

Reset: The Essential Church “Gathering”

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Digging Deeper

Reset— The Essential Church: Worshipping

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Background Notes

Key Scripture Text(s): Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 5:12-16; and others throughout.

Introduction

It's time to reset our experience of gathering in community, in person, and in fellowship. The word “fellowship” in the English language is often associated with terms like “friendly association,” “sociability,” “camaraderie,” “friendship,” and “mutual support.” Another emphasis is on “sharing similar interests, ideals, or experiences.” Different levels of meaning isolate the word along a spectrum from kindly familiarity to deep relationship. For some, fellowship is simply having a good time together with other people, commonly in a group setting. Nothing is decided about the depth of conversation or the degree of commitment, only the friendly atmosphere. There are, of course, plenty of reasons to interact with human beings in light-hearted conversation or activity. We are, after all, social beings who require this kind of fellowship in order to thrive.

Beyond this, however, is the experience of durable relationships that exceeds casual encounters and goes to the question of why persons need each other. Coffee clutches are nice and circles of fellowship are important, but they do not fully explain what happened to the first Christians in the early days after Jesus ascended to heaven and sent the Holy Spirit. As we will learn shortly, the Greek word for “fellowship” is *koinonia* which is thick with layers of meaning, identifying relationships that are reliable and committed. Cutting through the insulation of self-interest, fear, and pain, this kind of fellowship imagines a human society where people's care for each other leads to new structures and overturns prevailing systems. In bursts of transformative energy, the first Christians dared to challenge social arrangements that did not work, replacing them with fellowshiping communities that confronted the human condition head-on. They were not sitting around in safe circles of friendship while singing “We are the World.” Instead, they believed with all their hearts that a better way of being human had been launched by Jesus, the risen one, and they looked for Spirit-directed ways to implement that vision.

In a decisive challenge, Peter offered his audience in Acts 2:40 this directive: “Save yourselves from this crooked and perverse generation.” Evidently *salvation* entailed more than a collection of private experiences by isolated seekers, but involved whole communities deciding to follow Jesus by changing the form of their social life in keeping with the teaching of Jesus and the leading of the Spirit. With the history of Israel in the background, the new Christ followers saw how God's long-standing purpose for a new society in the world was making fresh headway in the midst of a corrupt world where the idols of self-serving greed would be replaced by instruments of God's peace. *Pax Romana* would give way to *Pax Christos*, where the rules for community were dramatically different.

This week we examine cases of the “gathered community,” of fellowship in action, as we watch the early church take a sharp turn toward radical fellowship as its reset in light of the risen Jesus and the gifted Spirit.

New Perspective on Gathering Together: The Early Church

In the life of the church, what should the kingdom of God *on earth* look like? How will the followers of Jesus gather together after months of separateness? Jesus, during his earthly ministry, had taught his followers the form and shape of the kingdom, especially in his *Sermon on the Mount*. He also used the unique literary genre known as the “parable” to construct “riddles” whose solutions expressed the true nature of the kingdom. Recall

the familiar statement, "The kingdom of God is like..." (See Luke 13:18 and elsewhere) found at the beginning of many of these riddles. However, much has happened *since* Jesus taught his followers the kingdom message: cross, resurrection, and Holy Spirit at Pentecost. We now have opportunity to see the *results* of these momentous events at work in the life of the Christ followers. *The kingdom of God starts to take shape as the followers of Jesus develop into communities after Pentecost.*

This week's study will examine some snapshots of life in the Christian community, just days after Pentecost. Luke offers concise descriptions of Spirit-filled "small groups" who take seriously the message of Jesus and put it into effect in their social relationships. Just as Jesus modeled the formation of a "society" by calling around himself the Twelve, even so the growing numbers of his followers after Pentecost, assemble around the risen Jesus who becomes present in the Holy Spirit. Here is the fulfillment of Jesus' earlier words, "Where two or three gather in my name, I am there in the midst" (Matthew 18:20). How might these snapshots guide our reset and our gathering?

What we see in the book of Acts is:
Holy Spirit *powered*
people
gathering in different *places*
guided by the *process* of becoming the New People of God.

In his profiles of this new community, Luke includes the imperfect along with the perfect. He is not shy to tell how some *people* tried to hijack the community's good will (see Acts 5) or how early Christians quarreled with each other over things like food. At the same time, he enthusiastically cites constructive examples of genuine community love, mercy, acceptance, and growth. *Followers of Jesus were enthusiastically implementing Christ's kingdom program, allowing the Holy Spirit to begin the work of New Creation afresh in their lives.*

In his commentary on *Acts*, New Testament scholar I.H. Marshall notes:

One of Luke's characteristics is to separate off the various incidents in the first part of Acts by means of short summary paragraphs or verses which indicate the situation of the church at the several stages of its progress.¹

Also, Ben Witherington shows that there are two different sorts of descriptions: *summary statements* and *summary passages*. The *statements* "link together the narrative panels"² and can be found at Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20. Their main purpose is to show how the Christian community *grew in size*. They tend to be short and concise. *Summary passages* function as *profiles* in the earlier sections of *Acts* and reveal what life in the community looked like, particularly in Jerusalem. Normally, the following sections fall into this category: 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 5:12-16.³ We are concerned for the present study to examine these three.⁴

Ancient writers and orators made use of summaries when they *lacked detailed sources* or when they wanted to *focus content for emphasis*. Luke follows this pattern with his summaries. Our information on Luke, the man, suggests that he joined the Christian endeavor with Paul in Acts 16:10, since from that point forward the narrative includes frequent uses of the pronoun "we" — the so-called "we-sections" of *Acts*. These serve as a kind of "clue" to the writer's presence in the story. If this is correct, then the earlier chapters of *Acts* depend on sources which Luke had to discover, and, likely, they were more detailed in one area than in another. When the coverage was sparse, Luke relied on summarization.

¹ I. Howard. Marshall, *Acts, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Intervarsity Press, 1980, p.83.

² Witherington, *Acts*, pp.158-159.

³ Witherington wants to include 8:1b-4 in this listing, but other commentators, like Marshall, follow our choices. Robert W. Wall (in *Acts* from the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume X, Abingdon, 2002, p.71) sees 6:1-7 as well.

⁴ Helpful material comes from H.J. Cadbury, "The Summaries in Acts," in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, Macmillan, 1920-33, 5:392-402.

We must resist, however, the unwarranted view that Luke *fabricated* these sections in the absence of detailed sources.⁵ Luke might "idealize" his material but that doesn't necessarily imply he *invented* it.⁶ He wanted to focus attention on those *traits* which marked out this newly formed community, revealing the character of Jesus in their lives. They were *reset people* undertaking a *resurrection process*. Building societies is not easy work. Many throughout history have attempted *utopian* societies (Onedia, etc.) and have not succeeded. Even the materialist Karl Marx envisioned such developments as the inevitable result of the economic process. Eastern Europe is riddled with evidences of that failure. So why would the Jesus community succeed? Luke's burden in these "summaries" is to give us a glimpse, starting with a glimpse of "The Community of Uncommon Life."⁷

Reset One: "All Who Believed Were Together" (Acts 2:42-47)

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

A few textual observations about this first summary in Acts 2:

1. It stands between Pentecost and the subsequent persecution by the Jewish authorities. The Holy Spirit held back the onslaught just long enough to allow the Christ community to get established. This was, however, the calm before the storm! Persecution would come (Acts 3-4), but it would not destroy the community, only strengthen its resolve.
2. Those who became part of the 3,000, in conjunction with the 120, including the Twelve, *did something* and then *became something*. It would be hard to separate their *obedience* from their *identity* as Christ followers. Consider the words: "devoted," "believed," "were together," "selling," "attending," "praising" — to name a sampling of action verbs in 2:42-47.
3. The question of their "growth" and "increase" in number rested with the Lord: "...the Lord added to their number."
4. Growth was a gradual *process* which happened "day by day." This stands to reason. Community life requires time to mature and to assimilate new members. Certainly there was nothing *forced* about this numeric increase. Luke documents such growth throughout the book of *Acts* at certain intervals, using summary *statements* as we noted above (6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20).

In Acts 2:42, Luke offers four distinct *actions* taken by the earliest converts. We might suggest they comprise a balanced *profile* of community life. These are elements of a *process* to which the Christian community *devoted* itself. The Greek word for "devote" is *proskartereō* and means "devote oneself to, continue in, keep close company with, be a personal attendant, be in attendance, be ready." The verb form is a present active participle, implying the ongoing nature of the action. Louw and Nida, in their *Lexicon*, suggest that the action might also involve the caveat, "despite difficulty" (68.68). The key emphases are: persistence, close association, and personal service. Classical Greek usage contained the idea of "to persist obstinately," "to adhere firmly," and "to be faithful" (Liddell and Scott). Luke uses the verb several times (Acts 1:14; 2:42, 46; 6:4; 8:13; 10:7).

The *Christ* fanatic is devoted in this fashion with a *firmness* and *fidelity* worthy of one who "takes up his cross and follows" Jesus. These were no "fly-by-night" Jesus groupies, but sincerely committed persons. As Elton Trueblood once called them: *The Company of the Committed*.⁸ Perhaps this is the distinguishing mark of a community vs. a movement. Movements come and go, and their followers might lose interest once the glamour wears off. But communities must take up the hard work of things like relationships, trust, conflict,

⁵ This tends to be E. Haenchen's position in *The Acts of the Apostles*, Westminster, 1971, pp.193-96.

⁶ B. Capper, "The Palestine Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods," in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. R. Bauckham, Eerdmans, 1995, pp.323-56; also, L.T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5, Liturgical Press, 1992, p.61.

⁷ Title suggested by Wall, p.70.

⁸ Elton Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed*, Harper & Row Publishers, 1961.

temperament, and service. *Persons* in community must live in close proximity, observing the details of each other's lives, and having to put up with the idiosyncrasies incumbent on human nature — albeit transformed by the Holy Spirit. That requires a long-term *process* and the faithfulness which accompanies it.

I suspect the first Christians would be puzzled by the way some folks today "do church." Americans "shop around," looking for a "good fit," and when things don't quite "work out," they opt out and look for another church more compatible with their situation. No such luxury surrounded the first Christians. It wasn't as if you could just go to the church "across the street" when the one you attended didn't suit you anymore. There *wasn't* another church across the street! *Places* — like cities and regions — tended to demarcate the boundaries of these first communities. There was the church "at Ephesus" or the church "in Antioch." Perhaps as in the case of Rome, several "house churches" existed throughout that sprawling metropolis. But *place* did not offer *options* as much as it offered *opportunities* to expand the reach of the whole community in that city. No, devotion meant commitment — through thick and thin — without the easy alternative of just leaving and going elsewhere.

Communities require *devotion*; they rest on *fellowship*. So here's what the community profile looks like in Luke's summary one.

1. Teaching by the apostles. We sometimes call this the *didachē* (Greek word for "teaching"). The apostles were entrusted with this role by Jesus himself, the person with whom they spent considerable time both before and after his resurrection. Recall how Jesus gave them a "crash course" in the Old Testament as looked at through his eyes and his life (see Luke 4:21; 22:37; 24:27, 32, 45). Finding the fulfillment of the Old Testament in the newly developing people of God was one of the apostles' principal tasks. The apostles were "authorities" on such matters because they were eyewitnesses of what Jesus said and did (see Luke 1:2, Acts 1:8, 1:22, 2:32, 3:15, 5:32, 10:39, 41, 13:31 and 2 Peter 1:16, to cite a few). Today, the compilation of those eyewitness testimonies, along with additional commentary, make up what we call *The New Testament*. The book of *Acts*, by Luke's own witness, belongs to that collection. When we read and study the New Testament (27 books in all), we are, in fact, studying the teaching of the apostles or those who were directly instructed by them (Recall Luke's preface in his Gospel, 1:1-4). Paul refers to the apostles as "foundational" to the life of the church (see Ephesians 2:20). This teaching was guided by the Holy Spirit who, Jesus promised, would guide the apostles "into all truth" (John 15:26; 16:13), a view also held by Paul (Romans 9:1) and John (1 John 5:6).

There is *good tradition* and there is *bad tradition*. The good kind adheres to the original idea of *traducō*, that is, to "hand down or across" from an *authoritative witness* to a *faithful follower*. Paul supported the authority of such apostolic teaching (see 1 Corinthians 12:28; 14:37; Ephesians 2:20; 3:5). Truth mattered to the honest formation of the earliest communities after Pentecost. Zeal? Yes, but not without *knowledge* (Romans 10:2). *Christ* fanatics are kept from being other kinds of fanatics by the solid *ring of truth*.⁹

Contemporary Christian communities today require solid *Bible teaching* to remain at the center of Christ's purpose for his kingdom. Every member of a local congregation should be involved in small group study, becoming more than "acquainted" with the Bible but saturated with its apostolic instruction. This was the first element in Luke's profile and for good reason. Such teaching helps in forming a "word view" that is thoroughly Christian and counters the surrounding cultural paganism. It means learning "to think Christianly," an idea rooted in the counsel of thinkers like C.S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, Os Guinness, and Mark Noll, to name a few. It means to "love the Lord your God with all one's heart, soul, mind, and strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5) and to "have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16).

⁹ See J.B. Phillips, *The Ring of Truth*, Shaw Books, 2000. This is a moving account of Phillips translation of the Bible into modern English and the "serendipities" he encountered along the way — affirming the authority of the Bible through the translation process.

The apostles' teaching, our New Testament, becomes the touch-stone for truth, the authentic center to which everything else must hold. Grasping this, the early Christian communities made sense out of the Old Testament, thus closing the circle of Scripture and securing their understanding of the Gospel. As one thinker once expressed it: the New is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed — an apt summary of how Scriptural truth in both testaments forms one continuous woven garment.¹⁰

2. **Fellowship.** From the Greek *koinonia*, this word "fellowship" conjures more than simply "food and fun," though it might well include both on occasion. The central thought is "sharing" (see also Romans 15:26; Hebrews 13:16). Our English word "coin" appears in this term, reminding us of the reason why currency is minted: to preserve a uniform medium of exchange managed by a central authority. Consider the early Christians as "Christ coins," bearing the image and likeness, not of Caesar, but of Christ. In their fellowship practices, they imitated their Lord who called for unity among his followers, "that they might be one even as you, Father, and I are one..." (John 17:11, 21-22). Party spirit and factions divided Judaism in Jesus' day. They would be, in time, its undoing. Jesus wanted something better for his own followers, and by giving the Holy Spirit, he sought to "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," to quote Paul (Ephesians 4:3). Already, Luke has informed us about the 120 being "in one accord" (Acts 1:14; 2:1). Paul would stress this quality of unity and harmony in his letters (Romans 15:5; Philippians 2:2).

The term *koinonia* and its variations appears in 17 verses, 4 different Greek forms and in 19 occurrences (Acts 2:42; Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 1:9; 10:16; 2 Cor. 6:14; 8:4; 9:13; 13:13; Gal. 2:9; Phil. 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; Phlm. 1:6; Heb. 13:16; 1 John 1:3, 6f). Underlying the word are these ideas: "an association involving close mutual relations and involvement" (Louw and Nida, 34.5), as well as "partnership and communion" (Liddell and Scott). What is in view reaches beyond agreement of belief to the actual sharing of social and physical life. This becomes clearer later in this passage and in the other summaries we will study. "I have a part in you, and you have a part in me," is the essential concept. Paul's understanding of the "body of Christ" would include the idea that "we are members one of another" (1 Corinthians 12:25; Ephesians 4:25). The suffering or joy of one Christ follower is shared by all the others in some real way. Even as Christ himself shared in our common humanity — experiencing our pain, our suffering, our grief, and our sin — even so we as *members of his body* share the same *koinonia* with one another. Paul actually referred to his own suffering as "the fellowship of his [Christ's] suffering" (Philippians 3:10 where "share"="fellowship"). The Christ followers were part of "the fellowship of the cross." This *koinonia* was not only *relational*, it was also *redemptive*. Even as we suffer with others, we are, together, in receipt of Christ's resurrection life!

3. **Breaking of Bread.** Marshall recognizes "The Lord's Supper" in this expression (Greek: *tē klasou tou artou*). Prominent in this expression is the double use of the definite article ("the"): literally, "the breaking of the bread." Luke, in his Gospel, tells the story of the Last Supper, including the symbolic action: "he took the bread, gave thanks and broke it" (Luke 22:19). But then, after Jesus' resurrection, he appears to the two on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), a lengthy "appearance narrative" in which the disciples do not immediately recognize Jesus. Dramatically, Luke tells the reader that while sitting with them at a meal, Jesus "took bread, gave thanks and broke it," using much the same language as we saw at the Last Supper (24:30). Immediately, we are told, "Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight" (24:31). Luke would later reprise the event in this way: "Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread [literally, "in the breaking of the bread"]" (24:35). The phrasing is the same, preserving the article "the" in both instances. It is also important to note that, while they walked with Jesus "on the way," Jesus "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets...explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (24:27). Thus, in a single narrative, Luke joins together "Word" (Scripture) and what we would call "Sacrament" (the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist).

¹⁰ I am indebted to Dr. Clyde Loew, Messianic believer, for this fitting metaphor which "weaves" the two testaments together.

This is no ordinary "breaking of bread" but the very specific kind which reveals the *presence* of the Risen Jesus. There is good reason why we call this sacrament, "The Lord's Table," for it is "the Lord" who comes to be among us when we engage in "the breaking" of "the bread." This is no ordinary bread, but that which reveals the broken body of Jesus, beneath the lash of the whip and then suffering on the cross to the point of death. When "this breaking" of "this bread" happens, our eyes, like the two from Emmaus, are opened to a deeper understanding of who Jesus is. Indeed, we ought to approach the Lord's Supper with just that expectation in our hearts. Fresh from hearing *the word* explained, "our hearts burning within us" (24:32), we then come to *the table* for "the breaking of the bread" where "our eyes are opened."

How important is the drama of "the breaking of the bread"? We think it is quite important. The celebrant (our pastor) at communion stands before the people of God, his hands grasping the single loaf of bread, raising it up, calling the congregation to remember that Jesus was lifted up on the cross. Then, with words of consecration, he proclaims the words of Jesus, "This is my body...", tearing the loaf in half, reminding the community of the painful crucifixion Jesus suffered for us. How can we miss this wonderful opportunity to proclaim the Gospel dramatically, powerfully, and communally? Communion is the innermost sanctuary of the whole Christian worship. For we have to do here not merely with outward signs only, but with the inner realities which those signs represent. The broken body of Christ unites his body, the people of God, in fellowship.

4. **Prayer.** "Teach us to pray," one of the disciples once requested of Jesus (Luke 11:1). The response by Jesus was the *Our Father*, in one of its two forms found in the New Testament. No doubt that prayer came to mind when the apostles led their respective Jerusalem converts into a deeper experience of community life. Of course, prayer was more than just *saying prayers*, a common practice within the Jewish worship. The book of *Psalms* is filled with such prayers, and they were used regularly as *inspired scripts* which guided the prayer life of ancient Israel. Jesus knew these prayers, and prayed at least one of them on the cross: "My God, My God..." from Psalm 22.

The Greek word for "prayer" which is used by Luke in this passage is *proseuchē* and is commonly associated with "a *place* for prayer," as well as the act itself of praying. Jesus went to very specific *places* to pray during his earthly ministry: mountains, the wilderness, and, of course, Gethsemane. The noun derives from the verb *proseuchomai* with this range of meaning: "to speak to or to make requests of God.

In some languages there are a number of different terms used for prayer depending upon the nature of the content, for example, requests for material blessing, pleas for spiritual help, intercession for others, thanksgiving, and praise. There may also be important distinctions on the basis of urgency and need. The most generic expression for prayer may simply be 'to speak to God.' It is normally best to avoid an expression which means primarily 'to recite' [Louwand Nida, 33.178].

No doubt, the apostles exemplified the teachings of Jesus about prayer before their growing Jerusalem adherents. The Temple was, ordinarily, *the place for prayer*, and Jewish people met together for appointed *times of prayer*. With the emerging of the Christ followers, welded together by the Holy Spirit, a new kind of Temple was arising, composed of "living stones," wrote Peter (1 Peter 2:4-10). Consequently, the *place of prayer* became the Christ community itself, although, set in Jerusalem, it most likely have included the set Jewish *hours of prayer* as seen in Acts 3:1, but no doubt exceeded them. The believers would have remembered the words of Jesus, "If any two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done" (Matthew 18:19). The life of prayer is evident throughout *Acts*. Perhaps the most moving prayer in these opening chapters appears in 4:23-31 and concludes with the resounding words, "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.

How important are church-wide concerted seasons of prayer? We believe they are extremely important. Our people need to make the disciples' request: "Lord, teach us to prayer." Our church needs to meet regularly to pray together, whether in small groups or during special seasons called for that purpose. In worship, we often "open the altar" for the express purpose of laying our concerns before God *as a community*. Throughout the week, others gather for intercession.

Luke's profile highlights the four distinctive practices described in 2:42. Additionally, he notes some distinctive features of community life.

1. **Awe.** Choosing the Greek expression *phobos*, meaning "fear, terror; fear, reverence (for God); respect (for persons)," Luke emphasizes the sense of divine presence not unlike what Israel felt when Yahweh gave Torah on Mount Sinai. God had come near, and the believers knew it. *All of them* knew it, we are told.
2. **Wonders and Signs.** From Acts 2:19-22, we learned previously that the coming of Jesus and the Spirit was attended by extraordinary occurrences not commonly witnessed within the natural order of things. The Greek words used in this instance are *terata* and *sēmeia*, suggesting events with deeply *emotional* and *mental* importance. God was working in their midst in ways that stirred their *hearts* and challenged their *thoughts*. Here is a wonderful marriage within the Spirit-filled life: heart and mind together. Theirs was belief anchored in true happenings: signs. But such things *mattered to them* and were not merely items of intellectual curiosity or speculation. The apostles were the human instruments for initiating these marvelous realities, though the power rested with God. When Luke says that these things "were done by the apostles," he does not mean that the apostles were the *source*, for he uses the Greek preposition *dia* ("through") rather than *ek* ("from, out of"). Part of the apostolic *witness* consisted in *words* established alongside meaningful *wonders* together forming *signs* which pointed to the presence of God in their midst.
3. **All the ones believing were together.** Which was more remarkable: that the apostles were instrumental in the wonders and signs, or that God's people were "all together"? The underlying Greek is the phrase *epi to auto* which appears some 56 times in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament and usually has the idea of "together" or "united" or "both" or "the same." Luke attributes this unity to "those believing," and the implication is that the "awe" and its roots in the apostolic "wonders and signs" belong to the nature of the church's faith — that it was a "believing" community. The shared experience of God's powerful presence in their midst created a solid unity and life together. Living in awe of God resulted in a deep sense of oneness within community.
4. **Were having all things common.** Sometimes scholars refer to the early church as a "community of common possessions." A certain discomfort arises in our minds when we consider such a view of property. The word for "common" is derived from *koinonia: koina*. The verb form "were having" is the imperfect tense of *echō*. This would imply a fluid and constantly changing arrangement. What we read here is not communism or socialism understood in modern terms. However, it is not pure capitalism either! In light of the poverty and social inequality found in Jewish society (90% of the population were peasants), the Christian faith was creating an *alternate economy* in the lives of its members. Gradually and consistently, the followers of Jesus were altering their method of meeting material needs. A slow but certain silent economic revolution was taking place.
5. **Were selling and distributing possessions and belongings.** Again, Luke uses verb forms implying continuous actions in the past and present. The Greek word *ktēmata* suggests a special kind of possession: *real property*. For peasants, this would be an unlikely possession, suggesting that some non-peasant landowners belonged to the 3,000. The strict stratification found in the wider society collapsed within the Christian community, especially if owners of land were selling their properties in order to meet human needs among the less fortunate. For a Jewish person to sell land was no small thing, even under Roman occupation. The other Greek word used here is *huparxeis* and commonly refers to *personal property*. Luke is telling us that all kinds of property was being divested so that its proceeds could benefit the needy. Marshall suggests, "What actually happened may have been that each person held his goods at the disposal of the others whenever the need arose."¹¹
6. **Day by day in the temple devoted to mutual agreement.** We've already encountered the word "devoted" above in relationship to the four activities of the early Christians. It occurs again in 2:46 and describes the consistency with which they frequented the Temple "in mutual agreement." This latter phrase is sometimes rendered as "one accord" based on the Greek word *homothumadon*. We might speak about their unanimous devotion or even their devoted unanimity! Their participation in Temple worship was without coercion and was by common agreement. Luke seems to imply that this was an unusual occurrence, perhaps in contrast

¹¹ Marshall, p. 84.

to the frequent party squabbles among the Jewish sects. Followers of Jesus exhibited a marvelous agreement in their commitment to Temple life. According to tradition, Temple worship involved the daily burnt offering and incense twice daily officiated by the priests and witnessed by the people. The congregation would receive the blessing of the priest. But their worship did not stop there.

7. **House to house they broke bread and ate food with glad and sincere hearts.** Already smaller communities began to form within the larger Jerusalem congregation. The "breaking of bread" mentioned here lacks the two definite articles seen above and probably refers to the more general sharing of meals, perhaps as part of common possessions. "Glad" is derived from *agalliasis* which means "extreme joy or gladness." The same word appears in Luke 1:44 in conjunction with John the Baptizer's jumping in his mother's womb when in the presence of Mary and the unborn Jesus. It was not unusual for such joy to manifest itself in bodily movement (jumping, dancing) and in song.¹² "Sincere" comes from *aphelotēs* and means a humility which arises from the simple life. Plainly, the community of common possessions promoted unmatched joy and prevented unwarranted pride. Knowing that the bread on my table comes from my brother in Christ, who shared it with me selflessly, brings intense joy to my heart and humility to my soul.
8. **Praise to God and favor with all the people.** The order of these is crucial, as Peter would later remark, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Favor (Greek: *charis*, also used for "grace") results from proper relationship with God, a teaching found in the Wisdom tradition of the Hebrew Bible (see Proverbs 3:1-4 as an example: "favor...in the sight of God and man"). The early Christians celebrated their relationship with the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Their praise had acquired fresh content that was undoubtedly impossible to contain and hard to miss! Luke uses the word *aineō* for "praise" which has special meaning of "to speak of the excellence of a person, object or event." Louw and Nida add these insights:

In a number of languages praise can only be expressed by direct discourse, and this requires some content which provides the basis for praise. For example, in Lk 2.13 instead of a literal rendering of 'praising God,' it may be necessary to have 'they said, God is wonderful,' and in Lk 16.8 it may be necessary to translate 'the master of this dishonest manager said, You are remarkable for having done such a clever thing' [33.354].

God indeed had done a remarkable thing through Jesus and His subsequent gift of the Holy Spirit. Praise flowed from heart-felt reflection and enthusiasm. Here is *Christian* fanaticism at its finest!

We noted at the beginning of this discussion that the matter of numerical growth within the developing community rested with God. "The Lord added to their numbers daily," Luke observes. What God "adds," Bruce notes, we must "receive."¹³ Growth belongs to the *process* of the Holy Spirit in response to faithful witness, both in words and lives. While we might think it can be orchestrated and controlled, the truth is that genuine growth belongs to the essence of life itself — God's life, resulting from the new birth. To further explain this *process*, the writer makes clear that those added were "the ones being saved." This reminds us of Peter's sermon where he enjoins his audience, "save yourselves from this crooked and perverse generation..." These new born followers of Jesus were entirely from the Israel living under the old regime. Part of their formation as lively new fellowships included leaving behind their natural claims to spiritual inheritance and taking up a new identity as the restored people of God. They are "the remnant people," called out of old Israel.

Reset Two: "No Needy Person Among Them" (Acts 4:32-37)

32 Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. 33 And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold 35 and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. 36 Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, 37 sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

¹² The early Christians practiced joy as these texts reveal: Acts 16:34; 1 Peter 1:6, 8. Joy belonged to the heritage of ancient Hebrew worship evidenced in the Psalms: 42:4; 47:1; 63:5; 100:2 and elsewhere.

¹³ Bruce (1951), p. 102.

Between the first summary and the second one Luke places: the healing of the crippled beggar, Peter's explanation of what it means, and the first official attack of Second Temple Judaism on the fledgling Christian community. We then hear a moving and powerful prayer offered by the gathered believers in response to their initial experience of persecution. During the course of these next several weeks, we will have opportunity to examine these intervening passages. However, since the focus of this week's study is a glimpse into the life of the early church, we will move forward to summary two.

We have already encountered the "community of common possessions" in Acts 2. What Luke does here is to *focus significance* on that practice, helping us to understand its importance in the context of Jewish-Christian life.

1. When we encounter the word "believed" in this section, the writer shifts the verb tense to the more settled *aorist* form. Those who *completed* the faith transaction *in their entirety* were "of one heart and soul." Faith eventually reaches a level of stability such that it can sustain consistent community life. True, faith continues to mature and develop after someone is "saved," but once the basics have been settled, in the words of *Hebrews*, believers must move beyond "milk" to "meat" (see *Hebrews* 5:12; 6; also 1 *Corinthians* 3:2). If members of the community continued to harbor doubts about the foundations of faith, commitment to growing relationships would falter, lacking a true basis. Luke makes clear that these believers had made the commitment and were, in fact, "moving on to completion" (see *Hebrews* 6:1).
2. The evidence of solid faith appears in oneness of heart and soul, *mia of kardia* and *psuchē*. Here was a group of people who allowed the Gospel to penetrate the outer shell of their physical life into their inner being. There, both feeling and thought, emotions and will, were affected profoundly. Commentator Robert Wall notes the similarity to the Greek ideal of personal friendship and reciprocity.¹⁴ If we reach back into the Old Testament, this language comes from the great *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:5 which commanded Israel's love for Yahweh, using the same language of "heart and soul," a theme picked up by Jesus in Luke 10:27-37. Love for God issues forth in love for others. Faith becomes works (see the New Testament book of *James*).
3. Concretely, faith-become-love changes attitudes toward possessions. As noted in the first summary (*Acts* 2), people shared what they owned with others. Luke wants the reader to understand the spiritual basis for that practice. A principle emerges: "No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own," and that is why "they shared everything they had." What would lead to such a *fanatical* change in viewpoint? The short answer is simply "the Gospel." The death of Jesus, among other things, was his paying of a price for the release of captives. The remnant community of Jesus saw themselves as "redeemed," "bought with a price," and therefore, "no longer their own" (see Paul's teaching in 1 *Corinthians* 6:20; 7:23). They belonged to Jesus; they were the New People *of* God. Therefore, in light of this saving purchase, this exodus from human bondage, nothing they "owned" any longer belonged to them but to God instead. Again, here is *fellowship* which drills down into the social values of people's hearts and souls, cutting them free from attachment to material things, liberating them to freely give to others in need.
4. By beginning this section with the Greek word *plēthous*, the term for "congregation, multitude" and the likely translation of the Hebrew term *qāhāl*, Luke makes clear that the whole community shared this value.¹⁵ This alone give us pause. How hard would it be for contemporary Christian communities to approach their possessions in this way? If someone asked them about their "vision," how usual would the response be, "Yes, we don't consider anything we *own* to be really ours"? This is especially germane during the present times of economic crisis when many are out of work and others are losing their homes. Where does the Christ community, the *fellowshipping* community, fit into these circumstances?

Placed at the center of this second summary section is an observation about the apostles:

¹⁴ Wall, p. 96.

¹⁵ The Greek word is a favorite with Luke. Out of some 31 uses in the New Testament, Luke's writings (*Luke* and *Acts*) account for 24 of them. The word *plēthous* functions as a synonym, in Luke, for the idea of the *ekklēsia*, commonly translated "church," but without its institutional trappings. These words describe the "whole assembly" who are "called out" by God through the Holy Spirit. See also Witherington, *Acts*, p. 206.

And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all (Acts 4:33).

Let's pose a question about this verse: How important was the sharing of common possessions and the selling of personal holdings to meet the needs of others -- how important were those actions in giving *credibility* to the "testimony" of the apostles to the resurrection of the "Lord" Jesus? Secondly, how important were these same acts of personal sacrifice to a shared experience of *grace*? Religion has a reputation for "talking a good game," but not necessarily playing one. Nothing authenticates our witness more than living out, with integrity, supportive community life. The Gospel in action strengthens our witness. In this case, Luke draws a tight connection between the belief that Jesus rose from the dead and the existence of a caring Christian fellowship. After all, if Jesus rose from the dead, then this world has undergone a radical transformation. Through the risen Jesus, God has declared His firm commitment to *this world* in all of its need and future possibilities. The same God who raises the dead also offers new life to the dying social order, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, helping the poor, healing the sick, caring for the widow and the orphan. The homily of James puts shoe leather on this idea:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (James 1:27).

The word "religion," from the Greek *thrēskeia*, does not appear often in the New Testament. Jesus did not come to start a new *religion* but to renew the covenant of Yahweh with Israel, and through Israel, with the whole world. James puts the emphasis where the book of *Acts* does: on the practical outworking of the Gospel through concrete acts of kindness and consistent attitudes of holiness. The early followers of Jesus, *empowered* by the Holy Spirit, gave authentic expression to religion, rightly understand. All other religions were *parodies* while the Gospel-in-community was the *reality*. Resurrection theology cannot be separated from social action.

Therefore, when the apostles give testimony to the resurrection of the *Lord* Jesus, they are bearing witness to the Jesus who is *Lord* of their lands and their possessions, and the *Lord* who showers down his grace — his powerful blessing into the lives of once broken persons who are now living in caring fellowships. This reminds us of the famous words of St. Francis of Assisi who once said, "Preach the Gospel always and if necessary use words." Whatever "words" the apostles used were reinforced by the powerful example of those who took seriously the teachings of Jesus about material things, "Sell your possessions, give to the poor and follow me" (Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). That instruction went to a "rich young ruler" who, having many possessions, sadly refused to heed Jesus' call. By contrast, the early Christian disciples obeyed, and, in so doing, sharpened the effectiveness of the apostles' witness. *What if we, the Christ fanatics, were to back up our often loud and demanding words for social change with acts of mercy and compassion? What if we actually practiced the Lord's dictum, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35)? What sort of power might be unleashed in our teaching, our preaching and our witness if we did? And is it possible that the voice of the church is muted because, unfortunately, actions speak louder than words?*

The results of such faithful sharing of possessions were astounding, as we read Luke's assessment:

There was not a needy person among them (Acts 4:34).

The Greek is emphatic: *oude gar endeēs tis ēn en autois*, literally, "For there was not even a single needy one among them." That is, if we look for one, we wouldn't find even *one*! These followers of Jesus, filled with Holy Spirit, believing deeply in the Gospel of the dying and risen Jesus, made certain that poverty was wiped out where its tyranny had once ruled.

This remark by Luke was not simply a fine bit of rhetorical flourish about poverty and its relief. Behind his statement lies the Torah requirements found in Deuteronomy 15. We print them here in full:

4 *But there will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess-* 5 *if only you will strictly obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today.* 6 *For the LORD your God will bless you, as he promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow, and you shall rule over many nations, but they*

shall not rule over you. 7 "If among you, *one of your brothers should become poor*, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, 8 but *you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need*, whatever it may be. 9 Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, 'The seventh year, the year of release is near,' and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the LORD against you, and you be guilty of sin. 10 *You shall give to him freely*, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. 11 *For there will never cease to be poor in the land*. Therefore I command you, '*You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.*'

In 15:11, God makes a *descriptive* statement about the ever-present problem of poverty. It simply states, "Poverty exists." However 15:4 begins with a *normative* statement: poverty must be abolished. The early Christian community heeded the words of this Old Testament text by going beyond it. Torah speaks of *lending*, whereas, the book of *Acts* clearly exemplifies outright *giving*. Once every seven years, debt was remitted under Torah. But in the case of what Luke tells us, there is no debt at all. As Paul wrote, "Owe no one anything but the debt of love" (Romans 13:8). We learn a great deal from the teachings of Jesus about the debtor-creditor society in which he and his contemporaries lived. He urged the forgiveness of debt¹⁶ and then went to the cross showing Israel what the ultimate payment of debt looked like when he satisfied the debt of our sins. No Christian, living in light of the cross, could possibly press a debtor who was already at the brink of deadly poverty. Not even Torah would sustain such conduct. But early Christians crafted an alternate economy which sidestepped the old debtor-creditor relations, replacing them with the genuine meeting of needs.

What a witness! What a fellowship! "Not a needy person among them..." Here is resurrection life in action! Here is the self-less life of the cross writ large in human lives and human fellowships! What if the contemporary church took seriously this goal? Imagine thousands of congregations who refused to have anyone remain poor among them; Christian believers who would sacrifice that much to "save" the poor, one person at a time! Did not Peter, in our last study, enjoin his audience: "Save yourselves from this crooked and perverse generation" (2:40)? We begin to see what that meant in practice, namely, to rescue the poor from a cruel and merciless system which kept 90% of its citizens as peasants, shared a small slice of the wealth with a narrow middle class, and then rewarded its wealthiest minority. "Saving" implied more than "saving souls" in the barest sense of that phrase. The New Testament does not regard "souls" as disembodied spirits, disjoined from real human bodies in real human need. The Greek word for soul, *psuchē*, requires its Hebrew counterpart to be understood properly. When Jewish people read about *nephesh*, the usual word for "soul" in the Hebrew Bible, they did not understand this to mean "soul without body," but, instead, *embodied souls, embodied life*. Human creation in Genesis 1-2 pronounced humans as "living souls," not merely *possessing* souls. That is, human beings don't merely *have souls*, they *are souls* in the fullest sense of being human *persons*. Followers of Jesus practiced their faith by saving *whole persons* in the truest Hebrew sense. After all, they had ready-to-hand the example of Jesus himself who combined the *good word*, "your sins are forgiven," with the *compassionate word*, "rise, take up your bed and walk" (Matthew 9:5; Mark 2:9; Luke 5:23)!

Luke, in 4:34-35, summarizes the *process* by which the goal of "no poor left behind" was achieved. Property, both real and personal, was sold and the proceeds entrusted to the apostles for distribution. This assumes, of course, that the Twelve diligently searched for the poor in their midst and had an accurate picture of the needs within the growing Christ community in Jerusalem. At this stage of their work, they accepted this task as

¹⁶ We are drawn to the *Our Father*, in this regard, with its words, "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." The root idea behind the Greek notion of "forgive" (*aphiēmi*) is actually to release from debt. By analogy it gets applied to forgiveness of the "debt of sin." The burden of debt drags human beings down to the grave. Consider, for example, the scandal of Third World debt, owed by struggling young nations who are grappling with wide-ranging problems of subsistence. In such cases, the call of the Gospel to international banking interests is to forgive such debt. Closer to home, the Christ community should commit itself to teaching and practice in helping people "get out of debt." Our congregation regularly offers the *Financial Peace University* directed to that end, and tries to assist its participants in becoming good stewards of what they "possess." See Matthew 18:23ff in this regard: a powerful parable directed to the proper treatment of those in debt. Refer also to Luke 7:41-43. Paul clearly connected the work of the cross as resulting in the cancellation of debt (Colossians 2:14).

belonging to the authentic witness of the Gospel. Preaching and poverty were common concerns. There was no sharp distinction between spiritual and social needs since they belonged to the same fellowship of believers. Luke is careful to use Greek verb tenses which convey *ongoing and unabated action*: the sellers were *continuously* selling and bringing the proceeds to the apostles; the apostles are *consistently* distributing; the needs of the poor were continuing. The verbs are in the imperfect and present tenses throughout. Nothing worth doing can be done half-heartedly or only sporadically. Intentionality must drive the relief of the poor. When so many people lived on the margins of existence, they slipped all too frequently into poverty.¹⁷ If the Gospel was going to prove its effectiveness, here was the way that would happen. Did not Jesus tell his disciples before he went to the cross, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples if you love one another..." (John 13:35). Does not such an opportunity present itself to us today?

A familiar rhetorical practice was the use of *examples* which gave extraordinary evidence for the point made by the speaker. Known by its technical term *paradeigmata*, the "appeal to example" occurs throughout the New Testament.¹⁸ Nothing convinces an audience more than actual historical examples, and, as Quintilian the master rhetorician taught, the more *recent* the better.¹⁹ Luke doesn't have to look far. A certain man named Joseph, originally from Cyprus, must have been well-known among the early Christians as someone who modeled the conduct of selling possessions and giving the proceeds to the apostles (4:36-37). Several facts about him are significant.

1. He is part of the *Diaspora*, having once lived on the island of Cyprus, but now evidently an active part of the Jerusalem community. Something so strong as the message, preached by the apostles and validated by consistent meeting of needs, drew this man to make a notable sacrifice to relieve the needs of the poor.
2. He is nicknamed "Bar-Nabas (or, Barnabas²⁰)" by the apostles, no doubt because his actions served to "encourage," that is, *motivate* others. Luke translates this nickname into Greek, using the word *paraklēseōs*, a term which shares its meaning with *paraklētos* the name Jesus gave to the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel. This man embodied the life of the Spirit through sharing in the community of common possessions.
3. He is a Levite. The tribe of Levi was responsible for the spiritual life of Israel, including its worship, music, sacrifices, health and instruction in Torah. Members of this tribe were the stewards of *Shalom* — "peace, wholeness, well-being." From this tribe came the priests who served in the Temple and at the great altar of burnt offering. We don't know what aspect Barnabas served.
4. He owned land. This is an anomaly within Torah. What do we mean? Levites weren't suppose to own land directly, but, under Torah law were allotted 48 towns throughout Israel taken from the various tribes (Numbers 35:1-8; Joshua 14:1-4; 18:7;). The only "inheritance" which the Levites were suppose to have was Yahweh Himself (Numbers 18:20; Deuteronomy 10:9; 18:1-2; Joshua 13:33)! The farther Israel was removed in time from their inception as a nation, the more they drifted from these requirements. Certain priests and Levites had become part of the middle class and often as retainers to their more powerful leaders, such as the High Priest. Clearly, Levites are landowners as in the case Barnabas.
5. He sells his land and gives the proceeds for distribution. This is significant, for it sends a powerful message to Israel: When the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah takes control of a person's life and the Holy Spirit fills her heart, she will properly keep Torah in its renewed and fulfilled sense. Here's a man who, before his encounter with the Gospel, was plainly in violation of Torah. But once he accepted the message of Peter at Pentecost, he immediately responded in obedience to both the commandments about the poor and the rule about holding land as a Levite. Of course, Barnabas was *more than a formal law-keeper*. His life was a

¹⁷ Witherington offers an excellent digest on "The Social Status and Level of the Earliest Christians" as an extended sidebar in his commentary on *Acts* (pp. 210-212). A very useful collection of essays on the whole topic of social relations in the world of *Acts* appears in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, edited by J.H. Neyrey, Hendrickson, 1991. Consider also E.A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century*, Tyndale, 1960; B.W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens*, Grand Rapids, 1994.

¹⁸ Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, Eerdmans, 1998, p. 93ff.

¹⁹ Quintilian, *Inst. Or.*, 3.8.36, 66.

²⁰ We find Barnabas playing a substantial role in the life of the early church, as evidenced by these passages in *Acts*: 9:27; 11:22, 30; 12:25; chapters 13-17.

powerful example to those around him, exemplifying the life of the risen Jesus, helping to spread around God's grace among those who were in need. Barnabas embodied fellowship *par excellence!*

Reset Three: The Healing Community (Acts 5:12-16).

¹² Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. ¹³ None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴ And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, ¹⁵ so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. ¹⁶ The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed.

We now come to the third of Luke's summaries. Between the end of Acts 4 and this passage Luke includes a most terrifying story. That story will be examined more carefully in a future study for it deserves special attention — more than we can afford it in this week's notes. Let me say, however, that the story itself should not come as any surprise, shocking though its outcome might be. Whenever any society attempts to form a community of common possessions, there will always be some who take advantage and try to manipulate the graciousness of others for their own selfish ends. We ask, "Should the fear that such abuse might happen keep the Christian community from practicing shared possessions nonetheless?" Hardly, Luke tells his audience through this story. God will always come to the aid of those who, with heart-felt concern, are sincerely doing His will. Feel free to read the story of Acts 5:1-11 as a background to this third summary.

"Signs and wonders" (*sēmeia* and *terata*) once more take center stage, as the work of the apostles continues through validating events designated by these two words.²¹ Recall the distinction: *signs* are events of *significance which point to an important idea or reality of God*. Such events appeal to thoughtful minds who want to *understand* what God is doing; *wonders* are events which move the heart and leave their witnesses speechless. The word "fear" is often associated with the second word, *wonders*: this fear is not the kind which *paralyzes* but rather the sort which *provokes* to action. In the Old Testament, as we have noted in previous studies, fear of God usually means reverence and awe. We must be careful not to take the emotional edge away from this word in our efforts to correct its misunderstanding. Make no mistake: what the apostles did for the people took their breath away! Wonders quicken the pulse to be sure! Still, the Wisdom writers in the Hebrew tradition repeatedly said, "The fear of Yahweh is the beginning of Wisdom" (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; 15:33). One especially helpful text is Deuteronomy 6:24 which states: "And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day." Some forms of fear are healthy responses which preserve our lives. God has "our good" at heart, "always," this text tells us. Whatever "fear" the wonders brought on these early followers of Jesus, it was "for their good only."

Such events take place, Luke writes, "at the hands of the apostles." This detail about "the hands" has a certain tenderness about it. It also reminds us of the language of the Old Testament which speaks about "the hand of the Lord" when He led His people out of Egypt during the Exodus (see Exodus 9:3=judgment and 13:14=deliverance). Luke uses it a similar way in *Acts* (11:21; 13:11), even as he did in his Gospel (1:66). However, these are *human* hands, *empowered* by the Holy Spirit and full of compassion for those in need. These are the extensions of Jesus' hands (Matthew 19:13, 15; Mark 6:2, 5; 8:23, 25; Luke 4:40; 13:13), he who touched lepers and the blind, persons with issues of blood, and even the dead. In his Gospel, Luke tells us, Jesus "lifted his hands" and blessed the apostles, commissioning them for their work (Luke 24:50). These were the hands which, even after his resurrection, bore the nail prints of the cross (Luke 24:40; John 20:20, 25). But now these hands are "members of the body of Christ," for we are his hands (see 1 Corinthians 12). Fellowship, in the truest sense, is being the *hands of Jesus*.

²¹ On the question of miracles in *Acts*, we refer you to G.W.H. Lampe's "Miracles in the Acts of the Apostles," *Miracles: Cambridge Studies in Their Philosophy and History*, edited by C.F.D. Moule, Mowbray, 1965, pp.165-178. Also, G. Thiessen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition*, Fortress, 1983.

Consistently, Luke refers to those within the hearing of the apostles — and accepting their message — as "the people," from the Greek *laos*. Presumably, this is Luke's way of describing those within Israel who were responsive to the Gospel of the risen Jesus: they are "the people of God" restored; they are Israel renewed; the remnant who at last has come back from exile and among whom God is present once again. However, not all of Israel shared in the kingdom program of Jesus. Again, recall our brief comments about the shocking story of attempted deception found in Acts 5:1-11. Though we have not yet studied them, Luke has several texts which reveal the hostility of the leadership to the apostles' work. Such detractors, along with persons like those described in Acts 5, Luke calls simply "the rest," from the Greek *hoi loipoi*, an expression when spoken quickly and repeatedly has a certain sarcasm about it. These "others," the rest, were are told, were not "brave enough" to join the community. The Greek word *tolmaō* has this sense of lacking courage (Louw-Nida, 25.161). It also suggests that even if the rest wanted to "challenge" the apostles, they didn't have the courage to do so. We see the protecting power of God around this vital community led by the apostles. Authentic power and authority surrounded everything they did to such a degree that no opposition was successfully mounted against them.

By contrast, "the people" (*ho laos*) placed the apostles in "high regard." Luke chooses the word *megalunō* to express this idea. The root meaning is "to cause to be large." When applied to persons, it suggests "to praise the greatness" of someone, and commonly gets applied to God. Yet a third layer of meaning refers to "showing respect or honor," which definition fits best in the present context. Obviously, the apostles are not honored as God would be. Still, what they do, through signs and wonders, makes them true servants of God, doing His wonderful works and thus worthy of respect and honor.

Once again, Luke, in 5:14, emphasizes the growth of the community, this time using the curious expression "believers were added to the Lord" (following the ESV; the NIV has "believed in the Lord and were added"). The various translations tackle this Greek statement differently. Is the *belief* in the Lord while the *adding* is to the community? Or, is the *adding* to the Lord as a result of the people's *believing*? Either way, the Lord's community grows, and the writer makes quite clear that "both men and women" joined the Christ followers in significant numbers. This is no small report since the whole idea of "women" being counted alongside men ran contrary to common Jewish census practice. Nor is this concept a stranger to Luke's overall perspective in both his Gospel and *Acts*. Perhaps more than the other Gospel writers (*John*, excepted) Luke grasped the *universal appeal* of the Gospel. *Jesus was for all kinds of people throughout the whole world.* The fellowship nature of the Christ community appears in its invitation, revealed here, to both genders. Granted, traditional Jewish roles remained alive and well among the Jerusalem Christians, but the openness of the community to have women enter the community *in their own right* gets special attention in 5:14.²²

How do we free Luke from the charge of cheap magic in 5:15? Peter is depicted as a "shadow caster," to whom the multitudes brought their sick into the streets, laying them on "cots and mats," hoping for healing through his adumbration. Some cultures have a superstition that if you're caught in another's shadow good or evil may happen to you. The Greek word choice in play comes from *skia*, "shadow," with the verb *episkiazō*, "to overshadow." This verb means "to cause a shadow by interposing something between an object and a source of light" (Louw-Nida, 14.62). The idea of shadow, used in 5:15, places Peter in the light of God and that is about as far from magic as we can get. It also stresses the role of the human agent in the process of healing. In that sense, there is no difference between the "hands of the apostles" and the "shadow of Peter." In fact, the shadow imagery works better because it draws attention to the source of light in creating the shadow. Peter stands in the light of the risen Jesus, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, thereby becoming an instrument of God's grace for the sick.

Until now, the community of fellowship has been concentrated in Jerusalem and on the seekers attending the Temple where the apostles ministered to "the people." A hint of "things to come" appears in 5:16 where "the towns around Jerusalem" extend the geography of those who bring their sick to Peter. "Unclean spirits" are

²² See I. Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles*, Fortress, 1996.

added to "sickness" as reasons for bringing these persons to the apostles.²³ We then read the remarkable claim that "they were all healed." Luke writes *hoitines etherapeuonto hapantes*, a sentence which could mean that the apostles were healing "all of them *together*," that is, whether they were in Jerusalem or in the outlying towns, whether they were men or women — none of these differences mattered. Healing came to them *all*. In this case, Luke wants to reinforce his claim that *no preferential treatment* existed in this healing process. If we look for other cases where the expression "healed all of them" appears, Luke obliges us with two examples:

Now when the sun was setting, *all those who* had any who were sick with various diseases brought them to him, and *he laid his hands on every one of them and healed them* (Luke 4:40).

And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and *healed them all* (Luke 6:19).

In this last example the clause, "for power came out from him," corresponds to "Peter's shadow."

It seems likely that in both sets of cases — those of Jesus and those of Peter — Luke intends to say that *anyone* who *believed* was healed. We know from passages like Mark 6:5 ("And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them") that certain local circumstances, such as the absence of faith, hindered the healing work of Jesus. This is explicitly stated in Matthew 13:58. And so the sense of "all" presumes such faith but also includes the premise that "*all kinds* of people" had access to this healing work. The point of Luke's statement, "healed them all," is to show the *inclusiveness* of this vibrant movement which has gathered around the risen Jesus and the *impact* it had on those who became a part of the Christ community. No money or other material price was exacted in exchange for healing; no entrance requirement based on class or gender; no social standing demanded. Instead, "*All* were healed." Here is inclusiveness in the fellowship of healing.

Here, then, is the third summary Luke gives us in these opening chapters of *Acts*. The portraiture is breathtaking, as the people of God are re-born through the presence of the Spirit and the ministry of the apostles. When the reader digests these summaries, she is struck by the convincing evidence Luke presents for the power of the risen Jesus *in the life of the new community*. Indeed, when Jesus' critics might mount arguments calling into question the historical nature of his resurrection, they are faced with the numbing vitality of the Jerusalem fellowship, the *koinonia*, bound together in ways which released the love of God in concrete expressions of sharing and healing.

Conclusion

At some point in the second century, perhaps 130-200 CE, an obscure Christian writer who called himself *Mathētēs* ("a disciple") addressed a letter to an important official in the Roman government. His purpose was to clarify *who these Christians were* and *what their relationship was to the rest of the world*. Although there is some debate about whether everything in our copy of this letter was original to Mathetes, it is generally agreed that it gives a fair snapshot of what life looked like in the Christian community during the period *following the apostles*, and well into the second and third generations of the subsequent Christ followers. I have decided to close this week's study with an excerpt from chapters V and VI of this letter. In it we have a significant witness to the *persistence* of the movement of *Christ-followers* which took its first breath of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, *did a reset*, and then proceeded to build *lasting fellowships* in Jerusalem and beyond. Nothing argues for the authenticity of a movement more than its "staying power" in spite of the rigors of pagan life all around it. As you read this moving passage, ponder the ways that Christians in the 21st century can have an impact, as caring communities, on their world, especially in the age of Covid-19 and its aftermath.

The writer Mathetes wrote the following:

²³ While there is no cut and dried theology of demons as the sole cause of sickness, the New Testament regularly connects the ruling powers of darkness in this world with the incidents of sickness. That is not to say that "sin" is necessarily the "cause" — a view that Jesus himself rejects in the case of the man born blind. The world lies under the power of the "evil one" (John 17:15), and Jesus has come to "destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8), which includes mental and physical afflictions. So, too, the Christian community executes the ministry of "casting out demons" as a witness to the power of the risen Jesus, whose authority at God's right hand reaches through his followers into the dark bastions of the enemy's earthly kingdom.

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country nor language nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.

To sum up all in one word--what the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world. The invisible soul is guarded by the visible body, and Christians are known indeed to be in the world, but their godliness remains invisible. The flesh hates the soul, and wars against it, though itself suffering no injury, because it is prevented from enjoying pleasures; the world also hates the Christians, though in nowise injured, because they abjure pleasures. The soul loves the flesh that hates it, and [loves also] the members; Christians likewise love those that hate them. The soul is imprisoned in the body, yet preserves that very body; and Christians are confined in the world as in a prison, and yet they are the preservers of the world. The immortal soul dwells in a mortal tabernacle; and Christians dwell as sojourners in corruptible [bodies], looking for an incorruptible dwelling in the heavens. The soul, when but ill-provided with food and drink, becomes better; in like manner, the Christians, though subjected day by day to punishment, increase the more in number. God has assigned them this illustrious position, which it were unlawful for them to forsake. [*Letter of Mathetes to Diognetus*, chapters V-VI].

What will *our reset as a gathered people* look like in light of this great crowd of witnesses who surround us through the history of the early Church? Let the spark of the Spirit ignite the energy of our devotion to God and to each other *when we re-form our community in light of new realities pregnant with spiritual possibilities*. We gather together with a prayer of invitation for the God of our Lord Jesus Christ to meet with us and make His presence felt among us. We gather inviting His blessing, direction, and discipline in our lives while we reset the perspective for our community of faith. A hymn writer from the 16th century, his identity unknown, leaves for us powerful lyrics to lift our hearts in this new work for the sake of God's coming kingdom. We are invited to sing his/her song:

We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing;
He chastens and hastens His will to make known;
The wicked oppressing now cease from distressing;
Sing praises to His Name; He forgets not His own.

Beside us to guide us, our God with us joining,
Ordaining, maintaining His kingdom divine;
So from the beginning the fight we were winning;
Thou, Lord, were at our side, all glory be Thine!

We all do extol Thee, Thou Leader triumphant,
And pray that Thou still our Defender will be;
Let Thy congregation escape tribulation;
Thy Name be ever praised! O Lord, make us free!

(Translated from the German by Theodore Baker, 1894)

To God Be the Glory! Amen!