were abused by their actions.

Remember, whatever we say and whatever we do is always said and done before God. And because this lie is just so deceptive, so deceptive, to want to give people the appearance of something quite different, God takes the lies of both of them.

Which ought to shock us. I've only ever known of one person in my ministry lifetime whose life was taken during worship.

and a post-mortem had to be done because, you know, it was so odd and the cause of death was not found. And we're so quickly to rule out that it could be God.

It's a frightening thing, isn't it? To lie to the Spirit of God. And so the issue here really has got nothing to do with the money.

[30 : 43] That's why Peter says, he makes the point really quite clear. Well, you know, was it not all of yours when you owned it and when you sold it was the money not there for your disposal? The issue is not the use of the money.

The issue that Peter is getting at, this is why he asks Sapphira the same question, is that they want to give the appearance that they were giving like everybody else without actually giving like everybody else.

They abused the fellowship through deception. And God dealt with it. And so whatever we say or whatever we do in a fellowship, God protects his fellowship by removing those who have the appearance of being genuine without actually being genuine.

That's what John 15 is really all about. God removes the branches that appear as though it looks like everything else, but it doesn't because it stunts the rest of the church.

It only needs to take a couple of people like here to destroy the rest of the fellowship. And it's destroyed by a lie. This is why Peter says, why has Satan filled your heart?

[31 : 56] Satan is the father of lies. And the lie here is the deception. And so God removes Ananias and Sapphira.

Why? Because the church has everything in common. God is protecting his fellowship. And in the same way Adam and Eve were sent out of the garden, a place where faithfulness and fruitfulness were meant to be in fellowship with God, God here with Ananias and Sapphira does exactly the same thing.

He sends them out of the place where God dwells, where faithfulness and fellowship is meant to be practiced. So God created this world with his word and God created the church with his word, Jesus Christ.

And we can be absolutely sure that God will protect his church because Jesus died for us.

So I want to conclude with this. Know this, that God loves you and protects the fellowship. Know also that whatever we say or whatever we do, we're always saying it and doing it before God.

[33 : 09] It never goes away. Remember the story of Susanna Wesley if you struggle with that. In a tough world, remember, we need a great church where the Spirit moves by giving boldness to be witness to Jesus, by creating a fellowship where those who have need no longer have needs, and by having a fellowship where everyone in the fellowship has everything in common.

In other words, we all understand what the priorities are, what the purposes are, what the plan of God is, and that we would pray for this to happen.

Now, we finished last Sunday evening with a clear sense that everything was new, that we had everything in common, that a line was drawn and this is a new day for us as a church meeting on a Sunday.

You ought to love that, and you ought to realize that your confidence can be built on that. That God has done something great in that he was with his people last week, he is with his people this morning, and God ought to be continually praised for that.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[34 : 38] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.