Pentecost 12

Although this chapter may seem to wander from ancient meals to salt, and then to baptism and beyond, stick with it to understand some key components of the early church in Acts 2.

 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 listed in Acts to which the first century church devoted themselves was “to fellowship, to the breaking of bread”. Please note that the phrase “the breaking of bread” is not separate from the phrase “to fellowship”. It describes the quality of fellowship they had.

Breaking of Bread

“Breaking of bread” may mean little to us today, but then it signified a meal. Today we eat meals with family or alone or sometimes even in a car after a “drive through” at a fast-food restaurant. At times we eat inside a restaurant in the midst of others, but not really “with” any one in particular. In the first century meals were much different and more significant.

Most meals then were shared with your most intimate and trusted family and associates. A typical meal consisted of bread and a communal bowl of vegetables and/or meat. The bread was in large loaves which would be torn apart (broken) and pieces dipped or used as gathering “scoops” in the communal dish. The host began the meal by ceremonially breaking the first piece of bread, giving God thanks.



This art was found in a Roman catacomb showing an ancient meal with the bread and dipping bowl. A major difference in meals then and now was the significance of salt. Here is some background on salt from the Jewish Encyclopedia of 1906.

SALT A condiment for food. From earliest times salt was indispensable to the Israelites for flavoring food. Although the fact is not explicitly stated in the Old Testament, salt occupied the same place as in modern cookery; it was of course a most important necessary of life (comp. Ecclus. [Sirach] 39:26; comp. Job 4:6). Salt is considered pleasant and wholesome for animals also (Isa. 30:24); and the ancient Hebrews of course knew that food was preserved by salt. Taricheæ, on the Sea of Gennesaret, indicates by its name that, in later times at least, the preparation of salted fish, a staple article of commerce, was extensively carried on there.

The importance of salt in daily life and in the ritual explains its symbolic importance in the ceremony of the covenant. Particularly holy and inviolable obligations were designated as "salt covenants" (Lev. 2:13; Num. 18:19; II Chron. 13:5). It must be borne in mind that in ancient times, as today among the Arab nomads, a meal taken in company meant temporary association among the members of the company and that a covenant was accompanied by a sacrificial meal. Consequently, as salt was always used on both occasions, it was probably taken as an especially fitting symbol of the eternal duration of such a covenant. To-day the Arab still says, "There is salt between us".

From ancient times salt was an important part of everyday life. Because there was no refrigeration, all perishable foods were preserved by salt. From literal preservation to a figurative sense, salt symbolized the idea of preserving words, covenants, and relationships. This became ritualized by the “covenant of salt”. Here is commentary on 2 Chron. 13:5 from the Revised English Edition.

Salt Covenant

Like the blood covenant, the covenant of salt was an ancient custom that was recognized all over the Middle East. The offerings of the Lord were to be offered with salt as a symbol of the covenant and a reminder of the commitment people made to keep the covenant (Lev. 2:13), and Numbers 18:19 specifically mentions the salt covenant. The importance and solemnity of the salt covenant in the biblical culture is shown in 2 Chronicles in that God promised the kingdom of Israel to David by a covenant of salt. In Ezra 4:14, the enemies of the Jews wrote to the Persian king that they felt obligated to report to him what the Jews were doing because they “eat the salt of the king’s palace.”

The salt covenant was considered inviolate, and was often taken instead of a blood covenant to seal an agreement or to confirm friendship (some of the older books on biblical manners and customs refer to it as the “friendship covenant”). However, the terms of the covenant must be understood by clear communication or by custom. Sometimes the salt covenant was forever, as in 2 Chronicles, and sometimes it was for a very defined period of time.

The most common way to take salt together was to eat food that had been salted. The Eastern sayings, “There is salt between us,” or “There is bread and salt between us,” or “He has eaten of my salt,” all refer to having taken a salt covenant by sharing food together. Edwin Rice writes: “Dr. W. M. Thomson tells of a Bedouin Sheikh, who dipped a bit of bread in grape molasses (dibs) and gave it to him to eat, saying, ‘Now we are brothers; there is bread and salt between us.’ The Arab also gave a bit of the bread to all Dr. Thomson’s companions, and to the muleteers, and to all about the tent, who tasted of it. This was the ceremony which sealed a covenant of friendship. It gave the missionary and his company permission to travel wherever they pleased in the Sheikh’s territory, he being pledged to aid and befriend them, ‘even to the loss of his own life.’

When the new disciples fellowshipped together, one telling aspect of the quality of their relationship was that they ”broke bread” together. In other words, they ate together. Because Jewish meals included salt, this means that they knowingly entered into a salt covenant together, meaning that they considered each other as “intimates”, not strangers or possible enemies. Although they knew each other sparingly or not at all before Pentecost, from the new birth forward they entered into a new “salted” relationship with each other. They treated each other like family… because… they were! They knew culturally that they could trust each other and be open with each other because they were salt covenanted together. The penalty for breaking the salt covenant was death, so covenant members were pledging their lives to each other. The pact tolerated no duplicitous façade. Those sharing a salted meal were “joined at the hip” – spiritually, socially, and even financially. This was a unique development. Why would the new believers invest such trust in people they’ve recently met, who only days before would never consider such a thing?

 Acts 2:41

Then those who received his word were baptized, and in that day there were added to their number about 3,000 souls.

Baptism

When these new saints received the words of Peter they were baptized. What did that mean? It meant performing a ritual observed by John the Baptist before Jesus’ ministry started.

 Mark 1:5

And the whole region of Judea and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him [John the Baptist] and were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, openly confessing their sins.

John’s baptism included more than just water. The participants confessed their sins publicly. This practice was loathsome to the proud religious leaders, whom John – to say the least - didn’t coddle.

 Matt 3:7-11

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath that is about to come?

 Come now, bring forth fruit worthy of repentance,

and do not think you can say within yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham even from these stones.

Indeed, the axe is already laid down at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that does not bring forth good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

I baptize you in water as a symbol of your repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with holy spirit or with fire.

These religious leaders would have eaten a flaming yarmulke before confessing their sins publicly. The self-righteous hypocrites identified with Abraham and assumed this gave them license to live as they pleased. God would have none of their two facedness and John reflected that in his confrontation. John further foretold that there was one coming after him that would also baptize, yet his baptism would be spiritual. When Jesus began his ministry, he also baptized in water like John.

John 3:26, 4:1,2

And they came to John, and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, about whom you have testified, look, he is baptizing and everyone is going to him.”

Now when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John,” (although Jesus himself was not baptizing, but his disciples),

Baptism and public confession of sins was an established practice at that time. Although John foretold clearly that Jesus would be baptizing in the holy spirit, the apostles took a while to realize the difference between water and spiritual baptism, even though God’s clear direction was that water was symbolic while spiritual cleansing would be ‘the real deal’. A few days before Pentecost, Jesus reiterated this.

 Acts 1:4,5

And being assembled together with them, he commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard about from me,

because John baptized with water, but you will be baptized in holy spirit not many days from now.”

On Pentecost, when the spirit came, the apostles still hadn’t changed their thinking and assumed water was appropriate.

 Acts 2:41

Then those who received his word were baptized, and in that day there were added to their number about 3,000 souls.

What kind of baptism was this, water or spiritual? The answer is both – look at the context.

 Acts 2:22-24

“You men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man pointed out to you by God by mighty works and wonders and signs, which God did through him in the midst of you, just as you yourselves know,

this man, delivered up by the decreed plan and foreknowledge of God, you, by lawless hands, crucified and killed.

But God raised him up, having freed him from the agony of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

Peter did not preach the “prosperity gospel”, that’s for sure! He didn’t preach “grace”, either. He was ‘in the face’ of the assembled multitude in the temple that Pentecost day, accusing them of aiding and abetting the murder of God’s Messiah!

 Acts 2:36

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

It’s not as if accusing the multitude accidentally slipped out of Peter’s mouth. He hammered the message home. Do you note the similar tone to John the Baptist’s when he confronted many of the religious leaders as “offspring of vipers”? I do. Both were confronting sin and the response is always either accepting and repenting or rejecting and hardening the heart. What happened then?

 Acts 2:37,38

Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brothers, what should we do?”

And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the holy spirit.

Peter offered water baptism after repentance and confession of sins. Then he promised forgiveness and the gift of holy spirit.

Now some might get uncomfortable because they think I am inserting water baptism into Pentecost. My answer is twofold. First, God inserted it, not me. Secondly, one of the biggest challenges in understanding Acts (and the New Testament overall) is overcoming the desire for there to be no transition between the Old and New Testament. Most folks want to think nothing changed between the Old Testament / Gospels and the Church epistles. That thinking is simplistic and wrong. This is why Christ came. If things in the Old Testament and gospels didn’t change after Christ came and gave us his spirit, then why did Christ come? If things didn’t radically change after his sinless life, death, resurrection, ascension and pouring out his spirit on Pentecost, they why did he do those things? The answer is obvious but uncomfortable for those with status quo thinking.

Most folks want to think that when the spirit came on Pentecost, if anything radically changed, then the apostles would have known it and made it known. Did that happen? Not really. Did they know about eternal life yet? Peter never mentioned it. How about a new creation within? Nope. How about salvation by grace, not works? No. They still thought you had to earn righteousness through works.

 Peter… 1. told them about Christ and their sin,

 2. told them to Repent,

 3. told them to get baptized.

 4. Then they’d receive forgiveness of sins.

 5. and receive the gift of holy spirit.

In other words, if they did 2 & 3, then they’d earn 4 & 5. That was the conditional formula. In other words, receive the gospel, do works (repent and baptism) then get forgiveness and the spirit. If this seems similar to the logic of John’s baptism… it’s because… it was John’s baptism! Did they know about Christ’s return for the church? No. Ok, how about the church itself? No clue. They still thought they were only Jews. They never knew that Gentiles could get saved until years later in Acts 10, and that took quadraphonic, technicolor revelation and a church council to decide it was OK! Folks, spiritual change can be earth-shakingly epic and yet unnoticeable physically. Think of the new birth.

 Eph. 1:3

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in union with Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,

At the new birth a new Christian is blessed with “every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”. Do they look or smell different? Not to the human eye or nose, but the difference couldn’t be greater. From death unto eternal life, from enemy of God to child of God, from the scent of death to a fragrance of life. From physical water baptism to spiritual baptism. We could go on, but the point is obvious – spiritual change can be pivotably important, but its recognition moves at the speed of man’s mind, not at God’s ability to reveal it or Christ’s ability to earn and bestow it.

It took years for men (beginning with Paul) to get the revelation of what Christ accomplished. Why? Because God hid it in Himself. It had been a sacred secret, a mystery. Had it been known, Satan would have never crucified the lord of glory and Pentecost would have never happened. So then, even though epic changes occurred at Pentecost, no one knew its enormity yet. It took years for God to find the saints who could understand and share it. Paul was the first, years later. Of course, in Acts 2, Paul is still Saul of Tarsus, not even saved until Acts 9 and had to spiritually grow for years until he could begin to grasp the revelation.

Although John the Baptist and Jesus himself plainly told of the move from the symbolic water to spirit, it took the apostles a while to shake their ingrained habit. Years later, Peter preached the gospel after God figuratively “dragged” him to the house of the Gentile, Cornelius, and was shocked at the response.

 Acts 10:44-48a

While Peter was still speaking these words, the holy spirit rushed onto all those who were listening to the word.

And the believers from the circumcision were amazed, all those who came with Peter, because on the Gentiles also the gift of the holy spirit was poured out.

 For they heard them speaking in tongues and exalting God. Then answered Peter,

“Surely no one is able to refuse water and insist that these should not be baptized, these who have received the holy spirit just as we have?”

 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Did God wait for the Gentiles to repent and get water baptized before filling them with His spirit, evidenced by their speaking in tongues? No, just the opposite. First, they heard the gospel and believed, then received the spirit and spoke in tongues. Then Peter decided that they could and should be baptized – symbolizing physically what God had already done spiritually. It was gradually dawning on the apostles that water baptism, confession of sin and public repentance were not prerequisites for salvation – only believing the gospel of Christ was.

Peter on Pentecost Acts 2 God with Cornelius and Peter Acts 10

 1. told them about Christ and their sins 1. told them about Christ

 2. told them to Repent, 2. They believed

 3. told them to get baptized. 3. received the gift of holy spirit.

 4. Then they’d receive forgiveness of sins. 4. I guess we should baptize them…?

 5. and receive the gift of holy spirit.

In Acts 2, Peter continues John’s formula. It was based on salvation by works. In Acts 10, God re-established a “new” procedure, based on salvation by grace – simply believing the gospel.

About 10 years later and more than 20 years after Pentecost, when Paul established the Corinthian church in Acts 18, the priorities in water and spiritual baptism were pretty well established.

 1 Cor. 1:14-17

 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,

 so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name.

(But I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other).

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to proclaim the good news—not with clever words, lest the cross of Christ should be emptied of its power.

Christ’s specific instruction to Paul was not baptism but preaching the gospel. He couldn’t remember how many he baptized in Corinth because it wasn’t important. Salvation comes from believing the good news of Jesus Christ just like on Pentecost and with Cornelius. Baptism and repentance of sin were a “throw in”, not a necessity. It was a pre-Pentecost tradition. Regrettably, baptism became a distraction in Corinth, morphing into a salvation “status symbol”. Even today some buy into the erroneous doctrine that it is necessary for salvation. Even babies are today baptized and considered “blessed”.



Now I know today’s babies have better nutrition and can hear classical music in the womb, but they can’t believe the gospel as infants. Adolf Hitler was baptized as an infant and look what good it did him! Symbolism and ritual may help some feel better, but good feelings don’t guarantee anything but good feelings. God’s blessing comes from obedience and trusting His promises. Baptism is meaningless and insignificant outside of believing in Jesus. He cleans us out spiritually by taking our sin upon himself, not because of some water cleansing us. Baptism is symbolic of the spiritual reality of “fire and the holy spirit”, God’s spirit “burning out the chaff” - in other words, our sins, our mistakes, our sickness, our hopelessness, our judgement, our shame, our “old” man. Christ cleans it all away… for eternity!

 Rom. 10:9

because, if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him out from among the dead, you will be saved.

Water baptism is not in this verse. It’s irrelevant to salvation. Babies are not in this verse either. They’re not ready to believe or confess Jesus yet. Baptism may be significant to the parents, but the baby only gets wet! They will decide later in life whom they choose to be their lord, Jesus, themselves, or an imposter.

Some may say, Steve, you really don’t like baptism. My answer is I have neither positive nor negative feelings about baptism. I only get concerned if people believe or are taught that to be saved you must be baptized. Perhaps that was true (emphasis on the past tense) before Pentecost, but since then it has gradually dawned on the church that it is a confirmation in the physical realm of what Christ already did spiritually. The spiritual cleansing, or baptism, is not optional, while the physical baptism is.

So, (you may ask) why are you making a big deal about water baptism in Acts 2? The big deal is that the new saints all did it because the apostles still thought it was right to do. This means that each saved individual also publicly confessed their sins. Peter’s preaching convicted the audience that they were complicit and responsible for the Messiah’s death. They then asked Peter, “What should we do?”

 Acts 2:38

And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the holy spirit.

Peter told them to repent, to publicly confess their sins, probably beginning with responsibility for the Messiahs death. Then each person probably continued with sins previously known only to themselves, most likely with tears and trembling. When they were done, there was probably a collective rejoicing for the newly saved and a ritual cleansing, either in the Jordan, the pool of Siloam, or one of the water basins of the temple. Can you imagine the deliverance of each individual as they grasped their sins being forgiven? Spirits were fleeing, healing was experienced, families were mended, tongues were manifested and probably some prophesy and revelation, too. What a time! About 3000 times that day! Can’t wait to see the video!

Each new saint was unburdened with sin, shame, fear of judgement, and secret sins in front of everyone. There was no doublemindedness. Each new saint made Jesus their lord and put everything else second. These folks knew what “lord” meant. It meant “master” as in “master and slave”. A slave disobeying the master was unthinkable to them. Their commitment to Christ as lord was absolute.

The reason the new saints willingly entered into a salt covenant with each other (signified by breaking bread) was because they had each emptied themselves out publicly – confessing the good, the bad, and the ugly. Each one had openly admitted their sins, “washed them away” in baptism and committed to following Jesus for the rest of their lives, which they thought wouldn’t be too long considering he could return any day to establish his kingdom in Israel over the earth. They spoke in tongues, overflowing with the fruit of the spirit. They had undergone such a radical change that the only ones whom they could relate to were fellow believers who loved the Nazarene carpenter and spoke in languages they also didn’t understand! They weren’t strangers any longer to each other, but spiritual family on the quest together to please God and share the good news of Jesus Christ. They could trust each other because they shared the same lord, same spirit, same forgiveness, and same goal – God’s glory.

As they dedicated themselves to learning and living the apostle’s doctrine, the new Pentecost saints opened themselves up to and committed themselves to each other, pledging to help each other. Although they might have been strangers days before, considering what they experienced together, a salt covenant relationship made sense and helps to explain the next thing God mentions – fellowship.