Pentecost 13

Acts 2:42

And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

The next thing Acts mentions the new Pentecost saints did after continuing in the apostle’s doctrine and breaking bread was “fellowship”. Here is the REV’s commentary on this.

The Greek word is *koinōnia*. Like many words, it has a range of meanings and uses, so it is important to pay attention to the context to determine which meaning it has in that particular context. *Koinōnia* refers to a close association involving mutual interests and sharing; a close relationship characterized by involvement and sharing. From that basic definition it came to refer to the love or good will that comes with a close relationship, and thus was used of “generosity” or “participation,” and it also came to refer to the result of close association, which is sharing, giving, and was even used of “a gift” or “a contribution” (2 Cor. 9:13).

For example, a person may go to a large church and sit in the auditorium and listen to the pastor or teacher. That person may well be learning valuable things, but that is not “fellowship” because it is not intimate (no sharing of hearts), and it is not “joint participation,” it is one-way communication. Listening to a lecture on the television is not “fellowship,” and sitting and listening to one in an auditorium is not either. One-way communication is not fellowship. Listening to teachings is important for building the like-mindedness necessary to have fellowship, but it is not itself “fellowship.” Similarly, a person who goes to a church but just chats and “makes small talk” may be engaging in “joint participation” but that is not true “fellowship” either because there is no “full sharing,” no “intimate joint participation” in which people open their hearts to each other.

Fellowship – Joint Participation Part 1

One of the most revolutionary aspects of the first century church is contained in one word “fellowship”. As the REV commentary makes plain above, this does not mean just a meeting, but a transparent exchange between people. If all it would take to achieve the fruit they experienced was “devotion to the apostle’s doctrine”, then we could set up an audio recording and broadcast the gospel with wireless headphones to each saint and it’s quickly achieved. That’s not going to work, is it? So, what is fellowship? First, let’s start on what it isn’t.

Not Fellowship

First, let it be known that I have nothing against historic church structure. My aim and calling is teaching God’s word, nothing more or less. I grew up in a church like many others. Notice the structure.

A large crowd of people in a church

Description automatically generated with low confidence

One guy up front, usually a clergyman (a priest or minister) and the congregation facing the front. This has been the norm for centuries because church design has been basically unchanged. Recently some churches modified the structure a little, but the arrangement essentially stayed the same.

A picture containing crowd

Description automatically generated

Is this a fellowship format? The answer is “No.” How do the hundreds of attendees “jointly participate”? They don’t - they only attend. This arrangement assumes that the clergy is qualified to instruct and bless Christians while the other attendees aren’t. Is this model scripturally supported? The answer is no.

Eph. 4:11-16

And he gave some to be apostles, and some to be prophets, and some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,

for the equipping of the holy ones for the work of ministry, with the goal of building up the body of Christ,

until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, growing into a mature person, attaining to the measure of the full stature of Christ,

so that we are no longer children, tossed here and there and blown about with every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery and craftiness in deceitful scheming.

But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, Christ,

from whom the whole body, being fitted together and held together by every supporting ligament, with each individual part doing its proper function, produces the growth of the body with the goal of building itself up in love.

The God-given church structure is modeled here. God energizes gift ministries in the church to equip all of us to serve and build up the church. This process continues until the Rapture so that the saints are not like immature children, swayed by evil ideas. Instead, we grow into spiritual adults, by speaking the truth in love, clinging to Christ, and each of us contributing that which only we can to each other’s lives. This is how the church grows up in love. Another word for this process is “fellowship”.

Let me point out that the clergy’s job is to instigate and maintain this pattern, not do it all. When the clergy does it all, it’s no longer a “fellowship”, but a “leader-ship” – a leader and the followers.

There are really only two positions in the body of Christ – head and member in particular. The way it is supposed to work is just as the physical body works and God described in Ephesians 4 – every part contributes and each part benefits at Christ’s (the head’s) direction. The apostles are not “better” or “more important” than the non-clergy in the church. What’s important is the spirit God gave each of us. And that is the same gift in all of us. There are no “apostle-sized spirits” and “attendee-sized spirits”. There is only one spirit God gave us all.

Eph 4:4-6

There is one body and one spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling,

one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

As we discussed before, all other considerations are fleshly.

2 Cor. 5:16

So then, from now on we regard no one according to the flesh (even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him that way no more).

Every one of us has the spirit of God to be able to contribute to the Church’s overall wellbeing. Each of us has spiritual long suits needed by others in the church.

Romans 12:4-8

For just as we have many parts in one body, and all the parts do not have the same function,

in the same way, we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually parts of one another.

But since we have gifts that differ according to the grace that was given to us, let us use them accordingly. If it is prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of our trust;

if it is serving, let us give ourselves to our serving; if it is teaching, to teaching;

if it is encouragement, to encouragement; the one who gives, do it with liberality; the one who leads, do it with diligence; the one who shows mercy, do it with cheerfulness.

The seven long suites listed are a sampling of spiritual abilities in the church, not a complete list. If it is complete, where is music, witnessing, or intercessory prayer? Those abilities are unmentioned, not because they don’t exist or are unimportant. Those listed are samples to illustrate the common principle – all the spiritual gift abilities in the church should be operated enthusiastically and interdependently. Those are fancy words for “fellowship” – intimate joint participation.

Let me ask you a hard question. Does “fellowship” – joint participation – usually happen in most churches today? How can it when you have one person up front doing the announcements, exhortation, teaching, and prayer? What are the other attendees doing? Perhaps occasionally singing, kneeling, standing, clapping, and worshipping. To look at it from Romans 12 perspective, how can the prophets prophesy, the teachers teach, the servers serve, the givers give, etc., if only one or two get to contribute? They can’t. It seems the current set up of most churches keeps the saints in constant spiritual constipation if all they do is go to the Sunday services, which is the norm. Is the church at large getting built up? I would venture the answer is clearly “not nearly as much as it could” because a few ministers are doing almost everything, and the saints are doing little.

One Example of Fellowship

What was a church meeting like in the first century? Thankfully, we have a glimpse.

1 Cor. 14:26

How is it then, brothers and sisters, that when you come together, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation? Let all things be done for building people up.

Can you imagine today’s church of 100 plus saints in ancient Corinth trying to sing a song, teach, share revelation, and speak in tongues and interpret? Stop imagining it for two reasons. 1. It would not be physically possible for a hundred to contribute at that church, and 2. The first century church met in the saints’ homes where only 15 – 50 people at most could fit (assuming it to be a wealthy person’s home). This allowed “each one has a psalm, a teaching” etc. to be a reality.

Now if everybody in today’s churches wanted to contribute, they would probably be squelched because of time constraints and/or lack of seminary training. Did Paul shut down the enthusiastic Corinthians?

1 Cor. 14:27-31

If anyone speaks in a tongue, let it be by two, or at the most three, and one at a time, and one must interpret!

But if there is no one to interpret, let him keep silence in the church, and let him speak to himself and to God.

And let the prophets speak by two or three, and let the others thoroughly examine what was said.

But if something is revealed to another sitting by, let the first keep silent.

For you are all able to prophesy one by one, so that all can learn, and all can be encouraged.

Paul didn’t say “Shut up! Nobody speaks except grads of Apostolic University!” On the contrary, he showed how everyone can contribute to the church and be built up. He gave wise guidelines for the arrangement of the manifestations so that “all can be encouraged”. In other words, the guidelines were 3 tongues with interpretation and 3 prophesies. Perhaps 5 people chose and led songs. Perhaps three more had teachings of what God showed them recently. If the home fellowship meeting was 20 folks, that’s 14 individual contributions so far! And someone cooked. And someone cleaned and set up the room. And someone played the lyre. And someone coordinated. And everyone could pray and sing. Everyone contributed and everyone benefited. Now, that’s a “fellowship” meeting!

Eph. 4:15,16

But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, Christ,

from whom the whole body, being fitted together and held together by every supporting ligament, with each individual part doing its proper function, produces the growth of the body with the goal of building itself up in love.

This is “joint participation”. Regrettably, many church attenders would hardly know another attender on the street. Why not? Because they are focused on the leader, not each other. One of the great surprises I’ve had in studying Romans is the lack of organizational meeting structure of the church in the practical section – chapters 12-15. There are no schools or classes mentioned, so what is the method by which the saints are instructed, corrected, and nurtured? The answer is right there in Romans 12 – the body of Christ. All of us instruct and correct each other. It’s not the gift minister’s job exclusively, it’s all of our job. We will see this truth highlighted as we study Acts. We will see that all of us have great resources to build Christ’s body as typified when a certain disciple, Ananias, spoke God’s word and ministered to the newly saved Saul of Tarsus. What’s important to God is the spirit within, of which we are all endued. We simply need fellowship situations to learn to spiritually grow and use it.

2 Cor. 4:7

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the exceeding greatness of the power will be of God, and not from ourselves.

God wants us all to speak in tongues, interpret, and prophesy.

1 Cor. 14:5

Now I want all of you to speak in tongues, but even more that you would prophesy, for greater is the one who prophesies than the one who speaks in tongues, unless he interpret, so that the church is built up.

“I want all of you to speak in tongues, but even more that you [all] would prophesy”. The idea of “all” in the first phrase carries over to the second phrase and also over to the interpretation phrase, meaning “if you all speak in tongues, you should all also interpret unless you are all prophesying” in order for the church to all be built up. Got it? God wants us to manifest all nine manifestations ‘all the time’. Remember, He didn’t give us the spirit primarily to have, but to use. And where else should the manifestations of holy spirit be in use but when the church gets together? At least, from a biblical perspective into the inner workings of a first century church at Corinth, that’s how they operated. And remember, Paul never told them to “Stop that holy spirit stuff!” He told them to do it decently and in order to edify everyone.

One of the signs of a fellowship meeting is the occurrence of teachers teaching, givers giving, leaders leading, prophets bringing forth a message from God, mercy poured out to all, etc. In other words…

1 Thess. 5:19

Do not quench the spirit.

They didn’t seem to quench the spirit in the first century. When the new saints in Samaria that Philip helped get saved didn’t speak in tongues, they called the apostles for help because the holy spirit was getting “quenched”. Shamefully today, if folks start speaking in tongues in many churches, some would call church leadership to help stop it! This is opposite from the way the first century church operated which accounts for the opposite results in outreach and quality of life today.

I am ashamed to say that most Christian churches today could be a part of the “Squelcher” denomination. There are more rodents in the basement and bats in the belfry than holy spirit manifested in the sanctuary. And it is amazing considering the Book of Acts makes it crystal clear how the church started spiritually on Pentecost and continued thereafter. It’s not as if we have no roadmap. We simply don’t use or believe it and “drive” wherever our flesh takes us, and we wonder “What’s wrong?” What’s wrong? Just read the road map and we can see where we left the path of our spiritual forefathers. Here’s a few wrong turns of today’s church.

1. Few manifest the spirit today in the church.

What the church did the first second of the first hour on the first day of the church, we still are – by and large – lacking. The will of God is clear – “I would that you all spoke in tongues” and “Don’t quench the spirit.” Yet the excuses and rationalizations pile up…

“It died with the apostles.” Really? The spirit of God died? Better get a new God with a better spirit!

“The spirit was around until the scriptures were organized and distributed, and then it went away.” Sure (I say sarcastically) we don’t need revelation, or miracles or healing. How nuts! James said if we need wisdom we should ask God, not search the scripture. Nothing wrong with the scriptures, but can you get the answers to what job to take, where to live, who to fellowship with, and many other specific needs from the scripture? Not usually. This takes revelation from God, which isn’t available if the spirit went away after the Bible was published. This accounts why many Christians are blown about regarding ambiguous answered prayer. Many look for their prayer’s answer in the circumstances of their daily life and interpret it like reading tea leaves. One friend told me he was moving to a different state because the headline in the local newspaper had a story on it after he prayed for guidance! Imagine moving your family after seeing a story in the newspaper! It didn’t go well. He was sincere but misguided. Newspapers are not prophets or conduits for spiritual guidance, but holy spirit is and we can and should get guidance through it from God. This is what Jesus promised the apostles repeatedly before the ascension, remember?

John 14:15-17

If you love me, you will keep my commandments,

and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another helper, which will be with you forever.

This helper is the spirit of truth, which the world is not able to receive, because it does not see it, neither knows it. You know it, for it is present with you, and will be in you.

Jesus promised that the coming spirit would be a helper and with us forever – not until the Bible is assembled in the 4th century AD. Sometimes the wrong teaching is so silly it makes my head hurt and would be laughable except millions of Christians believe it, rendering them spiritually disabled. It is one of the most tragic situations I’ve known. It’s like starving to death amid a grocery store. Imagine Christians being lost in life while having the Captain of Salvation within - ready and willing to guide them, yet rarely asked. This “spirit, gifts and manifestations are dead” teaching is wrong and spiritually lethal.

1. Most follow the Christian leader (not Christ).

From whence did this insidious practice slither? Did it start with the Papal doctrine as the representative of Christ on earth from early church history? Did it seep into the church from the almost universal ancient governmental, economic, and social structure – tyranny, meaning one leads and everybody else follows. All governments were dictatorships/kingdoms, as were virtually all businesses and families. Although we are now surrounded by democracy, with its politics, voting and elections, virtually all ancient hierarchical structure was autocratic, meaning “as system of government by one person”. Is this how Christianity is supposed to function?

Matt. 20:25-28

But Jesus, having called them near, said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.

It will not be this way among you, but whoever among you desires to become great will be your servant,

and whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave,

just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

As is usually the case, Christianity is the complete opposite of the world system. Most of the world missed the Messiah’s first appearance because he was cloaked in humble service. They were looking for a typical king, demanding everything and everyone to be subject to his will. Jesus served every single person who would ever live by giving his life, death, and resurrection for them. Thue leaders are servants, not the served.

1. Everyone attends and few act.

We have already established that God wants us to manifest all nine manifestations of holy spirit as much as possible. The exhortation shows the Lord’s emphasis “Do not quench the spirit.” In other words, “Let ‘er rip!”, not “Let it drip.” Got it? And that exhortation is in a church epistle, not Timothy or Titus, the leadership epistles. The exhortation is for the whole church, not just the ministers or clergy.

There’s nothing “special” about someone speaking in tongues or prophesying or getting revelation in the church. In fact, the manifestations are discussed at length in the super-secret, 10th degree black belt leaders’ epistles, right? (Just kidding!) No, they are discussed in a church epistle, 1 Corinthians 12-14. These topics are supposed to be everyday Christianity. Regrettably, they have become past Christianity, and we need to revitalize the Church with it.

Spiritual Fellowship

One of the greatest realities missing in today’s Christian church is the reality of fellowship – that all contribute, and all get blessed and grow. We’re not talking about contributions like baking cookies or ushering. We’re talking about spiritual abilities.

Heb. 10:24,25

And let us consider one another, to spur one another on to love and good works,

not abandoning our meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but exhorting one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

All of us need to be “spurred on to love and good works”. All of us need to be “exhorting (and exhorted by) one another”. So much of the greatest learning in the church is from each other, not just the ministers. Many times the ministers may give us the right words and teaching, but the realization of the words comes from the fellowship with other saints.

When I was a new believer once after a fellowship meeting where healing was taught, I asked a fellow saint to pray for my healing. He laid hands on me and prayed for my rash and it was healed. I was blessed and blown away. Two weeks later again after a fellowship meeting, I asked the same saint to pray for my healing again. He laid hands on me, then opened his eyes and looked straight at me and said, “God says to change your underwear!” We both laughed – him hilariously and me ashamedly! That was the last time I asked for healing for that because I had rash “repentance” and changed… my underwear!

Now you might say, “That’s pretty dumb!” I agree. I was not the sharpest tool in the chest, but young new believers rarely are. They need to be “spurred on to love and good works”. They need to be “exhorting (and exhorted by) one another”. This is how we grow up personally. We interact (another fancy word for fellowship) with others and learn and unlearn. Too many Christians “hide in plain sight” in church, smiling and hurting – grinning and suffering. All of us need to get away from the safe “attender” posture and into the one-on-one fellowship of our brothers and sisters.

All of us, as we saw with Simon the former sorcerer, need to unlearn things after we’re saved. Imagine thinking that you can purchase the ability to help others speak in tongues! Simon needed to learn “freely you have received, freely give”. He also needed to unlearn “If I have spiritual power that amazes others, it makes me something special and potentially rich!” He learned and unlearned by fellowshipping with Peter, John, and Philip. We’ll develop this subject more on the next installment.

Are you in a fellowship (intimate joint participation) with other saints regularly? God wants you to be!