

All Things in Common

Acts 2:43-47
Acts 4:32-35

INTRODUCTION

We have been emphasizing the importance of the union with God made possible through the coming of Jesus Christ. In essence this union is a relationship between ourselves as individuals and God, but to our amazement we discover that as we enter into it, we are at the same time drawn into a life-enhancing relationship with other persons. When we are "born again," we find that we have been born into a new family, a new community of love.

The deeper we enter into this fellowship of life-sharing, the more we experience it as a gift of sheer grace. There is nothing we have done, nothing we can do, to bring such a community into existence. It is not something we create or bring into being, but a community into which we are drawn through our life in Christ. We understand that it is the means God has provided to nourish us in our new life with him and the means he uses to call others into this same abundant life.

Opportunity for life-sharing fellowship with other Christians in this faith community is one of God's richest gifts. The experience is unlike anything we have learned to expect from our usual associations with others, because Christian community is grounded in the love of God for his people and in the agape love which the people express for one another. We discover

the joy that life in the Christian community brings to us in our loneliness, our pain, our frustration, and our fatigue. We find ourselves strengthened and equipped for our life in the world. Here is a place where rebellion is accepted and forgiven, where selfishness is conquered by love, where hidden guilt is brought into the light, where anxiety is examined and overcome. In this redemptive fellowship, called into being by God, we discover what it really means to be loved and to love.

COMMENTARY

The second volume of Luke's comprehensive work on the birth and growth of Christianity is usually called the Acts of the Apostles. The title is somewhat misleading, however, for the book is mainly concerned with Peter (one third of the book) and Paul (one half of the book). Luke's real interest is not in the activities of the apostles, but in the way in which events in the lives of the two chief apostles illustrate the expansion of the faith. The volume is divided into six distinct sections, each ending with a formula indicating that the next is about to begin. Beginning with the origin of the church in Jerusalem, Luke shows how the movement spread through Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, and Europe, finally ending in Rome. These ever-widening circles of influence provide the framework for the unfolding story, which is told with dramatic effect.

It would be difficult to overestimate the historical value of the Acts. No comparable narrative covering the origin and development of the Christian movement has survived. Luke's Gospel is one of the richest sources of our knowledge about Jesus, and its loss would be tragic, but we do have other Gospels that cover much of the same ground. The loss of the Acts would be a different story, however, because we do not have any other source of information for most of the events it describes.

Pentecost is a good example. According to Acts 2, the disciples were all together in one place on the day of Pentecost,

a traditional Jewish holiday. Suddenly they experienced the living presence of God in such an overwhelming way they could not find adequate words to describe it. They said it was like the rush of a mighty wind and like tongues of flame. Some of the disciples were so caught up in the ecstatic atmosphere of the event they began to speak in other tongues, "as the Spirit gave them utterance."

The "Spirit" is the most prominent reality in the Acts of the Apostles. There are only eighteen references to the Spirit in Matthew and Mark combined, but Luke uses the term nearly sixty times in the book of Acts alone. The Spirit was "poured out" on some disciples, while others were "filled" with it. The Spirit "instructed" Peter, "caught up" Philip, told Paul and Timothy when and where to preach, and guided the selection of apostles. This vivid awareness of the Spirit, the living presence of God, helps to explain the sense of joy, power, and vitality so evident in Luke's history of the early church.

Following the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Peter was questioned about the event. The sermon he preached in reply is very important because it shows us how the early Christians tried to communicate their experience of Christ to the world. Peter begins with references to the promises of God in the Old Testament. Then he shows how Christ, especially through his crucifixion and resurrection, is the fulfillment of these promises. He concludes, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." (Acts 2:36) When asked what to do about it, Peter replies: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38)

This event marked an important stage in the creation of the Christian community. Different answers have been given to the question, "When did the church begin?" Some trace it to the calling of the twelve disciples. (Luke 6:12-16) Others believe it began with the experience of the disciples on the road to Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked them who he was. (Matt.

16:13-20) Others are convinced that the church began during the resurrection appearance of Jesus when he said to the disciples, "Receive the Holy Spirit." (John 20) A great many persons date the beginning of the church from this experience of God's presence on the day of Pentecost, and speak of this as the "birthday" of the church.

The fact is that the church was "emerging" in all of these events. The Pentecost experience especially is important because the church entered a new stage of existence when the Holy Spirit came from heaven like a mighty wind and fire. From this time on the disciples had a new understanding of their life together as the people of God. This was the beginning of a self-conscious awareness by the followers of Jesus that they were "the church."

The New Testament word for church is *ekklesia*, a word used more than fifty times, mostly in the Acts of the Apostles and in the letters of Paul. It is translated "church" in our English versions of the Bible, but literally means "an assembly of persons called forth" from the general population. This idea is an effective way of emphasizing that the church is a result of God's activity in human history. Out of all the people in the world, a few have been called forth to be together in this special way. Other words could have been chosen to describe the Christian community, but *ekklesia* best expressed the way the Christians felt about their life together.

Another important word is *koinonia*. "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and *koinonia*, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:42) The word means "fellowship," but this English word fails to convey the richness of life-sharing intended by the New Testament writers. Part of the reason for this is our tendency to associate the word with many of the superficial activities of the organized church. The *koinonia*, the fellowship created by the Holy Spirit, is entirely different from mere social gatherings or associations of people. It is a community of life-sharing at the deepest levels, a community whose life together is grounded in the redemptive love revealed by Jesus Christ. Members of the community are

so vitally linked together that they call themselves the body of Christ. Each member performs a particular function, but each needs the others in order to live. As Paul points out, the members of the body are so closely joined together that "if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together." (1 Cor. 12:36) There is ample evidence throughout the New Testament of the peace and joy felt by these early Christians as they entered into creative life-sharing in this *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit.

Luke's summary of the church's life in Acts 2:43-47 and 4:32-35 reveals the intensity of this unique life-sharing. The disciples felt so close to one another they even shared their wealth and possessions! Luke tells us that after the experience at Pentecost, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need." (2:44-45)

Two chapters later, the disciples have had another overwhelming experience of God's presence as the Holy Spirit. (Acts 4:23-31) Luke concludes his description of the event with this summary: "Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common . . . There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need." (Acts 4:32,34-35)

In order to understand what Luke is describing in these passages, we need to know that this is not *communism* as we know it today. In fact it is just the opposite of the atheistic all-embracing political and economic system we have experienced as communism in today's world. In the early church private property was not formally abolished nor was the sharing of goods required as a condition of entrance into the church. The material sharing of goods was a voluntary expression of the love which the members were feeling for one another as a result of their life together in the Spirit.

In order to understand these passages, we also need to know that this is not *church* as many of us know it today. We think of the church as a building, as an organization, as an institution which needs to be supported with budgets and committees. But just as a human person is much more than his or her "body," so the church is more than an institution. The "soul" of the church is the faith community, but like human persons, the church also has a "body." The institutional structures serve the same purpose as the human body, to perpetuate and communicate the life of the soul. Only when we live our way into the "soul" of the church can we understand the enthusiastic sharing of goods in the first century as an expression of the love that was present in the church.

The type of communal living practiced by the early church was not intended as a model that all Christians must imitate. It was not the result of legislation of any kind. It was not compulsory, nor was it enforced as an absolute or general rule. Least of all was it intended as the guiding principle for an all-embracing political and economic system. It was simply a spontaneous way of expressing the deep love which the Christians were feeling for one another, especially for "brothers and sisters" who were in need. Each member felt the same: "If I have more than I need and a member of the community is suffering from a lack of necessities, it is unthinkable for me to hold selfishly what I have." This example from the life of the early church helps us understand the nature of authentic Christian community and raises questions for the modern church: (1) What is the best way for us to share *our lives* with one another? (2) What is the best way for us to share *our goods* with one another?