

Pentecost, Part II
The Church in the Power of the Spirit?
Reflections on Socio-economic Redistribution (and “Half-heartedness”) in Acts 2-5 as Warning Tales

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On the feast of Pentecost, Christians re-narrate the "birth" of the church in the power of the Holy Spirit. Yet what *sort* of practice the Spirit empowered at the first Pentecost, and continues to animate today, has been a divisive issue in the life of the church ever since. The contemporary debate about what it means to be "Spirit-filled" usually focuses on individual charismatic gifts, rather on the church as an alternative social model. In contrast, I would like to suggest that whatever else Pentecost was, it was portrayed by Luke in Acts as a public insurrection that midwived a radical resurgence of the old ways of Israel’s tribal confederacy, specifically narrated in terms of linguistic diversity and economic mutual aid. It was intended to illustrate how Christian faith can challenge imperial conformity and stratification—right in the heart of the most cosmopolitan city in Palestine, and in the face of Roman power.

Luke's story of the Spirit's descent on the disciples in Acts 2 consists of three parts:

- Acts 2:1-13 the experience of "tongues"
- Acts 2:14-41 Peter's speech and the response of the crowd
- Acts 2:42-47 the discipleship community of goods

The narrative opens with "tongues of fire *distributed* among the disciples" (Acts 2:3), and concludes with church members selling their possessions and "*distributing* them to whoever had need" (2:45). This is the only two appearances of the Greek verb *diameirizō* in Acts. Here I examine the latter re-distribution of economic power; in a separate article I look at the former re-distribution of cultural power.¹ In between these remarkable "signs," Peter proclaims that the "gift" of the Spirit will be given to whoever so desire, and that all debts have been unilaterally cancelled in Jesus Christ (2:38), a formula that echoes the Jubilee pronouncement of Jesus' in Luke’s account of the inaugural sermon at Nazareth (Lk 4:18ff).

Robert Tannehill notes that the scene commences abruptly with the unusual phrase: "When the day of Pentecost was being *fulfilled*..." (Acts 2:1). In order to understand this allusion, we must revisit the roots of Pentecost as an agricultural—and thus unavoidably social and economic—festival. Pentecost was originally a Hebrew observance called the "Feast of Weeks" (*Shavuot*). Coming between Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles, *Shavuot* was a celebration of the first harvest (Ex

¹ See "Pentecost, Part I: Cultural Insurgency and Gospel Liberation: Reflections on Jazz, Pentecostal Faith, and the Church," 2004.

23:14-17; Deut 16:9-12). In this liturgy of divine grace and natural abundance, the community dances before the Lord with the gifts of the land, offering the firstfruits back to the Giver in gratitude.

The original symbolism of the Feast of Weeks referenced more than harvest thanksgiving, however. There is a close correspondence in "liturgical calculations" concerning the timing of the Levitical Feast of Weeks and that of the famous Jubilee pronouncement:

Feast of Weeks: From the day after the Sabbath, from the day on which you bring the sheaf of the elevation offering, you shall count off seven weeks... You shall count until the day after the seventh Sabbath, fifty days; then you shall present an offering of new grain to the Lord (Lev 23:15).

Jubilee: You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period... gives forty-nine years... And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants (Lev 25:8,10).

This suggests that the feast of Pentecost was meant to remind Israel that the redistributive ethic of the Jubilee (in which lost land was returned, slaves freed and debts cancelled) applied not just every fiftieth year, but at *each and every harvest!*

This stands to reason, because the Israelite ethic was one of gift and grace. The Great Giver provides the produce through the gift of seed, soil, sun and water (see Is 55:10). The fruits of this natural abundance must, however, be shared, not hoarded (Ex 16: 16-18), with the Giver getting the symbolic first fruits as a return of thanks. The rest circulates through the community like the common wealth it is. If the gift is ever claimed as an exclusive possession, it stops circulating, and begins to atrophy and die, like brackish water, or stale air, or dried blood. The only ones who have "rights" to the gift are those in need. The gift is meant to flow, like the healing waters from the cosmic mountain, down to the lowest places. Indigenous peoples have always understood the cardinal property of the gift, writes Lewis Hyde in his brilliant book, *The Gift*: "Whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept... The essential is this: the gift must always move... 'One man's gift,' they say, 'must not be another man's capital.'" ²

This is the vision of what I call "Sabbath economics," which lies at the heart of Torah and the prophets. ³ However, generations of imperial "structural adjustments" of Israel's life on the land steadily suppressed these old liturgies, so that by the Hellenistic period the agricultural festival of Shavuot had become a commemoration of the giving of Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai (which is how it is still celebrated in synagogue today). It is, however, the older tradition of *Shavuot* as a Jubilee ritual of Sabbath economics that is being "fulfilled"—which is to say, recontextualized—in Acts 2.

² Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, NY:Vintage, p. 4.

³ See, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Church of the Savior, 2001).

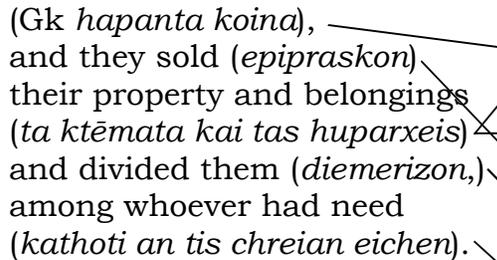
The redistributive imperative—so easily lost or compromised amidst the pressures of feudal, command and capitalist economies—is precisely what the Spirit empowers on the day of Pentecost. This is so central to Luke’s theology that of all the “signs and wonders” he relates in Acts, this one alone is described *twice*:

Acts 2:44f:

All the believers were together and had everything in common (Gk *hapanta koina*), and they sold (*epipraskon*) their property and belongings (*ta ktēmata kai tas huparxeis*) and divided them (*diemerizon*), among whoever had need (*kathoti an tis chreian eichen*).

Acts 4.32, 34f:

No one claimed their belongings (*tōn huparchontōn*) were their own; rather, everything was in common (*hapanta koina*)... for whosoever owned (*hosoi gar ktētores*) a place or possessed a house (*e oikiōn hupērchon*) would sell it and bring the value of what was sold (*tōn ipraskomenōn*)... distributing (*diadidōmi*) to whosoever had need (Gk *kathoti an tis chreian eichen*).



The verbal and rhetorical parallels enhance the didactic character of the tale. The point is to illustrate the church as a redistributive community where affluence and poverty are both being eradicated, as envisioned in another tradition of Sabbath economics, Deuteronomy 15. The echo is clear:

- **Deut 15:4:** “There will be among you no one destitute (Septuagint Gk *endēes*, also in vv 7,11), because the Lord your God will bless you in the land...”
- **Acts 4.34:** “...nor was anyone destitute (Gk *endēes*) among them.”

The plain sense of these texts, however, has not prevented our churches from discounting, devaluing or disappearing them! The proliferation of economic terminology in these Acts passages makes it impossible to spiritualize them. Consequently there are three *other* ways by which the economic sharing of the Pentecost community is dismissed by both seminaries and sanctuaries (their ubiquity is confirmed by the fact that each argument will be familiar to you):

One tack is the claim (by inference) that *the Jerusalem church had gone bankrupt by its “communistic” economic practices, which is why Paul had to take up his apostolic collection to bail them out.* The economic sharing in Acts is, this view asserts, an example of what *not* to do! Unfortunately, there isn’t a shred of evidence from the Pauline texts that suggests that the collection was in response to such a bankruptcy—or to any other specific crisis for that matter (such as famine or persecution). Rather, Paul invites the churches of Asia Minor to “share their resources with the poor (Gk *koinōnian tina poiēsesthai eis tous ptōchois*) among the saints at Jerusalem” (Rom 15:25f; see also I Cor 16:1-3; 2 Cor 9:12) as a principled expression of trans-ethnic solidarity. In this way Gentile Christians can reciprocate for being received into the great Jewish spiritual heritage: “For if the Gentiles have come to share in their

spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things” (Rom 15:27). Even clearer is II Cor 8-9, the apostle’s most elaborate rationale for the collection project, where economic sharing is mandated by the principle of social *equality* (II Cor 8:13-15). His argument concludes by drawing on the vision of *manna* redistribution in Ex 16 (see *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics*, chapters 1 and 7). In fact, then, the evidence compels us to draw the *opposite* conclusion from this objection: Paul’s collection was inspired by the economic sharing of the Acts community, which in turn was patterned after the Sabbath Economics traditions of *Shavuot* and Jubilee. Paul was trying to *nurture* this ethos among the churches in Asia Minor, not rescue it!

A second defensive strategy is to assert that *the first Christians thought the world was going to end soon, and thus didn’t have to worry about property management or economic planning*. This remarkably pejorative caricature fails to note that there isn’t any hint of apocalyptic rationale in the Acts text (other than the judgment of God alluded to in 2:16-20,40). Indeed, most scholars believe that Luke is the *least* apocalyptic writer in the N.T. On the contrary, the economic sharing of both Acts and Paul appeals to the longstanding principles of poverty-reduction outlined in Deut. 15, as noted above, and to the teaching and example of Jesus (cf II Cor 8:9).

The third common objection is that *the portrait of economic sharing in Acts 2 and 4 “idealized” the early community, and cannot be used as an example of normative behavior*. These practices were either fictional (liberal scholarship) or extraordinary (conservative scholarship); in either case they should not be taken seriously by later generations.⁴ This assertion forces us to look at the epilogue to Luke’s narrative in Acts 4:36-5—a dark morality tale that can hardly be characterized as an idealization! Indeed, if the story of economic sharing that some in Luke’s narrative *do* represents a “text of terror” for most North American Christians, his story about those who *don’t* share is worse! While the stern warning tale of Ananias and Sapphira is *also* routinely overlooked in our churches, it is nevertheless directed to all of us who constantly fudge on the vision of Sabbath Economics—and to the myriad ways we rationalize our possessiveness, give with half a heart, and hold back on circulating the gift.

But we can’t ignore this epilogue, because Acts 4:34-5:11 is a literary whole, knit together by a series of repetitive doublets. The general practice of selling fields and placing the proceeds “before feet of the apostles” described in 4:34f is illustrated with the specific divestment of Joseph Barnabas (4:36f). This *positive* example is followed by a *negative* object lesson, as the couple Ananias and Sapphira first “put aside from the proceeds for themselves” (Gk *enosphisato*; in Titus 2:10 the same verb means “to embezzle”) and only then bring the remainder to place “at the feet of the apostles” (5:1f). Similarly repetitive is the story of the fate of the couple. Peter confronts Ananias, who dies, is buried by the young men, “and great fear seizes all who heard of it” (5:3-6). Peter then confronts Sapphira, who dies, is buried by the young men, “and great fear seizes the whole church and all who heard of these things” (5:7-11).

⁴ Similar logic is often used to “get around” the Sermon on the Mount’s teachings, especially the command to love our enemies: these are “counsels to perfection” not meant for “ordinary” Christians. On this see our *Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Vol I* (Orbis, 2009), pp 54-56.

The demise of the couple, if interpreted as “punishment,” is not only disproportionately harsh relative to their transgression, but incongruent with the way of Jesus the apostles are proclaiming. It is therefore important to recognize that Peter’s role is only to expose their duplicity, not to penalize it. It is almost as if they “die of shame” (5:5,9). Moreover, Peter makes it clear in his indictment that the couple was under no obligation to divest (5:4). The practice of sharing modeled here is predicated upon freedom and grace, not law. Such an ethos is fragile, however, and easily subverted.⁵ If economic sharing is *dictated*, it inevitably brings coercion and resentment (such external mandates are what modern North Americans, with our ideology of individual autonomy, fear most). If, on the other hand, the *voluntary* nature of sharing is used as an excuse by some to keep more for themselves, as is the case here, the seeds of economic re-stratification are sown (a problem that in contrast is routinely ignored by affluent North Americans). The story of Ananias and Sapphira is perhaps best understood, then, as an enacted parable which demonstrates how easily the spirit of grace-as-redistributive-justice can “die” when we start lying to God, to each other and to ourselves about the degree to which we are possessed by our possessions.

The purpose of Pentecostal goods-sharing is to relieve real poverty and economic inequality in the community. The text suggests that these measures were taken “as the need arose,” i.e. for short term relief and long term economic justice. The emphasis is upon changing the definition of ownership: wealth isn’t so much relinquished as “communitized,” as articulated in e.g. Mark 10:28ff. And Paul makes it clear that the practice of redistribution is not about reversing deprivation, but about rehabilitating genuine mutual aid so that everyone has *enough*: no one with “too little” or “too much” (II Cor 8:14).

However much Christians in capitalist cultures may wish to, we can’t get around the fact that Acts 2-5 articulates a community standard in the early church concerning economic sharing.⁶ It is a poignant *midrash* on the old vision of how to deconstruct social inequality in Deuteronomy 15, an ethos that was rehabilitated in Jesus of Nazareth and empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The only barrier to realizing this vision in our churches is our “affluenza” and our half-hearted measures in world of vast disparities. Insofar as we only want economic justice as long as we can retain more than our share, we are truly the spiritual children of Ananias and Sapphira. This is why we must confront this warning tale honestly—because ultimately it is a wisdom story. The temptation to mistake the gift for a possession is as old as history, which repeatedly drives us out of communion with God and neighbor. This parable invites and challenges us to examine our “divided hearts” in a world where addiction to “too much-ness” makes the curse of “too little-ness” inevitable, whether across town, or across the border, or across the planet. A different world is possible—if the church rediscovers the power of the Holy Spirit to animate practices of redistribution, in order to rehabilitate community and commonwealth.

⁵ The apostle Paul knew these difficulties all too well, as evidenced by his contorted arguments to try to get the Corinthians to comply with their own promise to participate in the solidarity collection in II Cor 8-9

⁶ One of the few modern theologians to give these texts an unapologetic treatment is Mexican liberation theologian Jose Miranda: see *Communism in the Bible* (Orbis, 1981).