

Acts 2:43-45 (4:32-35) Part I

Introduction

Acts chapter two is all about the inauguration of end-times, eschatological realities. We have in Acts the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, which the prophet Joel said was to take place in “the last [*eschatos*] days [the days of fulfillment]” (2:16-17a). It’s through this pouring out of the Holy Spirit by the risen and exalted Messiah that a new, eschatological people has been birthed—the people who belong to Messiah’s kingdom and partake of all the blessings of His present rule and reign. It’s because of the eschatological identity of this new people that they were continually devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the fellowship (*koinonia*). It’s the apostles who have delivered to us all that Jesus said to them as our new, eschatological “Law-Giver”—as the one greater than Moses. And “the fellowship,” we remember, is that eschatological reality of having come to share with one another in Christ (the Messiah) insofar as we have come to share with one another in the Holy Spirit whom the Messiah has poured out upon us. And how were the believers devoting themselves continually to “the fellowship”? By devoting themselves continually to “the breaking of bread and to the prayers.” The Lord’s Supper is not only an eschatological meal (a meal that didn’t exist before Christ and could only exist after Him), but also a sign of our mutual participation in, and fellowship in, Christ. “The prayers” are likewise not only eschatological in nature (a calling upon the name of *Jesus* as “Lord and Christ” and offering up prayers to the Father in *Jesus*’ name), but also an expression of the fellowship that we have with one another in Christ. It’s against the backdrop of all this that Luke continues in verse 43.

I. Acts 2:43 — And fear [trembling awe] came upon every soul; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles.

The fear that came upon every soul was the result of the people realizing what they were witnessing. They were witnessing the final drama of redemptive history—the age of the Messiah and His Spirit. And the “many wonders and signs” that were taking place through the Apostles were constantly confirming this reality. It wasn’t the “wonders and signs” that caused fear to come upon every soul, but rather that awesome reality to which the wonders and signs were bearing witness.

But practically, what was the difference? Concretely and tangibly and “where the rubber meets the road,” as it were, what was changed? Luke answers this question in verses 44-47:

II. Acts 2:44a — And all those who had believed were together [*epi to auto*]...

That word “together” encapsulates what was the concrete and tangible expression of these eschatological realities. We could say that all those who had believed were *together* in their devotion to the teaching of the Apostles and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. The word “together” actually translates not just one word in the Greek, but a Greek expression consisting of three words which could be translated literally, “in/at the same [place]” (this expression appears only ten times in the New Testament). In Luke 17, the literal meaning predominates:

- Luke 17:35 (cf. 1 Cor. 7:5)* — “There will be two women grinding grain **at the same place** [together; *epi to auto*].”

But in other places, the emphasis isn’t just on physical proximity, but on a unity and oneness of heart and soul—of mind and purpose. We read in Matthew 22:

- Matthew 22:34 — But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves [*synago*] **together** [*epi to auto*].

“Together” (or “in the same place”), here, really isn’t necessary because the word “*synago*” already means “gathered together” (Mat. 26:57; cf. 22:41; 27:17; Acts 4:31). So the emphasis here is on being gathered together not just “in the same place,” but gathered together and united as one, with single-minded purpose (see Mat. 22:35-46). In Acts 4, the apostles quote from Psalm 2:

- Acts 4:26 — The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered [*synago*] **together** [*epi to auto*] against the Lord and against His Christ.

Once again, *synago* by itself already means “gathered together.” The point, then, is not simply that the kings and rulers of the earth were gathered together “in the same place,” but that they were gathered *together* with one common and shared purpose. Here in Acts, we’ve already encountered this expression twice.

- Acts 1:15 — [I]n those days, Peter stood up in the midst of the brothers (a crowd of about 120 persons was **together** [in the same (place; *epi to auto*)].

The emphasis here isn’t just on these 120 persons all being physically gathered together. The emphasis seems to be more on their “togetherness.” Their being gathered together in the same place was expressive of the deeper reality of their “togetherness” in heart and soul—with one mind and one purpose. In fact, Luke just finished saying in the preceding verse: “These all *with one accord* were continually devoting themselves to prayer...” (Acts 1:14). In chapter 2, we read:

- Acts 2:1 — And when the day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all together [*homou*] **in the same [place]** [*epi to auto*].

Why is Luke so emphatic about them all being together (*homou*) in the same place? Once again, this is expressive of their “togetherness” in heart and soul—of the deeper reality that they all shared one mind and one purpose. But if these things were true before the Spirit was poured out, how much more must these things be true after the Spirit was poured out? Now Luke can say

* Cf. 1 Corinthians 11:20; 14:23 — Therefore when you come together [*synerchomai*] **in the same place** [*epi to auto*], it is not to eat the Lord’s Supper... Therefore if the whole church comes together [*synerchomai*] **in the same place** [*epi to auto*] and all speak in tongues, and unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

“Come together in the same place” seems to emphasize only the church assembled for a meeting. That the emphasis here is not on being united as one or “gathered with one purpose” seems evident from the context.

absolutely: “And all those who had believed were *together*...” Only three verses later, at the end of this section, Luke will conclude:

- Acts 2:47 — And the Lord was adding **together** [in the same place; *epi to auto*] daily those who were being saved.

We see, then, that all those who had believed were “together” in the most wonderful and beautiful sense of that word. In an almost identical context in chapter four, Luke will say that:

- Acts 4:32 — [T]he congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul.

Specifically, as we’re about to see, they were together in their shared love and mutual care for one another. So how was the new “togetherness” of this eschatological community concretely and tangibly and visibly displayed? Luke tells us:

III. Acts 2:44–45 — And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were dividing them up with all, as anyone might have need.

Here’s an astonishing new reality in the world. Those who entered the Jewish sect of the Essenes which had withdrawn into the desert at Qumran were required to surrender all their property for the common use of the community. But there’s no hint, here, of anything obligatory. The sharing and selling and dividing was going on constantly over time (iterative imperfects) to meet the needs of the moment (“as [*kathoti*; ‘according as’ / ‘to the degree that’] anyone might have need”), which proves that none of this was a requirement for initiation into the Christian community, that not everything was sold at once, and that not everything was sold, period. Luke will tell us in chapter four:

- Acts 4:36–37 — Now Joseph... who was also called Barnabas... and who owned *a field*, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

Apparently, Barnabas didn’t sell the house he lived in. The very fact that Luke highlights Barnabas’ act proves that it wasn’t expected—much less required—but wholly voluntary. Otherwise, what was so special about it? Immediately after the example of Barnabas, Luke gives the contrasting example of Ananias and Sapphira.

- Acts 5:1 — But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold *a piece of property*...

Luke doesn’t say that Ananias sold “his property” (as in “all his property”), but only that he sold “a piece of property.” Ananias didn’t sell the house he lived in, and neither is it apparent that he sold all of his additional property holdings. But when Ananias brought part of the proceeds of his sale to Peter, he lied to the Holy Spirit by pretending to bring it all. So Peter said to him:

- Acts 5:4 — “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own [private property]? And after it was sold, was it not under your authority [private wealth]? Why is it that you laid this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.”

There would not *necessarily* have been any sin if Ananias had kept his property or if he had kept all the proceeds from the sale of his property, or if he had contributed only part of the proceeds without pretending to give it all (though there might still have been greed and covetousness). Ananias' sin was not in failing to give everything, but in lying to the Holy Spirit to gain a good reputation.

The Essenes were required to surrender all their property for the common use of the community not for the sake of meeting needs, but for the sake of “purification.” Not so in this new, eschatological community of Messiah's followers. What was so astonishing about this new reality of sharing and selling and dividing was that it was all completely voluntary—the expression of a wonderful “togetherness,” of a shared love and mutual concern and care for one another. It was a “doing” of “the fellowship.”

“The Greeks shared a common myth that in primitive times people lived in an ideal state in which there was no ownership but everything was held in common... Plato envisioned his ideal republic as one devoid of all private ownership... for some Greeks communal ownership was a major part of their dream of a ‘Golden Age’” (Polhill). Apparently, the Greeks believed that state communism could achieve the ideal of the elimination of all impoverishment and destitution. But this utopian ideal that could never, ever be realized by the world or by any form of state communism, is now, in this messianic, eschatological community, finally being realized. The “impossible” is happening here.

The Greeks also had an “ideal of friendship according to which true friends held everything in common (*panta koina*) and were of ‘one [soul]’ (*mia psyche*). Aristotle is reputed to have defined a friend as ‘one soul dwelling in two bodies.’ Such expressions became commonplace and are found in Roman writers such as Cicero as well as the Hellenistic Jew Philo” (Polhill). So when Luke says in chapter two that “all those who had believed were *together* and had all things in common [*panta koina*; 2:44]” and in chapter four that “the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul [*psyche mia*; 4:32a]” and that “for them, everything was common [*panta koina*; 4:32b],” these words “would have evoked an immediate response in his Gentile readers. What they esteemed as an [unattainable] ideal had become a reality in the young Christian community” (Polhill). In fact, what had become a reality in this young Christian community was far more wonderful than even their highest ideals. The Greeks pursued the ideal of “friendship,” and according to one commentator, “friendship in the Greco-Roman mold often involved ‘reciprocity between those who were social equals’, but Luke portrays a community where funds are provided for those who are needy without any thought of return, ‘and thus he is suggesting something more akin to family duties’” (Peterson, quoting Witherington). Not only was there no thought of return because the needy couldn't make any repayment, but also because the proceeds from the sale of private property weren't given directly to those in need, but “laid at the Apostles' feet” (Acts 4:36-5:2) to be distributed from a common fund. The Greeks pursued the “ideal of friendship,” but what has now been realized in this “end times” community is the ideal of family, with all the family's privileges and responsibilities. Both the Greeks and the Jewish sect at Qumran imagined an ideal that could only finally be achieved if it was enforced (something that can only result in the destruction of a society), but here in this messianic, eschatological community is the realization of a far higher ideal than the world could ever have

imagined because it's completely voluntary—the result of the Spirit poured out, and “the fellowship” created, and the deep “togetherness” of God's people.

While the Greeks imagined their mythic utopian ideal achieved by a state communism, God had already called His people to the true utopian ideal in the Old Testament law. We read in Deuteronomy chapter 15:

- Deuteronomy 15:1–3 — At the end of every seven years [at the end of the agricultural year which was the normal time for the repayment of debts; cf. Ridderbos] you shall grant a [temporary?] remission of debts [because every seventh year the land was to lie fallow (Exod. 23:10-11), thus making repayment of debts more difficult for the poor?]. And this is the manner of remission: every creditor shall [temporarily?] release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother because the remission from Yahweh has been proclaimed. From a foreigner you may exact it [because the foreigner was not subject to the law of the 7th year?], but your hand shall [temporarily?] release whatever of yours is with your brother [payment is to be deferred for one year?].

There were no commercial loans in Israel. Debts were incurred only by peasants struggling to clothe their children and put food on the table, which explains why all loans in Israel were to be interest free (Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:36-37; Deut. 23:19-20; Ps. 15:5; Prov. 28:8; Ezek. 18:8, 13; 22:12). It's immediately after this law about the remission of debts every seventh year that Moses goes on to say:

- Deuteronomy 15:4–5 — Indeed [*ki*; Gr. because/*hoti*], **there will be [there is to be] no needy person among you**, since Yahweh will surely bless you in the land which Yahweh your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, if only you listen obediently to the voice of Yahweh your God, to be careful to do all this commandment which I am commanding you today.

Is Moses saying that because there is to be no needy person among the people, therefore this law concerning the remission of debts should ultimately be rendered irrelevant? Is he saying that if the people will be careful to do all the commandment which he is commanding them, then there will be no borrowing or lending at all in Israel?[†] Or is Moses saying that it's precisely this law concerning the remission of debts every seventh year that will result in there being no needy person among them? Is he saying that if the people will be careful to do all the commandment which he is commanding them, then there will always be plenty to lend (interest free) in order to meet every need of the poor, and then even the remission of debts every 7th year will never be a burden for the lender?

It's important for us to understand that God was not promising that if everyone in Israel obeyed His laws, then everyone in Israel would be wealthy, or part of an affluent “middle class.” Instead, He was calling His people to an obedience which would result in the elimination of all

[†] This would require us to translate the Hebrew *ki* (cf. *hoti* in LXX) with “however” (LSB). Verse 6 addresses only lending to or borrowing from *the nations*, and equates this with ruling over or being ruled by *the nations*. Lending to a poor brother, on the other hand, was not to be a form of ruling over him (Prov. 22:7 probably pictures an oppressive money lender charging interest on loans to the poor; cf. Waltke).

impoverishment and destitution among the poor in Israel. No one but the lazy sluggard or the ungodly fool was ever to “go without” in Israel (cf. Prov. 9:13; 11:16; 13:25). The Greek word that’s used to translate the Hebrew word for “needy” in Deuteronomy 15 (*endees*) appears only here in the entire Pentateuch (vv. 4, 7, 11, 24) and outside of the Pentateuch it appears as a reference to the poor only 9x’s (Job 30:4; Prov. 3:27; 9:13; 11:16; 13:25; 21:17; 27:7; Isa. 41:17; Ezek. 4:17). The basic meaning of the word is to be “lacking” or to be “without” (cf. Prov. 7:7; 9:4, 16; 11:12; 12:11; 15:21; 18:2; 24:45; 28:16). One Greek dictionary says of this word: “Pertaining to lacking what is needed or necessary for existence” (Louw-Nida). Another commentator says that it refers to those “without the means of subsistence or the necessities of life” (Alexander on Acts 4:34). It’s this destitute and impoverished person that was not to exist in Israel. Because of obedience to God’s law, there should always be an over-abundance in Israel to meet every need of every poor brother so that no one went without or lacked any basic necessity of life (summarized in the Bible as food and clothing; cf. Deut. 10:18; Mat. 6:25; 1 Tim. 6:8; James 2:15-16). We see, then, that God was not saying that there should cease to be any poorer “lower class” in Israel or that there should cease to be any need for generous “giving/lending.” God wasn’t saying that there should come a day when each man could settle down and enjoy his wealth without any thought for anyone else because everyone else would be just as wealthy as he was. This, then, is what explains how Moses can go on to say in verses 7-11:

- Deuteronomy 15:7-11 — If there is a needy one among you, one of your brothers, in any of your gates of the towns in your land which Yahweh your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor close your hand from your needy brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. Beware lest there be a vile thought in your heart, saying, “The seventh year, the year of the remission of debts, is near,” and your eye is hostile toward your needy brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to Yahweh against you, and it will be a sin in you. You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing Yahweh your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you send forth your hand to do. For the needy will never cease to be in the land; therefore I am commanding you, saying, “You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your afflicted and needy in your land.”

There was one sense in which the needy would never cease to be in the land. There would always be the poorer, “lower class” who would depend to some extent for sufficient food and clothing upon the generosity of those whom God had chosen to bless with greater material wealth. But because there should always be an abundance of wealth to be shared, it could also be said with equal truth that there should never be any needy person among the people. This ideal, however, was never realized in the Old Covenant Israel because the Old Covenant Israel was disobedient and dead in its sins. The Old Covenant Israel didn’t have the Spirit. Over and over in the Old Testament the people are condemned for their treatment of their impoverished and destitute brothers and sisters within the covenant community (Isa. 10:1-2; Jer. 5:26-28; Amos 2:6-8; 4:1; 5:11; 8:6).

But now what do we see? We see in this new, messianic community more than the utopian ideal of the Greeks and even *more* than the moral ideal of the Jews. The fulfillment is even better and more wonderful than the Old Covenant shadow. The “togetherness” of this eschatological,

messianic community was of such a kind that they even “had all things in common,” and were “selling their property and possessions and were dividing them up with all, as anyone might have need”! If Moses could say to Old Covenant Israel, “[T]here *will be* [or ‘there *is to be*’; future (LXX)] no needy person among you [οὐκ ἔσται ἐν σοὶ ἐνδεής],” then Luke can now say of this “end times” people in Acts chapter four, “For there *was not* [iterative imperfect] a needy person among them [this is the only place in the New Testament where this same Greek word for “needy” is used; οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐνδεής τις ἦν ἐν αὐτοῖς; Acts 4:34]. Luke’s point is that the ideal of Old Covenant Israel is finally being fulfilled in this supernatural, eschatological, Spirit-indwelt people of the New Covenant. At the same time, Luke would also have us see in this fulfillment the “true” realization of all the misguided utopian ideals of the Gentiles. So Luke writes in chapter four:

IV. Acts 4:32–35 — And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and not one was saying that any of his possessions was his own, but, for them, everything was common. And with great power the apostles were bearing witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as [*kathoti*; ‘according as’ / ‘to the degree that’] any had need.

“Not one was saying that any of his possessions was his own [versus: “and not one retained his possessions].” As one commentator says, “While every man who had possessions still retained them, he was so inspired, not with mere philanthropy or pity, *but with a sense of Christian oneness*, that he did not speak of his possessions as his own, but as belonging to the church at large... A virtual community of goods arising from the practice of the most disinterested and self-sacrificing Christian love” (Alexander). “Such was the unity of feeling and affection in the infant church that, notwithstanding their numerical increase, they seemed to constitute a single household, with identity of interest, and even of possession” (Alexander). “No one regarded his possessions as belonging absolutely to himself, but as a trust for the benefit of others also” (Alexander). So we read in the very next verse here in chapter two:

- **Acts 2:46** — And daily devoting themselves with one accord in the temple and breaking bread *from house to house*, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.

In then in Acts chapter 12:

- **Acts 12:12–13** — [Peter] went to the house of Mary [private ownership], the mother of John who was also called Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying [sharing and community use].

Not only did everyone have all things (possessions) in common, but those who had “extra” land or houses were selling them and bringing the proceeds of the sales and laying them at the apostles’ feet, to be distributed to each “according as” (“to the degree that”) any had need. The point, here, is not the elimination of the poor, but the elimination of all impoverishment and destitution among the poor; specifically, among the poor within (inside of) this new,

eschatological community. In other words, while there's certainly a time and a place for giving to the poor in the world, this eschatological ideal can only be achieved within the eschatological people. Any attempt to achieve this ideal in the world is doomed to failure with catastrophically destructive results. Therefore, it's all the more important that we are faithful to display to the world the reality of this "ideal" in Messiah's church. What we have here is not philanthropy or pity or "charity" of any kind (far from it!), but rather the duties and privileges of family—of "the fellowship" that we have with one another in Jesus, the Messiah.

Conclusion

On the one hand, the "needy" will never cease to be among us. On the other hand, there's no longer to be any needy brother or sister among us. What a powerful witness this ought to be to the world around us! Due to our affluent culture and our appropriate rejection of all communist and Marxist ideology, we can all too easily be blinded to that true eschatological ideal that can only be realized within this true eschatological community. In Luke's first volume (his Gospel) Jesus spoke of this ideal as a reality that would be realized under His (now) present rule and reign:

- Luke 18:29–30 — "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more at this time ['houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, with persecutions'; Mk. 10:30] and in the age to come, eternal life."

May God cause us to be always "together"—"of one heart and soul"—for our joy, and for our witness to the world, and for the glory of God.