

The Pentecostal Life: 1: Prayer and Breaking of Bread

Acts 2:37-47

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Pentecost 1 / Trinity Sunday
June 3, 2012

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³⁷ Now those who were gathered together in Jerusalem and heard Peter speak were stung in the very depths of their being by what Peter had said. So they said to Peter and the rest of the apostles: “Brothers, what shall we then do?”

³⁸ Peter said to them: “Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift that comes from God alone, which is the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ For, know this: the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far away... all those whom the Lord our God now calls to Himself.”

⁴⁰ Peter bore witness with many other words. Among those words were the ones in which he urged them on, saying: “Come, you and your families, and be rescued from this crooked generation.”

⁴¹ Those who received his word were baptized, and their numbers increased by about 3000 souls that day. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, to commonality, to breaking bread, and to prayers. That is to say...

⁴³ Fear came upon every soul, and many signs and wonders were done by the apostles.

⁴⁴ Also, all those who had come to believe were of one mind and held everything in common; ⁴⁵ they sold their belongings and goods and distributed them to all according as anyone had need.

⁴⁶ Daily, they broke bread in their homes and shared meals with glad and generous hearts.

Daily, they gathered together in the Temple, ⁴⁷ praising God and being thought well of by all the people.

And daily, the Lord increased the number of those being saved and drew them together to be of one mind.

Who are you?

Or better said: What are you?

You are a church, right? But, what makes a church a church? Is it a building with a cross? Is it a group of people gathered together on a Sunday morning? Is it preaching and hymns? Is it any place where the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are done? Is it coffee after the service?

According to the [Heidelberg Catechism, Question 54](#), "the Son of God from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends, and preserves to himself by his Spirit and word, out of the whole human race, a church chosen to everlasting life".

You and I believe that the church was gathered, and began to be defended and preserved by the Spirit of God 50 days after the events of the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord at Easter. At that first Christian Pentecost, 50 days after the events of the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord, the Spirit fell on 120 faithful followers of Jesus gathered together in Jerusalem. Previously, and over 40 days, the risen Lord had appeared to them, either huddled together in fear, or in their homes, or on a country road, or even a hilltop overlooking the city. And then, from that same hilltop, on the 40th day, he had left them. But, 10 days later, so 50 days after Easter, while they were huddled together in a private dwelling, probably fearing for their lives, while everyone else was heading to the Temple to celebrate the 9 AM prayers on the day of the great feast of Pentecost, God sent the Holy Spirit upon them, with tongues of flame leaping from their heads, thrown and tossed about by a mighty wind, and then literally blown out the door into the streets of Jerusalem. There, people gathered in Jerusalem for the feast, saw them tossed about like men on a wild ship, falling over, like men who are drunk and can't even stand up, babbling but doing so intelligibly in languages that these farmers and lower class citizens of Jerusalem would have learned: Arabic, Coptic, Latin, Persian, Phrygian, and so on.

Then the Spirit pulled Peter upright to his feet and Peter began to address those who had gathered to watch this foolishness. And Peter did so with an eloquence that no farmer had.

Peter first of all told the crowd that had gathered what they were seeing. This was nothing less than the fulfillment of the promise made by God to the people of Israel through the prophet Joel. Peter told them: 'What you are seeing is the result of the gift of the Holy Spirit, sent by God to evidence the fact that the great and terrible day of the Lord is coming but that those who called on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved on that day of wrath.'

Peter continued, by telling them, that in spite of what they had done in causing the death of the very one by whom they would be saved, God was merciful and would spare them, if they repented and believed.

Those who had gathered in Jerusalem listened. They could not deny what they had seen. And they did not deny that they had been responsible, either directly or indirectly, for the death of Jesus only 50 days earlier. Aghast, they begged Peter: What must we do? Peter responded "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Luke tells us that 3000 believed and were baptized that day.

This was the event that in churches around the world we celebrated last Sunday, 50 days after Easter.

And now here you and I are today one week later. So, let's ask ourselves: one week later, what was that first church doing? Can we know? Does it matter to us? Does it have anything to do with what we should be doing one week later?

We can know because Luke tells us in the very next verse, vs. 42. He says their life after Pentecost was characterized by four things:

- (1) adherence to the apostles' teaching,
- (2) commonality (some of you may have the word "fellowship" in your translation),
- (3) breaking of bread, and
- (4) prayer.

Now, we could speculate for ourselves on what each of these four characteristics means. But, fortunately we don't have to because Luke goes on to tell us in the very next verses of his text, vss. 43-47, what he means by these 4 characteristics.

Let's start with the second one: commonality. In vs. 42 Luke says that "They devoted themselves to ... commonality" In vs. 44, he uses exactly the same word when he says that "all those who had come to believe were of one mind and held everything in common". (By translating [the Greek word in vs. 42](#) by "fellowship", translators have made it much more difficult for you to see what Luke is talking about.)

In vs. 42, he says that the 3000 + the 120 "devoted themselves to ... to breaking bread,". In vs. 46, he says that "Daily, they broke bread in their homes and shared meals with glad and generous hearts." Again, the same words.

Look at the final item. In vs. 42, Luke had concluded that the community devoted itself to "prayers". While he doesn't use the exact same words in vss. 46-47, he writes that "Daily, they gathered together in the Temple, praising God". Now, you will probably agree that the Temple would have been the perfect place to offer prayers to God and that praise is at least an important aspect of prayer. So, I think that we can agree that Luke is talking about what prayer looked like in this early church.

Now, in two weeks, I want to come back and say that if these three sets of verses, vs. 44, vs. 46, and vss. 46-47 are the verses in which Luke fleshes out what he means in vs. 42 by commonality, by breaking of bread, and by prayers, then it is very likely that the one item that we have left to flesh out from vs. 42, namely, the first one "they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles", is also fleshed out in the verses that follow. And I will suggest to you that that's exactly what happens in vs. 43: "Fear came upon every soul, and many signs and wonders were done by the apostles." After all, that verse, like the next ones, picks up a key word from vs. 42, the word "apostles", and repeats it exactly in the next verse. But, I will admit that it is difficult for us to see how "apostolic teaching" is fleshed out by vs. 43, so we'll leave this verse for the last one that we look at.

Now, you may wonder about why I'm going through all this detail. I'm doing so because it does matter. It matters because in these verses Luke is giving us the necessary clues for what a true church looks like, because a true church is a people who are washed by the blood of the Lamb and empowered by the Spirit. What it looks like is a group of people living what I will call "the Pentecostal life", that is, a group of people who are no longer living life as they once knew it but who are now living a life that is humanly impossible and that is possible only because the Spirit of God given at Pentecost is working in their midst.

To start our look at the characteristics of the church, let's look at the last two characteristics that Luke identifies as the characteristics of the Pentecostal life: prayer and breaking of bread.

Let's start with prayer.

And let me start with a story. I had just gotten on my flight to Winnipeg where I was the keynote speaker at a conference, very academic, very important. I got into my seat, checked the listings on the inflight entertainment system, and what to my wondering eyes did I behold: my favourite movie. You'll be surprised. [Enchanted](#). Disney meets NY. Now, I won't go into details but just to let you know that it's a wonderful comedy, and still one of my favourite movies. Well, someplace over northern Ontario, I was laughing, crying, almost falling out of my seat... had it not been for the seat belt. The flight attendant came by, looked at me, looked at the screen, and said: I'm going to watch whatever it is you're watching when we get to Winnipeg.

What is prayer? You and I probably think that we have a pretty good idea of what prayer is. For most of us, it is intercession or petition, that is, prayer is asking God for things for our world, for others, and for ourselves. In prayer, we pour forth names and situations of people in need.

For some people, prayer is also a ritual activity. In the Jewish world, as in most of the ancient world of the time, prayer was primarily a ritual activity marked by something that happened at a specific place, at specific times, using specific words. You prayed in a temple or a synagogue; you prayed at set hours (6 AM, 9 AM, 12 PM, and 3 PM); and you prayed particular, memorized words that were always used at the same times and in the same place and in the same way. There was value in that: it gave people a working set of instructions about how to be in touch with God.

Luke doesn't deny any of this. There is value in petition. After all, Luke writes in his gospel of how Jesus gave his followers the Lord's Prayer, though he does say that it was because they asked him to teach them how to pray as the Jewish prophet, John,

had taught his disciples how to pray. And Luke doesn't deny the value of ritual prayer in the Temple, as long as it isn't linked to evil actions outside the Temple.

But, Luke tells us that the prayer of the earliest Christians after Pentecost, empowered by the Spirit, was very different from either a series of requests made of God or the localized prayer in the Temple. Luke says that the prayer of the Pentecostal people of God is first of all characterized by praise. "Daily, they gathered together in the Temple, ⁴⁷ praising God and being thought well of by all the people."

The [Greek word "praise"](#) means to assent fully to someone and their decisions. And not just grudging assent but wholehearted, joy-filled assent. Praise is the kind of delight that swells in your heart that you can't contain it, which is also what happened when the room couldn't contain the disciples on Pentecost morning, right at the time of prayer in the Temple, 9 AM. It is saying "Yes, Lord" wholeheartedly.

What makes the people of God the kind of people that Luke is going to go on to talk about in Acts is not the fact that they have a Temple or a church in which to pray. It is not even that they cry out in need. Everyone does that. Even the pagans! What makes Jesus' people different is that they are known as a people overflowing with joy-filled assent of God and His purposes.

God is not uninterested in our petitions. Our prayers for our needs and the needs of others manifest our child-like dependence on God. However, it is very clear that God knows our needs before we ask. But, the prayer life of the church in the days following Pentecost was a Pentecostal prayer life. It was a life characterized by praise:

- praise for those who are being saved from the wicked generation in which they find themselves;
- praise for women freed from prostitution;
- praise for those who were freed from sicknesses that would not kill them but would keep them chained up for the rest of their lives (everyone has to die of something, but there are sicknesses that are simply a kind of slow, lingering, dying);
- praise for the ostracized child reunited with his family, for the racial group that is no longer considered scum;
- even praise for the salvation of the general of the Roman army of occupation named Cornelius;

And as Luke will go on to show, this is only possible for people who are empowered by the Spirit given at Pentecost. Why? Because, unlike everyone else in the world, the people who live the Pentecostal life will joyfully assent to God even in their need, even in their suffering.

Paul is a great example of someone who lived this kind of Pentecostal life. Even in his letter to the Philippians, written from a stinking, rotten prison, in which he and others were tortured, he wrote: I rejoice in my sufferings. Again I say, rejoice. He could just as well have used the word "I praise God in my sufferings... again, I say praise Him!" I assent to God's will for these sufferings as being evidence that I am being saved from this corrupt generation. You can almost hear his fellow prisoners mocking him: 'Are you crazy? Why do you and Barnabas keep singing hymns here amid the filth and pain of this prison?' Paul would have answered: Yes, we are crazy because we are empowered by a Spirit that is not of this world.

This is the prayer of the church. And it is contagious. Note what Luke says about their praise: all the people thought highly of them. If you are around people who are glum, depressed, frightened, even miserable, you do not want to stay there long. You want to get away from these people and whatever it is that they find so awful. But, with the earliest Christians, their joy was contagious and people wanted to be around them. "Why are you different? What is it that makes you glow? Where do you get this freedom?" Like the flight attendant on my flight: "What are you watching? I need to watch that movie when we land!"

Do you as an individual radiate that spirit? Do you as a church radiate the kind of praise that comes from God by His Spirit? Or are you angry, bitter, always striving to hold on to what you have, complaining about your luck or your fate, perhaps even justly so in the eyes of this world? Or, perhaps you are the kind of person who is so controlled that you would never be caught dead rolling in the aisles for laughter, even if the Spirit pushed you? The first community of believers was characterized by praise and people saw it. Those people didn't need to be invited to taste and see. They saw it and they wanted it, too.

 OK, one more, brief story, related to the other characteristic of the Pentecostal life of the people of God that I want to talk about, "breaking bread".

When I first came to Canada, I lived in a house with 15 other young men. In this house with 16 guys, meal times were the times of greatest joy and of greatest trial. If everyone was in a good mood, and someone had made a good meal -- since we all took turns cooking -- everything was fine; but if there was just one person who was upset or angry, or if the meal was tasteless, well, you can imagine. But, though none of us was related, we had one thing in common: Jesus.

Luke said that one of the key characteristics of the earliest community of faithful believers was that they “broke bread”. This does not mean that they celebrated the ritual that we have come to know as the Eucharist. Our Eucharist took centuries to form and even its earliest form only began to take shape some years after the Pentecost experience.

What Luke means when he says that “Daily, they broke bread in their homes and shared meals with glad and generous hearts” is that the earliest church ate meals together, in their homes, as families would do.

So, what is so astounding about this? Families have been eating together, whether happily or not, for millennia. What makes this a feature of the Pentecostal life, something that is only possible with the power of the Spirit?

What makes this so astounding is that they were not just eating with family members. They were eating with people who would not only have not been their family members, but in some cases would have been their enemies. This would have been unheard of in their day. And it still is in many parts of the Middle East.

Sure, some of those early Christians were eating with their immediate families, even with their cousins, uncles, nephews and nieces, even good Israelites, faithful stock of their common ancestor Jacob. But, many at the tables were not family.

- Some were sinners, who had been cut off from their own families;
- Some were runaways, ostracized from their family for doing something brought dishonour to the family.
- Why, some were even Samaritans, and, God forbid, Gentiles.

In other words, what makes this so astonishing, and super-natural, is that here you had thousands of people, eating in homes with people who were not family, even people who had no right to be at the table with other family members.

How had this happened? Well, it started at Pentecost, when those 3000 were drowned – because that’s what the word [“baptism”](#) would have meant to Greek speakers who heard the word: those who were baptized lost the lives that they had known in the waters of baptism and came forth from those same waters of death as new, risen people, as brothers and sisters one of another through the dying and rising of Christ. After that, they began to eat together as if they were a family because in that one Spirit they were one family, no longer known as descendants of Jacob but now as descendants of Jesus by that same Spirit. And so it was natural that the family should eat together and they did. Or better said: it was supernatural that they should eat together. Because among them were people that humanly speaking had been at each other’s throats for as long as anyone could remember.

The desire for vengeance ran deep in the Middle East and still does. Can you imagine the Syrian troops sitting down for a meal with the Syrian rebels, or the victims of the Syrian troops violence? No? You’re right, I can’t either. But, by the Spirit of God it happened at Pentecost and continues to happen in the Pentecostal life of the church of God. And here we find Luke saying that this began to happen 50 days after the crucifixion of Jesus, with Jesus’ followers breaking bread at table with those who had assented to his crucifixion and perhaps even some who had called out for him to be crucified.

This is astonishing. This does not happen in our own strength. Show me any other religion in the world, including atheistic secularism, in which people who are not family eat together. Fundamentalists, whether they be Islamist, or Hindu, or Confucian, respect and guard the lines of family. Oh, they might show hospitality in some cases, but it is to guests, not family. But, when later in Acts, the Gentile Philippian jailer who has tortured Paul and Barnabas is baptized and receives Christ, along with his whole family, the first that he does is prepare a meal at which he, and his family, and Paul and Barnabas, sit down together and eat. And together, in spite of the torturer’s presence and the fresh wounds of Paul and Barnabas, they all praise God who has rescued even this miserable torturer from this corrupt generation. This is amazing. This is the Pentecostal life.

The Pentecostal life is impossible in our own strength. Breaking bread with those who have killed your family members and praising God in the midst of extreme physical pain and suffering are not natural activities. They are supernatural activities that characterize the company of all faithful people who are washed by the blood of the Lamb and driven into the streets of our cities by the wind of the Spirit of God. We are the heirs of those first 3000 brothers and sisters and nothing less should characterize our life than characterized theirs. This includes a life characterized by praise and the ability to break bread with

those who have nothing in common with us other than the fact that they too are redeemed sinners. And there is more, much more, as we'll see next week.