

“Forged”

1 Peter 2:1–3; Romans 12:9–16; Acts 2:42–47

God has forged us into a community of his people.

The blacksmith pulls the red-hot metal rod out of the forge. He begins to pound the glowing iron with his hammer, impurities are knocked clean and soon the nail emerges -- sharp, strong, useful. In a way, but only a way, you and I are the raw material that God shapes into someone useful for God’s purposes,



ready to be a witness to Jesus in thought and in deed. But you and I are not like the metal rod, in that the reshaping is our task too, our responsibility as well. The spiritual milk that Peter has in mind in verse 2. is the milk of “grace and gift,” as David Bartlett puts it, so that we may grow “into salvation.” In his commentary on 1 Peter, Bartlett has more on this milk:

In 1:3 and 1:23 the author tells them that they have been begotten anew or born anew. Here he says that they are “just born” or “newborn” (*ἀρτιγέννητος artigennētos*), the emphasis not so much on being born again as being freshly born [2:2]. The reminder that the world of faith is a brand-new world for them leads to the image of the infant drinking milk, food both good and necessary.

There is no implication here that the “milk” newborn Christians drink is somehow inferior to the solid food they will get later on. In 1 Cor 3:2, Paul associates milk with immaturity and with a life still burdened by the cares of the flesh, still lived with one foot in the old age (see also Heb 5:13). Here, however, milk is gift and grace. It is of the spiritual realm, not of the flesh. Both the NRSV and the NIV call this “spiritual” milk, but the Greek adjective *λογικός (logikos)* is not derived from the word for “spirit” (*πνεῦμα pneuma*) but from *λόγος (logos)*, “reasonable,” “rightly ordered.” It is the same term Paul uses in Rom 12:2 for “a reasonable worship.” “Spiritual” is a fair enough translation, but the Pauline contrast between flesh and spirit, which also has its place in parts of 1 Peter, is not in the forefront here. Brox, who translates the term “spiritual,” also points to the other uses of *logos* in 1 Pet 1:23; 2:8; 3:1. Achtemeier suggests that the derivation of the adjective should be directly related to the word of preaching (as in 1 Pet 1:23) and translates the phrase, “the milk of God’s word.” Just as the promised land flowed with milk and honey for the children of Israel, so also Christian believers receive milk as a foretaste of the fuller salvation yet to come.

That is why spiritual milk grows newborn Christians toward salvation as mother’s milk nurtures newborn infants toward maturity. The NRSV translates the last part of v. 2 as “growing into salvation,” the NIV as “growing up in your salvation.” The former translation stresses salvation as goal; the latter stresses salvation as gift. For 1 Peter, Christians live with the promise of the fullness of God’s mercy and have a foretaste of what that mercy will be. The two translations capture those two aspects of the epistle’s hope, although the NSRV seems somewhat more accurately to reflect the Greek text and the usual meaning of the preposition “into” (*εἰς eis*).

“Milk” is here an image for the whole range of gifts provided to newborn Christians and should probably not be more narrowly specified as scripture or right doctrine. In this context, pure milk is the opposite of guile and slander. The selfishness of the flesh is what believers leave behind for the purity of the new life in Christ.¹

¹ Bartlett L. David, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 1994–2004, 12, 263–264

Newly forged

In Romans 12, Paul, later echoed by Peter, begins to show us, concretely, what this recreation looks like. We are transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may see clearly what is “good and acceptable and perfect,” so that we can imaginatively comprehend and embrace the will of God (12:2). This renewing does not take place in isolation, but in relationship within community. Our reshaping plays out differently from person to person, but all of it is given to us for the building up of the community (12:3-8).

And what does this renewing look like? It looks like love. And what does love look like? Love is genuine, coming from the center of ourselves. It cannot be faked. Love is sacrificial. It is mutual. It is being willing to play second fiddle. Love is taking care of those who need us or are simply in need. We laugh with our friends when they laugh, and we cry with them when they mourn. Read Romans 12:9-18 again. Read it in different translations. Try reading it less as a series of exhortations and more as a description, an imaginative description of the renewed mind living with others, including even those who are hostile to us or to the Gospel of Christ.

It is always worth remembering that the New Testament word for love is nearly always the Greek, *agape*. In Greek usage, it was a colorless, empty word, waiting to be filled with meaning and Paul does not hesitate to fill it right up. All understandings of love that exclude God are mere distortions of the real thing. Thus, Paul tells the Christians in Rome that they are to love but then has to tell them exactly what genuine God-given love looks like, so that they can despise what is evil and hold on to what is good (12:9).

We see this played out in the Christian community in Jerusalem nearly 25 years before Paul wrote Romans.

Love in Community

In the book of Acts, Luke tells the story of the beginnings of the Christian church from the time of Jesus to about 62AD, a little more than thirty years.² Luke begins with Jesus’ return to the Father and then moves the scene to Jerusalem. There, some of Jesus’ followers have gathered to await the arrival of the Holy Spirit.

Jerusalem is bursting at the seams. Perhaps 200,000 Jews are there for the late spring festival of Pentecost. On the day of Pentecost, Jesus’ disciples are gathered in one place and, as promised, God’s Spirit comes upon them with great power, enabling them to speak in languages it would be impossible for them to know. Some onlookers even accuse Peter and the others of being drunk. In the face of this ridicule, Peter rises to address the crowd. Invoking the words of the prophet Joel, Peter preaches the first great sermon in Acts (and there are many!), closing with “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36). Many in the crowd were “cut to the heart” and asked what they could do. Peter’s response was simple: “Repent and be baptized.” Luke records that on that single day, more than three thousand Jews came forward to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. 3,000 in one day! Now, that’s growth. But reading on in Luke’s account, what struck me most is the value of looking at these early Christians through the lens of disciples growing in the faith, through all the means God has given us.

Forged together

The story of Acts is a story of inviting – more than 3000 in a single day and many more as the movement expands from Jerusalem to the entire Roman empire. The invitation made is straightforward: repent, be baptized, trust that Jesus is Messiah and Lord. Worshiping was woven through their fellowship. They prayed together. They still went to the temple. As Jewish families would

² Acts is the second volume of a two-volume work that begins with the Gospel of Luke. Together, the two volumes comprise about 25% of the New Testament. Luke was the only non-Jewish writer in the New Testament.

Koinonia

Fellowship halls. They are as common in United Methodist churches as [fill in the blank]. It is easy to think that fellowship is merely a warmhearted brotherly and sisterly love. Fellowship is certainly that – but also far more.

The New Testament Greek word we translate “fellowship” is *koinonia*. Sometimes it is also translated as “communion.” Many Christian organizations and churches use *koinonia* as a name for one thing and another. Type it into Google and you will get about 5,660,000 results!

The best way to understand *koinonia* is to see it as “sharing in” something. At Pentecost, Jesus’ followers shared in the gift and the power of the Holy Spirit, as do all Christians (2 Cor 13:13). Indeed, the *koinonia* of the believers was a gift brought by the Spirit. But we also share in the Spirit, just as God has called us all to the *koinonia* of his Son, Jesus.

In verse 44, Luke writes that the Christians held all things in common. This was a well-known phrase from Greek philosophy indicating friendship. As Robert Wall writes, “A fellowship of believers share more than common beliefs and core values; they display a regard for one another’s spiritual and physical well-being as a community of friends” – a community created by God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

do, they came home from temple and shared a meal, praising God. This “breaking of bread” would come to be a remembrance of Christ and a tangible expression of Christian unity.

Jews greatly valued learning, so we should not be surprised that they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” There was much to learn. Who was Jesus? What was all the kingdom-talk about? What did it mean to be Christ’s church? What were they to do? Our own need for learning is certainly no less than theirs.

Luke attests to the loving and serving character of this new community. They took their responsibilities to one another so seriously that “they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as *any* had need” (v. 45).³ As any had need. Such a radical commitment.

Luke’s portrait of this community is so radical, so uncommon that it is sometimes seen as idealized. Who could really live this way? But such skepticism betrays a lack of appreciation for the power of the Holy Spirit to lead a community toward a life they never even imagined. No wonder that these disciples had “the goodwill of all the people.”

Teaching, fellowship, sharing our resources, breaking bread, praising God, praying – these are all marks of a genuinely Christian community. Our own vision statement expresses the same concrete understanding of what it means to proclaim Jesus as Lord. It is more than a belief, a baptism, a membership, even a tithe. Proclaiming and embracing Jesus as Messiah and Lord is a commitment encompassing all we are, do, and have. How could we not be passionate if we truly grasp the Good News? Through the grace of God and our own commitment, we share in one another and in Christ.

Daily Bible Readings - Read 1 Peter in its entirety each week, followed by a psalm on Saturday.

Monday	1 Peter 1	A living hope
Tuesday	1 Peter 2	A chosen people, called to serve
Wednesday	1 Peter 3	Living as exiles, part 1
Thursday	1 Peter 4	Living as exiles, part 2
Friday	1 Peter 5	Tending God’s flock
Saturday	Psalm 121	Assurance of God’s protection

³ Some see these verses as implying a form of early Christian communism with the banishing of personal property. But there is no need to read it this way. Luke simply says that the Christians sold assets and used the proceeds to take care of those in need.