

Acts 2:42-47, No. 7

“A New Community”

October 4, 2015

The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

What we will now see is typical of Luke’s narrative style: a major narrative – in this case the Pentecost event – the miracle of tongues, Peter’s sermon, and the response of the people – is concluded by a short summary. Obviously Luke was constrained by the amount of material he could include in what was already going to be a long book. We’d love to have more detail about life in the church in those earliest days, but Luke gives us only a cameo or a snapshot. Three thousand converts to the new movement in a single day had to attract the notice of the authorities, but Luke tells us nothing about that. How were they all baptized? Luke doesn’t tell us. What he concentrates on are those facts that are representative, that show us what it means to be a Christian and what the gospel accomplishes in the lives of those who embrace Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In particular, Luke here will describe the life of Christians *together*.

#### Text Comment

- v.42 “They” includes the original disciples, the 120 mentioned in chapter 1 and the several thousand converts from the events of Pentecost Sunday, or at least as many as could remain in the city and hadn’t yet returned home. Obviously the fledgling community of several thousand souls could not have met in a single place in the city of Jerusalem – the only place large enough for such a gathering would have been the temple and the authorities would never have stood for that – but we will read in v. 46 that the congregation was broken up into smaller units that met in individual homes.
  
- v.45 The “all things in common” obviously doesn’t mean that all private property was abolished because in v. 46 we will read that there were still home-owners among them. It was a voluntary generosity, as will become clear as we move further into Acts, but it was an impressive generosity. That is Luke’s point, with his hyperbole: “they had *all* things in common.” It is a point important enough for Luke to repeat. A similar thing will be said about the Christians’ generosity at the end of chapter 4. Motivated by the love of God and their sense of God’s generosity to them, it was natural for them to be unstinting in their generosity to others.
  
- v.46 It is a fascinating and important detail. The earliest Christians continued to worship in the temple, side by side with Jews who did not believe in Jesus and under the ministrations of priests, some of whom were Jesus’ deadly enemies. There is no sense anywhere in Acts that temple worship was inconsistent with Christian convictions. In fact, these Christians would have said that they and they only really understood what that worship meant, what the sacrifices stood for, and so on. In any case, the Christians worshipped publically and formally and privately or in smaller groups in their homes. This is a pattern that would be followed in all subsequent history: the formal worship of the Lord’s house and the worship of individuals or families or small groups. In any case, Luke makes it clear, that this was no breakaway movement from Judaism. It was rather the true fulfillment of the ancient faith, the faith that the Jewish people had, by this time,

largely lost. Well before the first century Judaism had lost the hope of a redeemer who would die for the sins of the world, but that hope *was* very clearly the hope set before the people of God in their ancient scriptures. This a point the rest of the New Testament will emphasize and one that was, of course, highly controversial among the Jews: Christians are the true Israel, the Jewish Bible, what we call the Old Testament, is a Christian book, and Jesus is the Messiah the prophets said would come to establish the kingdom of God on the earth.

v.47 The kingdom of God continued to grow by the grace of God. It was *the Lord* who added to their number day by day.

Man, those must have been heady days! The earliest Christians continued to worship in the temple but with a completely new spirit. There was among all of these people a sense that they were standing at the crossroads of the history of the world. As they listened day by day to the apostles explain who Jesus was and what he had done and why, the mists that cloud the minds of human beings began to clear and the truth, beautiful and powerful, stood out in sharp relief. They finally understood the meaning of life and their hearts were full of joy and hope.

Under that powerful impression they took every opportunity they could to learn more. It was all impossibly exciting (the church has always been a school where people learn about God and man and life and salvation). I remember attending some of Francis Schaeffer's lectures back in the early 1970s when he was gaining an international reputation as both a defender of the Christian faith and someone who could explain its intellectual and spiritual power. This was something a great many young people had never heard before – even many young people who had grown up in Christian churches – and they were hanging on his every word, drinking it up. It was an exciting time. Lots of people were coming to faith in Christ -- this was the Jesus movement – there was a sense that the gospel was on the move, and Christian truth was captivating minds and hearts. It isn't always like that, alas. It won't be even in Acts. There are times of the Spirit's power and times of his comparative inaction; why we cannot say. Such is his will and his wisdom. But this was a time of the Spirit's power. The believers were *feeling* the force of truth and the glory of the gospel of Jesus Christ and they were *living* under the influence of powerful conviction.

One feature of this new community was their sense of togetherness. A message of mighty love infused them with love both for God and for one another. This is what is meant by "fellowship" in v. 42, the famous Greek word *koinonia*. They were living their lives *together*, sharing their remarkable experiences – *experiences this wonderful needed to be shared* – and rejoicing together in what Jesus Christ had done for them. They were making new friends every day among believers they had never met before. They were bound together by a set of new convictions that set them apart from the rest of the world. They also found within their hearts a sense of responsibility for one another. There were among their number both rich and poor but no one went without because love was the controlling principle of their new life.

What came to be distinctive of Christian fellowship early on was the practice of eating meals together. Whether "breaking bread" in vv. 42 and 46 refers to the Lord's Supper or such fellowship meals – and good arguments can be made for either interpretation – we know from

other information that early on the Lord's Supper was typically observed in connection with a regular meal that was shared by the congregation. [Bock, 150-151]

It is also said here that they devoted themselves to "the prayers." The plural suggests formal prayers, such as those used in temple worship, though, no doubt they prayed alone and together for one another, for others they knew whom they were hoping to be saved, and for the extension of the kingdom of God.

And all of this was done with sincerity and passion. That is suggested first by the opening words of v. 42: "they devoted themselves" to these various things; then by Luke's reference to the strong feelings: their awe that God himself was at work in their midst, their gladness and joy at the experience of God's grace. Still more the devotion and passion of the early Christians are indicated by the fact that they felt these convictions so strongly that they were willing to part with their property for the sake of their new brothers and sisters. It wasn't a program, as if there were some new form of economic theory here according to which all private property was to be surrendered. Nothing like that. It was voluntary and called forth by the needs they encountered. But they were exceedingly generous, so generous that Luke can describe their largesse in such extravagant terms: "they had all things in common." A poor Christian, in other words, could count on the fact that his fellow Christian's property was as good as his own so far as his needs were concerned. And, finally, the measure of their devotion is indicated in v. 46 by the fact that they were doing these things – the things mentioned in these verses – *day after day*. Once a week did not suffice. They were like believers have sometimes been in times of spiritual revivals when the minister would finish his sermon and the people would sit there demanding more.

Two very important observations are then made about the impression all of this made on the community around them, unbelieving Jerusalem primarily. The first is that *they had favor with all the people*. Christ's work for them and the Holy Spirit's work in them made them highly attractive, admirable people. You remember the proverb: "When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him." [Prov. 16:7] Well so it was here. After all, what's not to like?

Generous people, happy people, good people, people interested in others are inevitably attractive people, people to whom other people are drawn. Now, to be sure, not everyone was drawn to them. "Having favor with *all the people*" in v. 47 is a typical hyperbole. The religious leadership was furious and the next two chapters will record how a great kindness shown to a man lame from birth resulted in the beginning of the active persecution of the church by the authorities. The attractiveness of these people's lives was lost on them. They felt threatened by the message of Jesus' resurrection and sought to stamp it out. But take the point. The Christian life, lived to the hilt, as it was in those earliest days and has often been since, is intensely attractive because it is so obviously the kind of life that everyone knows he or she ought to live and everyone to some degree aspires to live.

The second observation, all the more important for its place in this context, is that "the Lord added to their number *day by day* those who were being saved." Given that the same phrase occurs in v. 46, Luke seems very clearly to be drawing a connection between the life these Christians were living, their love for one another, and their impact *day by day* on those still

outside. Those who were attracted to these people because of their joy and their goodness were far more likely to believe their message and join their assembly. The Christians' lives were a powerful recommendation of the message they were proclaiming to others about new life in Jesus Christ. [Peterson, 164] A stingy person makes a poor recommendation of a message about the limitless grace and mercy of God. A selfish person cannot commend and empower a message of God's generosity. In the same way a gloomy person will always struggle to make believable the claim that God has given us an impossibly wonderful gift out of the sheer goodness of his heart. If that is true – even if there is much in life that must make us sad – there must be joy, real joy as well. Nothing is said here specifically about how the message, the good news, was transmitted. The apostles were preaching in the streets and the temple, as we will read in the next chapter, but no doubt the believers themselves were talking with friends and neighbors who couldn't help but notice the happy change that had come over these people.

Now, what are you and I to do with this material, with this beautiful picture of early Christian life? After all, it isn't always like this, is it? Even serious, devout Christians can be grumpy, easily offended, and act selfishly and sometimes, if not often, lack this kind of irrepressible joy. We are not always *this* generous; are we? These were extraordinary times after all. Miracles were occurring in numbers, as we read in 43. You can't tell me that witnessing a miracle, an act of supernatural power – perhaps the immediate healing of someone with a visible, life-long disability – I say, you can't tell me that witnessing such a miracle wouldn't stir your soul, wouldn't fill you with awe, and wouldn't make you realize in a new and living way what an extraordinary thing it is to know God. You would wake up in the morning realizing that the world itself was supercharged with the presence of God. In the next chapter we are going to read of the general astonishment that came over everyone when a man lame from birth was suddenly made to walk, and not just walk but leap and dance for joy. People ran to the temple when they heard what had happened, just to get a look for themselves. Such things simply don't happen; but this thing did!

But miracles are not and never were commonplace. They were happening at this moment because those people stood at an important junction in the history of the revelation of the salvation of God. That is when we find miracles in the Bible: with Moses and Joshua, with Elijah and Elisha, and with Christ and his apostles. The Bible reminds us that miracles did not occur the rest of the time, which was, of course, by far most of the time. By the end of Acts we hear almost nothing of miracles and by the end of the New Testament it seems clear they were no longer a feature of Christian life and ministry. They were a feature of the apostolic period alone. Paul in his early ministry performed miracles of healing, but at the end of his life he tells us that he left his friend Trophimus ill at Miletus, a friend he would have loved to have with him in Rome as he awaited his execution. No miraculous healing for him.

What is more, there were then the apostles of the Lord Jesus providing the teaching. They held an office of divine authority; they were eyewitnesses of the Lord's ministry, his death, and his resurrection and ascension. They could keep people mesmerized for hours just telling stories of what they had seen and heard. The people knew that they could rely on the apostles to tell them the truth, accurately to define what it is that Christians believe, and to explain it faithfully. They would never have listened to someone who came along saying that he knew better than Peter or John. It was easy to know what the truth was in those days. Not so easy since. Even the apostles

some years later had to fight against false doctrines that were being intruded into the mind of the church, incorrect and often dangerous ideas masquerading as the truth. And, of course, it has gotten worse through time. In those heady days after Pentecost there weren't competing visions of the Christian faith as there are today, with so-called Christian churches and Christian ministers who no longer believe much of anything that stirred the hearts of these Christians in the days following Pentecost. Nowadays we have so-called Christian teachers who claim that God didn't create the world, that Jesus *didn't* die on the cross for our sins or rise bodily from the dead, that it is not necessary to believe in him and submit our lives to him in order to go to heaven when we die, indeed that there is no Judgment Day at all. *Wouldn't it be wonderful to have the apostles with us still to make perfectly clear to everyone what the Christian message is, and what it is not!* But we do not have them with us; the church hasn't had them for a very long time and perhaps it was predictable – given the prevalence of false teaching in Israel's history – that the church would struggle to remain loyal to the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.

Many Christians, perhaps understandably, have supposed that vv. 42-47 are a template for the life of the church throughout the age between Christ's ascension to heaven and his return. *We all would love for that to be the case.* And some actually believe that we should have apostles and we should have miracles as they did. But to have apostles today one must completely redefine the office. No one living today could have been a participant in the Lord's public ministry and an eyewitness of his resurrection. And to have miracles today, sadly, has tended to require a fundamental redefinition of miracle as well, far too often only a story for suckers. And, alas, the beautiful devotion of the earliest Christians to the life of faith has not always been conspicuous either. Even in the New Testament we are going to be treated to accounts of Christians squabbling with one another, failing to be generous to those in need, and in sometimes bitter disagreement about church teaching.

There have been times – times of the Spirit's power, times of revival – when something much closer to the experience of those early days occurred again. A hero of mine, Alexander Whyte, the Scottish pastor and preacher who died in 1921 after a 50 year long ministry in Edinburgh, lived as a young man through such a revival in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Scotland. He was a young college student, just having arrived in Aberdeen, when the Spirit of God swept over Scotland in 1859. He was caught up in all the prayer meetings – multitudes attended them several times each week –; he listened in rapt attention virtually every day to powerful preachers who were holding services somewhere most days of the week; he took part in the spiritual conversations by which many came to Christ in living faith for the first time and in the joy so widely shared among those who now realized that God was in their midst and working powerfully. That experience left its mark on Whyte and shaped his ministry until its end. I tell you without apology that I would give almost anything for such a day to dawn in Tacoma, Washington, to see large numbers of folk swept into salvation, to see churches jammed full of folk wanting to join others in the praise of God and to pray for more of the Holy Spirit's work in their hearts and the hearts of others. It has happened many, many times in other times and places, it is happening today in Africa and Asia. Why not here?

But that is the Lord's doing. We cannot bring such times to pass. More than that, such days have always been, from the very beginning, the exception, not the rule. We look at Luke's description of Christian life in those earliest days after Pentecost with longing precisely because we wish

our lives were more like that! We wish that all Christians, and especially ourselves, were generally behaving in such Christ-like and Christ-revealing ways: generous to a fault, happy in the Lord, delighted with one another, eager to grow in knowledge and character. We can't help but think if only we were more like those thousands who then filled Jerusalem's streets and houses, the Lord would be adding to our number day by day those who were being saved.

So what *are* we to do with this description of an ideal Christian social life as it was lived for some time under an unusual outpouring of the Holy Spirit? Well, that's what it is: it's an ideal Christian life. The kind of life someone lives when he thinks the right way about life, and when he feels the great things of God and his grace as powerfully as he or she ought to feel them. Well, there is no point in whining that it is not the same today and here. We know that. There is no point whiling away the time wishing that it were – however much we cannot help ourselves – because only God can make it so. And he has not chosen to make our days just like those days.

But we can take from this picture of true and authentic Christian life our marching orders, the goals to which we ought always to be aspiring and for the accomplishment of which we should always be striving. The fact is we have only to look at these saints and their behavior to know that every Christian *ought to be* like that. We ought always to be asking God to make us *like this*. We ought to examine ourselves according to this standard and nothing less.

Are we anxious to learn more of the truth of God and do we devote ourselves to doing so? Are we people who live our lives in the happy fellowship of the saints, loving and being loved? Is worship a critical element in our lives. Parents, do your children know from listening to you and watching you that the worship of God is not only your duty, but your pleasure, and a primary source of your personal and spiritual vitality, the engine of your life? And is generosity – notable, surprising, even astonishing measures of generosity – a feature of your life and of our lives together? I'm deeply thankful for the generous character of this fellowship, for how much good is being done for so many others by those in this church. But surely we have not attained to such a spirit and practice of generosity that someone might describe it by saying "they had all things in common." Are we constantly in one another's homes sharing our lives but especially our lives in Christ?

Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount that our calling was to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. Such a statement can trouble the tender conscience because we are far, far from being perfect. In fact, the more honest among us fear that we haven't even attained to Christian mediocrity! There is far too much of ourselves and far too little of the Lord Jesus in our hearts. And, as a result, we also are noticeably short on both the awe and the joy that filled the hearts of these earliest followers of Jesus.

But that is the nature of the Christian life in this world. It is a life aspiring to what is not yet, striving to form a Christian character and a Christ-like way of life that will never be, until we die and go to be with the Lord, anything but a shadow of the real thing. But for us it must be enough to be at least darkening the shadow, making it more visible than it was. And, as was no doubt the case with these early Christians, as we strive to put on Christ others will see our progress more than we do!

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 1654, from 10:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m. – for two hours – the Spirit of God fell upon Blaise Pascal, the French mathematical and scientific genius and man of letters, probably one of, if not the most educated and intelligent man in the world of his day. He wrote down an account of his experience, nowadays known as “The Memorial.” Written on a small piece of paper which he then sewed it into his coat. It wasn’t found until his death some eight years later. This is what he wrote:

#### Fire

'God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob,' not of philosophers and scholars. Certainty, certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. God of Jesus Christ. *My God and your God.* 'Thy God shall be my God.' The world forgotten, and everything except God. He can only be found by the ways taught in the Gospels. Greatness of the human soul. 'O righteous Father, the world had not known thee, but I have known thee.' Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy. I have cut myself off from him. *They have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters.* 'My God wilt thou forsake me?' Let me not be cut off from him forever! 'And this is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.' Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. I have cut myself off from him, shunned him, denied him, crucified him. Let me never be cut off from him! He can only be kept by the ways taught in the Gospel. Sweet and total renunciation. Total submission to Jesus Christ and my director. Everlasting joy in return for one day's effort on earth. *I will not forget thy word.* Amen.

That overwhelming conviction of the reality of God, of the divine glory of Jesus Christ, and the absolute joy of salvation to eternal life is what these earliest Christians were feeling day by day. Pascal never had another experience like that in his life. But he treasured it so much that he kept it close to his heart every day he lived. It was, he knew – that experience, those two hours – his window on reality.

Well so for us the experience and the life and the behavior of these early Christians. If we have not had their happy fortune to have experienced the power of the Holy Spirit in remarkable and unusual measure, to have witnessed actual miracles, and to have welcomed day after day more and more new followers of Jesus Christ; I say, if we have not had their experience, we nevertheless share that reality, and can strive to do all we can do to live according to that reality as those early Christians did. And I am sure that the Lord knows it is far harder to live a faithful, devoted, sacrificial, generous Christian life in a time like ours than it was in those first heady days after the coming of the Holy Spirit. Our little may, after all, count for more, so long as our little is nothing less than our effort to do as much as we possibly can to honor what God has done for us!