

“Everything They Owned Was Held in Common”

Acts 4:32-35

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April 11, 2021 • Easter II

“Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul,” we read in the book of the Acts of the Apostles, “and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.... There was not a needy person among them, for as many owned land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.” That’s a remarkable picture. It sounds a lot like ... socialism. Or even ... communism. And it was the practice of the early church – the first Christians.

Everyone, take a deep breath. We’re going to talk about economics today. *Christian* economics. We live in a country in which many people apparently see socialism and communism as great evils. But when you really read the Bible ... well, honestly, you might be surprised at what it actually says.

Let’s back up. We’re in the fourth chapter of the book of Acts. This is the book from which we get most of our information about the earliest days of the church. At the start of the book, there is just *one* church, one “congregation,” the “mother church” in Jerusalem, which had only 120 members. The second chapter describes the events of the day of Pentecost, when 3,000 people were baptized and became Christians. Near the end of chapter 2, we are given a snapshot of what this community was like: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 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, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” That’s Acts 2:42-47 – a brief sketch of what was going on in the earliest Christian community, the “mother church” in Jerusalem. There are millions upon millions of churches around the world; every single one of them is a descendent of that “mother church” – which, from its very earliest days, was distinguished by this selling of possessions and re-distribution of wealth.

And they kept living like that, even as the church grew. In Acts 3, Peter heals a man who had been lame from birth; as word about that miracle spreads in chapter 4, another 5,000 people join the church, bringing the total number of Christians to about 8,000. That’s when we get the description of the Christian church that I read to you at first: “No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.... There was not a needy person among them, for as many owned land or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.” (Acts 4:32, 34-35) So this remarkable description of the economics of the Christian community is recorded not just once, but *twice*.

Unfortunately, we do not have any other records of this early church. They did not have a church building – there was no such thing yet; they met in small groups in people’s homes. There was not a paid staff – the members just volunteered their time. There was, as far as we know, no “church budget,” the way we think of it today. We have no financial records of any kind – no expense vouchers, no contribution records, no records of any property sales, no ledgers or spreadsheets, none of the stuff that Sheren works through and records in meticulous detail week after week. All we have are these broad descriptions from the book of Acts. There must have been some kind of organization to it; when new people joined the church, someone must have talked with them, explaining to them the economics of the Christian community, helping them sell their land and their houses, assisting with the re-distribution of their possessions, and also assessing which members of the community were truly in need of the community’s help and support. We unfortunately do not have any specific details about that. But we are given two examples of how this worked in practice – one positive, and one negative.

The positive example is described like this: “There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means ‘son of encouragement’). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.” (Acts 4:36-37) That’s the same Barnabas who later traveled with Paul, helping to spread the gospel far and wide.

The negative example is given at the beginning of chapter 5. There was a man named Ananias who sold a piece of property, and who kept some of the proceeds for himself. Sapphira, his wife, was aware of what her husband did. When Ananias brings only a part of the proceeds from the sale to the apostles, Peter sees right through the deception, and issues a harsh condemnation: “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ... How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!” Ananias falls down, dead. Soon after, Peter confronts Sapphira, and she too dies, for her complicity in this scheme.

So the message in the book of Acts is very clear: the *expectation* was that members of the Christian community would sell their possessions, bring the proceeds to the apostles, and the apostles would then re-distribute them to the members of church, based solely upon *need*. “There was not a needy person among them.” Because of these practices, *poverty* did not exist in the mother church.

Now this was not entirely without precedent. Something like this had been an ideal within Judaism for many centuries; the book of Deuteronomy envisioned that the people would make sure that there would be “no one in need among you.” (Deuteronomy 15:4) They didn’t do that, of course; sin and greed resulted in wide economic disparities between the rich and the poor, a situation that the prophet Amos cried out against eight centuries before Jesus. Then, around the time of Jesus, a group of Jews called “Essenes” created a communal existence for themselves out in the desert near the Dead Sea; this was a monastic community where the members did share their possessions with one another. We have the archaeological remains of the buildings they lived and worked in; we also have a large part of their library. So the communal existence that characterized the mother church in Jerusalem was similar to the communal existence that those Essene Jews had created out in the desert. Both groups envisioned an ideal situation in which there was not a dichotomy between the rich and the poor, but a reasonably equal sharing between all members of the community, and poverty would not exist.

It appears that many members of that mother church in Jerusalem were *very* poor. We know from Paul’s letters that when he went around establishing new churches in various places, he took up a collection to send to the mother church. He had agreed to this when he set off on his mission to convert

the Gentiles; he says that the leaders of the Jerusalem church “asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which is actually what I was eager to do.” (Galatians 2:10) The evidence suggests that there was greater wealth in the Gentile churches than there was in the mostly Jewish church in Jerusalem, so Paul’s collection helped to redistribute the wealth and reduce the poverty of the mother church.

The mother church in Jerusalem struggled to survive. First there were the persecutions by the Jews. Then there was the Roman siege of Jerusalem, when the Jews revolted, a siege that lasted four years, and culminated in the destruction of much of the city. Some members of the church managed to flee across the Jordan River before the siege began; many others died. Sixty years later, all the Jews that remained in the city were evicted. The Jerusalem church was finally able to re-establish itself in the fourth century. But it never again experienced the idyllic existence that is described in the book of Acts. Of course, there have been many attempts across the centuries – at monasteries, convents, and other Christian communities – to replicate the communal sharing that characterized the early church.

There are several important implications of all this. First: what the Bible describes as the practices in the earliest Christian church are most definitely some form of socialism or communism – not capitalism. Merriam-Webster defines communism, in its most basic form, as “a system in which goods are owned in common and are available to all as needed,” and capitalism as “an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are determined mainly by competition in a free market.” Socialism falls in between, with a combination of private ownership and sharing of wealth. What was going on at the mother church in the book of Acts was a communal existence. *This was not evil.* The leaders of the church – the apostles of Jesus Christ! – *expected* the members of the church to adhere to this philosophy. So when Ananias and Sapphira held a portion of the proceeds of the sale of their property for themselves, they were not following *God’s* will. They were following *Satan’s* will. That is what the Bible says. If you don’t believe me, well, go read it yourself!

Second: the Bible says *nothing* about how society *as a whole* should organize itself. When you have a society that is a mixture of Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and so on, plus a large number of avowed atheists and a very large number of agnostics and people who do not practice any faith, well, you have a situation that the Bible does not really address. Both communism and socialism can be easily perverted, with the people who are running things becoming wealthy, at the expense of the people they are theoretically trying to help. But a similar problem exists in capitalism, when business owners and executives become ridiculously rich at the expense of their customers or employees. All three economic systems are prone to excesses produced by that human sin called *greed*.

Third, and finally: *poverty* should not exist in the Christian community of faith. If there is someone in need – in our church, or in *any* church – then those who have resources should help. This applies to situations in our own midst – if there’s a church member who needs help, we really do need to give them help. But it also applies on a much broader scale. If there are churches in other parts of the world that are impoverished – or here in our own country – and there are churches like ours that are sitting on half a million dollars or more – well, what are we doing to help our poor brothers and sisters in the faith? I’m not saying we should just give it all away ... but I am saying that maybe we should do more than what we’ve been doing. Maybe we need to do a better job of “remembering the poor.”

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