

THE PENTECOST AND THE RESTORATION OF HUMAN NATURE. READING ACTS 2:1-47 IN A POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIAN FRAMEWORK

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Abstract:

This article examines the event of Pentecost as reported by Saint Luke in Acts 2.1-47 emphasizing its relevance for the post-communist Romanian society. The author argues that the community of Jesus' disciples is empowered by the Holy Spirit to mediate Christ's divine action of healing individual and social wounds that the communist regime inflicted on the soul of the Romanian people. It also explores the right human answer to God's healing and saving initiative, according to Saint Peter's divinely inspired sermon delivered on the day of Pentecost. In Saint Luke's narrative of the book of Acts, this response is called "repentance", which is the human reaction to God's gracious call that consists in regret for personal and collective sin, the invocation of God's forgiveness in Christ, and the beginning of a new life regenerated by the Holy Spirit. According to the biblical narrator, all the present benefits of divine healing are just the first fruits of the future glory of God's kingdom for which Christians bear witness.

Keywords: *The Acts of the Apostles, Christian witness, Holy Spirit, human nature, Pentecost, repentance, Saint Peter, post-communist Romania.*

Introduction

Communism is not the only causer of the hardships of Romanian society, but it is certainly the darkest episode in Romanian recent history. The severe damages it caused to the Romanian people have been the subject of numerous but perhaps not enough scientific studies and monographs. The pedagogy of fear that tried to shape "the new man" generated a collective

experience of mutilation, to which most adapted by crippling themselves morally. Thus, a factor of social dissolution appeared, which is the atrophy of moral and community sense. When you are dictated what to do about the things in which you have the natural right to decide personally, you end up living duplicitously. Community members learn new styles of lying, betrayal and theft. In short, their community life is severely damaged.

This article examines the event of Pentecost as reported by Saint Luke in Acts 2:1-47 and argues that the community of Jesus' disciples is empowered by the Holy Spirit to mediate Christ's divine action of healing individual and social wounds that the communist regime inflicted on the soul of the Romanian people. It also explores the right human answer to God's healing and saving initiative, according to Saint Peter's divinely inspired sermon on the day of Pentecost.

The coming of the Spirit and its meaning for the salvation of the human race (Acts 2:1-13)

The setting of the first outpouring of the Holy Spirit is the Jewish festival of Pentecost (Acts 2:1). The Greek word meaning 'fiftieth' does not appear in the Old Testament, but it was used by Greek-speaking Jews to identify a feast celebrated fifty days after Passover (Lev 23:15-22). It was the second of three major feasts (coming between the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles), known as the festival of weeks (Deut 16:9-12), the festival of harvest (Exod 23:16; 34:22), and the day of first fruits (Num 28:26-31).¹ The identification of Pentecost with first fruits conveys the idea that the three thousand who came to faith in Christ that day (Acts 2:41) were the first fruits of many thousands who would follow. The use of the imagery of first fruits for the work of the Spirit by Paul (Rom 8:23) suggests an association between the Spirit and Pentecost.

On the first Pentecost after Jesus's crucifixion, the apostles *were all together in one place* (Acts 2:1). The mention of 120 disciples in 1:15 suggests that the ambiguous "they" refers to that group. The prophecy of Joel quoted by Peter in his sermon (2:18) is an indication that women were among those present. The most likely place for the gathering was the up-

1 Mark J. Olson, "Pentecost", in D. N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, vol. 5, New York, Doubleday, 1996, p. 222.

per room of a house (see 2:2) where they had been praying.² Perhaps it was near the temple, which would explain how such a large crowd was so quickly attracted to the scene. Under the communist regime, evangelical Christians in Romania had the habit of meeting in houses for prayer and Bible study.³ They experienced sublime renewal movements of the Spirit, sometimes enthusiastic and charismatic. Such movements usually began with a significant group experience of fervent prayer. After almost 30 years of institutional stabilisation, Romanian evangelicals would benefit much from recovering such powerful environments which are conducive to the spontaneous and refreshing work of the Holy Spirit.

Several displays of divine power are associated with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The Old Testament imagery used to describe them recalls God's presence among his people. The *sound like the rush of a violent wind* (Acts 2:2) alludes to the creative and life-giving work of the Spirit of God (see Gen 1:2; 2:7; Ezek 37:9-14). The *divided tongues, as of fire, which appeared among them* (Acts 2:3) convey the idea of speech and communication of the gospel. Fire also symbolises God's presence in the Old Testament (see Exod 19:18; 1 Kgs 18:38-39; Ezek 1:27) and the combination of wind and fire depicts God's powerful and tempestuous intervention (Ps 104:4; Isa 66:15). *A tongue rested on each of them* indicating that the blessing of God's Spirit was for each individual believer in the community. When they *were filled with the Holy Spirit, they began to speak in other languages* (Acts 2:4), which means that the Spirit gave them the ability to speak prophetically and bear testimony to the exalted Christ, just as Jesus had promised (1:4-5, 8). The phenomena that accompanied the event could be heard (*the sound, other languages*) and seen (*tongues as of fire*), thus providing irrefutable evidence of the coming of the Spirit.

The noise drew a large audience formed by diaspora Jews (Acts 2:5), pilgrims to Jerusalem, permanent residents, and proselytes (2:10) or converts to Judaism. A great number of pilgrims attended the feast of Pentecost, as that time of the year was best suited to travel. The list of nationalities repre-

2 F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament), Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1988, p. 50.

3 For a detailed and thoroughly documented historical approach on prayer and Bible study groups among the Romanian evangelicals during the communist period, see Ciprian Balaban, *Istoria Bisericii Pentecostale din România (1922-1989). Instituție și harisme*, Oradea, Scriptum, 2016, pp. 156-180; Sorin Bădrăgan, *Bapțiștii. Repere istorice și identitare*, Cluj-Napoca, Risoprint, 2018, pp. 60-69.

sented includes fifteen places and groups ranging in an anticlockwise circle with Jerusalem at its centre (2:9-11).⁴ It may also be intended to evoke the first listing of nations in Genesis 10 that immediately precedes the event at the tower of Babel (Gen 11.1-9). At Babel, God scatters languages as a judgment action. At Pentecost, he scattered language to bring a new cross-cultural unity in the Spirit.⁵ Pentecost may be seen as a Babel in reverse. “To the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) is already being foreshadowed. Three times in this episode it says that the bystanders heard these *Galileans* (2:7) speaking in their native languages (2:6, 8, 11), therefore they were bewildered (2:6), amazed, astonished (2:7) and perplexed (2:12). Speaking in tongues in this context needed no interpretation as it did later in Corinth (1 Cor 14:5, 13, 27), and the observers listened to them *speaking about God’s deeds of power* (Acts 2:11) and understood them immediately. But the manifestations of the Holy Spirit are not always self-evident. When the crowd wondered about the meaning of what they were witnessing (2:12), some of the bystanders derisively accused the disciples of drunkenness (2:13).

In some evangelical circles the word ‘missionary’ still evokes an image of Western Christians spreading the gospel in far-off countries. But recent missiological statistics show that most of those engaged in cross-cultural mission are actually from the so-called ‘majority world.’⁶ Central and Eastern European churches must understand that this is a time when they too must be filled with the Holy Spirit of God for the sake of proclaiming salvation to all nations. We should not expect to be rich in order to bear witnesses to the resurrected Christ. God has already endowed us with all we need to proclaim his wonders. He has graciously and abundantly poured out his Spirit upon us and opened doors all over the world for us to go out in his name.

Saint Peter’s interpretation of the Pentecost and the results of his sermon (Acts 2:14-41)

The questions and sarcasm of some in the crowd prompted Peter to stand up *with the eleven*, raise his voice, and respond. People were expected to be

4 James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996, p. 26.

5 David E. Garland, *Acts* (Teach the Text Commentary Series), Grand Rapids, Baker, 2017, p. 28.

6 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God. Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2006, p. 38.

sober at *nine o'clock in the morning* (Acts 2:15). As in other historiographical works from the Greco-Roman era, the speeches in Acts do not report verbatim what was said.⁷ The wording in 2:40 (*with many other arguments*) shows that Luke presented only the highlights of Peter's sermon. He argued that the manifestations they were witnessing were part of God's purpose revealed in Scripture.

First, Peter claims that the prophetic vision of Joel 2:28-32 has begun to be implemented in the events of Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21). He changes the citation slightly by replacing the 'afterward' in Joel by *in the last days* (2:17), which indicates that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Jesus's followers marks the dawn of a new era. The final epoch in salvation history has been inaugurated. Peter includes speaking in tongues in the idea of prophecy, probably because the apostles were speaking in recognisable languages. The Jews had come to believe that with the last of the written prophets the spirit of prophecy had ceased in Israel. But they

7 Regarding the authorship of the discourses found in Acts, the general scholarly consensus is that they are not exact recordings of what the speakers said but summaries of their speeches. As for the rhetorical structure and theological content, some scholars say that they both are Luke's contribution. Christopher Tucket, for example, suggested that "the speech in Acts 2 placed on Peter's lips may not tell us so much about Luke's own views, but more about what Luke thought were the kinds of things Peter said, or should have said, in the context in which the speech is now placed within the story" (Christopher Tucket, "The Christology of Luke-Acts," *The Unity of Luke-Acts* [ed. Joseph Verheyden; Leuven, Leuven University, 1999], p. 141).

Others argue that Luke shaped only the rhetorical structure whereas the theology of each discourse reflects the *kerygma* of the early church. It is worth recalling here Cadbury's remarks of nearly 80 years ago: "Critics of the secular school would scrutinize [Luke's] speeches particularly. They were the most prized parts of the classical historians and the most carefully composed parts in contemporary historiography... Like Thucydides and the other best composers of speeches he attempted to present what the speakers were likely to have said" (Henry Joel Cadbury, "The Speeches in Acts", in *The Beginnings of Christianity. Part I: The Acts of the Apostles. Volume V. Additional Notes to the Commentary* [ed. Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury; London, Macmillan & Company, 1933], 425 and 426 respectively).

This debate is not really germane for our purpose in this article because whatever the case may be, what we have in these speeches reflects the main points of the apostolic *kerygma*. It's worth mentioning though that we believe that – as Beverly Gaventa put it – "Lucan theology is intricately and irreversibly bound up with the story he tells and cannot be separated from it" (Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Toward a Theology of Acts: Reading and Rereading," *Interpretation* 42, 1988, p. 150).

expected it to flourish again with the coming of the Messianic age, in fulfilment of Ezekiel 37.⁸ Peter is telling the people that this was the fulfilment of a prophecy that all devout Jews have been longing to see fulfilled.

God will outpour his Spirit *upon all flesh* (Acts 2.17), which means that the entire community will receive the divine gift of the Spirit, not only a few special people. Joel and Peter both understood this to mean the Jewish people. However, Luke, who is recording this, knows that it includes gentiles, all those who repent and are baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. The radical new community created by the unprecedented presence of the Spirit is remarkably inclusive. It is gender-inclusive: *your sons and your daughters* (2:17), *male and female* (2:18). It is age-inclusive: *your young men and your old men* (2:17). The prophesying mentioned is not only predicting the future, but also speaking about the nature and will of God. *Visions and dreams* were common means that God used to reveal himself. In the past, the Spirit had been poured only upon those anointed by God for special tasks as leaders or prophets of Israel. Now God will work in the new era through all who belong to him regardless of their social or economic status (*slaves, both men and women*).

The signs referred to in Acts 2:19-20 have often perplexed interpreters: *portents* (or wonders) *in the heaven, signs on the earth*. In the Old Testament, cosmic phenomena were signs of divine judgment. Peter's quotation adds the word *signs*, often paired with *wonders* in Acts (2:22, 43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 7:36; 14:3; 15:12) and in the Old Testament (Ex. 7:3; Dt. 4:34; 6:22). But signs and wonders in the New Testament usually display God's miraculous blessings. That is *blood, and fire and smoky mist* could more easily relate to the events of Jesus's passion and Pentecost. The *sun turned to darkness* and *moon to blood* (Acts 2:20) are standard apocalyptic images and almost certainly refer to the final cosmic events preceding the coming of the Lord. *The Lord's great and glorious day* refers to that terrible moment when God will judge humankind, as portrayed in Joel 3:1-15. The prophet Joel does not indicate the length of time between the outpouring of God's Spirit and the outpouring of his wrath, but the former is a sign that the latter will certainly take place.

8 More about first century Jewish messianic expectations in Romulus Ganea, "Mesianismul în literatura comunității de la Qumran și în cărțile apocrife și pseudoepigrafe", in *Plērōma*, decembrie 2000, pp. 73-84.

If signs that the end is near are so clear, it is a matter of urgency to seek salvation from the Lord before it is too late. *Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved* (Acts 2:21). *Everyone* corresponds with the earlier *all flesh* (2:17) as a reference to all people, Jews and gentiles. Salvation is linked with the invocation of *the name of the Lord*, here in connection with the exalted Christ (4:10-12; 22:16). Later, Peter explains that calling on his name means submitting in repentance and faith to baptism (2:37-39).

Peter assumes that his audience already has considerable information regarding Jesus's identity. He had been *attested* to them by God with *deeds of power, wonders and signs that God did through him among them* (Acts 2:22). Jesus was *a man*, but in the same time his miraculous activity was indicative of his divine nature. Yet this Jesus had been put to death by crucifixion. On the one hand, the responsibility for the Lord's crucifixion is placed on the Jews, who Peter accuses of evil complicity with *those outside the law* (2:23). On the other hand, Jesus was handed over to the Jews *according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God*. Nothing took God by surprise. In recent years, many Eastern European historians and sociologists have focused their attention on the damage that communism inflicted on people in this part of the world.⁹ Careful analyses have been undertaken about phenomena such as the historical delay produced within the iron cage, the economic journey from capitalism to socialism and back, predatory behaviour in transition economies, the former *nomenklatura* as the new business elite preying on the state in post-communist countries, the privileges of former Communist Party membership, social inequality in post-communist capitalism, and so on. Sober-minded assessments of post-communist societies are needed in order to facilitate a coherent transit to stable democracy. However, listing the dire consequences of communism sometimes throws a grim veil over people's hope for a better

9 Among them, Stelian Tănase, *Revoluția ca eșec. Elite și societate*, București, Humanitas, 2006; Lucian Boia, *De ce este România altfel?*, București, Humanitas, 2012. Vladimir Tismăneanu, Cristian Pătrășconiu, *Cartea președinților*, București, Humanitas, 2013; Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Diavolul în istorie. Comunism, Fascism și câteva lecții ale secolului XX*, București, Humanitas, 2013; Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Efigii ale unui coșmar istoric*, București, Humanitas, 2015; Andrei Pleșu, Gabriel Liiceanu, Horia-Roman Patapievici, *O idee care ne sucește mințile*, București, Humanitas, 2014; Vintilă Mihăilescu (ed.), *De ce este România astfel? Avatarurile excepționalismului românesc*, Iași, Polirom, 2017.

future. In these circumstances, those responsible need to be identified, but there must also be an awareness of divine sovereignty. Nothing in that sad epoch took God by surprise. No matter how hard it may be for us to accept, as with the sacrifice of Christ, everything happened according to God's all-embracing foreknowledge.

God acted to reverse the evil plan of those who murdered his son by raising him up, *having freed him from death* (Acts 2:24). Peter offers no explanation about why *it was impossible for him to be held in its power*. Not even death could withstand the purposes and intervention of God. Peter uses Psalm 16:8-11 to support Jesus's resurrection. This psalm expresses confidence in the face of humanity's most terrible fear, the fear of death. The author who calls himself God's *Holy One* (Acts 2:27), makes three confident assertions: that his *flesh will live in hope* (2:26), that *God will not abandon his soul in Hades* (2:27) or allow his body to decompose (2:27). Having experienced *the ways of life*, the author is confident that he will continue to live in God's fulfilling presence (2:28). The Jews traditionally believed that David was referring to himself. Peter contends that these verses were written by David, but they were not about David. Everyone knew that David died, was buried, and did not rise from the dead (2:29). The great king had been a prophet who foresaw the resurrection and exaltation of his descendant, the Messiah, who would die but somehow defy death (2:30-31). Peter links the hope of the psalmist with Jesus and his resurrection: *This Jesus God raised up* (2:32). The proof of Jesus's resurrection is the eyewitness report of the apostles. The twelve did not actually witness the resurrection, but the risen Christ has appeared to them (1:3).

Afterwards, Jesus was *exalted at the right hand of God* (Acts 2:33).¹⁰ In the ancient world, *the right hand* was often identified with strength, goodness, and divinity.¹¹ Only the one exalted at God's right hand can bestow God's Spirit. The two themes of the sermon so far – an explanation

10 The dative case of the Greek in v. 33 (τῇ δεξιᾷ οὐ τοῦ θεοῦ ὑψωθεῖς) could be rendered either "with the right hand of God" (instrumental sense, as NEB), or "at the right hand of God" (local sense, as ESV). The later sense is preferred by the majority of commentators, but in either case the point remains that Jesus had been exalted to a position of power and authority, marked by his receiving from the Father the promised Holy Spirit to give to God's people.

11 Richard P. Thompson, *Acts. A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Kansas City, Beacon Hill, 2015, p. 86.

of the gift of the Spirit (2:16-21) and a proclamation of Jesus as Messiah (2:22-32) – are brought together here.

Since *David did not ascend into heavens* (Acts 2:34-35), in Psalm 110:1 he was again not speaking of himself but of Christ. Originally, this psalm was about the enthronement of a son of David as king of Israel. The expectation of the Davidic Messiah burned ardently in the hearts of pious Jews in the first century BC and they believed that this psalm referred to him (Matt 22:41-46; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44).¹² The prophecy suggests that the king who will rule in Jerusalem is the Lord's earthly vicegerent. However, if David's son is his superior, the messianic kingdom is not simply a renewal of David's earthly dominion but a transcendental event. For Peter the quotation served as a transition from the confession of Jesus as Messiah to the ultimate confession that Jesus is Lord. Actually, the early Christians found in Psalm 110:1 the basis for the belief that Jesus was exalted to God's right hand (see Rom 8:34; Heb 1:3; 12:2; 1 Pet 3:22). Since Jesus had been uniquely exalted to God's side and poured out the promised Spirit, he could be called *Lord* in the sense that God is.

Peter concluded his message by affirming his main point: *God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah* (Acts 2:36).¹³ Jesus is the Lord on whom

12 David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (The Pillar New Testament commentary, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2009, p. 151.

13 This may sound like an adoptionist claim, but Conzelmann rightly asserts that Luke makes no essential distinction between κύριος and χριστός. Luke derives the combination of the two titles from the scriptural proof, the results of which he summarizes here; he obtains the Messiah title from Psalm 16 and the κύριος title from Psalm 110. "Luke is not reflecting on the time of installation at all but simply sets forth God's action in opposition to the behavior of the Jews" (H. Conzelmann, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*. Hermeneia, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987, p. 21). In the same line of thought, C. Kavin Rowe ("Acts 2.36 and the Continuity of Lukan Christology", *New Testament Studies*, 53, January 2007, pp. 37-56) offers an argument for a reasoned rejection of the majority view in the modern period. Modern interpreters (Wrede, Bultmann, Cullmann, Ulrich Wilckens, C. K. Barrett) seem to be united in their opinion that Acts 2.36 promulgates a christology that is recognizably different from Luke's own view – that Jesus has been made Lord and Messiah by virtue of his resurrection. According to Rowe this tension is due to the collision of different interpretive contexts. The conclusion of his compelling overview of Lukan Christology is that the biblical writer "creates a narrative Christology in which Jesus' identity as κύριος stands at the center". Thus, Rowe's point is that the "making" in Acts 2.36 does not refer to an ontological transformation in the identity of Jesus or his status but to an epistemological shift in the perception of the human

we should call (2:21) since he is the Messiah, resurrected by God in fulfilment of Psalm 16:8-11 and now exalted to his right hand in fulfilment of Psalm 110:1. Peter derives the combination of the two titles from scriptural proof. He is simply presenting God's action in contrast to the behaviour of the Jews. In this narrative Christology, Jesus's identity as Lord stands at the centre. Thus, the "making" in Acts 2:36 does not refer to an ontological transformation of the identity of Jesus or his status, but to a shift in the perception of the human community. In Luke's narrative, there was never a time when Jesus was not the Lord. The final words (*whom you crucified*) anticipate the call to repentance that follows. This implies that demonstrating the need for repentance should be part of any evangelistic endeavour (see 3:17-21; 10:42-43; 14:15; 17:30-31).

While communism banned religion altogether, postmodernism accepts it as long as it remains diffuse religiosity. In the last two decades, Romanians, for example, have shown a growing interest in various spiritual quests, esoteric movements, oriental mysticism and the paranormal and occult. Preaching a straightforward message about Christ is very appropriate in such conditions, because people need to discover that their inclination towards the transcendental is in fact an expression of their inner desire to know their Creator. This can only be satisfied through a personal, yet mystical relationship with Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Peter was an effective speaker due to the Holy Spirit's power. His listeners were *cut to the heart* (Acts 2:37), an emotional reaction to their role in Jesus's crucifixion. Feelings led to action, because they asked for immediate guidance: *brothers, what shall we do?* The question reminds us of the response to the preaching of John the Baptist (see Luke 3:10-14). The coming of the Spirit truly denoted a new phase in God's plan, just as John the Baptist denoted the previous one – Jesus's earthly activity.

Peter gives two specific instructions to the crowd (Acts 2:38). First, he told them to *repent*. This is a common motif in Acts (8:22; 11:18; 19:4; 20:21). Repentance includes both regret for sinful deeds and turning to God in obedience. The result is a new relationship with God and others.¹⁴ Second, he told them to be *baptized*. Baptism is often associated with re-

community. "In the Lukan narrative, there was not a time when Jesus was not κύριος... Acts 2.36, that is, does not contradict Lukan Christology but expresses it".

14 Darrell Bock, *Acts* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament), Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2007, pp. 141-142.

pentance in Luke's two volumes (Luke 3:3; Acts 13:24). Converts were baptized *in the name of Jesus*, the one under whose authority their lives would be lived out (compare 1 Cor 1:12-17). The purpose of Christian baptism is the divine forgiveness of sins. The primary link between repentance and forgiveness is expressed in baptism as the medium. In Acts, baptism is also associated with admission into the fellowship of believers (see 8:12, 16; 10:47-48; 16:15; 19:5).¹⁵

With these instructions came a promise: *you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*. The promise was not an afterthought; it was a description of what would follow when a sinner heeded the call to repent and be baptized. In Protestant theological tradition, the gift of the Spirit has been understood in two main ways. In mainstream evangelical denominations, Jesus is the unique bearer of the Holy Spirit, and the believer, by replicating Jesus's own experience through baptism, shares in his Spirit.¹⁶ In Pentecostal and charismatic doctrine, the baptism in the Spirit is a distinct experience, an empowering act of God on behalf of the born-again believer.¹⁷ Either way, the Spirit is given to minister the benefits of God's kingdom and to make possible the conversion of others.

The promise of receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:39) is extended to Jews (*your children*) and Gentiles (*all who are far away*). Those *whom the Lord our God calls to him* recalls the final promise of Joel's prophecy (Acts 2:21) which is turned on its head. Salvation is a synergic and reciprocal activity: the one who calls on the name of the Lord is the same one *whom the Lord our God calls to him*.

15 For a comprehensive and well documented approach on the practice of baptism in Romanian language, see John F. Tipei, *Botezul creștin. Semnificațiile actului în Noul Testament*, Oradea, Metanoia, 2004.

16 Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology. An Introduction*, sixth edition, Chichester, Wiley Blackwell, 2017, pp. 296-298.

17 For more detailed approaches on the Pentecostal perspective on the Spirit Baptism as an experience distinct from conversion, see Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of Saint Luke*, Peabody, Hendrickson, 1999; Max Turner, *Power from on High. The Spirit in Israel's Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic, 2000, pp. 348-427; Craig S. Keener, *Gift Giver. The Holy Spirit for Today*, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2001. For a Romanian Pentecostal perspective on the Spirit baptism, see John F. Tipei, *Duhul Sfânt. O teologie biblică din perspectivă pentecostală*, Oradea, Metanoia, 2003, pp. 183-186; Ioan Brie, "Promisiunea primirii Duhului Sfânt în Luca 11.1-13, din perspectivă pentecostală", în *Plērōma*, iunie 2015, pp. 87-97.

Peter testified using *many other arguments* (Acts 2:40) not recorded here. These were not merely religious polemics or exegetical points. Peter also *exhorted* his listeners, which means that he repeatedly called them to respond to his speech. Peter's appeal, *save yourselves*, picks up the language of 2:21, where salvation from God's coming judgment and inheriting eternal life is meant. In this context, the right response is to claim God's saving activity in Jesus. But the listeners' favourable attitude toward the apostles' testimony would rescue them from something more immediate too – the damning influence of their *corrupt generation*. This is Old Testament language for a generation that is stubborn, rebellious and not faithful to God (Ps 78:8; see also Deut 32:5; Phil 2:15).¹⁸ Those who want to be saved from the judgment of God must disassociate themselves from their generation and unite themselves with Jesus and his plan. *Three thousand* people believed and took the first step of obedience – they were *baptized* (Acts 2:41).

Today's successful preachers inevitably seem to have broad smiles, charismatic personalities and optimistic, shiny rhetoric. Peter's sermon at Pentecost reminds us that a faithful preacher should proclaim a crucified Saviour whose invitation is not to enjoy happiness as society defines it, but to repent in order to inherit God's eternal happiness in his glorious kingdom. The focus on Christ as Lord in Peter's sermon is an important reminder concerning the cross-shaped and Christ-shaped message of the gospel that Eastern European Christian preachers should proclaim in the midst of a consumer culture that constantly threatens to distort the message according to its own standards for success.

Above all, the most pernicious plague that communism caused in Eastern Europe is corruption. When more than 98% of Romanians declare themselves to hold some form of Christian faith, one would expect that the country would reflect Christian values in all spheres of daily life, including the economy, politics and society. Unfortunately, various studies on corruption depict a discrepant image of how everyday life is lived in Romania. For example, in Transparency International's *Corruption Perceptions Index for 2017* Romania ranks 59th in the world, with a score of 48/100. The situation raises the question: does the Christian church make any attempt

18 John B. Polhill, *Acts* (The New American Commentary), Nashville, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992, p. 118.

to correct the divergence between what Romanians say they believe and what they actually do? Let us not forget that according to the book of Acts, the call to repentance was an essential ingredient of the apostles' preaching and the same call is needed in post-communist Eastern European society.

Community life restored by the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:42-47)

Summary passages like this one are quite common in the first chapters of Acts (1:12-14; 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 5:12-16). Usually, they provide general descriptions of conditions in the early church at a certain moment. But they also divide the narrative into sections, while connecting the episodes in a continuous narrative.

The new converts *devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers* (Acts 2:42). This is a description of the ministry of the disciples in a variety of contexts, not intended as a primitive liturgical sequence. *The apostles' teaching* refers to the testimony of the Twelve about Jesus's ministry and resurrection. *The fellowship* mostly involved sharing material blessings, as described in 2:44-45. *The breaking of bread* denotes more than regularly eating together; it is Luke's shorthand for the Lord's Supper, which seems to have happened in the context of an ordinary meal. Finally, they devoted themselves to *the prayers*. This probably points to their participation in set times of prayer at the temple (see 3:1). However, meeting together in households involved praising God (2:47). They probably prayed together in such house groups.

The first Christians regularly gathered in the temple courts (Acts 2:46) because they could accommodate large gatherings. The crowds stood in *awe* (2:43) as the apostles now carried out *wonders and signs*. Luke often draws attention to the awe engendered by miracles (3:10; 5:5, 11, 13; 19:17). Of course, the apostles were no more than God's agents. The power was God's, and they were the channels of his grace.

Some scholars have noted that the vocabulary describing the community of believers in this summary passage reflects Greco-Roman philosophical discussions about friendship.¹⁹ Luke emphasises their being together and sharing all things in common (Acts 2:44-45). Perhaps his in-

19 Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts* (Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament), Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2008, p. 48; Richard P. Thompson, *Acts*, pp. 94-95

tention was to show that the Greco-Roman ideal of friendship was realised in the fellowship of the Spirit-created community. This community lived out its commitment to the apostles' teaching by gathering *day by day* in the temple courts to hear instruction. They also ate together, and on these occasions, they *broke bread*, a reference to Holy Communion. Their fellowship was practised *with glad and generous hearts* (2:46). The word *generous* here means they were open and frank in their relationships, a mark of selfless dedication to the Lord. They also praised God together (2:47). Their joyful spirit was attractive, a magnetic force, which attracted *the goodwill of all the people*. As the Christians were seen and heard by other people in Jerusalem, their activities were an opportunity for witness. As a result, *day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved*.

Psychological and sociological research, as well as philosophical reflections on the harmful influences of communism, point to the fact that the area of public life most seriously affected is the social solidarity of the people. In spite of the transformations that Romania has experienced in the past century, some informal practices and institutions have survived and adapted, and continue to influence Romanian society at the present time. One such practice is instrumental social relationships – using people to get what you want.²⁰ In this section of the book of Acts we see that the church, by virtue of its nature and mission, possessed the most effective means to counteract the instrumental approach to social relationships. Despite the confessional diversity that characterises it, the contemporary Church is endowed by God's Spirit to improve the social reality of the Romanian nation.

Conclusion

The sovereign and saving intervention of God through Christ in the history of mankind inaugurates in the present age the cosmic restoration of Creation. God, through the gospel, invites the human race to take part in the restoration of all things. Regenerated and empowered by the Holy Spirit, believers become adequate for the mission of the Kingdom of God

20 For a detailed and thoroughly documented study on the phenomenon of instrumental social relationships in post-communist Romania, see Cătălin Augustin Stoica, *România continuă. Schimbare și adaptare în communism și postcomunism*, București, Humanitas, 2018.

– to perform, in all spheres of their existence, the good works characteristic of God's rule in Christ.

The sphere of social relations is no exception. Purification through the atoning sacrifice of Christ encompasses all spheres of human existence, and relationships enjoy special attention, since the Bible says that the result of spiritual cleansing is the formation of "a people" (Titus 2:14). This people becomes an agent for healing social relationships and remediating the social fabric of the community. Sanctified by God's Spirit in Christ, Christians can develop in their professional environments relationships that reflect a human nature truly restored in the person of Jesus Christ. As vehicles of such a new life in the world, they will tend to spiritualize the social climate in which they live, making felt the presence of the renewing power. They are the living proofs of the final restoration that will take place at Jesus' second coming, when his kingdom will be fully established.

But the work of restoring human nature, which is followed by the restoration of the social fabric, is not a unilateral one but a bilateral one. In order to benefit from the divine saving action, one has to respond in the adequate manner. According to the divinely inspired narrative of the book of Acts, this is repentance. Repentance is that human reaction that consists in regret for the personal and collective sin, the invocation of God's forgiveness in Christ, and the beginning of a life renewed by the Holy Spirit. But all the present benefits of divine healing are just the first fruits of the future glory of God's kingdom, for which Christians bear witness.

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