

Mar 8, 2020

Acts 4:32-37

Outward Church: A Culture of Encouragement

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Every church has a **culture**, no matter how **big** or how **small**. Our culture is **who we are** and **how we do things**. Some might call it our “**ethos**”—the **character** of our church community.

- Some churches have a **culture of excellence**. They have great preachers and their worship teams are cutting edge.
- Some churches have a **culture of evangelism**. They’re constantly getting out into their towns and communities and sharing the love of Jesus with others.
- Some churches have a **missions culture**. They really care about their missionaries and are constantly sending missionaries to the utter most parts of the earth.
- Some churches have an **invitational culture**. Those who go to the church love to invite their friends.
- Some churches have a **service culture**. They’re always getting out into their neighborhood to serve and care for the **least of these**.
- Some churches have a **culture of fellowship**. They love spending time with each other and feel like one big **family**.
- Some churches have a **welcoming culture**. People feel really warm and welcomed when they come into the church.

There are lots of different cultures a church can have. Today I want to ask this question:

- What does a **culture of encouragement** look like?

If I were to stop and ask someone who has **visited** our **church recently**, what our culture is like, what would it **take for them to say**, “That church is a really encouraging place”? Today I want to **cast a vision** of what a culture of encouragement could look like. Thankfully, **our text today** (Acts 4:32-37) casts **that vision**.

We’re given another **snapshot**, a **Polaroid picture**, of the **first church** in **Jerusalem**. It sounds a lot like what we read right after Pentecost (Acts 2:42-37). It highlights the way the community is **encouraging one another** in **practical ways**. It helps us **define** what a culture of encouragement can look like.

A culture of encouragement is defined by:

Let’s read the first half of Acts 4:32, “All the believers were one in heart and mind...” (NIV) All the believers have grown to about **5,000 men**, not including women and children (Acts 4:4). All of them are sharing “one heart and mind.” The Greek says “one heart and **one soul**.” (NA28) One commentary I read says this means “**real friendship**.”¹ *A culture of encouragement is defined by:*

1) Friendship (v32)

We care about each other. This is a big church. Can you imagine a church of 5,000 people all caring about each other? I **imagine** some of them must have lived in the **outlying villages** and **towns** in **Judea** and yet they are all marked by an **atmosphere of friendship**.

A culture of encouragement **begins with friendship**. You have to **know what's going on** in each other's lives if you want to encourage each other. Otherwise we're **just motivational speakers**. Love is spelled "**T.I.M.E.**"—time. If we want to create a culture of encouragement we need to **spend time together**.

We as a church don't spend a lot of time with each other **during the week**, especially during the day. **Understandably so** because we're **all busy** working or parenting. We come together on Sundays and then we **go our separate ways**. The **20 minutes** of fellowship after the church service doesn't give us much time to go deep. The author and Christian counselor **Larry Crabb** once said, "I heard **two men talking** in a public restroom: 'I saw a **great movie** this weekend,' said one. '**Me too,**' replied the other. **Then they left.**"² "**How was your week?**" "**Good.** How was your week?" Good." "**See you next Sunday.**"

There might be a **program** here or there we could create to help **cultivate friendships**, but maybe this could happen a little more **naturally**. Remember a couple weeks ago when I challenged us to invite a family or person over to your home for dinner (or out to dinner) that you'd never had over before? Here's an opportunity. You can do it! *A culture of encouragement is defined by friendship and by...*

2) Generosity (v32-35)

Acts 4:32b says, "No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had." Then if you skip to the **second half of verse 33**, "...And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all 34 that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need." (NIV) (c.f. Acts 2:42-45)

The believers are marked by **generosity** and **compassion** for the **needy members** of their **church family**. When you grow to 5,000+ people, you're going to add those who **have money** and those who do **not**. Those who **had willingly helped** the **have nots**, even at cost to themselves.

One commentary I read said that the **middle-class** was about **10%** of the people, and not all of them owned houses, and the **upper class** was about **4-7%** of the people. That means maybe **14-17%** of people in **Jerusalem owned homes**, not many.³ Of our **88** members and attenders at Cornerstone, it would mean only about **15 of us** own homes, and that's **not distinguishing** between **adults** and **children**. **Toben** owns one of these homes. She's a **land baron**. Whether or not they were poor, it was **costly** for people to sell their homes.

One of the most encouraging things to see is when **one person** gives generously to **another person in need**. That's why we have a **benevolence fund** here at Cornerstone, so we as a church body can **donate** to a fund and the **Deacons** can give it to those in need within our church body. I'm always encouraged when I hear **how** our benevolence fund is being used to help others. I pray that **if the needs grew** our **generosity** would **grow with it**—even at the cost of us having to **sell** some of our **stuff** to care for each other.

What if you don't have money to give? You can still be an encouragement. **The Visual Guide to Acts** says, "If you are rich in something, be generous with it" like "**friendship**" or **hospitality**" or "**property**" or "**time**" or "**skills**."⁴ Whatever you can be generous with is what you can use to encourage others. Hebrews reminds us the **principal** is encouragement; whether with our money or something else.

Hebrews 10:24 (NIV) And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

A couple months ago one of the **women** participating in our Ockenga Fellows Program got in a really bad **car accident**. Her car **flipped** and she spent about a **month** in the **hospital** and is **now home** trying to **rest** and **recover**. One of our **cohort mentors** called her and asked if there was anything he could do to help and she asked him to send her some of his **sermons**. He did and she said she listened to them all in **one day**. I was challenged by that to do something nice for her as well, so I bought her **takeout**. When we spoke on the **phone** I asked her if there was **anything else I could do**. I was **hoping** she wanted me to send sermons too but she didn't ask for those... Nevertheless, my mentor's example of generosity and encouragement **inspired me** to do something similar.

I know **Matthew 6:3** says, "But when you give to the needy, do not let your **left hand** know what your right hand is doing," which is why sometimes I think we don't like telling each other what good things God has done through us. But sometimes I think we miss out on the opportunity to encourage each other. "Look at what God did (through me)!" "That's awesome! I want to do something like that too." *A culture of encouragement is defined by 1) friendship, 2) generosity and by 3)...*

3) Hope (v33)

This isn't just any kind of hope. This is hope **rooted** in the **resurrection**—this is resurrection hope. The first half of Acts 4:33 says, "With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus." (NIV) The Apostles really viewed it as **their job** to tell others about the resurrection (Acts 1:22). They **preach** about the resurrection over and over again (Acts 2:31; 4:2, 33).

If we really believe in the resurrection, it **changes things**, doesn't it? The resurrection is the **truth**, not just the idea, the truth that **Jesus died** and **God raised him back to life three days later**. There's a **second part** to it. If we **repent** of our sins and **believe** in Jesus, God promises one day he'll give **each of us** resurrection too. That's right, God will **raise you** from the dead to a **new** and **eternal life**.

My friend **Joe** is **gifted in encouragement**. We got breakfast this week at the **best breakfast place** around, **Cracker Barrel**, and he reminded me of how the resurrection of Jesus **ties** into the **visions** God gives us. **If God can raise Jesus from the dead**, he can work through us to do **great things**. That great thing might be singing on the **worship team**, going out of your way to help your **neighbor after work**, or helping found a **nonprofit** that will **reach millions** of people. Our God can bring life out of death. He can do anything.

When we **truly believe** the resurrection as a church community, it should **permeate our church** like an **aromatic perfume**. Can people "**smell the resurrection**" on our **hearts** as we **believe it** and **talk about it**? We have so much to be hopeful about and to encourage one another with. You ever heard the catch-phrase, "**You can do it!**" Well our version is—"**Jesus lives! You can do it!**" *A culture of encouragement is defined by 1) friendship, 2) generosity, 3) hope and by...*

4) People (v36-37)

A **culture of encouragement produces people of encouragement**. Or is it the **other way** around? **Encouraging people** produce a culture of encouragement. Which came first, the **chicken** or the **egg**? Encouragement starts with **flesh** and **blood** people encouraging each other, but pretty soon it can create a **church ethos characterized** by encouragement.

Let's read about **one of those people** who helps **cultivate** a culture of encouragement. Acts 4:36-37 (NIV) says, "36 Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), 37 sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet."

There's a man named **Joseph** who is a **Levite**. Levites **don't typically own land**. The Old Testament **law forbid** it (Num 18:20; Deut 10:9) but for whatever reason this man does, **perhaps** because he was raised on the **non-Jewish island of Cyprus**. Joseph is **such an encourager** the apostles **rename** him "**Barnabas** (which means 'son of encouragement')". If we look at all the places we hear about Barnabas **in Acts** we see he really is defined by encouragement. **Barnabas is:**

- a. **A friend** - Barnabas **sticks up** for Saul (Paul) **after** his **conversion** when the **disciples** are **afraid** of him. He tells them how **Saul saw Jesus** and **preached in Jesus' name** (Acts 9:26-27).
- b. **Generous** - Right here Barnabas sells a field and gives it to the Apostles (Acts 4:36-37). He's generous.
- c. **Hopeful** - He encourages the whole church to **keep** their **hearts set on Jesus** (Acts 11:23-26).
- d. **People** - He **sees** what **God can do through others** even when others can't. Later in Acts when Paul get's **frustrated with John Mark** for bailing on him and Barnabas, Barnabas gives John Mark a **second chance** when **no one else will**. He's a true friend (Acts 15:36-39).⁵

Barnabas lives out the call God wants to challenge each one of us with today.

1 Thessalonians 5:11 (NIV) Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Jesus calls us to encourage one other, to be **Barnabases** to each other, just as we **already are**, but even **more so**. A church culture that is encouraging is full of people who are encouraging, **not just at church**, but **this time tomorrow** when we're at **work** or **school**. You can create a culture of encouragement there too. Your **frontline** will know you as the **Christian** who **encourages**. **Not a bad way to be known**.

A culture of encouragement is defined by 1) friendship, 2) generosity, 3) hope and 4) people.

I want to return to our **opening question**, "What does a culture of encouragement look like?" and I want to **rephrase it** to, "**What can a culture of encouragement look like at Cornerstone?**"

It looks like us **grabbing breakfast** with each other **before work** or **eating lunch** together on **break**. It looks like us **inviting each other** into our **homes** to **play games** and **eat meals**. It looks like us doing **fun outing together** and **getting to know what's really going on** in each other's lives. It looks like **slipping an envelope** with **cash** in it to a family when their **car breaks down** or giving to the **benevolence fun** so the **Deacons** can **write a check**.

A culture of encouragement looks like us **hosting a church-wide yard sale** so we can **send kids to France** or **pay for a family's medical bills**. It looks like us all **having hope**, hope for the **future**, hope for our **ministry**, hope for **Westford**, hope for our **families**, and hope in **what Jesus can do** because **if he can rise from the dead he can do anything**.

Most of all a **culture of encouragement** looks like **people**. It looks like you and me **going out of our way** to tell each other that **we can do it**—whatever God is **sending** us to to—because **God is at work**. It looks like believing in **each other's giftings** and **callings** and **speaking "words of life"** to each other. It looks like us **caring** our **culture** of encouragement outside and onto our **frontlines** and the **places we're at every day**.

I believe **we have** a culture of encouragement already but that God isn't done with us yet. I pray he will make us **more and more encouraging**. I want to **be a part of what we're going to become**. *A culture of encouragement is defined by 1) friendship, 2) generosity, 3) hope and 4) people.*

Benediction (blessing) - 1 Thessalonians 5:11 (NIV) Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references, or share it through [Apple podcasts](#) or [Google Play Music](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions:

Enjoy some questions to talk through with your small group, Bible study, or Sunday school:

1. What would it take for an outsider to define your church as a “really encouraging place”?
2. What do you think a culture of encouragement looks like?
3. Have you found it to be easy, difficult, or somewhere in-between to form real friendships at your church? What’s one step you can take to develop real friendship in your church community?
4. If “love” is spelled “T.I.M.E.”, what do you love? What do you spend the most time with?
5. Share a story of how someone else’s generosity encouraged you. Have you had the chance to be generous too? Share a time when you tried to be generous to encourage the group.
6. What is “resurrection hope” and why does it matter for creating an encouraging community?
7. Does a culture of encouragement produce people of encouragement or do encouraging people produce a culture of encouragement?
8. How was Barnabas encouraging in our passage and throughout Acts? What can we learn from him?
9. What it look like for you to create a culture of encouragement at your workplace or your school, wherever you spend most of your time, your frontline (licc.org)?
10. Let’s take some time to encourage each other in our small group. Go around the group and say an encouraging thing about each member. Try to keep it brief but meaningful.

End by asking our Heavenly Father to help us foster cultures of encouragement in our churches and where we spend time with those who don’t yet know Jesus.

¹ Darrell Bock. *Acts: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. 2007. Baker Academic. Grand Rapids, MI. Page 213.

² Robert Logan and Tara Miller. *Becoming Barnabas: A Ministry of Coming Alongside*. 2014. ChurchSmart Resources. Page 19.

³ Baker Commentary. 215.

⁴ Kevin DeYoung and Chris Ranson. *Acts: A Visual Guide*. June 2018. Christian Focus. See Acts 4:32-37.

⁵ Barnabas is John Mark's cousin. See Colossians 4:10.