

Second Sunday of Easter

THE FAMILY OF GOD

Acts 4:32-35

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

4:32 Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. 33With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. 35They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

DIAGNOSIS: Cut Off

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Land-less*

The Jerusalem group around "the apostles" (led by James the Just, brother of Jesus) was most likely meant to continue Jesus' ministry of healing and inclusion (see 2:43-47) as a manifestation of the dawning kingdom of God. Among the "believers" in Jerusalem were those who were in material "need," that is, landless and unemployed or without the means to sustain themselves apart from begging for alms. These needy comprised the dregs of society, the castoffs who had no supportive community or family, and those who were ostracized because they were ritually unclean or morally empty or collaborators with the Roman occupation (see esp. John Dominic Crossan on the economic

context of Jesus' ministry). Yet the larger question that must have permeated the "whole group," but which was first raised in Jesus' ministry, was: *Who all is included among the needy—that is, needy for the kingdom of God?* Answer: Everyone.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Promise-less*

From a religious perspective, the castoffs from normal Israelite society and religious practices were *therefore* also cut off from the promises of God that were so closely tied to the land and from participation in the Temple cult. But given that Jesus and his disciples were also in all probability landless, and given that Jesus himself had issues with the Temple cult and with the religious leaders in general, then for Jesus and later on for the apostles, neither land nor cultus was necessary to be included in God's kingdom. Rather, it was for those who "believed" (the Greek word can also be translated as *faithed* or *trusted*) that, in and with Jesus, the kingdom of God was dawning on everyone—whether they were ready or not. So if being ready for the kingdom was a matter of faith only, and not of land or cultus, then anyone who trusted in land or cultus was as promise-less as they supposed everyone *else* to be. The blind leading the blind.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Rooted Out*

This is not to say that Jesus' disciples, prior to his death and resurrection, were any more ready for the kingdom than was John the Baptist (Luke 7:28). Not having faith in Jesus and thus being outside the kingdom (thus also outside "the whole group of those who believed") means that one is cut off from the fulfillment of the promise. And there simply is no future in that (see Luke 4:1-12) except to be "rooted out of the people" (3:23). Separation from the whole body of believers, that is, from the body of the Messiah, is the judgment that Jesus will bring when he arrives in his *parousia* as Lord of all.

PROGNOSIS: The Family of God

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *God's Momentous Act*

Jesus was crucified for claiming to be the prophetically expected Messiah (in political terms, the King of the Jews, Luke 23:38) who would proclaim the forgiveness of Israel's sins, free her from Roman domination, and fulfill God's promise to Abraham to "bless all the families of the earth" (3:17-26). For the Jerusalem believers, Jesus' resurrection (v. 33) from the dead proved both his messiahship *and* the eschatological reality of the kingdom of God (2:38-39). In this context the gift of the Holy Spirit to believers (1:8) was received as the counterpart to Jesus' resurrection, establishing a Spirit-filled Israel under the lordship of Jesus who was soon to arrive in glory.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Believing Together as One*

The Jerusalem group is described as "those who believed" in the kingdom begun with Jesus and continued among themselves. In this they "were of one heart and soul." This expression means that, acting as a single body, they "concurred" both in faith (and in love, see Step 6) as befitting to the Holy Spirit. The emphasis here is on the "group" rather than on each individual. No one was saved alone, to live the life of faith alone; the "whole group" believed (and acted, see Step 6) as a single entity (group/fellowship/church) because they all received the one Spirit.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Acting Together in Love*

Jesus' healing and inclusive ministry was continued by the "whole group" in Jerusalem which demonstrated by its actions that the kingdom of God had begun. Their messianic-eschatological expectation was the imminent return of Messiah

Jesus (1:11; 3:21) as Lord of all. The Jerusalem believers signified that the old way of being a part of God's promise to Israel was no longer valid by selling their "lands" (v. 34; but already implicit in v. 32 where the Greek text, paraphrased in English, reads "owners" implying owners of land). Selling one's land was normally always a last resort; now it became the first impulse! By relinquishing one's land voluntarily, one was dying to the old covenant and living in the new. For in God's kingdom, everything is in the service of the Messiah; thus to his extended, inclusive body of believers (see Mark 10:29-30). And at any rate Jesus would be returning shortly, and so land and other capital possessions would be under new management (or lordship). The tension here between the present and the near future could only be bridged by faith in Jesus. How the group practiced their faith is therefore free of all judgment (Acts 5:1-11 notwithstanding). For them, the management of the kingdom meant to take care of the "whole group" as a single extended body of faith. Under this circumstance, that is, leaving tomorrow's worries to the Lord (Luke 6:20ff; 11:2-4; 12:22ff), taking care of the "needy" among them in a maximal way was a no-brainer. One would do so for family; how much more so for the family of faith?