

The Pentecostal Life: 2: Commonality

Acts 2:37-47

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Acts 2:37-47

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.

I wonder if Pastor Ken, when he was still here, ever asked too much of you sometimes in sermons. Did he ever have an exam at the end of his sermons, or his series? What did you learn? How will you be different now? What difference does this make?

I always feel that there should be an exam at some point after my sermons. Do you think people would pay more attention if they knew that they had to pass an exam after a sermon? It might clear the church out completely!

Well, let's at least review. Because if there is an exam coming, you should know what we've covered.

Last week I talked to you about the Pentecostal life. I suggested to you that the Pentecostal life was the life that began to be lived by the 3000 + who turned to the Lord on Pentecost and found themselves washed in the blood of the Lamb for the forgiveness of their sins and experiencing the power to begin to live a completely new life, a power that came to them from the Holy Spirit of God.

This power led them to a new life characterized by four things:

- Regular adherence to the apostles' teaching
- Holding all things in common and being of one mind
- Breaking bread together, that is, eating together in their homes
- And regular prayer that was characterized by praise.

Each of these characteristics identified Christians after Pentecost as those who were not living a normal kind of life. They were living an impossible life, that is, a supernatural life, one that was only possible by a grace and power that had come to them from outside their normal world.

In the case of **breaking bread**, a normal life would have been to eat regular meals in their homes with their family members, with the men waited on by slaves or women, and with the slaves, and the women and the children usually eating together in the kitchen once the men of the family and their guests had concluded their meal.

Luke says that, after Pentecost, all of those who were baptized, that is, who lost their lives in the waters of baptism and lost their old identities, and came out of the waters of baptism as children of God, brothers and sisters of one another, began to eat together in their homes, not divided by blood-lines, Jews, half-Jews, Gentiles, but as brothers and sisters one of another, all together. Luke tells us that the early church was characterized by those who had come to faith in Christ gathering together in each other's homes for meals, looking each other in the face as family members across the family table, even if they had once been alienated from the family, even if they were enemies.

There could have been nothing easy about this. But, if this is still God's Word for us, then here's the exam: there is nothing normal or easy or even do-able for us about this! Just ask those Nigerian Christians when a Muslim Nigerian who has been responsible for killing Christians becomes a Christian. Just imagine sitting down opposite the man, or his son, who was responsible for the death of your family members and having a meal. This kind of life is only possible by the blood of Christ truly washing those who have been baptized and by the power of the Holy Spirit pushing Christians to go where they do wish to go by themselves.

And you know what the result of the exam is, don't you? After Pentecost, everyone around these new Christians began to ask themselves: "What's going on here? Why are these people eating together? They have no reason to do so, and no right to do so. But, they look so happy. I need to find out more about this. I need to learn about this God, and these people who worship this God."

The same thing happened with **prayer**. The people of Luke's day were used to going to Temples and synagogues for regular rituals of prayer, often with petitions for one need after another, especially for healing, especially for money, especially for questions of romance.

The community of Christians after Pentecost didn't stop that activity, but it soon became characterized by a different kind of prayer: praise. Praise is that joy-filled assent that says "Yes, Lord" to what God is doing and bringing about in our lives and the lives of those around us even if we cannot understand it, even if it results in our suffering.

Was this easy? There could have been nothing easy about this. It's not natural. It's supernatural, because God's will is perfect and in God's will even this suffering that is greeted by praise will result in people again asking: What is going on here? Who are these people that they respond this way to adversity?

OK, exam time. How did you do this week in your prayer life after last week's sermon?

Now, you look at me and say: Well, how did you do? Well, you know it's been a while since I've had to take an exam, but, OK, last week I did say to myself: What would my own prayer life look like if it were characterized by praise? And then, sure enough, wouldn't you know, the Lord provided an opportunity: our car was broken into while Rachel was in an evening meeting.

Reaction: shock, fear, a sense of violation, resolving the problem, asking the Lord to protect us ... All the natural reactions.

What about praise? Right: thank you, Lord, that our car was broken into. We praise you, Lord, that you have allowed this to happen.

No, that's not what praise is. As Rachel and I spoke together about this, we began to realize those things that we were going to go away with from this experience:

- The first thing that happened was that some of the men at the meeting, none of whom are related to us other than by the blood of the Lamb, began immediately to clear the glass away and to tape up plastic on the window so that Rachel could drive home. Thank you, Lord for these brothers.
- One of the women at the meeting took charge, helped Rachel contact the police, lent Rachel her cellphone so that while Rachel was calling the insurance company, she could also have the police on the other line to make her report. Thank you, Lord, for friends, and technology that allows prompt answers.
- One of the men followed Rachel all the way home in his car to make sure that Rachel arrived safely. Thank you, Lord, for those who go out of their way, miles out of their way, to help us.

The whole thing cost us \$50 deductible for the window. Even if we had had no insurance, it would have been only \$250. And if we had not had the money, I have no doubt that the people involved would have helped us out.

The next day, when Rachel told the children in her class about what had happened, they all prayed for those who had done the evil deed. But, they also thanked God for the response. And my guess is that what will stand out in the minds of the children is not the evil deed but the response and the way Rachel handled it. Why, even the hoodlums who committed the act, were they to find out the response, would wonder: Weird! Those Christians really act funny. But, you know, it's kind of interesting.

I do not believe that God plans these events to happen: they happen because of sin and evil in the world. That is true of sickness and persecution, too. But, those who live the Pentecostal life will respond to those events very differently from those who have no hope in this world other than to live out their lives in this world and then die. Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus and His righteousness, and our hope far transcends anything of this world. We praise God for that.

So, would our friends have helped us out with \$250 were we to have needed it? Would you? Of course you would have: you would have passed the hat for us, even though there is nothing that connects you and me, except the blood of the Lamb. And this wouldn't even be normal for Dutch people to do: it would be the push of the Holy Spirit that would lead you to it!

And that brings me to the **third characteristic** of the early Christian community of those living in the power of the Spirit after Pentecost. In vs. 42 Luke says: They devoted themselves to "commonality". What could that possibly mean? Well, Luke goes on to tell us exactly what that means in vv. 44-45: ⁴⁴ 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.

A former PhD student at Saint Paul told me about the experience that he had had at his Bible college. A well-respected, no nonsense, former military officer, who had become one of the leaders of pastoral care at the college was speaking to the students about Christian community and about what real Christian community looked like. The students were interested, well, at least as well as students can be when someone is lecturing to them. But, then, he stopped and said. "Are there any of you here who have experienced a real windfall recently? Something that has brought God's abundance your way?" Some of the couples held up their hands. They stopped and prayed, praising God for what He had provided. He continued his lecture, then he stopped again: "Are there any of you here who are in real need financially?" The students assumed that he would again pray with them, this time for their need. Instead, he stood up and said to the students: "The two groups of you need to talk. I'll come back in a while." And then left the room.

When Luke talks about having things in common, he's not talking about "communism". He's talking the same language as "breaking bread". He's talking about how families work.

The first century Middle East was not that different from what it is today: a vicious and violent place. Even the market place was violent: there was constant haggling and bartering for the best deals, much as you would find in the market places of the Mediterranean today, whether you wanted to buy a rug or some oranges.

The one place where that was different was in the family. In families all things were shared in common. No one haggled or hassled anyone. In fact, no one claimed anything for himself:

- Fathers did not say to the children: this bread is mine alone; you can go hungry unless you provide.
- Mothers did not hold food back for themselves, thus depriving their children.

In families, in fact, there were not even any loans: money was, lent without expecting any repayment. This would never happen outside of the family. Everywhere else, if you were given something, you had to pay it back, even if with friends. Only family members were treated as equals, and one shared freely. That was the way it had been for centuries.

But, things began to change with Jesus. Jesus began to call “family” anyone who wished to follow him and do God’s will. Who is my mother and my brothers and my sisters, he asked? All of these, my disciples, who do God’s will. While radical, this was still fine as long as those who followed him were Israelites, and at least Israelites in good standing. But, when he and his followers began to call sinners, and prostitutes, and the sick, and those who didn’t obey the law.... This was too much. And worst of all: eventually the family begins to include Samaritans and Gentiles, non-Jews.

And here is where the problem begins. It is one thing for Jesus to call together Jews, even outcast and misfit Jews, because, after all, they are still family, the family of Jacob, also known as Israel. They are just family members that have strayed, like the prodigal son. They can come back, and in Jesus, they do. But, what happens when those who have not been family members want to enter and take their place at the family table? What happens when your now-brother Samaritan needs your help? You’ve always been taught that he was your enemy: do you now give him what you have been saving up for yourself and your children if he needs it?

This is the same exam question that has faced the Easter people throughout our history: what will you British Christians do when Irish brothers and sisters seek a place with you? What will you Hutu Christians do when brother and sister Tutsi Christians cry out to you in their need? What will you Dutch Christians do when your Frisian brothers and sisters want to sit at table with you, and vice versa?

You know exactly what happened. Normal, human prejudices kicked in and people were not allowed in, or refused help. Worst of all, in many contexts, brother Christians turned on others and killed them. Can you imagine this as the Pentecostal life? I certainly cannot.

But where the Holy Spirit took broke through with Pentecostal power, there hearts and minds became captive to the Lord Jesus Christ as human barriers fell and people from different families recognized their brothers and sisters in their former enemies. There, as Luke says here in Acts, the people became “of one mind”. Luke doesn’t mean that after Pentecost all the people were alike, or even that they thought exactly alike. There were lots of differences of opinion. What Luke means is that the one Spirit, the Holy Spirit, took their hearts and minds captive and began to shape them into a body of people governed by the mind of Christ. They began to share what they had even with former enemies because they knew that they were no longer their own, that they had been bought with a price, and that ALL that they had was essentially on loan to them from the abundant riches of God the Father in the service of Christ the Lord.

Oh my friends, how easy it is to say: “All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thy own have we given thee”. But, most of us do not practice the reality of Pentecost, where the abundant riches of God are shared

among the family, especially with those who, for whatever reason, are in need. We have decided that, like those who lived normal lives in Israel, there is not enough to go around, and that surely someone will rip you off if you let down your guard.

That is not the Pentecostal life. That is a cheap imitation of the life of Christ. And I use this advisedly because the imitation of Christ, were we to follow it, would call for us to give up everything, just as our Lord did, who himself gave up everything and, as Paul says, became poor that we might be rich.

Does this lead to communism? Of course not. Paul himself will tell the Thessalonians: “If there are those among you who are lazy and who do not wish to work, then don’t feed them either. They’ll soon change their minds.”

No, the Holy Spirit led the early Church into a kind of life, the Pentecostal life, that changed the face of the world. He still does where, by the will of God, He blows through the doors and takes us out into the world.

Are you ready for that? You should be, because there will be an exam! So start preparing by living in the power of the Spirit that has already been given to you:

- Praise God for all that comes to us knowing, that God will use it for His glory.
- Start breaking bread together with all your brothers and sisters, members of the family of Christ, whenever you can.
- Share the abundance that God has showered on you so that no one among our brothers and sisters is in need, and thus show the world that this is truly a family of brothers and sisters, not sharing anything in common other than that we have been washed by the blood of the Lamb and given a new mind in Christ.¹

There is one more characteristic, the main one, the one that clinches it all. But, you’ll have to wait for that one for next week.

Let us pray.

¹ I do not think that it is a coincidence that the problem that has recently arisen in our Northern world, in which abundance characterizes our society (in a way that scarcity characterized the 1st century eastern Mediterranean world), through hard work and God’s grace, is that people still cling to what they have (even if there is always more) rather than sharing. On this, see the new book by R. Skidelsky and E. Skidelsky, [*How Much is Enough? Money and the Good Life*](#) (New York: Other Press, 2012). While non-Christians have no mandate to share, Christians do, and when Christians do not, their unhappiness simply reflects the unhappiness that is more broadly found in the world around them. Again, this is not a coincidence: God’s new covenantal plan is characterized by, among at least three other things, commonality and breaking of bread together.