

BEYOND BEYOND

The church at Jerusalem and Barnabas— Giving Cooperatively Goes Beyond What We Can Do Alone

Acts 4:31-37

by Dr. Ronald Meeks

Key Passage: Acts 4:31-37

“When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak God’s message with boldness. Now the large group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no one said that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common. And the apostles were giving testimony with great power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them. For there was not a needy person among them, because all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles’ feet. This was then distributed to each person’s basic needs. Joseph, a Levite and a Cypriot by birth, the one the apostles called Barnabas, which is translated Son of Encouragement, sold a field he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

Supporting passages: Acts 2:42-47; Acts 11:27-30; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:1-15

Teaching outline:

- I. The Bible describes the people who exemplify cooperation—the church at Jerusalem and Barnabas.
- II. The Bible describes the practice of prayer that inspires cooperation.
- III. The Bible describes the power that ignites cooperation—the power of the Holy Spirit.
- IV. The Bible describes the problems that potentially may hinder cooperation.
- V. The Bible describes the products that result from cooperation.

Lesson objective: To encourage believers to give cooperatively—beyond what they can do alone—to proclaim the gospel and meet the needs of others.

Probing question: What truths can we learn about giving cooperatively from Barnabas and the church at Jerusalem?

Lesson preparation:

1. Read Acts 4 and identify the importance of sharing the gospel in the early church.
2. Read the following passages from the book of Acts that highlight the importance of prayer in the early church: Acts 1:12-14; 1:24; 4:31; 6:6; 8:15; 9:40; 12:12; 13:2; 14:23; 16:25; 20:36; 27:29; 28:8.
3. Read the following passages from the book of Acts that reflect the dynamic of the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the early church: Acts 1:8; 2:4; 2:15-21; 4:8; 4:31; 9:17; 9:31; 13:2; 16:6-7.
4. Read the following passages that describe two issues having potential to hinder cooperation in the church at Jerusalem: Acts 5:1-11 and 6:1-7.
5. Study the following Bible passages and summarize what they disclose about cooperative giving: Acts 11:27-30; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:1-15.

Background for the study

In the book of Acts, the author describes the labor and witness of the New Testament church as it continued to carry out the work of Christ by the power of His Spirit. Essentially, the book shows how the gospel triumphed over numerous barriers to spread from a narrow sect of Jewish believers in Jerusalem to Rome, the center of the world's influence and power at the time. Although the writer of the book of Acts is anonymous, evidence from within the books of Luke and Acts and statements from the writings of early church fathers indicate that both Luke and Acts were written by Luke, the physician and traveling companion of the apostle Paul. Like the Gospel According to Luke, Acts is addressed specifically to a man named Theophilus; but, it is clearly intended for a broader gentile audience.

Although the exact time and place of the writing has not been identified, it seems to have been written sometime later than the early A.D. 60s—after the Gospel of Luke was written and after the imprisonment of Paul in Rome. Typically, Acts is considered a work of history chronicling, in a limited way, the spread of the church and identifying leaders and churches who played a significant role in the church's growth.

Thematically the book may be explored in two major divisions. Acts 1-12 narrates the witness of the church in Jewish culture, particularly highlighting the role of Peter. Acts 13-28 narrates the witness of the church in gentile culture, particularly stressing the role of Paul.ⁱ Our focal passage, Acts 4:31-37, elucidates the life and work of the church of Jerusalem as it begins to experience persecution from religious leaders in the city.

Introductory illustration

The last five months had been exciting for Jay and April—but difficult as well. The couple had both resigned from their jobs to serve as missionaries through the North American Mission Board. He had left his position as pastor of a local church, which he really loved, and she had left her work as a pharmacist to plant a church in Hawaii. While some think of Hawaii as an island paradise, Jay and April knew the spiritual reality is that 92–95 percent of the people on the big island have never trusted Christ as Savior and Lord of their lives. So, after months of planning, they prepared to leave their families to travel 5,000 miles to their new home.

At their commissioning service, just days before go time, they spoke to their family and friends who had gathered at a Mississippi luau to show their support. Jay's mother, father and sister were

Supporting Passages:

Acts 2:42-47
Acts 11:27-30
1 Cor. 16:1-4
2 Cor. 8:1-15

LESSONS

Adult: Session

there along with other family members. April's mom and dad were there along with her brother and his family and her sister and her family. Through thick passions and tearful eyes, April told of the emotional challenge of leaving their families, church and jobs. Then, she described the difficulty of the previous week—packing and leaving all behind for the one-way ticket to the mission field saying, “It's tough!” However, God had called, and she and Jay had responded obediently and gladly. They were trusting His Word: “And everyone who has left houses, brothers or sisters, father or mother, children, or fields because of my name will receive 100 times more and will inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29).

Jay and April were taking a serious step of faith. They were willing to give sacrificially to follow God's call. But would those of us gathered to support them be willing to live and give sacrificially as well? We needed to give our prayers, our encouragement and the financial resources they required. Could they count on us to work together? We as believers need to give cooperatively—beyond what any one of us could do alone.

Develop the lesson

The Holy Spirit inspired Luke to describe accurately what was taking place in the early church. While the early church, particularly the local church at Jerusalem, was not a perfect church, it does provide positive examples for churches today. In Acts 4:31-37, the church at Jerusalem exemplifies giving cooperatively—giving beyond what one person or group can give alone. Let us explore the truths about cooperation addressed by this passage.

The Bible describes the people who exemplify cooperation—the church at Jerusalem and Barnabas. First, and foremost, the narrative of Acts 4:31-37, provides an account of the people of God who exemplify cooperative giving. The believers in the church, including noted leaders like Barnabas, are examples to us of cooperation. They are examples in a number of ways.

They are examples in that their giving was based on the theological principle that God is the owner of everything. In fact, one of the foundational truths of Christian stewardship is that we do not own anything. God is the owner of everything we possess. We are but stewards, managers and caretakers of what He has given us. In Acts 4:32 Luke wrote: “Now the large group of those who believed were of one heart and one mind, and no one said that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common.” They were not the owners of the possessions. The implication is that the possessions belonged to God and should be shared among the believers as anyone had need.

James Leo Green, an outstanding Baptist scholar and educator wrote, “In His teachings Jesus affirmed that all things belong to God and are to be used for His glory in the carrying out of His purposes.”ⁱⁱ The truth that God is the owner of all things is the theological basis of cooperative giving, both then and now.

The believers in Jerusalem are examples of cooperative giving because of the way they gave. They gave liberally, even sacrificially. In Acts 2:44 Luke wrote: “Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. So they sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all as anyone had a need.” That description of their giving is very similar to what Luke wrote in Acts 4:32 (which was quoted in the previous paragraph).

In addition, Luke highlighted the giving of Barnabas, who became a leader in the early church.

LESSONS

Adult: Session

Luke wrote, "Joseph, a Levite and a Cypriot by birth, the one the apostles called Barnabas, which is translated Son of Encouragement, sold a field he owned, brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet." (Acts 4:36) Individuals, like Barnabas, who was identified specifically, sold both their possessions and their property to meet the needs of others. Luke did not mention the tithe in these significant passages. One possible reason for this could be that their giving was so generous and so sacrificial, that it went far beyond the tenth.

Having seen that cooperation occurred when individuals, like Barnabas, took the attitude that nothing was their own and brought sacrificial offerings, consider how cooperative giving in our Southern Baptist churches takes place today. Cooperative giving begins today just as it did in the early church. When individual believers contribute their tithes and offerings to the Lord, these offerings are combined with the offering of other believers and channeled together to support missions, Christian education and benevolence across the world. Southern Baptists call this combining of resources the Cooperative Program.

In 1925, the Cooperative Program became the primary means by which Southern Baptist churches provide systematic, reliable support for all our missions activities and benevolent causes. Offerings are channeled through our local churches, to our state conventions and on to the Southern Baptist Convention for all our national and international ministries. By giving through the Cooperative Program, any member of a Southern Baptist church can give an offering that will go around the world.

For example, I can picture my 12-year-old daughter, Carolyn, placing her offering in the plate as it is passed down her row during our worship service. She may not realize it, but her offering is going from her hand to the ends of the earth. Carolyn's gift is combined with everyone else's gift in our church. From all the undesignated gifts (those not given for a specific cause) a certain percentage of the gifts given in our local church are each month sent to the state convention. The percentages we give as churches are determined not by the pastor, but by vote of the congregation as led by God's Spirit.

At the state convention level, Carolyn's gift is combined with all the contributions from the thousands of churches in our state. A percentage of the contributions from the churches in our state are used to help bring our state and the world to Christ. Funds are used for missions, Christian education, benevolence and other forms of Christian ministry. The percentage that remains in our state is determined by a vote of the messengers to the annual state convention meeting. The remainder of the funds are sent to the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention. This committee, which operates the business of the SBC during the 363 days of the year that the Convention is not in session, receives the gifts from the approximately 46,000 SBC churches that are channeled through each of the state conventions. These funds are distributed to the International Mission Board, the North American Mission Board, the six Southern Baptist seminaries and the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the SBC. The funds distributed by the Executive Committee are based on the percentages voted on by the messengers to the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention. Thus, Carolyn's gift is combined with that of millions of Southern Baptists to support cooperatively the work of Christ around the globe.

LESSONS
Adult: Session

Application: As seen in the book of Acts, God-honoring cooperative giving begins when individual believers give regularly, proportionately and liberally to God's kingdom work. But the present reality is that only 5 percent of the people in the United States tithe, with 80 percent of Americans giving only 2 percent of their income.ⁱⁱⁱ Perhaps we should be confronted anew with the words of Lottie Moon, one of the most revered figures in the history of Southern Baptist missions. She wrote:

"I wonder how many of us really believe that it is more blessed to give than to receive. A woman who accepted that statement of our Lord Jesus Christ as a fact and not as 'impractical idealism' will make giving a principle of her life. She will lay aside sacredly not less than one-tenth of her income or her earnings as the Lord's money, which she would no more dare touch for personal use than she would steal. How many are among our women, alas, who imagine that because 'Jesus paid it all,' they need pay nothing ..."^{iv}

If cooperative giving begins with you, what will you do to give faithfully to God's kingdom work?

The Bible describes the practice of prayer that inspires cooperation.

Second, the account of the church at Jerusalem highlights the practice of prayer that inspires cooperation. The early church at Jerusalem, in an environment of prayer and spiritual unity, was inspired to give what they had to meet the needs of others. Verses 31-35 state:

"When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak God's message with boldness. Now the large group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no one said that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common. And the apostles were giving testimony with great power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them. For there was not a needy person among them, because all those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet. This was then distributed for each person's basic needs."

The early church was a praying church. In the book of Acts, the various words translated as *pray* occur more than 20 times and the word translated *prayer* occurs nine times. The prayers of the disciples at Jerusalem connected them to the power of God, united them as the people of God and inspired their cooperative giving.

While an exhaustive examination of the prayer life of the early church is beyond the scope of our study, a brief overview of the praying of the early church in Acts reveals the scope of their praying. The early church prayed to receive God's promised power because they had a need for spiritual power (Acts 1:12-14). The church prayed when they selected an apostle as a replacement for Judas because they needed the Lord's guidance (Acts 1:24). As we are learning in our study today, the church at Jerusalem prayed when they experienced persecution because they needed God's strength (Acts 4:31). The church prayed when they selected men to lead in the distribution of food because they needed wisdom to solve a practical problem (Acts 6:6). The church prayed for those who responded to the gospel message when the good news spread to Samaria because they needed the evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence (Acts 8:15).

LESSONS
Adult: Session

The church prayed for healing in the lives of those who were sick because they had physical needs (Acts 9:40; 28:8). The church prayed when Peter was imprisoned facing death because he needed to be released (Acts 12:12). The church at Antioch prayed as a regular part of their worship services because they needed God's fellowship and blessing (Acts 13:2). Paul and Barnabas prayed for the new churches they were planting because the churches needed to grow and develop spiritually (Acts 14:23). Paul and Silas prayed and praised God from prison because they needed God's grace to face difficult circumstances (Acts 16:25). Paul prayed with the elders from the church of Ephesus when he told them goodbye because they needed God's favor (Acts 20:36). Paul and the sailors on the ship with him on the journey to Rome prayed as they faced an impending shipwreck because they needed deliverance (Acts 27:29). These examples of prayer in the early church demonstrate repeatedly that praying was a vital activity that connected the needs of the people with the presence and power of God.

Application: The prayer life of the early church resulted in a spirit of unity and cooperation. Their example should inspire us to be people of prayer. We need the benefits of prayer just as much as the early church did. Yet, we must examine whether our prayer lives in any way resemble the prayer lives of disciples in the early church.

In his book, *Pray Like it Matters*, Steve Gaines made these observations: "Our lack of spiritual power in Christianity today is not due to the sermons we preach or the songs we sing. Rather, it is due to our lack of prayer. We do not pray like it matters. Jesus and His earliest followers prayed like it was important. We pray like it is inconvenient or inconsequential. Prayer was their priority. It is our postscript. We plan more than we pray. They prayed more than they planned."^v

Other than corporate prayers in worship services, do you meet regularly with others to pray for God's presence and power to be demonstrated through your life and the life of your church? Do you have a vital connection with God in prayer on a daily basis by which you surrender yourself to Him, and He empowers you for witness and service? What one, realistic step could you take today that would strengthen your prayer life?

The Bible describes the power that ignites cooperation—the power of the Holy Spirit.

Third, the account of the church at Jerusalem communicates the power that ignites cooperative giving (Acts 4:31). While Acts 4:31 is technically the last verse of the passage that precedes 4:32-37, it describes accurately the spiritual dynamic at work in the church at Jerusalem—the Holy Spirit. Simply put—the church at Jerusalem was empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the power that gives life to the church, both then and now.

According to Acts 1:8, Jesus promised He would make the disciples His witnesses when the Holy Spirit came upon them. In Acts 2, Luke described how the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost, fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy of Joel, that God would pour out His Spirit on all flesh (Acts 2:15-21). According to the book of Acts, the early church was empowered to preach boldly the gospel of Jesus Christ because of the power of the Holy Spirit. As the church faced challenges, it was encouraged by the Spirit (Acts 9:31). As the church grew, its leaders were persons who were guided by and filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4; 4:8; 4:31; 6:5; 7:55; 8:29; 9:17; 13:2; 16:6-7).

We may infer from Acts 4:31-37 that in an environment where the Spirit is at work, people are motivated to share life and to give cooperatively. Acts 4:32 states specifically that the believers were unified—of one heart and one mind. The believers were unified by the Spirit of God. The New Testament demonstrates the truth that it is the Spirit who gives unity to the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 12:1-13, Paul taught the church at Corinth that despite the differences in the body, it is the Spirit who gives unity to the body of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 13:13 Paul prayed that the believers would experience the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians Paul reminded the church that there is one Spirit who brings unity to the body (Ephesians 4:1-6). It seems clear from a study of Acts 4, in comparison with the epistles of Paul, that the power that inspired believers to come together in unity and to give cooperatively is the Holy Spirit.

The Bible describes the problems that potentially may hinder cooperation.

Fourth, the account of the church at Jerusalem relates problems that may hinder cooperation. While Acts 4:31-37 shows a positive example of cooperative giving in the church, the next two chapters in the book of Acts provide examples of potential problems related to giving. One problem is greed or self-centeredness. Acts 5:1-11 shows a negative example of giving and highlights a significant issue that hinders cooperation. Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, sold a piece of property, just as Barnabas had done, but instead of giving the amount in a truthful manner, they lied about the amount they gave. It appears they wanted recognition for giving, but at the same time also wanted to keep part of the money. They demonstrated that greed and self-centeredness can be a hindrance to authentic, God-honoring cooperation.

Greed and self-centeredness are still barriers to cooperative, generous giving today. In America, many believers and churches have adopted the materialistic values of our culture. While, in general, we have much more money and many more possessions than previous generations of Americans and much more than the vast majority of the world's population, we are not content with what we have. In his book, *Practicing Extravagant Generosity: Daily Readings on the Grace of Giving*, author Robert Schnase summarized this issue for many American Christians:

We can never have enough. Single minded pursuit of lifestyles highlighted by pop culture keeps us stuck on the surface of existence, captured in the material world, unhappy with what we possess and blind to the real riches.

When we accept unreflectively the myths of money, we suffer from a self-created, culturally-fostered discontent ... We wallow in abundance, while suffering from self-proclaimed scarcity. Despite the fact that we live in better houses, earn more money, drive nicer cars, spend more on entertainment and enjoy greater conveniences than 90 percent of the world's population, or than we ourselves enjoyed 30 years ago, we never have enough.^{vi}

Modern believers need to embrace and follow the selfless example of Barnabas and the other members of the church at Jerusalem, rather than the self-centered actions of Ananias and Sapphira.

A second problem that had the potential to quench the spirit of unity and cooperation in the church at Jerusalem was the issue of the distribution of the resources given to the church. In Acts 6:1-7, Luke described the dispute that erupted when the Grecian widows in the church were neglected in the daily distribution of food. The Grecians were those Jews who adopted the Greek language and Greek customs in their daily lives while the Hebraic Jews spoke Aramaic and maintained more distinctively Jewish customs. This issue had the potential to divide the unity of the church and halt

LESSONS
Adult: Session

the cooperation of the disciples. However, the church acted decisively by identifying the problem, coming together as a body to seek a solution to the problem, proposing a just resolution of the problem, and appointing spiritually-minded leaders to minister to the needs of the people.

No one left the church over the problem. No one selfishly withheld their giving to the church. No one hindered the progress of the church. Instead, Luke reported: “So the preaching about God flourished, the number of the disciples in Jerusalem greatly multiplied, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). We too can experience the spread of the gospel, the growth of the church and the conversion of the lost, when we give and work cooperatively as the unified people of God

Application: One way to address the problem of self-centeredness is to seek prayerfully how we can give more generously to God’s kingdom work. On a church level, one effective approach is to raise the percentage of cooperative giving in our local churches. Current studies indicate that on average Southern Baptist churches only give about 5.50 percent of their undesignated gifts through the Cooperative Program. In recent years the Executive Committee of the SBC has encouraged churches to take the 1% Challenge. This challenge is for each of the nearly 46,000 SBC churches to increase the amount of money they give through the Cooperative Program by 1 percent. The estimate from the Executive Committee is that if each church would increase its giving by just 1 percent there would be an increase in resources for preaching the gospel and Christian ministry by 100 million dollars.^{vii} With that in mind, what percentage of the undesignated offerings does your church give through the Cooperative Program for world missions and Christian ministry? Will your church accept the 1% Challenge (or more) within the next year?

The Bible describes the products that result from cooperation.

Finally, the account of the church at Jerusalem reveals some products that result from cooperative giving. One product or result of cooperation is that the gospel is proclaimed. In Acts 4:32-33, Luke described the church with the following words: “Now the large group of those who believed were of one heart and mind, and no one said that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common. And the apostles were giving testimony with great power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was on all of them.”

The attitude of the people was that no one’s possessions were his own. This attitude is at the very heart of cooperation. But building upon that, the Bible says the leaders of the church were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. When a church has a mindset of cooperation, the gospel is proclaimed. Luke stressed a key element of gospel proclamation when he wrote “giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.” An essential part of the message of the early church was that the Lord Jesus was raised from the dead. This resurrection of Jesus separates Christianity from every other religion.

The apostles were living witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. They had seen Jesus dead; they had seen Him alive after His death. They saw Him on the day of the resurrection; they saw Him at times during the 40 days after His resurrection, and they saw Him when He ascended from the Mount of Olives. Preaching about the resurrection of Jesus angered the religious leaders who were responsible for putting Him to death, and it angered the Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection. The apostles were threatened not to preach or teach in the name of Jesus, but they

LESSONS

Adult: Session

were witnesses of this mighty redemptive act of God and they were “unable to stop speaking” about what they had seen and heard. They became the witnesses Jesus promised they would become (Acts 1:8). One product of cooperation was that the good news of salvation through the resurrected Christ was shared with others.

The heartbeat of the Southern Baptist Convention has been and continues to be the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The last words of our Lord on earth are our first priority. He said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15). When the Southern Baptist Convention was formed in 1845 our purpose was for “eliciting, combining, and directing the energies of the Baptist Denomination of Christians, for the propagation of the gospel”.^{viii} When we cooperate, we are engaging in one sacred effort—the propagation of the gospel.

Another product of cooperation in the church at Jerusalem was that the needs of people were met. Acts 4:34 indicates “there was not a needy person among them.” Acts 4:35 states that the offerings of the people were brought to the apostles and then “distributed for each person’s basic needs.” Twice in the passage some form of the word *need* is used. Cooperative giving allowed them to meet the needs of people. The church at Jerusalem had a prevailing attitude that when the church is involved in cooperative giving, the gospel is proclaimed, and the lives of people are blessed and changed.

Today our cooperative giving as Southern Baptists channels resources to be used to meet significant needs. While the needs met through the Cooperative Program are too many to list, several significant areas should be noted. The spiritual needs of people are met as missionaries through the International Mission Board and the North American Mission Board preach the gospel and plant churches around the world. The physical needs of people are met as gifts through the Cooperative Program are used to feed the hungry, to treat the sick and to relieve those struck by disaster. The needs for church leaders are met as our six seminaries provide the highest level of training for ministry leaders in churches. The needs related to preserving our religious liberty and protecting our moral standards are met as funds are channeled to and utilized by the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.

Conclusion: The church at Jerusalem faced many challenges as it sought to follow the command of our Lord to preach the gospel to the whole creation. Those early believers were united by the Holy Spirit through prayer and overcame significant barriers to obey our Lord. They recognized God’s ownership of all things and gave generously—beyond the tithe—to share the gospel and meet the needs of people. Let us come together, follow their God-inspired example, and give cooperatively—beyond what we can do alone.

ⁱThomas D. Lea and David Allen Black, *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*, 2nd Ed. Rev. (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 301.

ⁱⁱJames Leo Green, “The Place of Material Things in the Purpose of God and the Life of Man,” *Resource Unlimited*, William H. Hendricks, ed. (Nashville: Stewardship Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1972), 65.

ⁱⁱⁱ<http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/what-would-happen-if-church-tithed#UuZ6JMWvpPgsmgw5.99>.

^{iv}Daniel L. Akin. *Five Who Changed the World* (Wake Forest: Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008), 61.

^vSteve Gaines, *Pray Like it Matters* (Tigerville, SC: Auxano Press, 2013), x.

^{vi}Robert Schnase, *Practicing Extravagant Generosity: Daily Readings on the Grace of Giving* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011), 45-46.

^{vii}“1% Challenge,” *SBC LIFE: Journal of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 23 (Fall 2014): 10.

^{viii}“Charter of the Southern Baptist Convention”, in Jesse C. Fletcher, *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1994),