

Revolution

“The Community on the Block”

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Digging Deeper

Revolution: “The Community on the Block”

Written by: Robert Ismon Brown (bbrown@c1naz.org)

Background Notes

Key Scripture Text(s): Matthew 22:34-39; Luke 10:36-37; Acts 2:42-47; 2 Timothy 1:16-18

Introduction

“Who is my neighbor?” In its most fundamental meaning, the neighbor is the person who is “nigh” (from Old English, “neah”) that is, “near, adjacent, contiguous, next” to us. Proximity is constantly changing, shifting, and moving in relationship to others. The present state of societies in the industrialized world scrambles neighborliness through population migration which requires attentive Christians who intentionally “notice, stop, care, and follow-through.”¹ Nothing in this regard must be left to chance or randomness, even though the landscape keeps changing. New persons keep coming across our paths, moving next door, entering workplaces, sitting next to us in church, handling our personal affairs, selling our groceries, policing our streets, delivering our mail, doctoring our health, and leading our nation. What was once a stable neighborhood with fourth generation families on the block has become a miniature United Nations, a rainbow of ethnicity, language, culture, and religious faith. The one we call “neighbor” belongs to a human community more reflective of the world as a whole, a microcosm of everyone from everyplace in every form.

To such communities and with such persons our lives have constant contact. Benjamin Franklin in his *Poor Richard’s Almanack* wryly wrote, “Love your neighbor; yet don’t pull down your hedge.” “Yet” obstructs the smooth flow of this sentence by asking the reader to pause mid-course in dealing with neighbors by cautiously invoking protection from suspected danger next door. Robert Frost in “Mending Wall” (1914) agrees: “Good fences make good neighbors,” a paradox with an equal and opposite rejoinder, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” And so it goes, our “on again off again” relationship with the neighbor, especially when he is not like us, when she is quiet and aloof, and when they do things so very differently than we do. “Time will tell,” we assure ourselves, hoping perhaps that “in time” how neighbors see each other will magically sort itself out. Except ... time becomes the wall, fraught with neglect, forgetfulness, and mindlessness.

Yet God never forgets, and time does not hinder the Lord of eternity, whose commitment to His neighbor called “human” found its lasting place in the man named Jesus “who became flesh and pitched his tent among us.” Jesus, the one who died a neighbor and rose a neighbor, is forever joined to the body of our humiliation and promised to be with us “always, even to the end of the age.” Followers of Jesus, God’s Son, like their Jewish ancestors of faith, have a stake in their neighbor: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself,” he taught us (Matthew 22:39). From the rich heritage of Israel the Torah taught:

¹⁶ You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor. I am the LORD. ¹⁷ You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:16-18).

There are teeth in this instruction: “slander, profit, hate, vengeance, grudge” glare at the reader of this comprehensive command which is the second “great one,” according to Jesus. All of those things function as “fences” and “walls” to disrupt the “nearness” of “neighbors,” and they are an offense to the One Israel calls “LORD, that is, *Yahweh*.”

Christians and the church share the promise of the neighbor while all the time navigating the shifting currents of a culture where neighbors simply refuse “to stay put” or adapt to opinions of them. That is why the church, the

¹ A paradigm for neighborliness taken from the planning graphs for this series by Pastor Brian Wrangler.

body of Christ, must remain vigilant and intentional toward this otherwise elusive person they call “neighbor.” In a previous study from this series, we discussed the “Body of Christ” with reference to neighbors. Our work this week reviews and then weaves further the threads of this theme. How does “nearness” happen to us in the routine course of our daily lives? What responsibilities, burdens, needs, promises, and hopes accompany the community on the block where neighbors live? Our study begins with a reprise of material about “the neighbor” developed a few weeks ago (April 27/28, 2019).

“Who is My Neighbor?”

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. ³¹ A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. ³² So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. ³³ But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. ³⁴ He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. ³⁵ The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' ³⁶ "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" ³⁷ The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:30-37)

Jesus, in the lead up to this parable, engaged a leading official in a conversation about “the greatest commandment,” ending with the affirmation from Torah to “love your neighbor as yourself” (10:27b; also the parallel account in Matthew 22:34-39). A fine response, between teacher and pupil as any Rabbi would have observed! But, since Rabbis rarely walked away from Q&A with a textbook answer, Jesus probed the answer with yet another question in classic rabbinic teaching style: “And who is my neighbor?” Apparently silence followed, as the official avoided eye contact with Jesus, anticipating no doubt that Jesus had fresh arguments “up his sleeve,” and so follows the parable.

Drawing on material from the previous studies, we think again, aloud, about “my neighbor” in light of Jesus’ parable. We recall the intention of the rabbi in pressing the question "who is my neighbor?" It was to "show himself in the right", and, presumably, leave others outside the circle of God's acceptance. He was, no doubt, a good Pharisee who saw the boundaries between "us" and "them" as drawn quite distinctly. He saw himself on the "inside", along with other "holy, Torah-keeping Jews", while seeing the rest on the "outside". Community was, for him, about being the right sort of person living with likeminded persons. When he put the question to Jesus, he was not ignorant of where Jesus stood. Jesus lived a life that constantly changed the boundaries accepted by this rabbi. *How well could Jesus defend, for all to hear, this revolutionary way of being community?*

The use of a parable in this context is standard procedure in synagogue schools. Stories, of which parables are a subset, allow for exploration, just as the topic of “neighbors” invite exploration. Parables also keep the participants “on the hook” with demands to make judgments, reach conclusions, and propose applications. Asking, “Who is my neighbor?” shifts the original discussion from generalizations to personal engagement: “my neighbor” comes closer to home, to community, to the block where “I” live, converse, respond, and care.

The parable Jesus tells begins ambiguously with "a man". He could be anyone. His party affiliation is not given, nor is his precise ethnic identity. It's common to suppose, for the sake of the question posed by the rabbi, that he was, in fact, Jewish. He is, by all account, just "a man" who happened to be traveling between the holy city of Jerusalem and one of the outlying towns, Jericho, which was some eighteen miles to the northeast. Geographically, the road from Jericho to Jerusalem ascended through narrow and rocky passes amid ravines and precipices. It was an exceedingly difficult and dangerous route, with dramatic changes in altitude (Jerusalem was "high", and Jericho was "low"). And its rocky crags were suitable hideouts for "brigands", social bandits who regularly attacked the well-to-do who happened to travel this perilous road.

Introducing the word "robber" (Greek: *lestes*, "brigand") into this story only adds to its relevance. Jesus knew that among the many groups vying for power in Israel were the "revolutionaries", *lestes*, whose activities were

directed against aristocratic Jew and occupying Roman alike. These formed the core resistance for the Zealot movement which would assume a direct role in the war with Rome during the 60's. But these brigands considered themselves to be loyal Jews, devoted to the "cause", the overthrow of corrupt landowners and the Roman occupation. They were one group, of course, who had a vision, albeit a violent one, for Israel's future form of community. So, then, were *they* a neighbor to the man? The answer is obvious: how could they be? They were responsible for the man's deplorable state. Jesus and the rabbi would probably agree on that point. No support for armed resistance here.

But now we encounter a priest and a "general Levite". Luke uses specific spatial language: each man "passed by *on the other side*". Recall our definition of "neighbor": "near". Are these near? No, they are "on the other side", away from the man. Do we expect them to be near? If they took him for dead, they would likely not risk the chance of being "defiled" by touching him, something required in order to help him. It's not acceptable to be "too near" a corpse if your official duties require certain forms of ceremonial purity. Remember the notion of "holiness" held by Second Temple Judaism. So, no, we don't expect them to get too close to our badly beaten and left-for-dead man, ironic as it may seem that priest and Levite, the holy men in Israel, can't help him. And so he lies there still.

Now comes the surprise. A Samaritan. Jesus knew what he was doing in constructing his parable in this way. While his rabbi acquaintance would certainly recognize priests and Levites as "good Jews", and worthy of inclusion in the community, no Samaritan could ever be allowed inside that boundary. Historically, the relationship between Samaritan and Jew was never good. Samaritans, named after the city of Samaria, former capital of the North Kingdom of Israel until its fall in 722 B.C.E., were a racially mixed group formed after the Assyrian exile of 722. Some residents of Israel did not go into exile, but remained behind, many of them intermarrying with their Assyrian overlords and other non-Israelites living in the environs of the old North Kingdom. Once Judah returned from exile, efforts were made by these Samaritans, as they were called, to join with their southern brothers in the reconstruction of Temple and Jerusalem. The Samaritans were rebuffed, as recorded in the Old Testament book of *Ezra*, out of fear that "mixed ethnicity" meant "mixed religious loyalty", something the returnees could not afford to risk. It was idolatry that drove Judah and Israel into exile, and only a remnant of faithful Jews had returned, highly vulnerable to compromise and outside influences. Only when the kingdom of Judah had been strengthened in Torah once again could she risk contact with her pagan environment.

In Jesus' day, Samaritans had formed a well-defined religious community with its worship center on Mount Gerizim. They held to Torah only, using a copy we call the "Samaritan Pentateuch". The Samaritan Pentateuch are the five books of Moses (Pentateuch) which the Samaritans took over from the Jews when they gained their independence in the 4th century B.C. Following this, the Samaritans separated themselves and restricted their canon to the first five books of Moses, using their own alphabet. A manuscript of the Samaritan Pentateuch was found at Damascus in 1616 C.E. It is a popular copy of the original text and contains some 6000 variants. It is not impossible that the Samaritan Pentateuch came into the hands of the Samaritans as an inheritance from the ten tribes whom they succeeded. However, it is much more probable to conclude that it was introduced by Manasseh (Josephus *Antiquities*. 11.8. 2, 4) at the time of the foundation of the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerazim. The Samaritans rejected all the Old Testament *except the Pentateuch*, and they claimed to have an older copy than the Jews, and that they observe the precepts better.

Because of their partial devotion to Judaism and their partly pagan ancestry, the Samaritans were despised by ordinary Jews. Because the Samaritans were sometimes hostile, and also the fact that a Jew believed that he could become contaminated by passing through Samaritan territory, Jews who were traveling from Judea to Galilee or vice versa would cross over the Jordan river and avoid Samaria by going through Transjordan, and cross back over the river again once they had reached their destination. The Jews repaid them with hatred. They rejected the Samaritan copy of the law and publicly denounced that Samaritans had any Jewish ancestry. The Samaritan was publicly cursed in Jewish synagogues. He could not serve as a witness in the Jewish courts. He

could not be converted to Judaism as a proselyte. He was excluded from the after life. Can we forget Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, in John 4, where many of these differences were brought to light, but quickly countered by Jesus' gracious offer of "living water" to an otherwise "hated" woman-at-the-well?

Jesus could not have chosen a more reviled group of people when he told his parable to the rabbi. The average Jew living in Jesus' day would hardly look to the Samaritans for instructions on "who is my neighbor?" Yet, Jesus effectively paints the portrait of a Samaritan, traveling well outside his own territory, finding "a man" in deep distress, laid low by Jewish brigands. Luke makes clear: "A Samaritan *came where the man was*", that is, he came "near". Near, not only in space, but also in compassion. "He had pity on him" as expressed vividly by the concrete actions he took. The Greek word for "pity" is *splagchnizomai*, and reflects the ancient Hebrew idea of "mercy" and covenant love. The parable supplies every detail:

1. He went to him (Note: The emphasis is placed on "being near", the literal meaning of "neighbor" as used in the parable).
2. He bandaged his wounds (Note: He would need to touch him to do this.)
3. He poured on oil and wine.
4. He put the man on his own donkey.
5. He took him to an inn and took care of him.
6. He paid for his expenses, present and future (Note: The "open checkbook" volunteered to the inn-keeper by the Samaritan).
7. He arranged for the man's care in his own absence.

No one could doubt the completeness with which the Samaritan cared for the man. Sounds like a *revolutionary* program for our community on the block, the Body of Christ!

Now Jesus has his own question, calling for the rabbi to make a judgment based on the parable. "Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" What is interesting about the question is the role into which the neighbor is cast by Jesus. *Being a neighbor* is, says Jesus, taking an active role, of coming "near" to the man who fell into the hands of robbers. Notice, unlike the implication of the rabbi's original question, neighbor is not someone I rule in or out of my little community, around whom I draw boundaries. Not at all. My neighbor is the one, who, in the words of the rabbi, "had mercy on him." To which Jesus replied, "Go and do likewise." In other words, "Go be a neighbor" by showing mercy to the man in need, and don't just engage in speculation about who your neighbor might be. Ironically, in Jesus' telling of the story, the person who turned out being the one who showed mercy was someone that the rabbi had already ruled outside the community! Yet it turned out that the Samaritan was capable of showing mercy, more so in this case, than the priest or Levite. Can you do as well as this Samaritan? Jesus seems to be saying. And so Jesus masterfully shifted the question away from a "*neighbor search*", as suggested by the rabbi, to a "*neighbor stance*" as illustrated by our "good" Samaritan.

The mercy shown, as illustrated and demanded by the parable of Jesus, follows the paradigm suggested in our *Introduction*: noticing, stopping, caring, following-through. The Samaritan "intended" each of these active movements which successively had the form of "next steps." They belonged to his *character*, formed by regular practice into habits that we recognize as *moral virtues*. Neighborliness, like righteousness, implies empowerment, even as the word "virtue" is about "power" internal to a person's character. In short, such a way of being must be learned from constant attention early in spiritual formation. Christians and churches only arrive at the character of being neighbors to others through their diligence to discipleship, acquired from consistent influence by the worshipping community of the church through example, teaching, and practice. *Practice to be neighbors!* Learn to show mercy on neighbors! Watch fellow believers being neighbors! Read texts from the Gospel story which instruct you in neighborly living!

Formation of community is an active stance, says Jesus. We must be neighbors, that is, draw near to, those in need. The parable was a story calling for a personal judgment by the rabbi. He needed to decide whether community could include neighbors like the Samaritan. And Jesus extracted from him that it could. Once the

rabbi said "the one who showed him mercy", though he did not use the word "Samaritan", he locked himself into the inevitable answer. We cannot decide who our neighbor is by drawing boundary lines around people, including some and excluding others. There can be no fences! Rather we must ask the question, "Who actively shows mercy? Who acts like God Himself acts toward those that are in need?" Only in this way can authentic community rise within the true Israel, Jesus is telling his conversation partner.

All of which is wholly consistent with the other things that Jesus did and said about community. In his personal dealings, he never rejected someone because of race or class, or, because they were sinners or tax collectors. Not even the woman of the street put him off. To Jesus, mercy is mercy. Remember the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7). Remember Jesus and Matthew Levi: "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). In mercy Yahweh deals with His people, and in turn, He requires that they deal mercifully as neighbors with each other (see Jesus' parable of the King and His Servants in Matthew 18:23-35).

Not *Only* About "Me"

1 Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. 3 For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. 4 But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. 5 For each will have to bear his own load. 6 One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches. 7 Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. 8 For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. 9 And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. 10 So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith (Galatians 6:1-10)

Community brings us close enough to others so that our shared "faults" come out into the open. That's awkward, of course. It's one thing to know our own sins and failures, our personal histories and downfalls, but quite another to have the *nearness of neighborliness* which uncovers the same shortcomings in the "other." What will we do with this knowledge? How will we negotiate the discovered truth about "us" and not only about "me"? There is room here for the insidious vice of comparison that renders judgments about superiority. If I hide my faults from the unhidden neighbor's, mischief follows both for me and for him. Paul, in this paragraph from *Galatians* likens the scenario to "burden-bearing," a common circumstance of ordinary life. We all must carry "stuff" from "here" to "there," and often complain that there is nobody around to help us with the load. So also it is with our sins and those of our neighbor's. Are sins any less burdensome than loads? "Keep watch" is apropos to the relationships within community. We should not be like Cain (Genesis 4) who complained to God, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Seeing my neighbor's burden prompts healthy self-examination, and in this way my neighbor helps me toward vigilance about myself. But the neighbor is first in this transaction since she is the one "caught" in the transgression. Our sense of superiority, expressed in the text by the word "spiritual," yields ground to our neighbor's need while also drawing attention to our own need. Minimized by this awareness is the judgment that we are "something while he is nothing." When the neighbor and we bear burdens mutually, the experience changes us both in the same instant, so that neither of us can really live flourishing lives without each other. Paul calls this "the law of Christ." Life alone, isolated from neighbor, is, says Paul, a "deception." It is better that my neighbor's sins become mine in that moment, and in so acknowledging we imitate the redemptive work of Jesus who carries the burden of our sins as his own. Is that a hard truth for us, this business of being our neighbor's sin bearer? Well, then, it must be "testing" time for us when we drop the hollow pride about ourselves "who are spiritual" and pick up the sins of our neighbor.

Not only does the presence of my neighbor's stumbling under his load become reason for me to "keep watch on myself," it also puts both my neighbor and myself under the "good things taught in the word." The whole encounter makes possible instruction and renewed practice of what we learn together when the Word of the Lord comes to us in the time of our shared need. My burden is "boasting" while hers is "falling" under the load.

What do we learn from the word on such occasions as this? As I have written earlier in another series, we learn about the breadth of forgiveness.

We are a people who are forgiven before we are a people who forgive; but forgive we must. Ours is the community of restoration and burden-bearing. Recovery is celebrated, sin's power broken, and a new character is formed. None of this happens in solitary. Like Paul we learn what it means to say "My neighbors" who know one another's faults and failings, seeing them as our own. To be *my neighbors* in the gathered community of the church places others in risky proximity. *My neighbors* are, sometimes, much like me and for whom friendship appears natural. But not always: *Quiero que ellos sean mis amigos*. Followers of Jesus dare to cross the road through the wide space of difference where the conventional signs of neighborliness no longer suffice.

Paul in his letter to the Galatians takes neighborliness beyond pleasantness into the territory of the untamed. What sort of people "detects transgression" in their neighbors with mutual acknowledgment? That kind of neighbor puts neighborliness in jeopardy for the sake of community. When my neighbors are in trouble with sin, I'm in trouble with sin, and only when they are restored, am I restored. The practice of restoration has nothing in common with the judgment that makes us superior and the offender inferior. "Gentleness" in the community mentors friends into wholeness. Paul uses the Greek word *prautēs*, elsewhere translated "meekness," to describe the manner of this detection and restoration. Sin, after all, is the enemy here, and not my friends. The gathered community called the church does its work with full knowledge of its own weakness, sinfulness, and failure. Weeding the garden of the soul takes care not to disturb the soul's rootage in the soil of grace. And yet the work of restoration is still disturbed by anxiety about the loss of my neighbors.

A better metaphor lifts the cloud of anxiety by choosing the image of "burden bearing." The yoke of restoration rests on the shoulders of both the transgressor and the restorer, and *together* they pull the plough that fulfills the "law of Christ." Jesus offered his yoke's restorative power when he told the first disciples:

²⁸ "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30).

The language is virtually the same as Paul's, and Jesus makes carrying heavy burdens the very heart of becoming his disciples. The church, gathered together, shares the yoke that restores the fallen, the faltering, and the foolish. The church shares this yoke of the neighbor because Jesus bears it.

"The Community of Uncommon Life"

42 And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).

The title of this section is more than a little ironic. Clearly the kind of life described holds "all things in common," but to do so makes the community so formed highly *uncommon* in a world where privatization is the prized possession of the individual. Some readers of this text shudder at images of *socialism*, and yet Marx himself once quipped that the New Testament understood economics better than most churches! Don't construe that as my endorsement of Marx, but the irony is patent. Revolutionary theology must make a difference in Christian practice or else the game is lost. From the very start, followers of Jesus recognized the implications of his three-year long instruction about the coming Kingdom of God. They remembered his Sermon on the Mount, and the announcement of a new way in forming societies around its instruction. The disciples would need to realize community *life together* on terms contrary to the rampant greed of both the Roman nobility and the Judaic elites in Jerusalem. And so we focus our attention on the cutting-edge text of Acts 2 which turns the values of patrician-peasant society on its head, replacing them with the virtues of Christian neighborliness rooted in the sacrifice of Jesus, re-energized by the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

A few textual observations begin our discussion of Acts 2:42-47.

1. The text 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 separation 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*.² 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, 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. Revolutionary communities of *neighbors together* require devotion.

So here's what the profile looks like.

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

² Elton Trueblood, *The Company of the Committed*, Harper & Row Publishers, 1961.

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*.³

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).

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.⁴

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

³ 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.

⁴ I am indebted to Dr. Clyde Loew, Messianic believer, for this fitting metaphor which "weaves" the two testaments together.

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! Radical? Fanatical? Absolutely!

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).

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 — yes — fanatically?! 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.

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. Fanatical? Absolutely. *Christ* fanatical. Our people need to make the disciples' request: "Lord, teach us to prayer." Our church needs to meet regularly to pray together, whether in Adult Bible Fellowships 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*. Wednesday evenings, some gather for "Base Camp" intercession in the Chapel.

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."⁵
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 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.⁶ "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

⁵ Marshall, p. 84.

⁶ 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.

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."⁷ 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.

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.

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

⁷ Bruce (1951), p. 102.

Wall notes the similarity to the Greek ideal of personal friendship and reciprocity.⁸ 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 *fanatical faith* 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.⁹ 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 *fanatical* community, fit into these circumstances?

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

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 understood. All other religions were *parodies* while the Gospel-in-community was the *reality*. Resurrection theology cannot be separated from social action.

⁸ Wall, p. 96.

⁹ 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 *ekklesia*, 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.

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.

What a witness! "Not a needy person among them..." Here was *revolutionary resurrection life* in action! Here was 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 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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ Nothing convinces an audience more than actual historical examples, and, as Quintilian the master rhetorician taught, the more *recent* the better.¹² 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). Barnabas.

He was a Levite who owned land. This is an anomaly within Torah. What do we mean? Levites weren't supposed 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 supposed 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 Levites had become part of the middle class and often retainers to their more powerful leaders, such as the High Priest.

Now Barnabas *sells his land* and gives the proceeds for distribution. This is significant, for it sends a powerful message to Israel: When the revolutionary 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 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 was the *Christ Revolutionary, par excellence!*

Conclusion

A brief vignette rounds out our conversation this week:

¹⁵ You are aware that all who are in Asia have turned away from me ... ¹⁶ May the Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, because he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chain; ¹⁷ when he arrived in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me ¹⁸ -- may the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day! And you know very well how much service he rendered in Ephesus. (2 Timothy 1:16-18).

From either Paul's own hand or a young protégé, this blessing is given to a dear friend credited with "refreshing" the imprisoned apostle sometime before his execution. Bereft of support from others, Paul finds in Onesiphorus the character of a true neighbor within the community of Jesus. Using a Greek word meaning "to cool, to revive by fresh air, to refresh," Paul cherishes the diligence of this man who "searched and found" his captive friend and was "eager," both in time and frequency, to do so. He never gave up on Paul, exemplifying the persistence of his service in the Lord's work. Of such persons the revolutionary community of Jesus is made, neighbors who want to be *near* without shame, even when others like Paul are condemned by the world. Throughout the course of this study, we encountered the church as a community of neighbors who "noticed, stopped, cared, and followed-through." May we be that church; let us be those neighbors!

To God Be the Glory! Amen!

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, Eerdmans, 1998, p. 93ff.

¹² Quintilian, *Inst. Or.*, 3.8.36, 66.