Portrait of the Church at Pentecost

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Acts 2:1–21 tells the familiar story of how Jews from every nation had gathered to Jerusalem for Pentecost (the Feast of Weeks), one of three annual pilgrimage festivals named in the Old Testament. While there, the Spirit descends upon the disciples as tongues of fire, enabling them to bear witness to the teachings, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus in the native languages of all those who had gathered in Jerusalem. The effects are profound. That day about 3,000 people were baptized (Acts 2:41), and for all intents and purposes the church was born.

One detail that the book of Acts leaves out is the fact that in Jewish tradition certain biblical texts are recited at every major religious festival. The Song of Songs is read at Passover, Ecclesiastes during Sukkot, Esther during Purim, and Lamentations during Tisha B'Av.[1] At Pentecost, the book of Ruth is read. The point of connection between Ruth and Pentecost is the wheat harvest. In ancient times, wheat would typically be harvested about seven weeks after Passover (i.e., fifty days, thus the "pente" in Pentecost). One made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem at that time not only to celebrate the abundance of the harvest but also to offer portions of that harvest as a grain offering at the Temple.

The major drama of Ruth unfolds during the wheat harvest. Ruth, a Moabite widow and refugee, has followed her mother-in-law, Naomi, to Bethlehem and is trying to eke out a living among others who were economically vulnerable. In chapter 2, Ruth finds favor with a man named Boaz, who, during the wheat harvest, enacts on Ruth's behalf the ancient law of gleaning (Lev. 19:9–10). The law of gleaning was a biblical principle that required landowners not to harvest to the edge of their fields or to gather up produce that had fallen to the ground during the reaping process. What was left in the fields was designated for the poor and refugees. This ancient practice was predicated on the theological belief that caring for the most vulnerable members of a community superseded the right of any individual to maximize profits from their own land. Remarkably, a failure to carry out the law of gleaning was thought to be a form of theft (Lev. 19:11).

The law of gleaning is just one of many principles named in the Old Testament that are designed to provide tangible, material support for those experiencing poverty. Other examples include the cancellation of debts during the sabbath year (Deut. 15:1–5), giving one's tithe every third year to the poor rather than the Temple (Deut. 14:28–29), not charging interest on loans to the poor (Deut. 23:19), and allowing fields to lie fallow every seventh year so that the poor may come and eat of the produce (Exod. 23:10–11).[2] Rather than dismissing these ancient practices as vestiges of Israelite religion that no longer applied, the faith community gathered at Pentecost took them quite seriously.

This is evident in the description of the early church in the verses that immediately follow the Pentecost story:

> [44]All who believed were together and had all things in common; [45]they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. [46]Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts (Acts. 2:44–46).

What is striking about this portrait of the church at Pentecost is, in part, what is not named. No mention is made of specific doctrines that the community adhered to or theological beliefs that were required for membership. If there were such doctrines and beliefs, they are left in the background. Instead, what Acts 2 highlights are a set of practices based on radical generosity, shared meals, communal worship, and meeting the practical needs of everyone in their community.

When I teach about the pattern of life on display in Acts 2, someone inevitably raises the objection: "Wait, this sounds a lot like Marxism or Communism!" Using such terms to describe the church at Pentecost is not only wildly anachronistic, but it also misses a more obvious point in the text itself. This way of being and belonging together was a direct result of the community's encounter with the Spirit (2:1–13), their learnings about Jesus (2:14–36), and their study of the apostles' teaching (2:42). What we see in the church at Pentecost is thus not an expression of political ideology but rather lived theology. In fact, the activities named in Acts 2:44–46 can be understood as an application of the type of economic principles described in the book of Ruth.

This portrait of the church proves to be remarkably durable over the next several centuries. Until the late-fourth century CE, the main thing the church was known for throughout the Roman Empire was not its Trinitarian theology, impressive buildings, or cultural influence. The church was most known for its poverty relief efforts. Magnetized by Jesus's example, the early church went to great lengths to address social and material conditions wherever the gospel spread. This proved to be a point of irritation to Emperor Julian (r. 361–63 CE). This fringe religious movement organized around the resurrected Jesus was doing more to move the needle on the problem of poverty than the vast apparatus of the Roman government. Half impressed, half envisioned, Julian launched a massive effort to expand Rome's poverty relief efforts in order not to be outdone by the Christian movement.

Fast forward 1600 years and much has changed. This isn't to say that there aren't contemporary churches that care deeply about things like affordable housing, hunger, livable wages, food deserts, and so forth. Such churches exist and do important work. But the fact remains that poverty relief is nowhere to be found on the lists of "things the church is known for" that research firms like Pew and Barna produce.[3] Even when and where we do find poverty relief efforts within the modern church,

they tend not to be the focal point of our budgets, mission, identity, sense of piety, or preaching. By and large, the church today—whether Mainline, Evangelical, Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, or any other variety—is known for its preoccupation with arriving at a shared set of right beliefs (orthodoxy) rather than finding solidarity and belonging around a shared set of right practices (orthopraxy). The portrait of the church today looks little like the portrait of the church at Pentecost.

The goal is not necessarily to get back to the way things used to be in Acts 2. In fact, doing so would be impossible. The political, economic, and social landscape of our day is nothing like what those gathered at Pentecost would have faced. Different questions, pressures, and possibilities are operative in our contexts. Moreover, Acts 2 simply does not provide the level of detail needed if one wanted to recreate the early church in our local congregations. Still, the portrait of the church at Pentecost is worth pondering. What did the earliest Christians understand about Scripture that led to this way of being and belonging together? What did they know about Jesus and the nature of the gospel that oriented them so doggedly around orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy? What have faith leaders today lost sight of that would have been so evident to the church in its infancy? Below are three dynamics that, at least partially, can begin to account for the differences between the portrait of the church at Pentecost and the portrait of most contemporary Christian congregations.

1. Far more than we do today, the church at Pentecost likely recognized how much of the Bible is about poverty and economics.

It would be difficult to say exactly how many verses in the Bible are about poverty and economics. Some scholars suggest upwards of 2,000, and theologian Jim Wallis contends that poverty is the second most prominent theme in the canon (idolatry being the first). From the Pentateuch to the Prophets, the Psalter to the Proverbs, every single book in the Old Testament plumbs issues related to the material and socio-economic dimensions of lived experience. Much of the same is true of the New Testament. At least 1 in 15 verses explicitly address poverty, and in the Gospel of Luke it's 1 in 7. Whatever the exact numbers might be, matters of economics get more airtime in the New Testament than heaven, hell, baptism, the Trinity, sanctification, and church governance—combined.

And it's not just a matter of counting up verses. Often, economic concerns are lurking just beneath the surface of texts that would not otherwise be included among the 2,000 so-called "poverty passages." This is true of the oft-quoted line from the prophet Amos, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24). Rather than being a generic call for justice, these words address a very specific economic development in Israel during the 8th century BCE, precisely when the prophet Amos was active. At that time, a small group of wealthy individuals, mostly in the central hill country in and around Samaria, were beginning to form large agricultural estates through the exploitative acquisition of small plots

of inheritance, or *naḥalah,* that were historically allotted to every extended family in Israel. This process, which is known as "latifundialization" (from the Latin *latifundi,* which means large estate), is pictured in the story of Naboath's Vineyard in 1 Kings 21. In an agrarian economy, losing access to one's *naḥalah* was catastrophic. Without access to land as a means of subsistence, families faced abject, inter-generational poverty. Meanwhile, those who were in control of the large estates profited mightily. The prophet Amos was deeply aware of all of this, and while his words can be applied today to a wide range of justice issues, in their original context his words imagine a torrent of justice shattering the staggering wealth gap that the process of latifundialization had created.

If so much of the Bible is actually about economics and poverty, why do we tend to miss it? Part of the answer has to do with our training. I managed to get through a three-year MDiv program before I ever encountered scholarship on the Bible and poverty. Most pastors I know have had a similar experience. But the problem is not just with seminary curricula—it has to do with our neurobiology and a phenomenon known as "inattentional blindness." In a fascinating study by the cognitive scientist Daniel Simons, subjects are shown a video of two teams of kids, one wearing white jerseys and the other wearing black jerseys, passing two basketballs back and forth among their respective teammates. Before it begins, subjects are told to count how many times the players wearing white pass the ball. Counting the passes takes great attention because the players on both teams are in constant motion and weave amongst one another. About halfway into the one-minute video, a man in a gorilla suit walks on the stage, beats his chest, and then strolls off the stage. The kids keep passing the ball, and then at the end of the video subjects are asked: "Did you see the gorilla?" Remarkably, more than 50% of subjects miss the gorilla. Why? When we are told to look for one thing, our attention narrows and we actually become unable to see other things—even things as obvious as a man in a gorilla suit.[4]

When it comes to Scripture, we have been told to look for a lot of things, like definitions of marriage, the right age for baptism, who gets into heaven, who can be ordained, when Christ will return, etc. With our attention so focused on these questions, we are blind to the big hairy gorilla of poverty and economics. Fortunately, curing inattentional blindness is quite easy. Simons points out that when subjects are asked to raise their hand when they see the gorilla enter the stage, not a single person misses it. Perhaps it's time to start asking our congregations to look for those places in Scripture that talk about economics, poverty, and how the good news of Jesus addresses material realities. Chances are they won't miss it, and it just might bring us a bit closer to the portrait of the church at Pentecost.

2. Even when we do see passages in the Bible that talk explicitly about poverty, we tend to over-spiritualize their meaning.

Proverbs 31:9 calls us to "Speak out, judge righteously, defend the rights of the

poor and needy." The word for poor (*'ani*) in this text means "to be without property" and the word for needy (*'ebyon*) means to be lacking when it comes to physical nourishment. This text is explicitly and undeniably about material poverty. Yet, if you browse most commentaries or do a quick Google search, you will find no shortage of interpretations of Proverbs 31:9 that focus on the "poor in spirit"—that is, those who are facing some type of challenge in their relationship with God.

It is not inappropriate to interpret Psalm 31:9 in this manner. In fact, the early church affirmed that all biblical passages have a two-fold sense: the spiritual and the literal (that is, the meaning that emerges from a plain reading of the text's grammar and historical context).[5] Each mode of reading is valid. Yet, when we too quickly pivot to the spiritual meaning, or when we assume that spiritualizing the Bible is a more faithful mode of interpretation, we very often miss key truths and insights.

Consider, for instance, the Hebrew word *shalom*. Often translated as "peace," *shalom* includes a range of connotations related to wholeness, health, friendship, harmony, and spiritual wellbeing. While *shalom* can refer to any of these things, what we often overlook is the fact that its core meaning is economic. The noun *shalom* is based on the verb *shalem*, which means to repay or make whole financially. The verb includes actions such as paying back a debt, offering fair wages, and even compensating those who have experienced injustice or harm (something akin to our notion of reparations).

Economic connotations are not present in each of the 237 occurrences of the noun *shalom* in the OT. Even so, it is hard to imagine an ancient reader—such as the Jews who gathered at Pentecost—missing the fact that the concept of *shalom* intrinsically includes matters related to material and socio-economic conditions. Cultivating *shalom* in the world isn't just about having a better prayer life or resolving conflict with others. It's about moving toward practices that respond to the material needs of our communities and that address the systems and structures that lead to those needs in the first place. What we see on display in the portrait of the church at Pentecost is a faith community who refuses to spiritualize the concept of *shalom* and instead institutes practices that cultivate *shalom* in and through the material realities of the community.

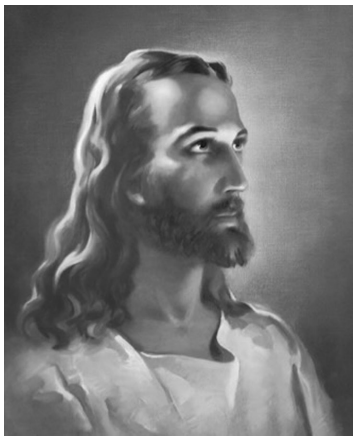
What would it look like today to invite Christians to resist the urge to over-spiritualize the Bible? From the pulpit, pastors would have to model this interpretive practice in their exegetical work. In addition, we would do well to create spaces for laity to experiment with what I call "poverty hermeneutics," which is a practice of encountering Scripture with questions about material and socio-economic realities front and center in our theological reflections.

One way I do this in my own teaching is through an exercise centered on the lament psalms. These ancient prayers express heart-wrenching grief, agony, and anger to God, but they often leave unspecified the circumstances that have given rise to the prayer. This lack of specificity in the language presents an opportunity to

wonder what it would be like to read a lament psalm as a prayer that arises out of an experience of economic vulnerability. To help facilitate this experiment, I juxtapose a reading of Psalm 22 with contemporary images of those experiencing poverty and homelessness. I ask students to reflect on how this exercise changes the way they see the psalm: What elements or images stand out, what do they see that they had never noticed before, what questions emerge? Conversely, l ask students to reflect on how they might think differently about the work and mission of the church if they imagined such prayers being uttered not just by Jesus on the cross (Mark 15:34) but by the economically vulnerable members of their own community. Similar experiments might be carried out with other laments psalms, with many of Jesus's parables, or even with entire books of the Bible. The effects are typically profound and can create space for conversations that bring the concerns of the world more fully into the church's orbit.

3. Unlike the church gathered at Pentecost, we tend to forget that Jesus himself was poor and very likely homeless.

One of the most enduring images of Jesus in American Christianity is the "Head of Christ" by mid-20th century artist Warner Sallman. Though more than 500 million copies of this painting have been sold, its portrayal of Jesus bears no resemblance to the physical appearance of a man born in the Roman control territory of Palestine in the first c. CE. The problem, though, is not just with the white skin and blond hair. Sallman's painting seems to reflect the equally inaccurate assumption that Jesus was from the middle class—educated, relatively secure in terms of daily needs, with access to stable housing and other support structures.



Head of Christ, Warner Sallman, 1941; The Warner Sallman collection: http://www.anderson.edu/sallman/.

The Gospels give a very different impression. Jesus spent most of his life in the Galilee, an agricultural region that was crippled by Herod's exorbitant taxes and whose resources were siphoned off to support the wealthier cities in the region, such as Sepporhis. Jesus's family was from Nazareth, which had a reputation of being the poorest and least important town in the area, so much so that the disciple Nathanael felt compelled to ask, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). When Mary and Joseph come to the Temple to circumcise the newborn Jesus, they offered a pair of turtledoves (Luke 2:24), which according to Levitical law was an allowable sacrifice only for those facing extreme poverty (see Lev. 5:11). At the end of his life, Jesus didn't even have money for his own tomb. All of this should remind us that Jesus not only cared for the poor in his

ministry, but he himself experienced the effects and realities of poverty in his everyday life.

That the Word became flesh in the body of a poor man from the Galilee is a fact of history that the early church took seriously. And so should we. Doing so would require a profound reorganization of the religious visual culture that informs and structures our experience of Jesus today. An encouraging step in this direction is found in the work of the Canadian artist Timothy Schmalz. In a series of provocative sculptures, Schmaltz portrays Jesus lying on a bench, huddled under a blanket only with his feet exposed. The posture is clearly that of someone who is experiencing homelessness and is trying to find shelter from the elements. The only indication that this is Jesus are the nail marks visible on his feet.

What if this is how we imagined Jesus? What if images of a homeless Jesus were emblazoned in our stained-glass windows or hung from the ceiling of the chancel? Who might start coming to our worship services, and who might stop? Would seeing *this* Jesus propel us to set aside the sort of theological squabbles that have split churches and denominations in recent years, and instead, much like the church gathered at Pentecost, find belonging and solidarity around a set of practices designed to meet the real needs of people in our neighborhoods?

"Homeless Jesus," sculpture by Timothy R. Schmalz, Capernaum.

As the church gathered at Pentecost spread out into the world, it embodied the conviction that what was so good about the good news of the gospel was not just the promise of eternal life in heaven, but the possibility of a transformed social, material, and economic life in the here and now. We see this clearly in Acts 17. In this text, Paul and Silas have just arrived in Thessalonica and are teaching in its synagogue. Even as some were persuaded by their message, others resisted. An angry mob formed in the marketplace and drug some of the disciples before city authorities, accusing them of "turning the world upside down" (v. 6). The Greek word translated "world" is *oikoumena*, from which we get the English word "economy." Unlike the more typical Greek term for world (*kosmos*), *oikoumena* refers to the administrative world, and with it, financial institutions, taxes, public policy, social systems, and so forth. The version of the gospel proclaimed by Paul and Silas wasn't just turning upside down religious beliefs; it was transforming the economy. This is exactly what angered the mob in Thessalonica. Worship a resurrected Messiah? Sure, no problem. Just don't mess with the economy.

This longing for an *oikoumena* redeemed and restored is what, in part, produced the portrait of the church that we see in Acts 2. And maybe, just maybe, this same longing is what can help the church lean into a more vibrant, relevant, and engaged way of being in and for the world today.

Notes

1 Tisha B'Av is an annual day of fasting that commemorates the destruction of Solomon's Temple and other tragedies that have occurred throughout Jewish history. It typically falls in July or August.

2 A field that lies fallows still yields produce, especially olives, grapes, dates, citrus fruit, and other perennial crops. The point of this ancient practice was to make these crops available to the poor in the community.

3 For a representative study of how non-Christians think about the church, see for instance: https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/.

4 For further discussion of this experiment and the phenomenon of inattentional blindless, see Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris, *The Invisible Gorilla: How Our Intuitions Deceive Us* (Harmony Press: Easton, PA, 2010).

5 The spiritual sense is sometimes further divided into three subcategories: allegorical, moral, and anagogical.