



ACTS, PART 10: THE NATURE OF BELONGING

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I am not a guy who gets worked up very easy. I'm normally a pretty laid back, go with the flow guy. But there is one place where I turn into this tightly bound ball of nervous twitching. Air travel.

In my mind I like to think I am God, and that I can control all of the circumstances life brings but once I step into an airport, my false divinity comes crashing down. I'm terrified of missing flights, losing bags, or getting marked as a terrorist.

And I was reading an article this week which said part of the reason people get so anxious when they travel is because their atmosphere of belonging is stripped away. No one belongs in an airport.

And we as humans have this overwhelming desire to belong. In fact a study was released by the University of Stanford in 2007 which studied how ones perceived areas of belonging contributed to their academic and cultural success. They concluded that the psychology of belonging is essential to the idea of human flourishing.

In the book of Acts right now, we are beginning to see what it looks like to belong to this new church called the Christian church. And one thing we have seen is that what the church looks like is attractive at some levels to people who are outside of it.

When Michael Lawrence preached here a couple weeks ago he talked about how the church's love for one another should be attractive to those who are on the outside of us. People should want to belong. But what is the actual nature of belonging to the church, which is the true Christian community?

That's what we are going to look at today in the book of Acts. What we are going to find is that true Christian community is other-oriented in action but created, sustained and unified by the fear of God. That's what it takes to belong in the church of Jesus. **Let's Pray.**

Like I mentioned before, the church is gaining structure in the book of Acts. People are starting to act differently, live differently, and worship distinctly. And it is attractive to people who are witnessing it. Primarily for one reason, and we call it "one-anotherness."

We get a glimpse into the Christian community which is identified by other oriented action in **Acts 4:32-35**

This is actually the second time in the book of Acts we have seen the church typified by a corporate giving, and "one-anotherness." The early church was really good at taking care of itself. And one thing we learn about the church here is that it isn't one specific social class which is coming to Christ.

Only about 17% of the population at the time was in an economic position, wealthy, or endowed enough to own property. And yet we see all who owned property were selling it, and donating the money to the feet of the apostles and trusting them to take care of church needs with it.

Christianity didn't start as just "a poor man's religion." It was a movement which knew no social bounds, it included the poor, the middle, and the upper class, because in Christ everything else is secondary to the message of his resurrection.

And in this eclectic community care was happening. People were giving great amounts of wealth, and the result was church care and preaching. There was not a needy person among them. That's a huge thing especially when we consider the number of believers was growing by the thousands.

We as a church want this one-anotherness. And you know what, to some degree it is already happening here. I am always amazed at the stories which come from our community group describing this group care. People pooling money, time and resources to care for individuals inside their group. It's amazing.

Did you see the language of unity in this passage? The full number of believers were with one heart and soul, no one claimed anything as their own, but they had everything in common, a great grace was upon them all. This group possessed great unity. But my question is what created this unity?

Well Luke is going to help us see the creative and sustainable force behind this unity. And he is going to do it by presenting two examples. One which resides inside the authentic community, and one which comes from outside this community.

The first example is that of Joseph: **Acts 4:36-37**.

So we read about Joseph, who is called Barnabas, and who actually plays a large role in the book going forward. And Barnabas sells his land, and gives it to the apostles. And we could think nothing of Barnabas' example but there is a literary feature at the beginning of chapter five. "But."

"But" implies that this story of Ananias and Sapphira is to be contrasted with the story of Barnabas, so now let's read the story of Ananias and Sapphira. **5:1-10**.

If this is your first time in church, you are probably a little nervous right now. You just saw that offering bucket pass right by your face, and you didn't give the entirety of your bank account...

This story ends in a far different way than Barnabas' did. So my question for you is why? Why is Barnabas present as a positive role model, but Ananias and Sapphira are killed for their generous donation?

Is it because Barnabas gave 100% and Ananias and Sapphira didn't? No! You see the beauty of the portrait of community we saw in chapter four is that there was no imperative to give. Peter knew that. Look at what he said to Ananias: **Acts 5:3-5**.

The money was always yours. The land was always yours. The issue wasn't why didn't you give it all, the issue was why did you purposely say you gave it all when you clearly didn't.

You see the biggest threat to Christian community is Satan's lie that your actions are greater than your heart. It is easy to look at this community and get distracted by the identity of it.

It's easy to look at the physical appearance of a church and want to belong. You want to have the good friendship, the comradery, the generosity, you want to be part of something bigger. But identifying with a community by your actions is not synonymous to belonging to a culture with your heart.

When I was in junior high, I went through a skateboarding phase. I wore skater clothes, I got skater shoes, I had the skate board, the lingo, I walked the walk, and I talked the talk. If you looked at me, it would have been easy to identify me as a skater. But here is the thing...I wasn't a skater, I was really bad at it. In fact I really didn't love skateboarding, but I certainly loved the idea of belonging with the skater culture.

In the same way my clothes and accessories didn't create an authentic belonging for me in the skatepark, Ananias and Sapphira's attempt to belong was insufficient because their hearts were broken.

So why did Barnabas belong, but Ananias and Sapphira didn't. Because Barnabas knew that in order to truly belong to the Christian community, you needed more than other oriented actions, you needed a different heart. Barnabas' heart passed the test of community, Ananias and Sapphira's didn't.

So what is it that brings a unified heart? What allowed Barnabas to belong? Well look at what typified the believers following this event: **Acts 5:11**.

The whole church was gripped by a great fear. You see at the beginning of this passage we saw the full number of believers were unified by a great grace, and at the end they are unified by a great fear. And while grace and fear are typically antithetical towards each other, I want to propose to you today that the great grace which unified the church was actually the great fear of God which fell upon the church.

For someone outside of the Christian cultural lingo, this idea of fear can have a negative connotation. But Biblically this fear of God is a gift. The Psalmists write that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, it is the beginning of knowledge, it is clean and enduring forever, it is the fountain of life, it is the delight of the believer.

So what is the fear of the Lord, and what does it have to do with the Christian community. The fear of the Lord is this: A realistic comfort before a holy God.

It is the realistic awareness of who God is. Our God is holy, and he hates sin. Didn't we just see that in the story of Ananias and Sapphira? Didn't the early church just get that picture in a very real way? God wrath burns against sinners.

Yet look at what **Prov 14:26-27** says. The fear of the Lord is confidence. On one hand we are aware of God's might but on the other hand we are aware of God's gift to us in Christ Jesus. Through Jesus the wrath of God is satisfied, and through Jesus we are able to fear God not as enemies, but to fear him rightly as blood bought children.

In Jeremiah, God is prophesying to a people who are scattered, and I want you to hear what God promises them, and be thinking of the words which we just read in Acts 4:32-26. **Jer 36:39-41**.

You see it is exactly the fear of God which brings the church to be unified in one heart and in one soul. Because it is only with a right fear of God that we understand the beauty of the gospel. It is only with a right fear of God to we actively cling to believe in him because we know that Jesus has removed us from his fearful wrath in into his powerful safety. We know God as wholly other, but we know him as wholly ours.

When we see the portrait of a Christian community we shouldn't aim at the manifestations of community, we should aim at the source of unity. Because it is only in light of the power and the gospel and the fear of God that our hearts are naturally able to be other oriented for the good of the church and the glory of God. This passage is less about the defining actions of a Christian community and more about the defining heart of a Christian community.

The application of this message isn't give 100% or God will kill you. The application of this message is belong 100% or judgment will find you. True Christian community, the church is identified by other oriented action, but created, sustained and unified by the fear of God.

The church is important. And on one hand this church before you right now is filled with believers and unbelievers. But at the same time, inside this building there is a true church. This true church, or what some people call the invisible church is made up only of people who really belong.

This invisible church is made up of people who see that it is only through Christ that we find our sins forgiven. It is to this group of people Peter wrote his message of encouragement in **1 Peter 2:9-10**. The true church belongs through Jesus. The demarcation point between attending church and belonging to the church is the person and work of Christ. His death for your sins. He was cast out so that we may belong. It is these people who Church Membership wants to identify.

So my question to you is: In what way do you feel you belong to God's church?

For those of you in here who know you are not a Christian, but are here because your friends, spouse or roommate brought you. Thank you for being here. We want to welcome you, we want to have you back, we want to get you plugged in. But we want you to know that this presence in church is not sufficient to save you from God's judgment.

It is not your position on a Sunday which saves you, it is the position of your heart. And it is the message of Jesus and his resurrection which so captured the church which will change your heart.

In this group there are people who think they are Christian because they play the part. They give, they serve, they sit, they listen. But like Ananias and Sapphira they think that it is their efforts and their actions which grant them entrance to the church.

But the church is not for the generous, the church is not for the morally upright, the church is not for the powerful, the church is for those who realize their need to be saved by Jesus Christ. Anything short of that realization is a desperate clawing at the fool's gold of the idol of self-sufficiency. What unifies this church, what births and grants entrance to a gospel community isn't the gift of man, but the gift of Christ.

God will one day judge your heart. Will you be found standing in the work of Christ, laboring for the good of others? Or will you be found standing in the arrogance of your own works, self-obsessed and dead in your sin.

For you true Christians: Are you captivated, in one heart and in one soul with your church through a right view of God. Has the fear of God so captured your heart that you cannot but think in terms of eternity?

Because as a church, as true Christians we want this message of Acts, we want the boldness in evangelism that the church portrays, we want the authentic community that identifies them, but do we want the cost that enables all of that.

Paul wrote more on the church and its operation than anyone else, he was one of the greatest evangelists and missionaries the world has ever known. But what was the sustainable motivation for Paul's ministry.

In closing I want you to hear this word from Paul in 2 Corinthians and I want you to listen for three things: 1.) What is his unifying motivation, 2.) What is the interpersonal result, 3.) What is the result on his life.

2 Cor 5:11-21.

Because of the fear of God, we seek to serve others, and preach Christ, until eternity comes, for the glory and fame of Jesus Christ. May the great grace of God fill your heart. Let's pray.