

Acts

Lesson #4

Life in the Spiritual Fast Lane

(4: 32 – 6: 7)

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Review

In Lesson #3 the Church continued growing quickly, from 120 in the upper room after Jesus' Ascension (1: 15), to 3,000 after St. Peter's sermon at Pentecost (2: 41), to 5,000 only weeks later (4: 4). Such rapid growth raised eyebrows and quickly produced opposition. After Peter healed a crippled beggar at the Temple, the Sanhedrin arrested both Peter and John. Brought before the high priest and the Jewish leaders—*the same men who condemned Jesus to death*—St. Peter offered a fiery defense:

“Leaders of the people and elders: If we are being examined today about a good deed done to a cripple, namely, by what means he was saved, then all of you and all the people of Israel should know that it was in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazorean whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead; in his name this man stands before you healed.”

(4: 8-10)

The Sanhedrin let Peter and John off with a strong warning *“never again to speak to anyone in this name”* (4: 17) . . . but *“filled with the holy Spirit”* they *“continued to speak the word of God with boldness”* (4: 31).

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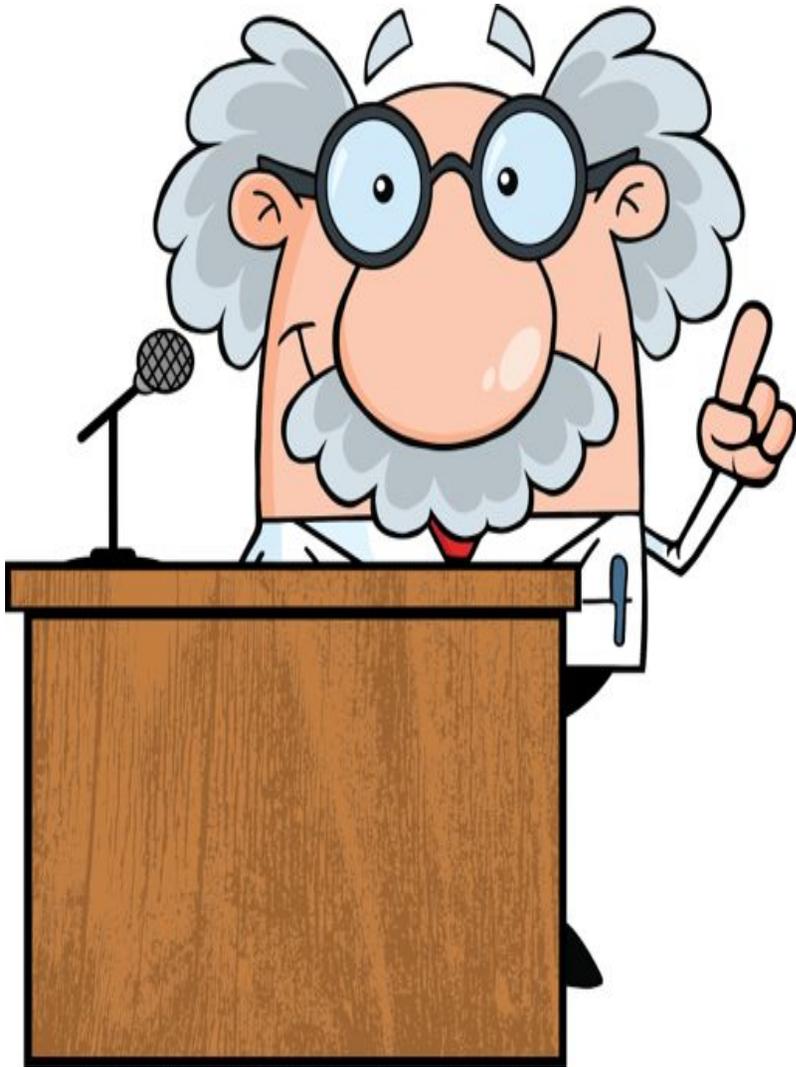
Preview

Lesson #4 transports us back to the formative days of the Church, a time when *“the community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common”* (4: 32); a time when *“there was no needy person among them”* (4: 34); a time when Barnabas, a Levite from Cypress, *“sold a piece of property that he owned, then brought the money and put it at the feet of the apostles”* to contribute to the common good (4: 36-37); a time when *“many signs and wonders were done among the people at the hands of the apostles”* (5: 12); a time when *“they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and mats so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on one or another of them . . . and they were all cured”* (5: 15-16).

Preview, cont.

And yet, even within this Utopian vision, conflict and turmoil threaten the Church's very existence: Ananias and Sapphira cheat God, and they die for their offence; the Apostles are arrested . . . again; and the Church grows so quickly that jealousies emerge, bitterness between the Hellenists and Hebrews poison the community, and the Apostles are overwhelmed, exhausted with work.

As the community's growth accelerates—approaching warp speed—we meet a fascinating cast of characters, several of whom will play major roles in our ongoing story. In these early days, the believers are living life in the spiritual fast lane, an exhilarating, but dangerous place to be.



In Lesson #2 we learned about life in the Church in the wake of Pentecost, a time when the believers *“devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers,”* a time when *“all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need”* (2: 42, 44).



We also learned that this was a ***description*** of the Jerusalem community in these early days, not a ***prescription*** of how life should be lived in a Christian community.

True, Jesus urges us to get our priorities straight, to seek the Kingdom of God first, to sell our belongings and give alms, and to seek ***“an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy”*** (Luke 12: 33). But Jesus does not command a utopian society, such as we see in Jerusalem, immediately following Pentecost.



Rather, in these early days, the Apostles struggle with supporting thousands of Pentecost pilgrims who have stayed in Jerusalem long after they had planned on returning home. Indeed, in Acts 8: 1-3, when persecution begins in earnest, *“all were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria, except the apostles,”* and we won’t see this model in Scripture in a Christian community again.



That is not to say that such Christian communities are impossibly utopian; quite the contrary, voluntary Christian communities that hold all property in common and are built on the four pillars of the early Church—1) the teaching of the Apostles; 2) the fellowship; 3) the breaking of bread (the Eucharist) and; 4) prayer—are admirable and praiseworthy, indeed. Being called to such a life—and embracing it with love, passion and perseverance—is a great gift of grace.

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Life in the Nascent Christian Community

“The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. With great power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was accorded them all. There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need. Thus, Joseph, also named by the apostles Barnabas (which translated “son of encouragement”), a Levite, a Cypriot by birth, sold a piece of property that he owned, then brought the money and put it at the feet of the apostles.”

(4: 32-37)

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Paolo Veronese. *St. Barnabas Healing the Sick* (oil on canvas), c. 1566.
Musée des beaux-arts de Rouen, France.

Here we meet Barnabas, a Jew from Cypress, who was either living in Jerusalem at the time, or who had been on a Pentecost pilgrimage in A.D. 32. He becomes one of the first believers.

- Barnabas sells property he owns in Cypress to help support the nascent Church in Jerusalem (Acts 4: 36-37);
- He is the cousin of Mark, our Gospel writer (Colossians 4: 10);
- At the risk of his own life, he meets with the great persecutor of the Church, Saul of Tarsus, to determine if Saul's conversion is genuine (Acts 9: 26-27);
- He introduces St. Paul to the church in Syrian Antioch, where he and Paul take up residence and become teachers (Acts 13: 1); and
- He travels with Paul on the 1st missionary journey, A.D. 46-48 (Acts 13: 2).

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“A man named Ananias, however, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property. He retained for himself, with his wife’s knowledge, some of the purchase price, took the remainder, and put it at the feet of the apostles. But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart so that you lied to the holy Spirit and retained part of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain yours? And when it was sold, was it not still under your control? Why did you contrive this deed? You have lied not to human beings, but to God.’ When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last, and great fear came upon all who heard of it. Young men came and wrapped him up, then carried him out and buried him.”

(5: 1-6)

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Raphael. *The Death of Ananias* (oil on canvas), 1515.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

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“After an interval of about three hours, his wife came in, unaware of what had happened. Peter said to her, ‘Tell me, did you sell the land for this amount?’ She answered, ‘Yes, for that amount.’ Then Peter said to her, ‘Why did you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen, the footsteps of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.’ At once, she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men entered they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.”

(5: 7-11)

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**Nicolas Poussin. *The Death of Sapphira* (oil on canvas), 1652.
Louvre Museum, Paris.**

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“Many signs and wonders were done among the people at the hands of the apostles. They were all together in Solomon’s portico. None of the others dared to join them, but the people esteemed them. Yet more than ever, believers in the Lord, great numbers of men and women, were added to them. Thus they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and mats so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on one or another of them. A large number of people from the towns in the vicinity of Jerusalem also gathered, bringing the sick and those disturbed by unclean spirits, and they were all cured.”

(5: 12-16)

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**Masaccio [Tommaso Cassai]. *St. Peter Healing the Sick with His Shadow* (fresco), c. 1424.
Brancacci Chapel, Church of Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence.**

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The Jewish leaders had forbidden Peter and the Apostles to speak of Jesus—but of course, they continue to do so anyhow.

Signs and wonders multiply, and *“yet more than ever, believers in the Lord, great numbers of men and women, were added to them”* (5: 14). Church growth accelerates!

To the religious leaders red lights flash and alarms sound. The movement must be stopped: now!

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“Then the high priest rose up and all his companions, that is, the party of the Sadducees, and, filled with jealousy, laid hands upon the apostles and put them in jail. But during the night, the angel of the Lord opened the doors of the prison, led them out, and said ‘Go and take your place in the temple area and tell the people everything about this life.’ When they heard this, they went to the temple early in the morning and taught. When the high priest and his companions arrived, they convened the Sanhedrin, the full senate of the Israelites, and sent to the jail to have them brought in. But the court officers who went did not find them in the prison, so they came back and reported, ‘We found the jail securely locked and the guards stationed outside the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside.’ When they heard this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were at a loss about them, as to what this would come to . . .



**Antonio de Bellis. *The Liberation of St. Peter* (oil on canvas), c. 1640.
Blanton Museum of Art, University of Texas, Austin.
[On loan from a private collection in Scandinavia.]**

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“Then someone came in and reported to them, ‘The men whom you put in prison are in the temple area and are teaching the people. When they had brought them in and made them stand before the Sanhedrin, the high priest questioned them, ‘We gave you strict orders [did we not?] to stop teaching in that name. Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and want to bring this man’s blood upon us.’ But Peter and the apostles said in reply, ‘We must obey God rather than men. The God of our ancestors raised Jesus, though you had him killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior to grant Israel repentance and forgiveness of sins. We are witnesses of these things, as is the holy Spirit that God has given to those who obey him’ . . .

“But a Pharisee in the Sanhedrin named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up, ordered the men to be put outside for a short time, and said to them, ‘Fellow Israelites, be careful what you are about to do to these men. Some time ago, Theudas appeared, claiming to be someone important, and about four hundred men joined him, but he was killed, and all those who were loyal to him were disbanded and came to nothing. After him came Judas the Galilean at the time of the census. He also drew people after him, but he too perished and all who were loyal to him were scattered. So now I tell you, have nothing to do with these men, and let them go. For if this endeavor or this activity is of human origin, it will destroy itself. But if it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them; you may even find yourselves fighting against God . . .

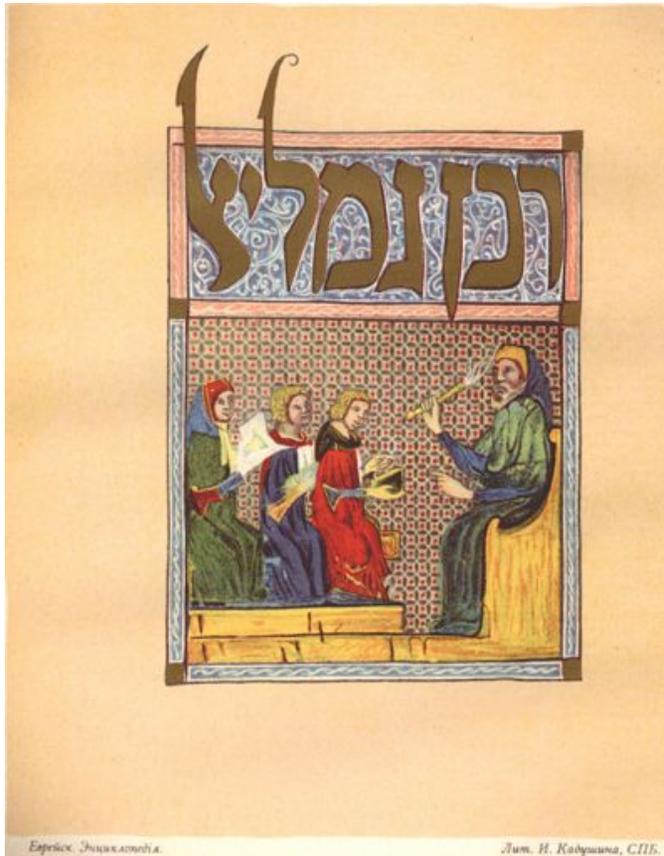


Illustration from the Brockhaus and Efron *Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1906.

- Gamaliel was among the greatest rabbis of the 1st century. He was the grandson of the Hillel the Elder (of the famed Hillel/Shammai controversies), the greatest rabbi of the previous century. The Talmud refers to Gamaliel as *Nasi* (“prince”) and *Rabban* (“master”), as well as “president” of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.
- At St. Paul’s defense before the Sanhedrin in Acts 22: 3, he says, *“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city. At the feet of Gamaliel I was educated . . .”*
- The *Mishna* recounts “the king and queen” (most likely, Herod Agrippa II and his wife Berenice) asked Gamaliel’s advice concerning Jewish rituals, suggesting the extent of Gamaliel’s reputation and authority (*Pesahim* 88:2).

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Theudas claimed to be a “messiah” when Fadus was procurator of Judea (A.D. 44-46). Josephus recounts what happened:

“It came to pass, while Fadus was procurator of Judea, that a certain charlatan, whose name was Theudas, persuaded a great part of the people to take their effects with them, and follow him to the river Jordan; for he told them he was a prophet, and that he would, by his own command,, divide the river, and afford them an easy passage over it. Many were deluded by his words. However, Fadus did not permit them to make any advantage of his wild attempt but sent a troop of horsemen out against them. After falling upon them unexpectedly, they slew many of them, and took many of them alive. They also took Theudas alive, cut off his head, and carried it to Jerusalem.”

(Jewish Antiquities, 20. 97-98)

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When the Roman authorities deposed the incompetent Jewish king Herod Archelaus in A.D. 6, his territory of Judea, Samaria and Idumea were annexed under a new governor, Coponius. Coponius increased taxes on the local inhabitants, and Judas the Galilean led a rebellion against him. Acts 5: 37 tells us that as a result, Judas the Galilean was killed and his supporters scattered.

“They were persuaded by [Gamaliel]. After recalling the apostles, they had them flogged, ordering them to stop speaking in the name of Jesus, and dismissed them. So they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. And all day long, both at the temple and in their homes, they did not stop teaching and proclaiming the Messiah, Jesus.”

(5: 17-42)

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The extraordinary growth of the Church brought with it tremendous logistical problems. Recall that many—if not most—of the believers were those who had traveled from throughout the Roman Empire to Jerusalem for Pentecost in A.D. 32, and after the “birth of the Church” they stayed.

Even though the believers sold property and belongings and pooled their resources, day-to-day living became evermore difficult, and inevitable tensions grew among those who lived in Jerusalem and those who were visitors, with tempers flaring.

“At that time as the number of disciples continued to grow, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. So the Twelve called together the community of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right for us to neglect the word of God to serve at table. Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task, whereas we shall devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.’

(6: 1-4)

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The Apostles faced the same problem Moses faced after the Exodus.

“[Moses father-in-law, Jethro, said], ‘What you are doing is not wise . . . you will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you. The task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now, listen to me and I will give you some advice, and may God be with you . . .

DELEGATE, MOSES!

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“The proposal was acceptable to the whole community, so they chose Stephen, a man filled with faith and the holy Spirit, also Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas of Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them. The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly; even a large group of priests were becoming obedient to the faith.

(6: 5-7)

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**Fra Angelico. *St. Peter Consecrates Stephen as Deacon* (fresco), c. 1447-1449.
Niccoline Chapel, Apostolic Palace, Vatican.**



The term “deacon” derives from the Greek word *διάκονος*, meaning a “waiter,” one who serves tables.

The original 7 deacons are men, although in Romans 16: 1, St. Paul mentions Phoebe “*who is [also] a διάκονον (a feminine, singular noun) of the church at Cenchreae.*” She is the woman who hand-delivers Paul’s epistle to the church in Rome in A.D. 57. St. Paul asks that they “*receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the holy ones, and help her in whatever she may need . . . for she has been a benefactor to many and to me as well*” (16: 2).



Well, the Church seems poised for the next stage of its growth, but will the opposition increase?



Stay tuned for the next lesson!

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Questions for discussion and thought

- 1. The Apostles nicknamed Joseph, Barnabas. What does his nickname name mean?**
- 2. Why do you think Ananias and Sapphira withheld some of the money they received when they sold their property?**
- 3. How did St. Peter's shadow heal people?**
- 4. Did the Sanhedrin make the correct decision in following Gamaliel's advice?**
- 5. The seven deacons were appointed by the Apostles to do what job?**

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