

DETOUR THROUGH ACTS: BEING TRUE COMMUNITY

by Michele Hershberger

KEY VERSE:

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” Acts 4:32

FAITH STORY:

Acts 4:32-35

FAITH FOCUS:

After John and Peter are arrested, reprimanded and sent back to their community, the believers ask the Holy Spirit for an even greater boldness in preaching the gospel. The house shakes with the presence of the Spirit. Through the power of this same Spirit, the community lives in unity and shares all its possessions. It is known for the bold testimony of the apostles and for its abundance of grace. Everyone who has land or houses sells them and places the money at the apostles' feet.

SESSION GOAL:

To help students claim a radical vision for community life.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- Discuss the ramifications of living in community together.
- Summarize the qualities of community life in Acts 4.
- Take a survey of the youth group on different community life qualities.
- Write on a T-shirt their wishes for the group's own community life.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Bibles
- 2 White T-shirt and fabric pen
- 3 White board and markers
- 4 A copy of the Community Life Survey handout

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (7 minutes)

Greet the students as they enter. Ask how their week has been going. After everyone has arrived, play the “Step on the T-shirt Game.” In this community builder, each person must place at least one foot on a T-shirt that is placed on the floor.

The group should work together, doing whatever they need to do to get everyone "on" the T-shirt.

CONNECT: (5 minutes)

Ask, "What can we learn from this T-shirt game? How was this exercise like living together in community? How was it different?"

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (15–17 minutes)

Divide the group into three smaller groups. Instruct one of the small groups to read Acts 4:1-22, a story that comes before and helps set up the explanation of community that the session revolves around. Have them write down answers to these questions:

- *Why do you think so many people believe Jesus through Peter and John?*
- *According to Peter, who healed the lame man?*
- *Why were the rulers, elders and scribes so amazed by Peter and John? If you would have been there, would you have been so amazed?*
- *Why couldn't the leaders of the temple just celebrate with the lame man and give glory to God? Why did they want to keep the word about the healing from spreading?*
- *Why didn't the authorities punish Peter and John?*
- *What kind of "community" did the rulers, scribes and elders have? If you could guess, how did Peter and John's community help empower them to do what they did in these verses?*

Direct another small group to read Acts 4:23-31 and write down answers to these questions:

- *How did the Peter and John's friends (community of believers) respond to the news of their arrest?*
- *To what source did the community go to help them interpret the arrest? (Old Testament scriptures) Do you think that is a good thing to do? Do you find truer interpretations of scriptures as individuals or as a group? Why?*
- *What did the community ask for? (Even more boldness) Does this seem like an unusual request to you? Why or why not? If you would have been that original community, what would you have prayed for?*
- *What happened when they prayed together?*

The third small group is to look at Acts 4:32-35 and list all the qualities of community. The list should look like the following:

- One heart and soul
- No one claimed private ownership of any possessions
- Everything they owned was held in common
- They spoke with great power
- Great grace
- Not a needy person among them

Gather back together as a big group and have each group summarize what they learned. Ask the third group to write their list of the qualities of the community on a white board. Talk about where this community got the strength and courage to live out these qualities. How did community life strengthen people like Peter and John?

APPLY: (12–14 minutes)

Grade your community with a survey. Make your own or use the one included in this lesson. As a group, talk about how you can become more like this community (remember that you are the beggar—last week’s lesson). Remind them that this kind of miraculous community is possible only through the Holy Spirit.

APPLY, Option #1:

Read and discuss this case study: Jim came to youth group looking pretty defeated. When asked what was wrong, he confided in the group that the family business had just declared bankruptcy. Jim had a hard time talking about it; it seemed to him like such a shameful thing. He asked the group to keep this confidential and to keep him and his family in their prayers. Then he fell silent, saying nothing about the upcoming trip to convention.

Ask: How should Jim’s youth group respond?

RESPOND: (10 minutes)

Talk as a group about how you can strengthen community by the help of the Spirit. Then take the same T-shirt you used in the Focus activity and a fabric pen. Take turns writing down community wishes on the T-shirt. If appropriate, have the shirt passed around for each member of the group to wear. End with a time of prayer, asking God for boldness and to have one heart and soul.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

The miraculous just keeps happening in the book of Acts! One story leads to another in the pattern of action and reflection (see Insights from Scripture in the Detour through Acts: Being the Beggar). The miracle cure of the lame man makes the temple authorities pretty edgy. It’s obvious that a mighty miracle of God has been done. This is a well-known beggar (4:21) and he is standing in the middle of the crowd, fully able to walk. But the priests, ruler, elders and scribes can’t rejoice with the man, for this miracle threatens the smooth running operation of the temple. In some ways, the apostles threaten not only the theology of the temple by claiming that the healing comes through the name of Jesus. They also threaten the economic system of the temple. Who’s going to bother to come to the temple and pay the temple tax if you can get healing through this band of uneducated but eloquent people? Why go through the temple system for forgiveness of sins when the People of the Way claim that forgiveness comes through the name of Jesus? And they have the miraculous healings to back them up.

So the authorities sternly warn them to stop speaking in the name of this Jesus. But the apostles throw down the gauntlet when they say they can’t keep from speaking what they have heard and witnessed. They cannot keep quiet. And with such a big crowd looking on, the authorities can’t punish them like they want to. So they let Peter and John go.

Upon release they go straight to their beloved community. And here, in verses 23-31, we see the community at work. They interpret scriptures together as a body, an important practice that guards against heresy. They praise and bring petitions to God. And amazingly enough, given the recent arrest of Peter and John, they don't ask for more protection from God or a decrease in the persecution. They ask for more boldness! The Holy Spirit comes to them in a special way, with a physical shaking (see chapter 2). God hears and honors the prayers of this group. Miracles continue and they speak the word of God with boldness.

What follows next (our story) is similar to Acts 2:42-47. In both places, Luke summarizes what community is like. Our story goes more in depth with the practice of sharing possessions, but both passages show a balance of worship, fellowship and care for the world.

The group has one heart and soul because all are centered on Jesus. This may seem like a pious statement. But they live out this piety by sharing their possessions with each other. Because of this unity and singular focus (one heart and soul) it only makes sense to do this, since all material things belong to the Lord. Much of the combined narrative of Luke/Acts deals with economic issues, and this is no exception. But it's not that this practice is mandatory. That is clear in Acts 5:4 where Peter reminds Ananias and Sapphira that giving the money—and how much they give—is their choice.

Yet many of the believers do sell their property and lay the money at the feet of the apostles. This makes it possible for every member to live without need (verse 34). And this practice goes hand in hand with the great power they have to testify to the resurrection of Jesus. What better proof that Jesus lives than people doing what is humanly impossible to do—rise above living out of selfish interests! Can this be part of the answer for more boldness? What can be bolder?

As we know from other parts of Acts, not every believer sells his or her home. But homes not sold are used as places of warm hospitality (Acts 16, Lydia's house). Either way, the money, possessions, time, and devotion all belong to the Lord. And this singular loyalty—produces community! Love for Jesus helps nurture a love for others. Add to that the miraculous gift of the Spirit, and community comes alive. The place is shaking!

WORKS CITED:

Faw, Chalmer E. *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Acts*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993.

Munck, Johannes. *The Anchor Bible: Acts of the Apostles*. New York: Doubleday, 1967.

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Student Worksheet

Community Life Survey

Describe your faith community. Who all is included? What draws you all together?

Now, using the above definition, compare your faith community with the faith community of Acts 4:32-35. Rate each statement using this scale. 1 = very true, 2 = somewhat true, 3 = not sure, 4 = not really true, 5 = not true at all.

One heart and soul:

1. We know how to talk to each other in love if we disagree. 1 2 3 4 5
2. We all seek to love God with all our hearts and souls. 1 2 3 4 5
3. When one person is sad, we all share that pain. 1 2 3 4 5
4. When one person is really celebrating, we can share in that too. 1 2 3 4 5
5. People say that we really love each other, no matter what. 1 2 3 4 5

Sharing material possessions and money:

1. When one of us is in need, we all pitch in and help out. 1 2 3 4 5
2. We don't judge each other on things like new cars, etc. 1 2 3 4 5
3. We put all our incomes in a common pot. 1 2 3 4 5
4. No one feels excluded from our group because they don't have enough money to be a part of us. 1 2 3 4 5

Speaking with great power:

1. Others in the community know what we stand for. 1 2 3 4 5
2. We aren't afraid of being laughed at by other youth. 1 2 3 4 5
3. We tell other people about Jesus. 1 2 3 4 5
4. We can talk freely about our faith with each other. 1 2 3 4 5

Great grace:

1. We can talk about our shortcomings and find forgiveness. 1 2 3 4 5
2. People would say that we truly love each other. 1 2 3 4 5
3. We really depend on God for our strength and love as a group. 1 2 3 4 5
4. We don't have to wear a "mask" around each other. 1 2 3 4 5
5. Arrogance is not a big problem among us. 1 2 3 4 5

Not a needy person among us:

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| 1. We don't have a social ladder in our group. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 2. If someone is in need, we don't make them feel bad. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 3. We gently and love help each other out when we sin. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| 4. If a person has material needs in our group, we help out. | 1 2 3 4 5 |

Now share some of your insights with each other.

What do you think is the most important area that your community needs to work on? What does the whole group think?