

## **F. The Fruit of Pentecost: The Ecclesia of the New Creation (2:41-47)**

Many among the Jews and proselytes gathered before Peter were pierced to the heart as they realized that they, in solidarity with their countrymen, had opposed and approved the murder of their Messiah. They had killed the Prince of life (cf. 3:14-15) and now stood accountable before Him as He sat enthroned and glorified at Yahweh's right hand, "*far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come.*" In a way no Jew had imagined, Israelite unbelief had fulfilled the divine will, but the Father had given His Son to finally put an end to the creation's corruption and alienation, and thus Peter answered his hearers' plight with a call to repentance and faith:

- Christ's work has established every man's obligation to be personally reconciled to God.
- And precisely because forgiveness and reconciliation with God involve participation in the renewal and transformation He has inaugurated in His Son, repentance and faith are to be attested by baptism – a testimonial ritual symbolizing the "*washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit*" that yields union with Christ by His indwelling Spirit.

The connection between repentance and baptism wouldn't have been lost upon Peter's Jewish audience, for he was calling them to a public response that set them squarely against their previous convictions and sensibilities, not to mention their Hebrew brethren and their own national identity as Israelites: A Jew's covenant status and confidence of righteousness before God were attested in the fact that only proselytes to Judaism were baptized; Jews needed no ritual cleansing and initiation because they were already "clean"; they already were members of God's covenant household and possessors and servants of His covenant Law. It was the Gentiles who lived apart from the true God, "*excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world*" (Ephesians 2:11-12).

For a Jew to undergo baptism was for him to effectively deny his covenant identity and status, and yet here was a fellow Jew insisting that this is exactly what Yahweh requires of Abraham's sons now that His promised kingdom has been inaugurated. Peter's meaning was painfully clear:

- The kingdom of heaven is of such a nature that even the Hebrew "sons of the kingdom" must be cleansed and initiated into it. Abrahamic descent and adherence to the Law of Moses – i.e., citizenship in the Old Covenant kingdom – afforded them nothing with respect to Messiah's kingdom (Luke 3:1-9; John 8:31-59).
- Moreover, the sons of Israel must be baptized into the name of Jesus of Nazareth. A Jew's share in the kingdom of heaven depends upon his union with the King himself – the Abrahamic Seed and True Israel in whom he obtains authentic status as a son of Abraham and member of the household of Israel (Isaiah 49:1ff; Galatians 3:1ff).
- In the messianic kingdom of heaven, Jewishness no longer identifies the sons of the kingdom; that identity and status are bound up in one's share in the King's own life and righteousness. Every son of the kingdom of heaven is a son *in the Son*; this is why repentance and a new birth attested in baptism are necessary for Jew as well as Gentile.

The kingdom of heaven inaugurated in Christ – the Last Adam – is the kingdom of the new creation. It is the realm of creational purging and renewal, and thus its citizens are also partakers in this restoration. Apart from the washing of renewal by the Spirit, a man cannot even rightly *perceive* the kingdom of heaven, let alone enter it (John 3:1-8). The answer to the dilemma, “What shall we do?” is, “*You must be born from above.*” Life in the fulfilled kingdom is life in the new creation, as Luke demonstrates by his summary description of the fledgling Church.

1. The first thing Luke noted is that three thousand individuals responded to Peter’s exhortation and were baptized (2:41).
  - a. Importantly, he explained their response in terms of “*receiving the word,*” and it was on that basis that these three thousand Israelites and proselytes underwent baptism. Those whom the disciples baptized were those who personally embraced Jesus Christ in faith as He was revealed in Peter’s preached gospel.
  - b. It is also significant that Luke explained the outcome of this receipt of Christ’s gospel in terms of these individuals being “*added.*” This verb denotes something or someone being joined to some entity that already exists. In context, Luke’s meaning is that these three thousand believers were added to the group of disciples that had already received the Spirit and been thereby joined to Christ as the beginning of His New Covenant Body. Though Luke didn’t state it directly, his language implies what Peter had just promised, namely that these new believers were also given the Holy Spirit (ref. 2:38).
2. Luke was careful to show that a new community was being formed, not upon the basis of shared ethnicity, religious solidarity, or doctrinal conformity, but the possession of the Holy Spirit. The community that emerged on Pentecost is preeminently spiritual in that it is *of the Spirit*. Furthermore, because this sharing in the Spirit consists in mutual indwelling, those who are members of this community are partakers in the Spirit’s work of renewal and transformation. *The believing community is the household of the new creation*, born of the Spirit and joined together as mutual sharers in His renewal by which they are constituted the new humanity in the Last Adam.

The corporate entity that would become known as the Church of Jesus Christ wasn’t simply another community of religious adherents; it is the “firstfruits” of the triune God’s work of creational restoration. Thus Luke described the Church in language calculated to convey its supernatural and other-worldly nature and operation.

- a. First of all, the Church was characterized by **devotedness**. Luke expressed this by means of an imperfect periphrastic construction which emphasizes the continual, persistent nature of this preoccupation. It indicates that the members of the community of the Spirit gave themselves entirely and without distraction to the objects of their dedication, which Luke summarized in the general categories of the *apostles’ teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer* (2:42). Notably, each of these things highlights the communal orientation of the Church.

- 1) The believing community was first and foremost bound together by the **apostolic doctrine**. At that early stage there was no New Testament as the formal written record of the apostolic interpretation of the Scriptures in the light of the person and work of Jesus. The Church's doctrine was the doctrine of the Law, Prophets, and Writings, but as fulfilled in Christ and interpreted by His appointed, Spirit-led representatives (cf. again John 14:26, 15:26-16:15 with Luke 24:44-49; Acts 1:3-8). One could not be regarded as holding to Christ and His gospel unless he was holding to the teaching of Christ's apostolic authority. Apostolicity was the singular criterion of orthodoxy in the early Church and would later be a crucial consideration in the determination of the content of the inspired New Testament canon. If a word of instruction or revelation didn't accord with the apostolic message, its inspiration and authority were rejected (cf. Acts 15:1-16:4; Galatians 1:6-2:2; Ephesians 2:19-20; 2 Peter 3:1-2; etc.).

Being Jews and proselytes, the first Christians were familiar with the Old Testament, but they were now hearing it and appropriating it differently. The apostolic message heralded the fact that all the Scripture testifies of Jesus, and these who possessed His life approached it with a new eagerness and purposeful commitment to growing in Him.

- 2) The Church was secondly bound together by the common-union of **fellowship** (*koinonia*) in the Spirit. This spiritual communion would become the framework and centerpiece of the apostles' practical instruction in their epistles. In every way, Christ's people are to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the recognition that they are members of one another because they are members of Him by virtue of sharing in His Spirit (ref. 1 Corinthians 12:1-27; Ephesians 4:1-6; cf. also 1 Corinthians 1:9; Philippians 2:1-2; 1 John 1:1-7).

Luke elaborated on this common-union by observing that the believers in Jerusalem "*were together and had all things in common*" (2:44). It wasn't that they had no private property, but that they shared their lives in common. Luke expressed this togetherness with the Greek phrase "upon the same" (cf. 1:15, 2:1, 2:47, 4:26), which indicates in context that they were joined together by common convictions, concerns and priorities, purpose and orientation. In a word, they were of one heart and mind. These saints didn't divest themselves of all personal property, but recognized that their resources should serve the common good and not merely their own (2:45; cf. 4:32-5:4; also Philippians 2:1-8).

Many Christians through the ages have used this passage to biblically substantiate the notion that the life of the Church should be entirely communal, or communistic. While Christians need not live as ascetics and renounce all worldly goods, God would have them renounce private ownership and hold their possessions as community property.

*The truth is, the philosophy and ethic of personal property that marked the early Church is far more challenging than communism. In the latter, individuals don't have to make decisions regarding the use of their resources since they are under another's control. Those decisions are made for them. In the early Church, however, each believer retained ownership of his property and the rights that come with it, but he was to regard his ownership as *stewardship*. He was to recognize that what he possessed had been given to him by God as a trust to be used according to His mind and will. Unlike the communist, the Christian has to continually grapple with how God would have him allocate his resources, given a broad array of ever-changing needs. These first believers could do with their property as they pleased, but it was to be their pleasure to use it to serve God and one another. It was in this sense that they "had all things in common" and "not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own."*

3) The third matter of devotion was the **breaking of bread**, and the fact that Luke mentioned it separately shows that biblical fellowship transcends the contemporary conception of it. Among American evangelicals, virtually any activity involving believers is regarded as Christian "fellowship." But the Scripture understands this idea in a more defined and spiritual way.

- As indicated above, fellowship – common-union – concerns who Christians are as a spiritual body formed in relation to the triune God more than what they do. Regardless of how they conduct themselves toward one another, all believers are in *de facto* fellowship with one another by virtue of being in Christ.
- However, that objective communion is to be lived out in their daily lives and the relationship they enjoy with one another. The truth of the Church as one body with many members implies that the well-being of the individual members and the well-being of the body are inseparable; the good of the one is the good of the whole.

Thus Luke treated separately the issues of fellowship and the breaking of bread: The former speaks more properly to common-union in Christ; the latter to the practical dynamics of that union. So the first Christians in Jerusalem were expressing their inherent union with one another by knitting together their daily lives, in this instance by taking their meals together. Some believe Luke was referring to the observance of the Lord's Table, while others maintain he was speaking more generally of everyday meals. In fact, both views may be correct in that the historical evidence indicates that the early Christians often concluded their meals together by observing the ordinance of the Table. (These meals were known as *agapes*, or love-feasts; ref. 1 Corinthians 11:17-34; cf. also Acts 2:46, 20:7 together with Luke 22:19 and 24:28-30.)

- 4) Finally, the members of the early believing community were bound together by **prayer**. Christians not only share the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same faith and baptism; they also share the same Father upon whom they depend and to whom they look as children. For this reason they are a people united by prayer.

The Church as a praying community raises the important issue of corporate prayer and its distinction from private prayer. The New Testament records numerous instances of believers gathering together in prayer, and few Christians would deny the need for church bodies to engage in some sort of corporate prayer. Nevertheless, misunderstanding of corporate prayer and how it functions has too often rendered this practice lifeless and tedious. *Corporate prayer is to express the harmony and synergy of many hearts and minds united together as one.*

The early Church prayed corporately with one mind and heart, coming together as one man to lift up a common burden to the Father (cf. Acts 1:6-24, 4:23-31, 6:1-6, 12:1-12, 13:1-3, 20:17-36, 21:1-5). Whether one or many articulated that burden in audible prayer, all present in the gathering were united in it. This is in sharp contrast to contemporary corporate prayer which commonly consists of different individuals in succession praying through a compiled “prayer list,” or a group of individuals each expressing in turn his own personal “prayer closet” petitions to God.

- b. Secondly, the Church was characterized by the vertical devotion that is **awe** and **reverence** toward God. Those who had believed in Christ were given to continual worship (2:46a) and praise (2:47a), and this joy and delight in their Lord overflowed to become the general disposition of their lives individually and corporately. Whether in the temple in connection with the formal times of prayer or gathered together in each other’s homes, the early Christians were marked by exultation and praise (2:46b). Their hearts were continually directed upward in praise and thanksgiving to the triune God and this caused them to manifest lives of contentment, single-minded simplicity, and open and eager generosity.
- The profound, supernatural fruit the Spirit was producing in His own could not help but be noticed (ref. 2:43). Doubtless some observers were left perplexed and others resolved to oppose this new “way,” but none could argue with what they saw: sincere and devoted love to God and man. In this sense, the Church was finding favor with the people (2:47).
  - Christ’s fragrance in His saints gained them the approbation of the citizens of Jerusalem and its environs, but this regard went beyond mere acknowledgment that these followers of Jesus were decent, compassionate and unselfish people; the Lord used this testimony to bring more and more individuals to Himself (2:47). The most compelling gospel witness is the irrefutable testimony of transformed lives.