

Challenges to the Ecumenical Movement

(2 of 9)

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Catherine. Acts 4:32-37

Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which they possessed was their own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was no needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need. Thus Joseph who was surnamed by the apostles Barnabas (which means, Son of encouragement), sold a field which belonged to him, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Justo. As we look at this text (and at others like it in the book of Acts), the first thing to note is that interpreters have often sought ways to diminish its importance. (Not an entirely innocent enterprise.)

One way of interpreting this text so as to avoid its radical implications is to say that the early community did indeed practice a commonality of goods but soon abandoned this practice.

According to this commonly held notion, the failure of this practice soon convinced Christians that their original zeal was unjustified and that having things in common was a mistake. As a result, it is claimed, the entire idea was forgotten a few years—perhaps months—after Pentecost.

This interpretation, however, goes against the most common principles of historical scholarship. When looking at ancient historical texts, scholars usually expect that the practices and ideals of the time at which the document was written have been projected back to the time to which the document refers. In dealing, for instance, with the various gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, scholars are quick to point out those elements in such accounts that reflect conditions, not at the time of Jesus, but at the time of the actual writing of the gospel.

But when it comes to the several texts in Acts that speak of an original commonality of goods among Christians, it is customary to take the opposite tack, declaring that such commonality was probably a fleeting experiment that failed. Were we to apply to these texts the same principle applied elsewhere, we would come to the conclusion that, no matter whether or not the very early church practiced such commonality, at the time when Acts was written, this was either the practice or the ideal of the church.

In consequence, it seems logical to conclude that, at least at the time when Acts was written, the church was practicing, or trying to practice, a commonality of goods such as the one described in our text. That this was true, not only in Luke's time but even much later, will be shown in a moment.

Catherine. A second way in which the implications of this text are avoided is by taking the opposite direction and claiming that the commonality of goods described in Acts never

happened. According to this interpretation, Luke is simply projecting back into the early days of the church an ideal that he actually took from Hellenism. There was a long tradition in Greek philosophy, dating back to Pythagoras and even earlier, and including Plato, that saw the common possession of goods as a characteristic of the ideal society. Therefore, so the argument goes, what Luke is actually doing here is simply projecting back that ideal into the early Christian community.

The main difficulty with such an interpretation is that, as we read the book of Acts, it is difficult to come to the conclusion that Luke is trying to picture an ideal community. This is the community of Ananias and Sapphira, and the community in which the widows of the Hellenists find it necessary to complain that they are not getting a fair share.

Justo. There is, however, another reason to reject the claim that this never happened or that it happened only in the very early days of the church. In a nutshell: There is ample textual proof that, even after the time of Luke, Christians were speaking of the commonality of goods as something that was still practiced among them.

In 1875, a long-lost document was discovered in Istanbul. The date of this document, called the Didache or Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, is difficult to determine, but most scholars agree that it was written sometime between the year 60 and the first decades of the next century. In

other words, it is roughly contemporary with the book of Acts. There we find words that remind us of the text we are studying:

You shall not turn the needy away, but rather will share everything with your brother [or sister], and call nothing your own. Since you already share in immortal goods, should you not do so even more in those that are mortal? (4:8)

Almost exactly the same words are found in the so-called Epistle of Barnabas (19:8), probably written around the year 130.

Likewise, Tertullian, writing around the year 200, declares, "all of us who are joined in one heart and soul do not hesitate in sharing material goods. All things are common among us, except women."

Thus, the notion that the text we are studying is pure Lukan fiction, or that it refers only to a fleeting moment in the life of the early church, is clearly shown to be wrong.

There is, however, another way in which this text has been interpreted so as to diminish its challenge to us. That is by over-radicalizing it. According to this interpretation, what this text means is that, as a result of their overwhelming experience, the early Christians "went on a happy." They sold all they had—or as we would say today, used up their principal—and soon they were all left in poverty. There were even commentators who then told us that this failed experiment was the reason why Paul had to spend so much of his time collecting an offering for the church in Jerusalem.

This is simply not what the text says. Greek, as many of you know, there are two forms of the past tense. (I may add that the same is true in Spanish, that other vehicle of divine revelation!). One of these forms of the past tense, the imperfect, refers to an ongoing action in the past (as in "When I was in college, I went to the movies on Saturdays"). The other refers to a single action in the past (as in "I went to the movies last Saturday"). In both cases, the verb is "went," but in the first case I mean that I used to go, while in the other I mean that I went once; I completed the action then, and did not continue it.

In the text in Acts, the past tenses are in the imperfect. Thus, what this text and the two other similar passages in Acts say is not that the early believers went out and sold everything, but rather that they would sell their possessions and goods and would distribute them, "as any had need" (Acts 2:44).

It was not a modern commune, guided by some ideological dream of common property. It was simply a community of concrete love, guided by the need of the less fortunate.

Since I have just used the word "community," it may be well to clarify another point, closely related to this subject, at which we have weakened the language of the New Testament. We all know, or think we know, that *koinonia* means "fellowship." What we are not usually told is that it means much more than what we today mean by "fellowship." In some ways, it comes closer to "partnership," as in a business venture. Thus, in Luke 5:10, the RSV tells that James and John,

the sons of Zebedee, were "partners" with Simon. What the Greek says is that they were *koinonoi* with him. In the common secular language of the time, if a group of us were to join in a common business venture, being common owners of it, what we would have would be a *koinonia*. Thus, *koinonia* does not mean simply "fellowship" or "communion." It also means partnership in the sense of sharing in material or any other kind of wealth. Therefore, when the New Testament speaks of the "koinonia of Jesus Christ," or of the "koinonia of the Spirit," it does not mean simply, as we often think, the good feeling of fellowship engendered in us by Jesus Christ or by the Spirit. It means also our common participation, in a way our common ownership, in Jesus Christ or in the Spirit. And it also means our partnership in all things because of Jesus Christ or because of the Spirit.

If on that basis we look at the entire New Testament, we find that this kind of sharing, not only in the spiritual sense but also in material, appears throughout. Whenever the church is spoken of as a *koinonia*, what is meant is, among other things, a company in which we are all equal stockholders, so that all we have is at the disposal of the rest, and what they have is at our disposal.

(It might be interesting at some point to play with possible uses of an equally ambiguous word in English: company. The church is a company. . . breaking bread.)

Catherine. The clearest example of this is the collection for the church in Jerusalem, which plays a fairly prominent role in the letters of Paul. Some interpreters have claimed that the church in Jerusalem became poor because they had sold all they had, eaten the proceeds, and been left with nothing to live on. There is nothing in the New Testament to support such an interpretation. On the contrary, there is every indication, supported by both pagan and Jewish historians, that there was a general famine in Palestine at this time. If such was the case, what most likely happened was that the church in that region, composed mostly of people of meager means, was sorely trying to meet the most urgent needs of the poorest among them.

In Romans 15:25-27, Paul explains to the Romans that his hope for visiting them has to wait until he finishes his work on the offering for the Jerusalem church, "for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to establish koinonia a (a partnership) with the poor among the saints in Jerusalem." Paul then goes on to say that these Gentiles "were pleased to do it, and indeed they are in debt to them, for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings."

Paul also needs to remind the Achaians—particularly the church in Corinth—to fulfill what they had promised to the suffering church in Jerusalem. In II Corinthians 8 and 9, he does so.

It is best for you now to complete what a year ago you began not only to do but to desire. . . I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance may supply your want, that there may be equality. As it is written [in Exodus 16], "He who gathered much had nothing over, and he who gathered little had no lack."

In this passage, as a theological prod, Paul reminds the Corinthians of what happened in the Exodus, as recorded in Exodus 16. We generally remember the miracle of the manna—that God gave the "bread from heaven" for the Israelites in the wilderness—but we often overlook the miracle that Paul reminds his Christians readers of in this passage: the miracle of the distribution. When the manna fell, the head of each "tent" went out to collect enough for the family, to be measured at about a quart apiece. Some gathered much more than they should have, and others did not get enough (a typical human situation!). However, when they came to measure it, a miracle occurred, and those who had gathered too much found that the excess had disappeared, and those who had too little, found their supply had increased to the right amount. God had performed a miracle to make the sharing in the resources provided come out right. (Perhaps one of the reasons we tend to remember the miracle of production and not the miracle of distribution is that we can boast of imitating God in being productive but not in the manner our resources are distributed.)

In both Romans and Corinthians, Paul points out a sharing that is both in material and in spiritual goods. The Gentiles had received and were still receiving a share in the spiritual resources of the Jerusalem church and therefore ought to share with them the material resources that they possessed. It is the same expectation we saw in the Didache: If we share in immortal goods, ought we not also share in mortal ones?

One could raise from these passages the question whether churches that are materially poor often have spiritual gifts to share with those churches that are materially richer materially. Although clearly this cannot be universally assumed, it is often the case.

Justo. There is an interesting passage in Proverbs that points to the dangers of too little material wealth as well as too much: Both conditions pose spiritual dangers:

Proverbs 30:7-9:

*Two things I ask of thee:
deny them not to me before I die:
Remove far from me falsehood and lying;
give me neither poverty nor riches;
feed me with the bread that is my portion,
lest I be full, and deny thee,
and say, "Who is the Lord?" or lest I be poor, and steal,
and profane the name of my God.*

The phrase "the bread that is my portion" is translated, "the food that is needful for me" in the RSV. What it refers to is the daily ration of a soldier—the proper share, neither too much nor too little. It is that phrase that lies behind the Exodus story. It also occurs in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." What is meant is the right portion for us, with a clear understanding that too much can be as dangerous as too little.

In the case of the collection for the Jerusalem church, Paul is pointing out that sharing the material resources can help both Jerusalem and Corinth. The collection would help balance things out so both churches had the right amount. Churches that pray the Lord's Prayer should

have a constant reminder of the need for the right amount. The Acts community, in their readiness to share to meet the material needs of all of the members, is living out the meaning of the Lord's Prayer. No wonder there is not a needy person among them.

In dealing with the collection for Jerusalem, Paul has gone beyond the local congregation. The *koinonia* we have in the Spirit is worldwide. Therefore, the sharing of resources, seeking to prevent there being any needy among us, is also global. Nor can we assume that the churches that have the material wealth to share have no poverty that the poorer churches cannot help to fill.

Catherine. BREAK INTO SMALL GROUPS OF TWO OR THREE

Discuss briefly what are the resources that could be shared among the churches you know best in different parts of the world? What are the material resources? What are the non-material resources? Are these found together? What are the impediments to such sharing—on the side of the possible recipients as well as on the side of the possible givers?

The ideal of commonality of goods in the church did not disappear even after centuries. In the West, it became institutionalized in the monastic movement, a process that continued it for the few while eliminating it as a goal for the vast majority of Christians. Within the monastic movement, it has continued even to this day in the Catholic tradition. In Protestant churches,

however, it has had no currency, except for occasional experiments in community living or in small churches stemming from the Radical Reformation.

Monasticism has also included another concept that needs to be distinguished from this one of commonality of goods. That is the idea of voluntary poverty. Obviously, there is a relationship between the two. Both imply a certain loose attachment to material goods, a lack of the possessiveness and acquisitiveness that generally characterize our culture. The Acts passage does not seek poverty. In fact, it takes a certain pride in the fact that "there not was a needy person among them."

Scholars have pointed out that the term "poor" in the sense of the absolutely destitute—*ptochos*—which is quite common in Luke, does not appear in Acts. Could it be that the author's mind had somehow changed between the two treatises? Or is it rather that what Acts is saying is that in the community of the Spirit the promise Deuteronomy is fulfilled, that "there will be no poor among you if only you will obey the voice of the Lord your God"? (Dt. 15:4). From all that the book of Acts says about the sharing of resources and its connection with the outpouring of the Spirit, the latter would seem to be the most adequate explanation.

There is a place in the church for voluntary poverty. It makes possible an identification with the poor that might otherwise not exist. It makes possible readiness for certain forms of ministry that might not take place without it. It has an individual quality about it, a decision to give away

everything and be poor. There are obviously solid Biblical bases for such a response to the Gospel.

But commonality of goods is a somewhat different matter. It implies constant readiness to share, to give away piece by piece as necessary. It implies an ongoing awareness and sensitivity to the needs of others and meeting those needs joyfully, without even being asked. That is what the account in Acts anticipates. It is out of love rather than out of a search for personal holiness that such actions occur. There is a place for both in the church, but they cannot be equated.

Justo. There is, however, a relationship between the two. The commonality of goods described in Acts requires sensitivity to the needy. Such sensitivity is much more likely within the context of a lifestyle that promotes it. It is a clear fact, for instance, that during the time of the Spanish conquest and colonization of Latin America, it was generally the friars, rather than the diocesan priests, who understood the enormity of the injustices that were taking place. One reason was that the friars, with their vows of poverty, lived closer to the Indians. Thus, while the colonizers, and many priests and bishops, saw cities being founded, churches being built, and people being Christianized, the friars, precisely because of their voluntary poverty, could see the oppression and genocide that was hidden from the eyes of the rest.

As we read this text in Acts, the most obvious question is, what would happen if in today's church we took this concept of commonality of goods seriously? There is, however, a previous

question, both easier and more difficult to answer: What must we, as individuals and as of churches, do in order to gain more sensitivity and solidarity with the needy without which such sharing of resources is not possible?

