

Solidarity in the Early Jesus Movement

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Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned they held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands 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 4:32-35 NRSVue)

The lectionary for the Second Sunday of Easter has as one of its readings the above passage from the Acts of the Apostles. I always crack a smile to hear this one read out in church. Financial demands placed on believers have always been a controversial aspect of church life, and this text can seem a bit too socialist for some. In fact, 'all things in common' has been the enduring slogan of Christian communists for over two millennia.

As part of its early mission in Galilee and Judea, the Jesus movement controversially demanded that 'the rich' should part with their wealth if they wished to enjoy treasures in heaven (e.g., Luke 18:22). Now, on the other side of the Easter event, the community of disciples, filled with the Holy Spirit, are charged with taking this good news for the poor out from Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, to the ends of the earth, according to the narrative schema of Acts 1:8.

Acts describes the apostolic community's pooling of resources in two places (2:44-45; 4:32-37). This was not only a practical measure which helped to meet the Jesus movement's pecuniary needs and to facilitate its expansive ambitions. A radical redistribution of wealth was also a concrete way of levelling a burgeoning community of believers, in solidarity and in anticipation of their new life together in the kingdom of God.

The fact that Acts 4:34 mentions some members who own lands and houses, which they in turn put up for sale, places them in a wealthier tier of ancient peoples, and perhaps also among the most generous. These wealthy landholders were certainly not of the same ilk as the bulk of the movement's rank and file: slaves, fishers,

farmers, labourers, and craftspeople who mostly lived at or near subsistence.

Yet, as these highly idealised Acts passages make clear: 'no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common'. What's more, 'there was not a needy person among them'.

Singled out for honourable mention is Barnabas who, like the others, places the proceeds of his property sale 'at the apostles' feet', undergirding their authority in administering its redistribution (4:36-37).



Image: Raphael, *The Death of Ananias*, c. 1515-6 (Wikimedia commons)

A negative example is offered of the scheming married couple, Ananias and Sapphira, who keep back some of their proceeds from the apostles. They are struck dead for their misdeed in one of the more shocking biblical passages against defrauding others (5:1-11).

The image of early Christ followers holding 'all things in common' has inspired many Christians through history to experiment with different forms of communal living or to abrogate private property. For others, it simply represents an ideal picture of the church as a community mutual aid organisation.

Whatever its potential application—and its application remains contentious given the extremities of wealth in both the world and the church—the apostolic practice of attending

to its members' financial needs was deemed a powerful witness to Jesus' resurrection and a sign of great grace. Indeed, the suggestion in Acts that there was not a needy person among them immediately follows the apostles' testimony concerning the risen Lord.

Easter signalled for them the inbreaking of a new dawn. The movement's newfound economic arrangements, under the executive authority of the apostles, gestured towards the replacement of Rome's imperialist hierarchy with a new hierarchy ruled in the interest of the masses. No wonder the Jesus movement would be later accused (rightly or wrongly) of causing popular disturbances, acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, and turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6)!



Image: The millenarian organizer and theologian Thomas Müntzer (c. 1489-1525) regarded 'omnia sunt communia' (Latin for 'all things in common') as the definition of the gospel (Wikimedia commons)

This month at

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| <p>APRIL</p> <p>Dr Caroline Blyth 2:00 PM - 4:00 PM</p> | <p>15</p> | <p>Wollaston Research Seminar</p> |
| <p>APRIL</p> <p>Led by the College Warden 10:00 AM - 4:00 PM</p> | <p>20</p> | <p>WTC Quiet Day</p> |
| <p>APRIL</p> <p>5:00 PM - 7:00 PM</p> | <p>29</p> | <p>Feast of Dedication Cocktail Evening</p> |

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