

“A New, Improved Formula?”

Acts 4:32 - 5:16

Series: Book of Acts, #05

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Theme: **An Effective Church Meets The Challenges Of Life.**

Introduction

All of us face challenges, day after day. Some are big and vital, others not so big and vital. We face them in our personal lives, in relationships, at work, school and in the community. How do you ...

- work through real differences with someone?
- get the job or raise you really want?
- make the cold and snow disappear?
- get brighter laundry or whiter teeth?
- solve the gnawing restlessness or dissatisfaction with your life?

Whatever your question, struggle or challenge, someone somewhere has the answer for you. They have *just what you need* in their “*New, Improved Formula.*” Get it, follow it, and your frustration will be gone, your challenge will be conquered. That’s great, isn’t it? ... I don’t see you all standing up and shouting “*Yeah!*” Well, perhaps not. And so once again we are reminded of the phrase, “*Welcome to the real world.*”

While the language is usually different, we often see the same approach in spiritual and church life. What do you want to overcome, or to have that is new or different in your spiritual life or church? Whatever it is, there are speakers, books, videos, seminars and conferences that in effect hold out “*A New, Improved Formula*” for what you want. And, let’s face it, all those resources wouldn’t be there if we weren’t looking for them and trying them.

The reality is that the basic principles of spiritual life are established in God’s Word. They are sufficient and do not change. There are no *new, improved, magic-like* truths. Yes, indeed, our understanding should grow, and there are fresh applications of God’s truth in His word that need to be made for the current day. But our expectations should never be for new, easier, magic-like truth for the challenges of spiritual life.

The first major section of the book of Acts is on *beginnings*. It opened with preparation, then on to Pentecost, next Preaching, Miracles and Growth. In chapter 2 we saw four qualities of the powerful life of the first church in its first days. In the latter part of chapter 4 and on into chapter 5 we see some *challenges* they faced, and in those challenges there is a *profile of effective spiritual life and ministry* for us.

This section tells us that *an effective church meets the challenges of life*. The church in those days faced a number of challenges. One of the challenges was a positive challenge.

The Positive Challenge: Unity.

There always has been a great interest in unity. That interest reflects both the desire for peace and togetherness as well as the conflict and alienation which are so common. We see the desire expressed in political slogans and movements, in religious, educational and even business organizations.

So what is unity, really? The opening verse of this section, chapter 4 verse 32, “And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul...” Now think about that church. It was made up of thousands of people. Most of them had not known each other before Pentecost. They came from all over Palestine and many different regions beyond, bringing a great diversity of backgrounds, native languages and cultural experiences.

And yet, Luke tells us, they all “were of one heart and soul.” That’s amazing! This kind of unity, Biblical unity, unity brought about by the Holy Spirit is not everyone agreeing on everything. It is not *unanimity*. Rather, they had “one heart and soul.” They shared and were committed to the same central purpose and goal in Jesus Christ. This was not a contrived, forced, lock-step uniformity, but a unity of purpose because they allowed the Holy Spirit within them to minister to and direct them.

Let’s sharpen the focus a bit as we move to their unity in action. We start again at verse 32,

“And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them.”

Now, drop down to verse 34,

“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. Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who 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.” (34-37)

The first observation here is that real unity can be seen. It is not just an ideal. It is a commitment to Christ and His purpose for His church that is *active*, and so, *can be seen*.

The example here is an example. This is neither an exhaustive statement of Christian unity nor a mandatory specific practice for all churches and times. The specific situation, as we noted when we were in chapter 2 was that many of these people were in Jerusalem temporarily, having traveled there for the celebration of Pentecost. We don’t have a breakdown of numbers or percentages, but certainly a sizeable number of the large and growing church were not from Jerusalem.

All, except the original 120, were new believers who needed teaching and training. So they extended their stay in Jerusalem. As a result, there were many practical needs for food and housing, especially as people began to run out of money. What we see here are specific actions flowing out of their *unity* in Christ to meet specific needs.

Then, let's note two principles, two *challenges* for them and us. First, there is the priority of spiritual over material. They took the God's statement through Moses in Deuteronomy 15:4-5 seriously, as both a promise and command,

“However, there shall be no poor among you, since the LORD will surely bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, if only you listen obediently to the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today.”

The actions in verses 34-37 do not record a universal, prescribed sale of all property, nor collective ownership. We see Peter affirming the individual's right to do what he pleased with his property in chapter 5, and Mary the mother of John still owning a house and having servants when we come to chapter 12. What we see are believers who knew their spiritual responsibility to obey God and care for each other superceded clinging to what they owned. They knew and lived out the principle of the priority of spiritual over material.

The second principle flows from the first: the willingness and readiness to sacrifice for God's work and for others. Historians tells us that in first century Palestine there was a small middle class of about 10%, and an even smaller upper class of 4-7%. So then, around 85% of the people in Palestine were poor. In comparison, today in Canada, depending on whose standards you use, between 5-12% of our people are in poverty.

Even without great resources, they were willing and ready to help each other. Many of them may have had something they could sell to help others, but not a lot of things. This willingness and readiness came from their hearts, from their unity.

It is the same motivation that we see later in the churches of Macedonia which Paul cited in 2 Corinthians 8,

“that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability, they gave of their own accord, begging us with much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints, and this, not as we had expected, but they first gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God.” (verses 2-5)

And so, there are these two important principles for us:

- The priority of spiritual over material.
- The willingness and readiness to sacrifice for God's work and for others.

This church was effective as it met the positive challenge of unity. But they also faced a negative challenge.

The Negative Challenge: Hypocrisy.

They also faced a negative challenge. The challenge of hypocrisy.

We know, even without the multitude of surveys which reflect it, that many people say they don't attend church because they are turned off by all the *hypocrites* in churches. Hypocrites have a negative influence on others. Jesus denounced hypocrisy.

But what makes a person hypocritical, or a hypocrite? Webster's dictionary defines a hypocrite as "a person who professes beliefs and opinions that they do not hold." Another dictionary similarly states that hypocrisy is "the practice of professing beliefs, feelings, or virtues that one does not hold or possess." And then adds that it is the quality of falseness.

Our word hypocrite came through French from both Latin and Greek. It's meanings in Greek included:

- one who plays a part on the stage (i.e., one who played the role of a character, not himself);
- or, one who pretends to be something or someone he/she is not;
- and also, one who hides or disguises his/her true motives, feelings or beliefs.
- So being hypocritical is being *phony*.

However, we are **not** hypocrites just because we make mistakes, sin, or are not perfect. That in itself does **not** make us hypocrites.

With this in mind, let's look at the Challenge of Hypocrisy the early church faced in Acts 5. Chapter 5 opens with the word "*But*." There had been a great beginning, with great growth and, as we have just seen, great unity and sacrifice, *but* ...

Here was a challenge to the vitality and effective ministry of the church. Ananias and Sapphira were a couple, two believers, who got caught up in *phoney*, in hypocrisy. We heard the account in the Scripture reading earlier. With others selling property and giving the entire proceeds to the church to help those in need, this couple decided they also wanted to help—which was a good thing. They also thought they should keep some of the proceeds of their property sale—which was a perfectly acceptable option, as Peter pointed out in verse 4.

But, they wanted to be *seen* as giving the entire proceeds. So they came up with the story that their gift was the total amount of the sale. *Why did they do this?*

- Because they wanted people to think they were as generous as those who had given everything.
- Because they wanted to be well thought of and praised more than to be honest and

faithful.

- Because they gave into the temptation and lies of Satan's forces that this would be okay. After all, *who would ever know?*

And so, they tried to deceive the rest of the church as “they kept back” some of the proceeds—the term “*kept back*” was tied to financial fraud in those days. And, because they were presenting the proceeds as an offering to God for His service they were not only lying to the rest of the church, but also to God.

Do you think things have changed in the last 2,000 years? Satan's forces still tempt us to excuse and rationalize, to think something is okay when it isn't,

- to think that as long as no one else knows its okay;
- to think that it is important to give the impression we are doing what others are doing, even when we aren't, and even when we don't have to;
- to think that if we are concerned about providing for ourselves as well as others, we don't really have to divulge the first part of that;
- to sing ...

“All to Jesus I surrender” while having a vice-grip-hold on the control of my life;

“Where He leads I will follow,” but not when the weather's bad, or there are other things to do;

or, “I'll tell the world that I'm a Christian,” while I am doing my best to blend in with the crowd.

Now remember you aren't a hypocrite because you are not perfect. Hypocrisy is *phoney*ness.

The church met this challenge. Note just several key points here. First, there is Peter's spiritual perception. Being directed by the Holy Spirit, he saw through the pretence, the phoney ness. God revealed to him what was really going on. This kind of revelation was not the norm then or now. This incident evidently was the first serious challenge to the church from within and, as in the case of Achan in the Old Testament, God made sure His people knew that He knew, and that this kind of sin was serious (cf. Joshua 7).

While Peter's insight here is not the norm, God does give us insight as the Holy Spirit teaches and challenges, leads and corrects us—first of all in our own thinking.

In this case God's response was swift. For Ananias, look at verse 5 (a), “And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last...” Then for Sapphira who, about three hours later, did not know what had happened to her husband. Verse 10, “And immediately she fell at [Peter's] feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.”

God removed these two believers. He disciplined them by taking them home to heaven

at this time. Who knows what potential they threw away with that sin? That's the way it is with hypocrisy, with all sin. At the time we never know what we are throwing away. We never know how God will discipline us. God hates phoneyess. This discipline was not the norm, but it views how serious it is to be phoney.

About 20 years later when Paul addressed disorder and sin around communion in the church at Corinth, he wrote, "For this reason [*i.e.*, because some were not examining their lives and confessing their sin and still coming to the Lord's table giving the appearance that all was in order] many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep" [*i.e.*, a number *have died*] (1 Cor. 11:30).

And so the church was meeting the challenges of life—the positive challenge of unity and the negative challenge of hypocrisy. *An effective church meets the challenges of life.*

There is another vantage point in this section on what it means to be an effective church. Let's look briefly at a profile, a profile of effective ministry.

A Profile Of Effective Ministry.

The four marks of this profile parallel the qualities we saw in chapter 2. First, this church had a witness with great power. Go back to chapter 4, verse 33, "And with great power the apostles were giving testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and abundant grace was upon them all."

Now, before you finish the thought, I know it is tempting to think, "*But these were the apostles! I'm not an apostle!*" Look at the end of the verse, "and abundant grace was upon" ... *the apostles? No!* "upon *them all.*"

Back in chapter 1, Jesus promised that believers will receive power "when the Holy Spirit has come upon [them]." That happened to you when you received Christ.

If our witness is anemic, it is not because the Holy Spirit is unwilling to give us power, or because we need a special position or experience. It may be because we aren't really looking to be consistent, effective, powerful witnesses. It may be because we are not looking to God for His power. It may be because there is sin in our lives we aren't willing to deal with.

One reason the church in Acts 4 & 5 could meet the challenges of life was because they looked for, depended on, and lived in the power of God for their witness.

A second aspect in the profile of the church in these chapters was that they had a fellowship which met needs. As we saw earlier, at this time it included meeting specific physical and material needs. I'm certain these were not the only needs they met for each other.

They had a real servant attitude and lifestyle. It is one thing to talk about this when we think of Jesus washing His disciples feet, but another when we ...

- need to give full acceptance or even preference to each other's ideas and plans;
- when we need to listen and feel with someone, even if it's difficult because of time or that person;
- when it means real sacrifice to care for each other.

A third aspect in the profile of the church in Acts 4 & 5 was that they had a life worthy of respect. Drop down to 5:11,

“And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things. At the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were taking place among the people; and they were all with one accord in Solomon's portico. But none of the rest dared to associate with them; however, *the people held them in high esteem.*” (11-13)

There are a couple of difficult phrases here. But for now, note the final statement about church in verse 13. The believers were held in high esteem by the people. To be sure the powerful preaching and miracles were a factor in this. But there was also the witness of this diverse group of believers being together “all with one accord.”

In short, they faced their challenges with faith. They used the gifts and opportunities God gave them. They served each other. They sacrificed for each other. As they were faithful to Christ, they gained the respect of the people, who knew the phoneyess of many of their religious leaders. The people recognized that these believers in Jesus were different. Although their message that Jesus was the Messiah and had risen from the dead sounded strange, they saw the impact of Jesus in the believers.

The principle is just as true today. Faithfulness in servanthood and sacrifice leads to respect. Back in the 80s I had a small part in the process of organizing relief among some churches for the terrible famine in Mali. The grain that was provided was distributed through the local churches in Mali. It was distributed to Christians and Muslims alike, and was a powerful witness. A typical response from the Muslims was “You Christians ran out of grain at the same time we did. We would never have shared with you in that way.” That action gained respect, opened the door to witness, and was used by God to open hearts to receive Jesus Christ.

A profile of effective ministry includes living a life worthy of respect.

The final aspect of the profile of the church in these chapters was that they had a ministry blessed with fruit. Let's look at the last three verses of this section, 5:14-16,

“And all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number, to such an extent that they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and pallets, so that when Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on any one of them. Also the people from the cities in the vicinity of Jerusalem were coming together, bringing people who were sick or

afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all being healed.”

We’ve already seen the church go from 120 to over 3,000 then to perhaps about 10,000. Now, multitudes were *constantly* coming to faith. Along with the preaching and people coming to faith were the ongoing miracles that God had commissioned through them for this time.

Yes, some people didn’t understand, and others were superstitious, but God kept on blessing them with fruit.

What about today? What about us? Often people get caught up in the miracles and numbers here instead of the underlying principle of faithful and effective service being used by God to produce fruit. We know the pace of this dramatic outpouring of miracles and taking in massive numbers of new believers in Acts 5 did not keep up for very long. *And what the specific numbers were or are is not the point!* The point is when God’s people look to Him, rely on Him, face the challenges in His strength using the gifts and abilities He has given, there *will be fruit*. God *will* accomplish His work.

Conclusion.

An effective church meets the challenges of life. How are we doing, individually and together? Are we meeting our positive and negative challenges?

It is common to look to others to make that happen—to leaders, pastors, people who have been Christians longer than we have, who know more than we do, who we see as more gifted and able than we are, to the *star players*. But it really comes down to each one of us and all of us.

Ken Ruetters was a first round draft pick and played offensive tackle for eleven seasons for the Green Bay Packers. He is a Christian, and now runs GamesOver.org, a non-profit group to help former pro athletes cope with the stresses of retirement, while he also works on a Ph.D. in sports psychology.

He tells Christians to “take the offensive lineman challenge.” He explains. Offensive linemen aren’t the *star players*. As an *offensive lineman*, “you won’t be receiving a lot of accolades, trophies, or recognition. It’s not a glamorous job. You’ll butt heads with the opposition, get knocked down a few times, and have no recourse but to get up and go at it again... Sometimes you’ll receive only what might look like penalties—loss of free time, sacrifice, commitment, and hard work. But the rewards will come...”

Let me suggest that for us, for Knox Church, to be effective, to meet the challenges of our lives and our life together, we need to take *the offensive lineman challenge*.

- To look to God for His power for witness and all of our ministry;
- to give and receive fellowship that lovingly, patiently, quietly meets real needs;
- to live so that people around us will respect us;

- to serve with faith and obedience so we will see God produce fruit in and through us.

As you spend time with God now, thank Him that it is His power and grace that makes this all possible. Thank Him that His plan to make it happen includes you. And decide to really *get in the game* or always *stay in the game*.

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