

Fellowship in Crisis

By Paris Reidhead*

Will you turn, please, to the portion that was read in Acts, Chapter 4. The 4th Chapter of the Book of Acts relates to us the effect of God's working. Peter and John had on just one of the days of the week gone into the Temple at the hour of prayer for the purpose of assembly at the worship and with others of their own group that would come, for they felt even at this time, some have suggested as long as 4 years after Pentecost, that it was possible to remain a faithful, effective, worshipper through the rights and traditions of Judaism. You see, God had given a period of rest to the church after Pentecost, a period when they could gather their strength, consolidate the 3 thousand that had come to believe on the Lord. They went daily to the temple for the stated hours of service there, and apparently the believers would gather some time during the day for a time of Christian fellowship. And thus this particular day Peter and John were on their way into the Temple, and they passed the lame man. He had been apparently at this same place, begging, for many years. It was nothing unusual to Peter and John. They had passed undoubtedly for many days. But something happened.

You see, they had come from a place of fellowship. It is after all fellowship that concerns us. Fellowship, this word *koinonia*, sharing, participation, communion. They had come from fellowship. God had been wonderfully manifest in their midst. Now, as they passed this lame man, Peter looks upon him, senses that he has faith to be healed. A lot of things are left unsaid in the narrative. We do not know what conversation they had had previously. Undoubtedly, the lame man knew Peter and John, for they would have gone that was as accustomed. But this we know, that on this particular day, they sensed, by the illumination of the Holy Ghost, that he had faith to be healed, and they had faith for his healing.

So, Peter stopped, spoke to him, "Wouldst thou be made whole? In the Name of Jesus Christ, rise up and walk. And he did, and went leaping, and jumping, and dancing, praising the Lord, making his way into the temple, and creating holocaust every step he took. People assembled, the throng pressed upon him, and he said, Now here is the man, and there is the man, and these are the two by whom I have come to this place of health" (Act. 3:6-8). Well, it is not long until Peter is using it for a Gospel service.

You see, there is something right here, and wrong about us. In the New Testament they preached where the people were. They went to them and preached. Now, customarily we try to bring the people to where we are. And I am wondering if the Open Air Campaigners that have been in the city off and on for several years and are coming on a permanent basis at the first of the year to not have something of the answer for our reaching our metropolitan area. They went where the people were.

And so the throng is gathered. Peter preaches, and that day some 5 thousand believed. Wonderful. But, remember, this world is no friend of grace; however some working moratorium may be established so that we can get along for a little while. This world is no friend of grace. It just requires an event to crystalize the sentiment and the feeling that has been lying dormant a while.

And the Sadducees and the Pharisees are not the least pleased with this. They have not known quite what to do. There has been no occasion up until now, but with a throng, with 5 thousand converts, something has to be done. The time has come to take a stand. And thus, Peter and John are called before the authorities, the captain of the temple, that is the Levite who was in charge of the soldiers that would have been there to police this place and keep it from any rowdyism and disturbance, arrested them, took them into the assembled elders, where they were forced to give an account of their conduct.

By what name? By Beelzebub? By the prince of darkness? By some false god, some cult? By what name have you done this? And the answer was, In the Name of Jesus. So, knowing it was a notable miracle, and that a great multitude has heard of it, they threatened them, and said, Do not do this again. They forbade them to preach in that Name, and sent them away.

Now this meant that Peter and John were facing an edict that affected not only them but the whole church. The order of the group before which they had appeared was that they should immediately, as of that moment, silence all proselyting, all preaching. It was finished. It was over. They were through. Well, what did they do? "And being let go, they went to their own company" (Act. 4:23).

What happens to you when you are let go? If you did today just exactly what you want to do, what would you do? You see, you aren't what you are going to do. You are what you want. I made that statement the other day. We have got to understand that character is not equated with conduct. There are many reasons why people will moderate their conduct. There may be social approbation, or approval, that they seek. There may be fear of reprisal. A person is not what he does. He is what he wants. And Peter and John, being let go, free to depart, did not run for the caves to hide, and thus disassociate themselves. On one occasion you remember, when Peter was let go, "he with cursing said, I know not the Man" (Mat. 26:74). He used his freedom to denounce his Lord. Now, there is a bodily threat. At that time there was not particularly. What does Peter do? There has been some change in his character. There has been some dramatic alteration of his person, his nature. What is he doing? Is he saying to John, Now look, things are getting difficult here, and persecution is going to break out. It is time for us to forget this bunch of Christians we have been associated with. After all there are problems back there, they are fighting with the widows over who is going to get the proper amount of food, and Jewish widows are getting more, the Greek widows say, and oh, this isn't what we thought it was going to be. Let's use this as an excuse now to just travel and get out of here. This is what they might have done. No one could have stopped it. Or they could have said, Well we don't like this. But you see, there would have been fear, or some other motivation that would have moved them to this kind of conduct. But this is not what happened.

"Being let go, they went to their own company." Is this what happens to you? I was so happy today in visiting the International Students Class to meet two young men that were here on a training ship from Brazil, and was informed that there were some 12 or 13 on this training ship that are evangelicals. And "being let go on the Lord's Day, they went to their own company." And they came to the door, and said, We are looking for Christians who love the Lord Jesus as do we. Sailors in New York City, perhaps the first time they visited. Oh, what a great number of places they might have gone, what a great number of things they might have done. But you see, "being let go, they went to their own company." What happens to you? When you are let go? What happens to you when restraints are off? What happens to you when there is no one there that knows you, and no one that watches?

Here were these that had found true freedom, in a bondage to One so big, so good, that they could commit themselves wholly to Him, and this is after all the only true freedom, the freedom of a voluntary servitude, a bond slavery to One whom we love, and whose Person is so important, and whose service is so important, that we are prepared to sacrifice everything to please Him.

Now there was a company to which they belonged. Have you found a company to which you belong? a group of people of which you are a part? by the sovereign and the supernatural operation of the Holy Ghost? Are these your people because something has happened in your heart that has made you one with them? Oh, there are many ways that you can belong to a company, by intellectual convictions, by emotional affiliation, by family affiliation. There are many different ways that you can become part of any group, and particularly part of a church. But these had partaken of the same life. Sinners, they had come to a Savior. They had known pardon, and cleansing, and deliverance from the guilt of the past. Guilty, they had come to know the washing away of all the stains of memory that defiled and corrupted, and polluted, and burned like a cancer in their hearts and minds. Weak, they had come to One that was able to make them strong. Vacillating and impetuous, they had come to One that was able to give them that kind of character that they themselves didn't possess, the kind that was exhibited by Peter's behavior. And so, they are part of a company of people that had brought their need to One that was able to provide it. This is what characterized the company. They were all failures. They were all sinners. The one thing they had in common was their bankruptcy, and their weakness, and their powerlessness. The one thing they shared was the fact that they had nothing to share but their sin. This is a strange company.

And He said, Go out into the highways, and find the lame, the ones who can't walk in the Law of God, and find the blind, the ones that cannot see the right way, and find the deaf that cannot hear, and the dumb that cannot speak, go find the hopeless, and bring them to my banquet, and they will eat of the gifts of grace that I provide. The lame are not going to be lame any more, not because they are any better, but because that food of which they have partaken is able to change them. And so it is that there is a company now to which they belong, and they know that they belong, and they feel part of it, because they came in bankruptcy, and they came in hopelessness, and they came in helplessness, and they ate of bread, bread that had come down from heaven, and in the eating were made whole. And so they are a company of the off scouring of the world. That is why it was not a particularly large company, or a particularly popular company. Oh, if it could have been the wise that had

been called. It would have been an entirely different number. If it had been the educated, if it had been the powerful. But here is a company. Do you belong to this company? Do you belong to this company of the weak? Do you belong to this company of the hopeless? Do you belong to this company of those that had nothing to offer but a mountain of guilt, a world of sin, and you came in need and met a Savior? Oh, then you understand. And though you might have been deaf, you look at the neighbor who was dumb, and you see the one that was lame or halt. And your problem might not have been the same. Yet you were all at the gate as beggars. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," the broken, and the beggarly respect to the in spirit (Mat. 5:3).

Did you come that way? Do you belong to this company? And when they got there, they immediately put into practice a verse that is little understood by us, vs 32, "And the multitude that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common" (Act. 4:32).

Well Peter said, "Silver and gold have I none," so we know what he didn't possess. Now what did he have? He had a threat, a threat that if he spoke again in the Name of Jesus he would be arrested and he would be sentenced to death, and they had the power of seeing that he was executed. That is quite a possession to have, isn't it? How would you like to have that handed to you today, that if you assemble hereafter with the people called Christians, you are subject to arrest. Would you immediately go and say, Oh, isn't it wonderful. Look what the Lord has given me. I have a possession. Well Peter had no money. He had no gold. He didn't have any political influence. He had very little education. In fact he had nothing but a heart that was full of need, need that had been met by the broken heart of the Lord Jesus. And so Peter and this group had all things in common.

Well, you see they were of one heart and of one soul. Well of course they were of one heart. Evil hearts that had been cleansed. One soul, crippled, that had been made whole. And so now they are under the sentence, and they are all affected by it. They have been forbidden to speak, and this includes them all. So now, Peter and John run home and say, Look what we have, look what has been given to us. And they share it.

The point that is so important is this, that in the crisis, the group shared. Oh, they might have said, Now wait a minute, Peter, John, you are the ones that got into trouble. Now we are disassociating ourselves from you. We just would prefer if you did not meet with us anymore, because you carry a stigma with you. Their eye is on you. The rest of us have not been in any trouble. You get along with this thing now. You go out here. We just do not want you because we might be hurt if you stay with us. They could have said that, just as Peter and John could have fled.

No, they received the inditement, they had received the prohibition that was put upon Peter and John as affecting all of them, and as indeed it did. And so they said, Come, tell us what is this? And they told all that the chief priests and the elders had said unto them because they had all things in common. Every man's problem was the problem of the group. Almost invariably the church has failed to understand this principle, and I admit that I have had very little teaching in the past. When I come to speak to you on a series of messages as the Lord leads, on Koinonia, on fellowship, there is very little that I can get that has been prepared and given to the church. Oh, there is a lot on the ecclesia, the called out group. But this is not ecclesia as much as it is koinonia, this is fellowship, this is sharing. And there is very little. But this I do know, that it was not just an economic relationship. Oh, we do find a little further that they did not lack anything, because as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them. They did not have a big bargain basement sale one Saturday when they sold everything; as there was need, a man was moved upon by the Lord. He sold it and brought the price of the things that were sold. There was not any need sustained by the group, because every member was part of the group and they had all things in common, and the need of one was the need of all. We do find here that Barnabas is the son of consolation, and undoubtedly he earned this by his having land, selling it, and using this. Perhaps he is even the one who established the pattern. We do not find that it is commanded in the Scripture. We do not find anywhere that God lays this down as an economic rule of fellowship. And certainly it is not forced sharing. There is something that has happened to them. They have partaken of one bread, they have drunk of one cup, they have shared in the risen life of their Lord, and because of this they have one heart, and one soul, one mind, one spirit, one interest, and it is all voluntary. No one is coerced. No one is forced. To use this Scripture as some do as vindication of what we call today Communism is a gross distortion of the Scripture, because here there is perfect liberty, and perfect freedom, and there is no obligation at all other than the obligation of love. But you see this included not only the price of land, but here someone has to share his need.

I can imagine some of these Rabbis that had been converted, that had had property and were disinherited, finding it extremely difficult thing to go to church and say, My hands are empty. I have lost everything. It is a great blow to a man's pride, you know, to have been the owner of goods and now in this date of his life to find that he is penniless. And so somebody had to share his poverty. It is much easier to share your money you know than your poverty. Sometimes it is much easier to say, Here take my dollar, than to say, I haven't a dollar. I need it. But there is a sharing. "They had all things in common." One man shares his weakness, one man shares his failure, and one man shares his sin. You mean he shares it? How? Because having all things in common meant that what affected one affected all, and they were learning the principle of fellowship, they were learning the principle of participation, communion, and sharing.

I think this is the most difficult aspect of the Christian life, unquestionably. And it is one where there is the least guidance, the least literature, and yet if I understand what is happening today it is this, that possibly God is so determined to get koinonia, to get fellowship, that He is willing to allow governments to be swept away, and freedom to be taken, and liberty to disappear, so that in the crisis of mutual desperation people will come on His terms to each other and to Him. But isn't it pathetic that it has to be this way? Isn't it sad that it should have to be brought to such a pass, that God would have to allow such stringent and difficult pressures to force His people to each other. I wonder what will be the story when China is opened and its history is written? I wonder what is going to be shown. I don't for a moment think that the Chinese church has been exterminated. Oh, I know that there is that show church that is there for the sake of western visitors. But we also know, according to official publication, and this is the last I have heard, and I may be incorrect, that some 15 million have been deprived of existence for the reason that their religious faith is incompatible with government interests. But I do not believe for a moment that 15 million can exterminate the church in China. But you know, I think that somehow in the midst of this there is a koinonia, there is a fellowship, there is a participation, and there is a sharing. It has been said that the church thrives most and best under persecution. And I am prepared to say this morning that unless American Christians begin to learn the meaning of sharing on a Biblical level, I am not talking about economics, this is the byproduct of an understanding of a spiritual relationship, God is prepared to take away the freedom, independence, and some of the things we have taken so for granted in order to put us into those circumstances where we must share. And I believe that it is far better that it should be done voluntarily. I believe that this was not something participated by the experience. I am sure that it was accentuated by it was increased by it, it was strengthened by it, but I do not think it began there.

In fact, we know it did not, because in Acts 2, right after Pentecost, there again "they had all things in common." But the principle that is so important is this, Are you prepared to share? Are you a Christian in the sense that you have partaken of one life with others? that you have come bankrupt and hopeless, and helpless to the foot of the cross, bringing only your need, your guilt, your sin, and you have nothing more than the lowest of the low, and the vilest of the vile? For had you, a nice sinner that you were, been the only sinner, it would have been necessary for Jesus to have died as horrible a death as He did in order to have redeemed you. And that same death was adequate to redeem the vilest of the vile. And so it is that we come in at one door, and one level, and one threshold. He doesn't have an upstairs window for nice sinners, and basement door for low sinners as some might think. We came broken. We came with nothing. He gave everything.

Now do we recognize that as Christians we have been made part of the Body, one mind, one heart. Have we learned to share? Have you learned to share your need, have you learned to share your failure? Have you learned in brokenness to share your desire? What do we know of it? Oh, I wish somehow there was a test we could pass, or take today, to find what level of Christian we are in respect to this most of important of things, koinonia. How much fellowship do we know? Do we know how to have fellowship? Do we know what it means? That is why I have been so anxious through these years of seeing smaller groups. A service such as this is good in the sense that the Apostles' doctrine can be presented. But oh, where is the fellowship, the koinonia? Where you can respond and share. I speak of sharing, but when is the opportunity to share? Certainly not in the public service. And there ought to be a time when those that are members of a body, perhaps it will come again, that there will be a discipline, and there will be, as Wesley¹ had, the love feasts for those who were members of the society gathered, and absent for two months was sufficient reason unless it were well explained for their names to be read out of the society. And

1 John Wesley (1703-1791) Anglican cleric, Christian theologian, and founding the Methodist movement.

one occasion he said, the fellowship at Bristol, the Society of Bristol is this year suffered a loss of 800 members, but it has gained greatly in strength because of its loss. I do not know how many it had, but the point was that there was an important fellowship, there was some sharing, and there was koinonia. Do you understand this? Do you have it? Is there some Christian to whom you can be what you are, honest and open in brokenness, sincere. I believe that is what they had. Not just their danger, not just the threat, Anything that affects any member of the body of Christ as equally hazardous as was this threat of the officials, anything. And what I am so concerned about today is, that we in our quest for all that God wants, in a great needy city, should ask ourselves this, To what degree do we pass the test and measure this Biblical standard, of having one heart, of one soul, having all things in sharing, in fellowship. That is the word, common.

What is the effect of this? "And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection..." and "the place where they were assembled together was shaken, and they were filled with the Holy Ghost" (Act. 4:33; Act. 4:31). I wonder if God is not waiting for people that are prepared to meet Him on His terms in order to reveal again the wonderful power of the risen Christ through the Holy Ghost? I am frank to tell you, that in a city such as ours, as spread as we are, scattered as we are, with the odd working hours that we have, and all the other hindrances, right now I haven't any program. I haven't any program. I do believe that a layman's movement has to begin with a layman, or it isn't a layman's movement. It is just a superimposed clerical movement on the laymen. And that is one reason why I haven't organized it. I am grateful for instance seeing that there is a group meeting this week at the home of FB for prayer, the Young People that will meet to share. Other groups meet other times. This much I do know, dear friends, that it was when they were together in their need, and in their openness, in their brokenness, one heart, one accord, having all things in fellowship, that the Spirit of God was poured upon them, the place was shaken, and with boldness they gave witness to the resurrection.

Now there is the Scripture, and there are you, here am I. What are we going to do to put ourselves in a place where God can do with us what He wants to do in such a great needy city, mission field, world, as we are serving here in New York. You are part of it. You are either part of the problem or part of the answer, and possibly the Spirit of God may through you give some insight that will be a blessing to all of us. It seems to me that you ought to accept the responsibility as a very personal one, and ask the Lord to guide you.

Shall we bow our hearts in prayer. Teach us what it means, our Father, and they had all things in fellowship, in sharing, in participation, in communion, in common. Help us to see it. We don't know now. There may come a time, our Father, that Thou wilt have to do for our land, what Thou hast allowed to be done for others. We trust not. But, O God of grace, if it must come to that prepare us today for that by laying hold of this text, meditating upon it, giving ourselves to study of it, until Thou canst implement it for us in the 20th century. We know that all 3 thousand weren't in this room, to which Peter and John came. They couldn't have been. There was not a room big enough in Jerusalem then. So, Father, we do not know just what it meant. We do not know just what it is going to mean for us, how it will be implemented, but we believe Thou art of the same mind still, that Thy people that have one life, one Lord, one baptism, one hope, one faith, are also to understand what it means to have fellowship. We do not know. We are asking to be taught. As little children we come and sit at the feet, the nail pierced feet of Thy risen Son, and say, O Lord Jesus, do as seemeth good in Thy sight. But get for Thyself something that is Thine, through which Thou canst manifest how wonderful Thou art. We've seen so much of what mighty men can do for a needy Lord, and it's failed. Now Father, we want to see what a mighty Lord can do for needy men, and we put ourselves here, asking You to teach us, and lead us into Thy Word, and to imbed the truth upon our hearts. Now should there be one among us that does not know the joy of sins forgiven, might this be the hour when they open their heart's door and invite our risen Lord in to reign and to forgive, as Savior and Lord. He is waiting to do this, so grant it, Father, to some needy heart now.

Let us stand, dear friends, for the benediction. We are leaving you with the Word. We haven't a program. We have a Scripture. We have a text. We have a truth. Now you will have to complete the message by finding out what God's application of this is to your heart. "Now unto Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen" (Eph. 3:20-21).

* Reference such as: Delivered at The Gospel Tabernacle Church, New York City on Sunday Morning, October 28, 1962 by Paris W. Reidhead, Pastor.