

THE CONTAGIOUS COMMUNITY

SERIES: GOD'S SERVANTS IN THE WORLD

By Steve Zeisler

A phrase I associate with the Olympics is “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.” Some athletes devote their entire lives to obscure sports, such as curling, that receive attention only every four years. It must be thrilling indeed to emerge from obscurity and receive a gold medal!

With this picture in mind, remember the important word of Jesus about joy, about being caught up in something great. It comes in his parable of the lost sheep and the shepherd who went to search for it. When he found it, the shepherd rejoiced and called his friends to celebrate. Jesus says, “I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance [meaning self-righteous persons who desire no repentance]” (Luke 15:7). The thing that gives heaven joy is finding the lost and bringing them to life. We can picture angels with tears streaming down their face like athletes at the end of a competition, so joyful when one who was lost comes to faith.

Now if that is true, imagine the scene in heaven on the day of Pentecost described in Acts 2, when three thousand were added to the church all at once! It was the thrilling beginning of the expansion of the church of Jesus Christ. What joy because of all these lost ones who were found!

Lets recall the scene before we focus on these three thousand who came to faith. The opening chapter of the book of Acts tells about 120 believers who were waiting for the promise of the Father (see Discovery Paper #4741). Then at the beginning of chapter 2 the drenching rain of the Spirit was poured out upon them (see Discovery Paper #4742). There was a sound like a rushing wind that gathered a great crowd, most likely in the courtyard of the temple. A majority of the people who assembled probably heard the speaking in tongues, concluded that the believers were drunk, mocked them, and left. But many stayed. Observing the same evidence, they said, “Something of God is present here! We need to understand it.”

So Peter stood up and preached. First he declared that what they were observing was the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy of the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh in the last days. He ended the first half of his sermon with the statement “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (2:21). Then he turned and preached directly to the three thousand. That’s where we will pick up the account in this message. What did Peter say to these whose lives had been stirred, yet who didn’t know what to make of the events?

Witnesses of God’s actions

Acts 2:22-36:

“Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. For David says of Him,

**‘I was always beholding the Lord in my presence;
For He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken.
‘Therefore my heart was glad and my tongue exulted;
Moreover my flesh also will abide in hope;
‘Because Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades,
Nor allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay.
‘Thou has made known to me the ways of life;
Thou wilt make me full of gladness with Thy presence.’**

Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. And so, because he was a prophet, and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants upon his throne, he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay. This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says:

**‘The Lord said to my lord,
“Sit at My right hand,
Until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet.”’**

“Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Peter’s sermon is as powerful in the second half as it was in the first half. It is confrontational. This is not the language of blurred definitions and gradual slopes. Peter was willing to say the hard things that needed to be said.

The apostle was clear that this was not another religious society advancing new insights on old ideas. Rather, what Peter insisted was that God was now present and was calling for a response to the evidence of the Spirit’s descent and the content of the word being preached.

Consider the points he made. In verse 22 he said that Jesus was attested to them by God through miracles during his life. In verse 23 he said that Jesus’ death came about through the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God; the incarnation had in mind the crucifixion from the beginning. God designed it to save the world. Peter said in verse 24, “God raised him up again, putting an end to the agony of death...” In verse 32, God “raised him up.” In verse 33, Jesus was “exalted to the right hand of God.” In verse 36, “God has made him both Lord and Christ.” Whatever choice they made, they were accepting or rejecting, believing or denying, embracing or turning away from the speech, actions, and plans of the living God, nothing less. Peter’s sermon is very strong. Three thousand who asked what the events meant heard the answer in unmistakable terms.

The other element of Peter’s sermon to notice is his references to witnesses. Peter said of himself and the rest of the 120, “We are witnesses to the resurrection. The tomb is Jesus is empty. We are telling you about something that we know for sure.”

He cited the witness of Scripture, in particular of King David, who looked ahead to Christ from a thousand years prior.

Finally Peter said, “You yourselves who don’t yet believe are also witnesses.” Note the end of verse 22: Jesus’ life was attested by miracles and signs “just as you yourselves know.” In verse 23 he said, “You nailed [Him] to a cross by the hands of godless men.” At the end of verse 33 he said Jesus poured forth his Spirit, “which you both see and hear.” Finally in the powerful climax of his whole message, Peter said, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ.” Peter was challenging them, “You’ve resisted, denied, stopped

your ears and run from the truth. But all along the news about Jesus has been clear enough that you could have believed. You didn't—so you are witnesses against your own hearts.”

That is the same observation that Paul makes about everybody in the world in Romans 1. God is speaking in what he has made, declaring his greatness, displaying his power. Our unbelief does not begin with a lack of knowledge; it begins with resistance to what we already know. In Paul's telling of his own conversion story toward the end of the book of Acts, he says he heard the Lord say to him from heaven, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (Acts 26:14b). He meant it's hard to deny your own conscience.

Let's pick up the story in Acts 2: 37-41 and find out the result.

Repentance and baptism

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself.” And with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, “Be saved from this perverse [crooked] generation!” So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

The Spirit had descended on the church when it was only a small band of believers. But the Spirit's descent on Pentecost was also for the world, for these three thousand who didn't know when the day began that they would end the day as followers of Christ. They had come to a time and place of God's choosing for them, to be stirred first by what they saw, then by what they heard, and by the conviction of their conscience.

“What shall we do?” they asked. Peter's first answer was to individuals. “Repent, and let each of you be baptized....” Repentance can happen to only one person at a time. There is no hitchhiking on the repentance of someone else. Repentance means turning from something. It means that you can't just add the Christian religion to what you already believe, like putting extra hot sauce on your burrito, adding spice to what is already there. Repentance means saying no to what you once were, what you once believed, the convictions that drove you, the fears that owned you; and being joined to Christ, whose love then controls you (2 Corinthians 5:14).

Baptism in water declares a great truth: union with Christ. You stand with, are buried with, and are raised with him. You are saved by him. The Spirit comes as his gift. That's the calling that every one of us chooses or rejects individually.

Repentance and baptism being individual choices, there is also a community component to this preaching. Peter also said, “Be saved from this crooked generation” (quoting a reference to the generation of the exodus who wandered in the wilderness). He exhorted these people to leave the identity of a community that was lost and join the community that served God and that was acting in accordance with the gospel. The rest of this chapter is about the expression of Christian life in this community.

What happened to these three thousand immediately upon their conversion? What were the elements of the new community?

Teaching, sharing, breaking bread, praying

Verses 42-47:

And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

What would it have been like to live this way, to have so much of the underbrush cut away, to be able to put first things first, for each to have the experience of their love for God echoed in the experience of the others' love for God? What would it have been like to see the miraculous events, to have the rest of the world, whether they believed it or not, respect Jesus' disciples because they couldn't help themselves?

Of course the next question is, why did it end? For it is very clear that it didn't stay exactly like this very long—probably some period of months, perhaps a year or so. Even as Luke penned these words there must have been tears in his eyes, because he knew that before long Christians would start mistreating one another, lying to one another, taking advantage of one another. The world also would become antagonistic and aggressive, no longer expressing favor. There would be spiritual battles to fight for human souls. The book of Acts ends with Luke's dear friend Paul a prisoner under house arrest. Luke knew that the beauty of what he wrote here was not going to last. We'll return to the question of why in a bit.

First let's look at the events and see what lessons we can take from this story. In verse 42 are listed four things to which these first Christians were devoted. "Devoted" is a strong word in Greek; it means focusing hard, refusing distractions, being strongly committed to something.

The first thing these believers devoted themselves to was the apostles' teaching. Think what that might have been like, especially for these new converts. They probably knew something of the Jesus story; Peter's message suggests they knew about his miracles and death. But probably a majority of these new converts were ignorant of most of Jesus' life and message. Imagine what it would have been like to hear the apostles say, "Let me tell you about what he was like.... Let me tell you the stories he told.... Let me tell you about his prayer life...about his tenderness...about his laughter...about his strength...." Hearing about these things for the first time, the new converts would have been gripped by them, because Jesus had changed their lives. We suffer from being over-familiar with the stories of the Bible, but they were hearing many of them for the first time, and the news was so good it had to be shared. Perhaps their devotion, and that of other new believers who are thrilled to grasp gospel truths clearly for the first time, can rekindle our love of "the apostles' teaching."

The second thing these first Christians were devoted to was *koinonia*, common life and community. That consisted of genuine, deep, sustained, honest relationships. *Koinonia* is the antidote to loneliness. It is also the antidote to broken and disturbed relationships, the alternative to codependency. *Koinonia* is life-giving, freedom-enhancing, joy-producing. Those who struggle in their families should find encouragement and support in the wider community of the church. What has happened to us? Why do we struggle to experience what seemed so natural at the beginning? What steps we can take to regain what has been lost?

I read the other day about the great popularity of the TV show *Friends*. “I’ll be there for you, and you’ll be there for me too,” the theme song says. That’s the point of the show. It’s one of the reasons that a show about silly people doing crazy things, even destructive things, brings in millions upon millions of dollars to its producers. Humans long for *koinonia*, and the first Christians were known for their experience of fellowship.

The third thing they were devoted to was a common meal that included communion. It is referenced here as “breaking bread” together. “For My flesh is true food, and My blood is true drink,” Jesus had said (John 6:55). In our modern-day observance of communion, together with other believers we draw deeply on the presence and power of our Lord. We remember him and worship him.

The fourth of these devotions was prayer. God hears your prayers. Although he knows what you will say before you say it, he invites you to say it, in community with other people and when you are alone. And he responds to your prayers. He answers inwardly, through circumstances, and in Scripture. The heart of prayer is deep communion with God. They were devoted to prayer.

In verses 43-47 there are five outcomes that flowed from the priorities of Scripture (the apostles’ teaching), fellowship, worship in communion, and prayer.

A taste of heaven

First of all, they experienced miracles with awe. Awe is a trembling, inward awareness of the presence of God. Miracles are the external evidence of the presence of God. Together these experiences testify to his nearness.

Second, they were together and they expressed their togetherness in sharing and generosity, having all things in common, one delighting to give what he had to another, longing for the opportunity to be a blessing to someone else.

Third, they cared for the poor. They sold property deliberately to have money to give to the needy.

Fourth, their life was a walking expression of natural worship. From house to house, in the temple, wherever they went they expressed the life that they were so passionately experiencing within. It happened without any effort. Worship was a way of life.

And fifth, God kept adding souls to their number. They were respected and believed, and day after day, many were attracted and joined them.

Reading this, we should respond by letting it stir us to action. I know many stories of people here who have experienced some of these things. But I also know that it is too infrequent, it is only partial, and it doesn’t seem to last. Clouds cover the sun after a time. So we need to make choices, to set aside encumbrances, to say no to alternatives. We can and must fight for the priorities that distinguished the church at the beginning!

Why did it end? Why didn’t the church’s expression of something as beautiful as this remain? Essentially the reason is that this world is not our home. What the first Christians experienced here was nearly heaven. But we are not ready for heaven yet. We still have responsibilities in the world, battles that we are called to fight. We live hoping for what we don’t yet have. We are not home. This world can’t be made to feel like home ultimately, because we would settle for that if we could. But we were made to long for something that hasn’t happened, to press forward toward it, to be sure that it is coming until our Lord returns.

I know people whose best daydreams are of Eden. “Oh, to go back to the time of innocence, before there was sin and trouble and division!” But that’s not the best dream for Christians. The best dream is heaven, still in the future. We can periodically taste it, as Peter and James and John did on the mount of transfiguration. They wanted to build shelters and stay there, but they were sent back down to the valley. We’re not done here yet, and so struggle and uncertainty and faith are our assignment. But we know enough about where we are headed, even from this description, to want it badly.

Meanwhile we can rejoice (as heaven does) that unbelievers are in the process of coming to faith. At our recent men’s retreat John Fisher said, “The best way to regard unbelievers is not as the wicked but as the lost.” We must invite others to the banquet.

And we can determine to experience Christianity as deeply as God will let us go, to not settle for anything less, to not put up with phony relationships when we know we were meant for real ones, to take risks that go with a life of prayer and worship and devotion and learning. We can throw off every encumbrance (Hebrews 12:1) and press on.

There are some decisions to make. If you are not a believer, the opportunity remains today for you to be joined to Christ. If you are a believer, there may be something in what we’ve studied that you’ve lost. Take this opportunity to be determined to gain it back.

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