

—The Message of Acts—

Lesson 5—The Holy Community

- I. Heaven: City or Country?
- A. What's *your* mental picture of paradise? A city or a country? For many, the benefits of a city are overshadowed by its threatening ugliness: poverty, crime, pollution, and congestion. For many, paradise is country-like with wide-open fields, meadows of green grass, and space for quiet and privacy.
 - B. But the Bible teaches that God is a city-dweller and that the goal of His people's pilgrimage is a city resplendent with His own glory, Heb 12.22; Rev 21.2; 22.1-2.
 - 1. The Bible portrays the Father's home as *a city* that awaits us, the place of perfect safety, sharing, justice, and joy. The wilderness, on the other hand, symbolizes danger, struggle, testing, and hardship. This biblical imagery unveils God's ultimate purpose for us: we were made to live the city-life, together, with each other and with our God.
 - 2. Of course if you put any number of sinners in a small space, the pressure intensifies the destructive tendencies of their fallenness, to rub each other the wrong way. *But* when God fills His city with people purified by His Spirit, the crowds will gather in peace and praise.
 - 3. *The church, then, is to be a present foretaste of that future heavenly, holy community.*
 - a) But sadly, it's the church that sometimes makes us long for the wide-open spaces.
 - C. Luke's summaries of the church's life and growth in the early chapters of Acts give us a glimpse of how the church behaves when it's, not sinnerless, but a normal, healthy, holy community of Spirit-filled, Jesus-loving sinners.
 - 1. The church in Acts was far from flawless. Hypocrisy marred its purity (Acts 5) and interpersonal friction (Acts 6) threatened its unity. Nevertheless, the people who confessed Jesus as Lord were molded into a fellowship that was attractive in its love and terrifying in its holiness, Acts 5.12-14
 - 2. Let's look at three summaries: Acts 2.42-47; 4.32-35; 5.12-16. These are the fullest descriptions of the believers' daily life together.
- II. The Fellowship of the Spirit
- A. *Fellowship* is at the heart of Luke's portrait of the church, which shows that the church's life is more than preaching and that the church's internal relationships affect its external testimony.
 - B. As the NT speaks of it, *fellowship* is deep, robust, and costly. But what we experience as fellowship today is too often cheap and superficial. *The higher we value our personal privacy and freedom from commitments, the shallower our grasp of fellowship will be*, until it's reduced to moments of idle chatter over coffee before or after the service.
 - C. Luke corrects our cheapened concept of fellowship by using the word *koinonia* in Acts 2.42, a word which has depth, breadth, and substance. The focus of this word is on what believers *have in common* and on what they *share* with one another. Biblical fellowship has hands and feet.
 - D. Partnership in and with God's Spirit
 - 1. At the root of all tangible Christian fellowship, as its cause, is the fellowship which is shared with God's Spirit (1Cor 12.3, 11-13; Phil 2.1). It's our participation and fellowship with God's Spirit that produces a willingness to part with things and self for the sake our brethren. We're united as family, not by coercion, but by the Spirit of grace, and not for human fame, but for God's glory. And it's this *spiritual* fellowship that produces *koinonia*, cf. 2.44, 46; 4.32; 5.12.
 - E. Hindrances to Spirit-Given Fellowship
 - 1. Only a powerful magnet could draw and hold such a diverse group of people together as make up Christ's church, cf. Acts 2.9-11; 6.1.
 - 2. The early church's setting was no more congenial to a commitment to Christian community than ours. Are our schedules too full to fit in some *koinonia* that's more than skin-deep? They faced the same temptation, Mt 13.22; 2Tim 4.10. Would excessive involvement in the church bring

criticism and pressure from family, friends, and employers? See Heb 10.25. Are the needs of others so troublesome that we'd prefer to keep them at arm's length? This isn't new either. See 1Jn 3.17; Js 2.15-16. —Some were as reluctant to get involved then as we are now.

F. The Surprising, Deep Fellowship that Grace Creates

1. The point is this: *it wasn't any easier in the first century than it is now to come together and stay together in genuine Christian community*. There weren't fewer distractions and fewer temptations to selfish, aloof individualism, protective of one's privacy. Yet, the early church was a gathering of people who rejoiced to be together consistently, to eat, share, and serve together. What force bound them to each other? *The grace of God*, Acts 4.33. Luke calls the followers of Jesus 'brothers' in Acts more than he calls them 'disciples' or anything else. He wants us to know that the familial bond uniting believers to one another is of utmost importance to the identity of Christ's church and to our identity as individual members.

G. The Breaking of the Bread

1. Celebrating the Lord's Supper together regularly focuses on the center and source of Christian fellowship/partnership/community: namely, the redemptive death of Christ and His presence as the risen Lord among His people through His Spirit.

H. The Prayers

1. The church naturally and instinctively reacted to crises and decisions through prayer, showing that the unifying center of their fellowship was communion with God in the Spirit.

I. The Fellowship in Finances

1. In Acts 2.42, when Luke speaks of "the fellowship" to which they devoted themselves, he's pointing directly to their readiness to treat their possessions as community property, to be used wherever needs arose in the family of God. In fact, this *tangible* dimension of fellowship is often prominent when the NT uses the noun *koinonia* and the verb *koinoneo* (cf. Phil 1.5 where *koinonia* is translated "partnership" because of its financial overtones (cf. 4.15-19)). Christian *koinonia* involves investments not only of time and attention but also of dollars and cents.

J. Christian Communalism?

1. These passages are not a pattern for mandatory economic communalism in the Christian church. Luke makes it plain that wealthier Christians sold lands and houses to care for those in need *as needs arose* (Acts 2.45; 4.34-35). Peter's rebuke to Ananias makes it clear that the liquidation of one's property was not a requirement for church membership, 5.4. And Paul's instructions to Timothy (1Tim 6.17-18) presupposes that members have the freedom and authority to make their own decisions regarding the use of their financial resources. Thus, the NT confirms the right of private property.
2. However, Luke's definition and the early church's out-fleshing of *fellowship* challenges our attitude toward, and use of, private property. One tangible evidence of the Spirit's renewal in the early Christians was their *attitude* of partnership, their *bias toward sharing* with needy Christians. Their instinctive expression of *family love* was to give over their own resources into the service of others, and this reaction displayed the "great grace that was upon them all," 4.33
 - a) In some ways, mandatory communalism would be easier. It would simplify struggles of conscience over money. Turning over one's money to the elders would turn over the hard questions as well: "How much is enough? How do I weigh my family's needs against those of others? Should I save prudently or give to the poor until there's no more to give?"
3. However, Acts points to a more difficult form of financial fellowship, a fellowship which probes our *motives* and never lets us shift responsibility to others. The concepts of enforcement and compliance don't fit into Luke's portrait, because the generosity he extols is prompted, not by external coercion or peer pressure, but by *the inner compulsion of grateful love*.
 - a) So we must ask ourselves: When confronted with another person's need, is it my first impulse to help or to edge away, to find a way to meet the need or to find an excuse for avoiding involvement? When brothers and sisters are in need, the normal response of people

touched by God's Spirit is to share together as members of a family do. How normal is our church?

4. The result of the Christian sense of family partnership/*koinonia* is spelled out in 4.34. The fulfillment of God's promise in Dt 15.4 is to be fulfilled through hearts turned inside out, from protective selfishness to risky liberality.

K. Financial Fellowship in Global Dimension

1. The international dimension of the early church's fellowship in material resources calls us to lift our eyes and see ourselves as part of the whole church, Acts 11.29; Rom 15.27.

III. The Spirit's Fellowship Scorned

- A. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was, like Achan their counterpart (Josh 7), the sin of *deception*. They showed contempt for the knowledge of God (thinking to deceive the Searcher of hearts) and for the holiness of God (daring to touch what was devoted to the Lord). When Ananias devoted *part* of his profit to the Lord, while claiming that it was the *whole*, he pilfered part of *the Lord's money* when he held back some of it out of greed (5.2; cp. Josh 7.1). It was *his* and he wasn't required to give it; but once he'd given it, it was the *Lord's* and it was the sin of deception to lie about it and the sin of embezzlement when he kept some back for himself.
- B. The Lord's judgment on Ananias and Sapphira, in its suddenness and severity, warns the church through the generations that it's dangerous to violate God's holiness. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there's freedom and joy, but there's also danger, danger to those who would take lightly the purity and power of His holy presence in our midst.

IV. The Holy Community Today

- A. Have we lost sight of the church? It's easy to lapse into viewing the church in terms of its *externals* and to think of our fellow members only in terms of their aggravating habits and frustrating failures. What would happen if we treated all our fellow members as *family*? What would happen if we were acutely aware that the Searcher of hearts was *present* among us in our worship and community? What would change if we were convinced and convicted of the *tangible* nature of Christian *koinonia* as evidence that the Spirit of God indwells us?