

Intro

Since the murder of Charlie Kirk—and since his memorial service in particular—I’ve seen a lot of talk online about revival. Are we in the midst of a revival? There seems to be a surge in church attendance nationwide. And I’ve seen numerous testimonies of people affected by recent events saying they have put their faith in Christ for the first time. These are encouraging signs that God is at work. Time will tell if there is widespread and lasting repentance of sin and faith in Jesus.

It’s too early to declare a revival, but we ought to hope and pray for revival in our land. In Peter’s sermon from Solomon’s Portico he said, “Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19–20). We desperately need times of refreshing from the Lord. We need to be renewed and revived.

What does it look like when God restores his people? In our text this morning, we see a vivid portrait of that.

Acts 4:32–5:16

³² 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. ³³ And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴ 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 ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. ³⁶ Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, ³⁷ sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

^{5:1} But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and with his wife’s knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet. ³ But Peter said, “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? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not 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 man but to God.” ⁵ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him. ⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.” And she said, “Yes, for so much.” ⁹ 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.” ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

¹² Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico. ¹³ None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴ And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, ¹⁵ so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. ¹⁶ The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

Prop

This passage is another summary description of the church in Jerusalem. It’s similar to Acts 2:41–47, where Luke described the life and marks of the church. In fact, this is the first time Luke refers to disciples of Jesus as “the church” (v. 11). The Greek word is *ἐκκλησία*. That word could refer to a public assembly of the citizens of a city. But it had a specific usage in the Greek Old Testament, where it referred to the congregation of people God had redeemed and gathered to himself.¹

¹ Peterson, 213.

Luke's usage of that word at this time is significant. It marks another major shift in the new covenant age. The church has replaced the temple as the place where God dwells. God has united himself—his presence and his glory—to the church. The distinguishing mark of the people of God is the presence of God. And this band of uneducated, ordinary men and women who had come to rely on Jesus through the preaching of the gospel—they are the true people of God.

In this text, Luke describes four discernible signs of God's presence in his church: Great Power, Great Grace, Great Fear, and Great Esteem

1. Great Power

The first effect of God's presence in the church that Luke describes is great power. "And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (v. 33). The verb here indicates an ongoing or habitual action, not a one-time event. Luke used the same verb form in 4:31 when he said, "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness." Verbal witness was the characteristic activity of the Apostles.

And we shouldn't be surprised! Jesus commissioned them to make disciples by teaching people to obey Jesus. Then Jesus promised to make them witnesses (Acts 1:8). And throughout Acts, we see that Jesus kept that promise.

Luke uses rich vocabulary in Acts to describe the Apostles verbal ministry: witnessing/testifying (μαρτυρέω, 23:11), evangelizing (εὐαγγελίζω, 14:7), preaching/proclaiming (κηρύσσω, 9:20), teaching (διδάσκω, 18:11), reasoning (διαλέγομαι, 17:2–3), explaining/expounding (ἐκτίθημι, 28:23), persuading/convincing (πείθω, 28:23), speaking (λαλέω, 4:31), proclaiming/declaring (διαγγέλλω, 15:36), exhorting/encouraging (παρακαλέω, 14:22), refuting (διακατελέγχομαι, 18:28), and warning (νουθετέω, 2:40).

Verbal witness is the main activity of the church in the world. Not producing goods or services, but announcing the resurrection of Jesus. That doesn't mean the apostles spoke only of Jesus' resurrection.

That's shorthand for the gospel of Jesus Christ—that God became man, lived a sinless life, died as a sacrifice for our sins, and rose from the dead as Savior and Lord.

But our message and our method is folly to the world, as Paul said:

“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ... For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom [skeptics want proof, academics want respect], but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18, 22–24).

A bit later, Paul tells us why God works this way:

“For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Corinthians 2:2–5).

That's what happened in Corinth, and that's what was happening here in Jerusalem. And their witness was powerful. That means two things: that the messengers were bold and the message was effective.

Remember, this description comes on the heels of the church's prayer for boldness. The chief priests and religious authorities who crucified Jesus had threatened Peter and John and warned them to quit teaching in Jesus' name. The church responded to those threats by praying for more boldness (4:29). And God answered their prayer:

“They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness” (v. 31).

Witnessing with great power means Spirit-empowered courage to talk about Jesus in the face of danger.

But it also means that the gospel message was having a Spirit-empowered effect. People who heard the gospel came to faith in Jesus and their lives were transformed. Verse 14 says,

“More than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.”

Later, the gospel will spread to Thessalonica, and Paul wrote to that church:

“Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

That speaks, not just to the boldness of the messengers, but to the effect of the gospel on those who heard it. Has that happened to you?

That gospel message is still the power of God to save (Rom 1:16). The gospel is still changing the world, toppling idols and false religions. Today, the gospel of Jesus Christ continues to overcome demonic philosophies and ideologies—Marxism, socialism, feminism, critical race theory, queer theory, “and every other lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor 10:5). May God empower us with his Spirit to bear witness to Jesus in this city with great power.

2. Great Grace

The second effect of God’s presence in the church was great grace: “And great grace was upon them all” (v. 33). Grace is God’s dynamic power working in God’s people for their good and God’s glory. Three times in Acts, Luke speaks of people being commended (or entrusted) to the grace of God for a particular work or for being built up (Acts 14:26, 15:40, 20:32). “Great grace was upon them all” means that God’s favor was on them and God’s dynamic power was working in them and through them and for them.

So God’s dynamic power was at work in the church. And there was observable evidence of this grace. “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. ... There was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:32, 34). There were two pieces of evidence of God’s grace: unity and generosity.

Why is that description of the church so remarkable? It’s remarkable because deep unity and radical generosity is not normal. Normal life under sin looks like division and hostility, need and greed. What

are two of the biggest social issues people worry about today? Division and economic need! And yet those effects of sin are undone and reversed in the church—God’s new people.

Some take the statement in v. 32—“They had everything in common”—as an affirmation of communism or socialism as the political/social/economic ideal. Was the church in Jerusalem a massive (10,000+) commune, like a group of hippies? No.

The statement in v. 32 describes their attitude: “No one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own.” This is basic to a biblical worldview. David prayed,

“But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you” (1 Chronicles 29:14).

The effect of the grace of God on the hearts and minds of these believers was that they saw their property and wealth—not a tenth, but all of it—as belonging to God and entrusted to them for the cause of Christ.

Nothing in the text suggests that they practiced communal ownership. Individuals sold private property and gave the proceeds to the Apostles (vv. 34, 37).

Neither did they sell everything, which would’ve left them all homeless. Barnabas, one notable example Luke highlights, sold a field (v. 36). Those with wealth—home owners and land owners—voluntarily sold some of their property to cover needs in the church as they arose. The phrase in v. 35, “as any had need” probably means that people gave as needs arose.²

Neither was there any external compulsion; all giving was voluntary. Peter clearly tells Ananias that he was not obligated to sell any property:

“While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?” (5:4).

² Peterson, 206.

The language here echoes the Old Testament blessing described in Deuteronomy 15.

“But there will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess” (Deuteronomy 15:4).

If you read the rest of Deuteronomy 15, it becomes clear how it would come to be that there were no needy people among them. God did not promise that every individual would have the same amount (“equity”). Some would have needs (Deut 15:7, 11). But God would supply others with abundance. God would not provide evenly, but he would provide enough. The result is that those who have more experience the joy of giving generously. And those who have less experience the joy of trusting the Lord to provide.

And this OT ideal was realized in the NT church! Yet another sign in Acts that the church is the true people of God. In the church, the new covenant has become a reality.

So when the Spirit fills the church, the result is powerful witness and radical generosity: great power and great grace. Now, don’t miss the connection between those two.

“And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.” (Acts 4:33).

Many who advocate for generosity in the name of Christ try to manipulate others with guilt. The message is, Shame on you for having a house, a car, a hot meal. Don’t you know there are billions living on less than \$1/day? And you call yourself a Christian!

Others might try to avoid explicitly relying on guilt, but the motivation is moralism. To be a good person, you must do more, give more.

But that’s not what we see here. The Apostles preached Christ—specifically the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And the result was that great grace came upon the church, which produced generosity.

3. Great Fear

The third effect of God's presence in the church is great fear. After describing one example of the kind of generosity that characterized the church in those days, Luke narrates a shocking story of God's purifying presence in his church. The episode ends with this statement in v. 11: "And great fear came upon the whole church" (also v. 5).

Their sin was not that they gave only part of the proceeds. Again, Peter makes it clear that they were under no obligation to sell the land. And once they had sold the land, they were under no obligation to give any or all of it.

Their sin was conspiring together to make it look like they were giving everything, while secretly keeping some for themselves. Oh how deceitful sin is! It pollutes everything. It turns an act of generosity—they actually gave money—into a damnable vice.

Ananias and Sapphira stand in stark contrast to Barnabas, the poster boy for generosity who was nicknamed (by the apostles) "son of encouragement" (vv. 36–37). Ananias and Sapphira could be used as a warning against greed or deceit. But Luke's point is bigger than that. His point is about the nature of the church.

Ecclesiology is the doctrine of the church, from that word *ekklesia*. What is the church? How do you view the church? Acts 5 is one of the most significant texts about the church in Scripture. And it should profoundly shape our ecclesiology—our attitudes and actions.

Follow Peter's logic when he confronts Ananias.

"Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit ...?" (5:3).

To whom did Ananias lie? Verse 2 says he brought the money and "laid it at the apostles' feet." But Peter says he lied to the Holy Spirit. Again in v. 4,

"You have not lied to man but to God."

And when Sapphira arrives, Peter says,

“How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord?” (5:9).

In the OT, testing the Lord meant inviting God’s judgment by distrusting his promises and disobeying his commands. A disobedient child is said to be testing the boundaries. He’s crossing the line to see if a parent means it. To test the Lord is to willfully violate his commands, daring him to act.

Here’s the point: Jesus is one with his church. Therefore, to sin against the church is to sin against the Lord.

Scripture says the church is the bride of Christ, which helps us grasp this. A husband is one with his wife. She is called by his name. So if anyone insults her or assaults her, it is an attack on him.

So it is with the church, the bride of Christ. God is present everywhere. But he uniquely manifests his presence in his church. Jesus has so united the church to himself, that he takes personally every threat to the unity and purity and holiness of the church.

Some people come to the church mainly looking for community, for friendships. And community is a vital part of life together in Christ. The saints in Jerusalem “were of one heart and soul” (4:32). But the church is not merely a club or social organization or affinity group.

The essential mark of the people of God is the very presence of God. The church is the community where God dwells by his Spirit. And to sin against the church is to sin against the Lord.

So Luke tells us (in his first use of the term church), “And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things” (v. 11). This is the fear of the Lord. It is not a cowering, timid, tiptoeing-on-eggshells kind of fear.

The fear of the Lord means hating sin as utterly sinful.

“The fear of the LORD is hatred of evil” (Proverbs 8:13; cf. Prov 16:6).

“Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. ... Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:11–14).

The fear of the Lord means taking care not to sin (2 Chron 19:7).

Positively, the fear of the Lord means seeking to please the Lord. In 2 Corinthians 5:11, Paul says,

“Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord”

What is the fear of the Lord? In vv. 9–10 he says,

“So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Corinthians 5:9–10).

So the fear of the Lord is knowing and living like you will stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira provokes questions. And the first or most common one is something like, “Is that fair? How could God do that?” But that reveals how lightly we take sin and how small our view of God’s holiness is. The question is not how God could judge guilty sinners. The real question is how any of us could stand here in God’s presence week after week ... and live.

Does it fill you with reverence and awe and holy fear and hatred of sin to belong to the church? Or do you approach this community casually and flippantly? May the Spirit produce in us a reverent dread of doing anything that would damage the purity of the church that Jesus bought with his blood!

4. Great Esteem

In vv. 12–16, Luke returns to the effect of the Spirit through the church on the world outside.

“Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women ...” (Acts 5:12–14).

There is a fascinating contrast here—an apparent contradiction even. On the one hand, Luke says that no one dared join them. On the other, he says that multitudes of men and women were coming to the Lord. Which is it?

Luke is saying that the church is distinct from the world around it. You are either inside or outside of the church. And those outside may be interested, curious, and respectful. Or they may be hostile and violent. But either way, it's clear who is in and who is out.

The seeker-sensitive movement in America was (and is) very concerned with making sure that those who don't yet know Jesus never feel uncomfortable in church. The desire to reach the lost is commendable. But the method of erasing anything distinct about the church, replacing reverent worship of God with the entertainment of man is wrong.

The awesome presence of God is what sets the church apart. And God's presence both intimidates and attracts people. It's okay if unbelievers come into the church and know that they don't yet belong. We want people to think, "I don't belong, but I want to."

We have to be careful about the desire for esteem from outsiders. Some evangelical pastors and leaders have been so concerned with being accepted by the world, that they have been willing to erase anything hard or offensive in the gospel. Some confuse approval from those outside the church with effective witness. But in Acts 5, high esteem from outsiders was not the result of winsome personalities. It was the effect of the presence of God that set the church apart. People are not drawn to the church because it looks just like the world. They are drawn to the church because God is there.

That is what we hope and pray for in our day. And God is at work! Even while many in our country rage against God, the Spirit of God seems to be drawing many to himself by drawing them into the church.

Conclusion

Church, you are God's new humanity. You are the ones in whom God manifests his presence and power on earth. You are the people who bear witness to the world that Jesus is Savior and Lord.

God's grace is at work in you: Your fellowship and unity is undoing the division and rivalry of sin. Your generosity is providing for the needs of others. And your reverent worship is a sign that the gods of this age are doomed, and that this world will be full of the knowledge of the glory of God.