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Have you ever had a group of friends — dare I say, a gang — that was really tightly knit, really close, and for whom you would do anything? Some of us get this, some don't. Conflict can bring it about, as it unites us against a common cause. Also any difficult situation can draw people together. So soldiers often become very close friends — their need to trust each other is huge, and they live and work closely with each other. University often forges close friendships for the same reason.

The early church described in Acts has all the marks of this closeness. They are still a relatively small group, but they share an extraordinary belief and an extraordinary hope — that Jesus is risen from the dead, ascended to heaven, and they live in his grace. They are forbidden from preaching Christ crucified and resurrected, but they do it anyway — they live life like they have the cheat code (which they do). And, in this early shape of the church — a bit haphazard, but full of life and joy — they share completely with each other as if they were one close family.

We can look at this short passage in Acts in joy and amazement, and perhaps with naive envy too. This short paragraph makes it all sound so easy. Here is the Christian community getting it right straight away, to powerful, marvellous effect. How is it so hard now? Let's look at the pros and the cons of their situation as compared with our own, and see if we can draw anything useful from this.

So, firstly, we could talk about recency bias — this is our tendency to put more emphasis on recent things than those that happened longer ago. For the church in Acts 4 the crucifixion and resurrection *were* very recent things, and they were also very important — this was very exciting news that had to be spread as much and as loudly as possible. It was earth shattering and world changing, and those who heard and believed had every reason to change everything about all aspects of their life. We, on the other hand, live in a world that is very familiar with the existence of Christianity and its claims. How can the world get excited about something that happened two thousand years ago?

Another difference between now and then is the extent of materialism. However rich you were in those times, nothing could compare with modern wealth and materialism. There was simply less to possess or to spend wealth on. The rich could have big estates and own more horses, but theirs was not a world of super-yachts and private jets. And the common person had far less to covet. Our time is in slavery to wealth and the material — it is so much harder to win people into freely sharing. I'm not saying we are poorer, I'm saying that in our times we are less willing to share, and the wealthiest are usually the least willing. This is a point corroborated by the fact that communism, a political philosophy whose end goal looks like that of Acts 4, nonetheless requires an iron rule to maintain. And How equality is established is *very very* important. It is hard to imagine such a freely-sharing community now, beyond a few radical communes.

New movements can be fragile. After the disappearance of Jesus's body on Easter Day and the rumours of Jesus's resurrection, both the Romans and the Jewish Authorities must have banked on this new faith, this sect of Judaism, fizzling out quickly. Things fizzle because of the sheer number of people who are *not* in it, and who remain skeptical, or worse, who persecute it and whose influence we feel. The doubt of the masses can really shake our confidence, just as it shook Peter's willingness to admit his discipleship before the cock crowed on Good Friday morning. What sustains such a movement is overwhelming confidence in the truth of the movement - and - intensity. This church had such overwhelming confidence in the resurrection there was no doubt for them either on what they believed, or how they should live in response.

And that assurance gave their testimony enormous power. They spoke very confidently of what had happened, and, while not having every nuance of the theology worked out, they knew the most important bits – that Jesus was risen from the dead, vindicated as the son of God, and had secured for them salvation from their sins. Together with the complete lifestyle change, they would have been enormously persuasive.

And this is not to deny the power of the Holy Spirit working in them. An intensely joyful, prayerful church will see the power of the Holy Spirit. They had seen the Spirit at work in Jesus, and then in the acts of the disciples, and they had faith in the Spirit to act in power. The Spirit also strengthened their prayer life, and their power to share their faith.

The joyful, powerful and extraordinarily egalitarian image that we have in Acts 4 didn't really last. There were disagreements, there were difficulties, and yes, these early Christians were only human, as we are. But that doesn't stop the impact of that short period in church history, nor does it stop us aspiring to live in a such a joyful, faithful and good way. If this is what we want, we need to pray for the help of the Holy Spirit to empower us. We should be deliberate about sharing our faith as they did, and we need to work together in faith. Perhaps a starting point is to pray regularly with another friend – prayer partners pray different sorts of prayers to those who only pray on their own, or only pray as part of a large group.

I think the sort of dynamic image of the church in Acts 4 may be something of the past, but it is also a vision for the future, a vision which will one day become a reality, realised by our faithfulness and God's power.

Amen.

SDG.