

## The Acts of the Apostles

[ Wed. Apr. 23, 2014] Acts Series, Acts 4:31-37 - Craig A. Thurman

### Necessary Changes in the First Church after Our Lord's Resurrection Do Scriptures Suggest a Communal Lifestyle for N. T. Churches?

32 *And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul:*

Only the Lord can bring together a people so agreed. These believers of the church in Jerusalem had a common goal; witness the living, resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. This church is a living organism that we see being empowered by the Holy Spirit of God (endued, clothed, Lk.24.49; Acts 1.8; 2.1-4), growing and perfecting in the things that she does. While the Lord Jesus was with them bodily everything was done under His direction. The focal point was He, and rightly so. But now that He has ascended to the right hand of the Father the Holy Spirit begins to establish the church in a number of fundamental and distinctive ways. The apostles begin their proactive role in leading the church. The nature of the church becomes altered from a previously transient state; in other words, everywhere in the country of Israel that the Lord Jesus went with the apostles and disciples, there was the church; but now since Christ's resurrection the church begins taken to take a much more restricted, localized personality; **she becomes the church at Jerusalem**; a church located in one place with one people in a locality that now clearly constitutes her membership there.

This really should dissolve any notion of a universal church entity. Acts 2.44 *'were together'* means *'into one place,'* ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό [cf.2.1 with one accord *in one place*], 47 *the Lord added to the church.*

What are we saying? During our Lord's earthly ministry this same church becomes more defined and called *the church which was at Jerusalem.* ( Acts 8.1) As we progress into the book of Acts her officers shall become obvious; her gifts more pronounced, and her doctrine established and her practice defined. When Christ was with her she had little in the way of substance. Judas carried about all that they had in a bag. (Jn.12.6) She depended on the hospitality of others along the way to rest, eat, and teach; even looking to a fish to give them the necessary *piece of money* to pay their tribute. (Mt.17.27) Then they took nothing for their travels. Yet at

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His anticipated departure He directs them to take things sufficient for their journey. (Lk.22.35, 36) Christ was there with them; he was the Great Shepherd of the sheep; everywhere He went He personally tended to the needs of His sheep. Now, since His resurrection, the church is become the entity of His body on earth caring for those especially of her household (1Ti.3.15) through the contributions of its members for the good of her own body. After the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ this church morphed from a travelling church throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria into a stationary body located in the city of Jerusalem. From this same church now located in Jerusalem, even before the first missionary journey of the apostle Paul, many other churches, just like her, spring up in Judaea, Samaria, Syria and Cilicia. (Acts 9. 19; 31; 11.26; 15.41 Nothing whatsoever is said about how these churches came into existence.)

To be clear concerning these changes that took place upon the church immediately after our Lord's resurrection let me reiterate something so that there is no misunderstanding. This is too important a matter.

The church was established by her Head and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, during his personal and earthly ministry. She was empowered by the Spirit of God on the day of Pentecost. The early church, the first church, the only church then, would become situated in a locale, touchable, and identifiable, just as these things can be said of an individual person. Though she shall grow in her government; her officers, doctrines, and practice, she was as much a church during our Lord's ministry as she ever was after His resurrection. To put this into an analogy that we might better relate to (though it is still a poor analogy): the church was conceived during our Lord's ministry, but was as an infant after His resurrection in the first chapters of the book of Acts, but she shall continue to mature, and there shall be many other churches established in a short time, even by the time we reach Acts 9.31. Keeping the church's maturity in mind as you read the book of Acts will do much to help us account for some of the differences in the church that was then and the church that is today. In other words some of the original things we read about in the first church and churches in the book of Acts and in some of the church epistles must be weighed in the light of such a context. I.E., apostles, prophets, knowledge, tongues, healing (called *childish things*, 1Co.13.11), all fit the early churches, who for

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some time, had no compendium of N.T. Scripture at their disposal for solid and objective direction. When the N. T. Scriptures are delivered to the churches, the once necessary, subjective experience of the Holy Spirit among them must give way to the Holy Spirit's direction through the objective, unchangeable Word of God.

This ends my thoughts on the necessary changes in the first church after our Lord's resurrection.

### **Read the text: Acts 4.32-37**

*32 And the multitude of them that believed were **of one heart and of one soul**:*

What we read here in our text today is a continuation of things already begun in the second chapter, at verse 44. Let's reexamine those Scriptures in light of our text tonight. **Do Scriptures suggest that churches should live a communal lifestyle?** Should we all agree to buy a parcel of land, build central living quarters, eat, sleep, work, and worship together? Is this a doctrine of the Bible? Is owning private property evil and disagreeable to the Word of God? I'm not asking if saints can cooperate as individuals in such a way so as to alleviate the burden of debt, or bless a business venture, or help one another make ends meet. I think that common sense answers that for us.

*Ec 4:12 And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.*

But my question is, 'Does the church have an injunction from Scripture for communal living?' The following exegesis of Scripture sheds a lot of light on this topic.

*Acts 2.44 And all that believed were together,*

*together, ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό, is found in Mt.22.34 together; Lk.17.35 together; Acts 1.15 together; 2.1 **in one place**, 4.44 together; 3.1 together; 4.26 together; 1Co.7.5 appears to be untranslated; 1Co.11.20 **into one place**; 14.23 **together into one place**.*

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Should this be interpreted to teach that the church began to come together into a communal lifestyle? Or, could it mean that they began meeting in one particular place as a N. T. church?

*Ac 1:15 And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said, (the number of names **together** were about an hundred and twenty,) **Together** meaning that *in one place*, this place, at this time were gather about 120 disciples. The disciples must have agree to meet here this day in this place and at this time. This suggests that there were more of them, but that not all were there at that time. Nevertheless, because they had come together as a church into that place they could conduct their first business meeting to fill the vacated apostolic office of Judas Iscariot. Which thing they did.*

In Acts 2.44, *All that believed were together* literally means that **they began to come into one place as believers apart or distinct from all other gatherings**. When they first met in the Temple (Acts 5. They were not a temple gathering. When they met in council they weren't a gathering of the Sanhedrin. When they met together even in places called synagogues they weren't synagogues. They were the gathering of that church there when they met. This marks the first time that the nature of the church becomes so clearly defined as being able to be located in a place. They knew that they should come *into one place* as a church. Yes, they did meet in the temple for some time, but they congregated together in those instances as an identifiable group of believers in Jesus Christ. So, *All that believed were together*, or came into one place. Then Acts 2.44 goes on to read,

*and had all things common;*

First of all, to help our basic understand of this phrase let us arrange it in our usual English syntax: and had all common things. *Common* being the adjective modifying the noun *things*. This church had *all things*. Now we need to describe what those what *all things* are to

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them. They are *common*. As we shall see, this means that the things this church possessed were **shared** property.

κοινά, root κοινός, KJV common 7 (Acts 10.14 *eaten any thing that is **common***; Tit.1.4 *my mine own son after the **common** faith*; Jude 3 *write unto you of the **common** salvation*), defiled 1( Mk.7.2 **defiled hands**), **unclean** 2. Common faith is the faith that is **shared** among all the saints. Common salvation is the salvation that all the saints are **enjoyed**. Common hands are hands that have **shared** in all the things of the day. So that now, all things common means that they who began coming together into one place also began **sharing things** among themselves. These things shared are now the *common* things between us who come into one place as that church. As *common* these things are no longer mine, no longer yours, but now are ours to use in order to promote the church's welfare and mission. Having all common things is related to being in one place. This does not change the fact that the things that are in my place are my things, and the things that are in your place are your things.

For example, if we are members of the same church and I decided one day to come to your house and take something that you had without your permission that would be called by everyone *stealing*. The police officer can lawfully charge me with the crime of stealing. Even the world know that my actions were wrong. This is sin against my neighbor and against God. We must respect one another's right to own private property. This can especially be helpful for those churches who meet in the houses of its members.

Churches meeting in houses, or from house to house, should be careful among its membership to remember that the house in which a church meets is not *common* property. It rightfully and biblically belongs to a particular saint. Recognizing one another's right to private property will do much to foster a proper attitude among the saints, especially in house-church atmospheres, and significantly reduce the occasion for unnecessary offenses.

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Churches who are fortunate enough to have buildings of their own in which to meet; its members should remember that the land, building, and its contents are not any one person's to do with as they please, but the whole church's property. Everything that involves church property should be accomplished by consent of the church. Members have no right to take any *common property* of the church to themselves. This is a misappropriation of church property and is as much the sin of stealing as going down to the local merchant and shoplifting. It is wrong. Always treat the property of the church better than we would our own, personal property because in reality these are the Lord's *things*.

Having private property remains an unaffected fact of life in the churches. It is still biblical. The thought of communism being taught in the Scriptures is an erroneous notion that should be put away from those who name the name of Christ.

How my substance and your substance become our substance is shown us in the next verse.

*45 And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need .*

First of all, this explains how my and your substance came to be the common goods of the church. It should always be through the **freewill offerings** of her own membership.

We would do well never to solicit or receive good from those outside of the church. That is not God's design for the body. This can create an occasion for great trial, partiality and distress.

The substance that the O.T. priests used to build the sanctuary of the Lord was through the freewill offerings of the children of Israel. (Ex.25.1, 8, 9) And that is precisely how the N.T. should receive the things that she uses to minister to others. Simply through the principal of N.T. giving; freewill offerings. This is the practical

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expression of the oneness of the church. This is the Lord's provision through the church to help our poor or poverty stricken members.

*neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed ὑπάρχοντας was his own; but they had all things common.*

J. P. Green Sr, Interlinear Bible, *but were to them all things common.* The things contributed to the church became the property of the church to distribute as she deemed best..

When the membership works together in this manner and gives into the common treasury we give up our claim of personal ownership and trust its distribution to the judgment of the body for the good of others as the Lord leads.

*33 And with great μέγας power δύναμις gave*

ἀποδίδωμι, to give or deliver forth

*the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace χάρις τε μεγάλη was upon ἐπὶ them all.*

The Lord was clearly working in this church both by the apostles' witness of Christ's resurrection and the freewill offerings of her membership to meet the needs of her destitute. This verse seems disconnected from that which precedes it as well as from that which follows. The church's main objective is to witness the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ! She should NEVER lose sight of her mission. As she preaches Christ care for one another.

*34 Neither was there*

ὑπῆρχεν , really the same very in vs. 37 *having.*

*any among them that lacked:*

ἐνδεής, used only once in the N.T.; LXX many times: i.e. Deu.15.4 *poor*; 24.16 *needy*; Job *want*; Pv.3.27 *poor*; Is. 41.17 *needy.*

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In the LXX Scripture this is the *poor* and *needy*.

*Neither was there any among them that lacked:* Does this mean that there were no longer poor and needy in the church? No. But that the Lord provided the things necessary to help them in their poverty.

*Mr 14:7 For ye have the **poor** with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good ...*

*Lu 14:13 But when thou makest a feast, call the **poor**, the maimed, the lame, the blind ...*

*Ro 15:26 For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the **poor** saints which are at Jerusalem.*

*Ga 2:10 Only they would that we should remember the **poor**; the same which I also was forward to do.*

*for as many as were possessors*

κτήτορες, root κτητωρ, only this once; κτήμα, 2.45; 5.1 *possession* 4 times.

*of lands χωρίων or houses οἰκιῶν sold πωλέω (vs.34, 37; 5.1) them, and brought*

ἔφερον, root φέρω, as in *bear, carry, bring, lay*.

*the prices of the things that were sold*

πιπράσκω (9 times translated only as *sell*; 2.45; 5.4),

*35 And laid*

ἐτίθουν, root τιθήμι, KJV *lay* 28, *lay aside* 1 (Jn.13.4 *laid aside his garments*), *lay down* 12, *make* 10, *set forth* 1, *set* 2, *ordain* 2, et al.



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*them down at the apostles' feet:*

The Lord supplied an orderly means for the care our poor. That the membership brought of their substance and laid it at the apostles' feet shows a subjection to the ordained government of the church. Someone in the church is responsible for managing the detailed affairs of the body. In this case that management fell to the apostles. In time these affairs would become the care of the pastors and/or servants of the church. (cf. Acts 6.1-7)

*and distribution*

διεδίδοτο, root διαδίδωμι, KJV *distribute* 2 (Lk.18.22; Jn.6.11), *divide* 1 (Lk.11.22), *give* 1, *make distribution* 1. This Greek compound is '**the through giving.**' I'd use the word, *donation* ...

*was made unto every man [or each one] according as he had need.*

*Lit. but to each was distribution made according as any should have had need.*

To the apostles fell the charge of overseeing the affairs of the church. The distribution of those goods that the saints brought to the care of the church was not their attempt to bring everyone to the same economic level or standard of living. That was not the goal of the giving nor of the distribution of the common resources of the church. The goal is to help each person where they needed help; to meet that need.

Redistribution of wealth is an antichrist system. Have we noticed that this is the supposed goal of the world's church and the world's government? The churches of Jesus Christ should not become side-tracked with the world's labyrinth of social programs. It will suck the life right out of a church. Why? Because the love for Christ gets lost in all of the rat race of trying to keep up with the unreasonable demands that the world puts upon her. We are not here to fix the social ills of the world. We are here to

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preach the gospel and live, as best we can, the witness of Christ until He comes.

Now, let's take this moment to redress the issue of interpreting these Scriptures as teaching communal living. The truth respecting this should be obvious at this point. Here is the problem that we meet with if we interpreted these Scriptures as teaching communal living:

If everyone had lived together communally in the Jerusalem church, and if everything that everyone possessed was actually contributed into one big account and was then equitably redistributed to all of her membership, then it stands to reason that no one saint could lack any more than another. At least that should have been the immediate result. But the problem is that this was not the result at all. Poverty among the saints did continue ... *distribution was made unto every man according as he had need*. This proves, **first** of all, that communism could not have been the experiment of the Jerusalem church. Communism was experimented with by the early settlers of our continent (America). What they discovered was this:

**'Since hard work was not personally beneficial for the settlers (of Jamestown) they responded by stopping work.' ... 'Communism doesn't work because it destroys the reward and work nexus.'**

Private ownership of property goes all the way back to the very first book of the Bible. (Ge. 23.16-18 Abraham; 33.19 Jacob; 47.18 Egyptians) Be wary of brethren who would direct the church to begin a communal lifestyle. It is never good for the church membership or for the witness of Jesus Christ.

And **second**, we need to agree with the Word of God, that poverty will continue no matter what programs are instituted, good or bad. But to be clear, some governmental and charitable, social programs, whose goal was to help others always contribute to, aggravated, and confuse the situation more than it ever helps.

The best program for a church is the Bible's program. Keep to the Scriptures. God's programs yields real and lasting results:

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**Those that are blessed of the Lord to have possessions should learn to give a *portion* to those who are less fortunate.** (*Ec 5:19 Every man also to whom God hath given riches and wealth, and hath given him power to eat thereof, and to take his portion, and to rejoice in his labour; this is the gift of God ; Pr 19:17 He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the LORD; and that which he hath given will he pay him again.*)

*Ex.22.25-27 ¶ If thou lend money to any of my people that is poor by thee, thou shalt not be to him as an usurer, neither shalt thou lay upon him usury.*

*Lev.25.25-28 If thy brother be waxen poor, and hath sold away some of his possession, and if any of his kin come to redeem it, then shall he redeem that which his brother sold.*

*Le 25:39-43 And if thy brother that dwelleth by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee; thou shalt not compel him to serve as a bondservant:*

*Deu.15.7, 8 If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates in thy land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not harden thine heart, nor shut thine hand from thy poor brother:  
8 But thou shalt open thine hand wide unto him, and shalt surely lend him sufficient for his need, in that which he wanteth.*

*Lev.19.9, 10 And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest.*

*10 And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the LORD your God.*

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*Le 23:22 And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not make clean riddance of the corners of thy field when thou reapest, neither shalt thou gather any gleaning of thy harvest: thou shalt leave them unto the poor, and to the stranger: I am the LORD your God.*

It was never the purpose of God for either Israel or the N. T. church to eradicate poverty among the people of God. The poor give occasion for the rich of the saints to manifest the love of Christ for the lowly. And the rich give occasion for the poor to give thanks to God for His faithful provision.

### **Being either poor or rich often has nothing to do with personal sin.**

Whether we are born into it, inherit it, as an incidence become it through war, death, or acts of God. On the other hand we can make good and bad choices that affect our state to some degree for richer or poorer. But most important is not what we are but how we are in our state. The poor can be covetous, and the rich can be oppressive. The saint should be neither; but be generous and helpful.

There is not a better way, perhaps, to help the poor among us than through free-will offerings into the church treasury. This means keeps anonymity of the giver, prevents glorying in men, and leads the recipient to thankfulness to the Lord who provided those things that were necessary. (Mt. 6.3, 4)

The action word here is the word *selling*. Some saints *sold* things. This is the means of converting one substance into another '**ready to use**' substance. Churches should not be unnecessarily burdened with the disposal of property in order to be able to communicate the benefit of ones 'gift' to help another. Let's be sure to do our part and that what we are actually giving is a gift. If it is worth giving, we should make every effort to convert it into what the church can use. Once this is done, then we are ready to genuinely give from our hearts unto the Lord. This is the example of Barnabas in the following verse:

*36 And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus,*

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### 37 Having

ὑπάρχοντος, possessing. This verb is used in two other places as well. Both in Acts, 19.40 *there being*; 27.12 *was*.

*land (ἀγροῦ, or a field), sold it*

πωλήσας root πωλέω (vs.34; 5.1), *and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

A perfect example of giving into a common treasury, a *having all things common*. (Acts 2.44; 4.32) Barnabas made this decision himself. There was no command to do this. The Scripture simply records that this is what he did. Not every Christian can do this, nor should they. Those who are convinced in themselves, having no compulsion but the love and work of Christ should ever give to the church. The apostle Paul gave instruction to the Corinthian saints about how to give to the destitute saints in Jerusalem.

*2Co.9.6 ¶ But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. 7 Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver.*

The Lord judges giving according to how we *dig* into the supply that He has put at our disposal, not how much bigger or smaller it is in comparison to another's gift. That is a terrible mistake to make.

*Mr 12:44 For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living. The widow, by our Lord's judgment, cast in more than all they that cast into the treasury that day. (vs.43)*

What we give, and how much we give is a matter of personal conscience or conviction before the Lord. Everything that we give should be given freely.

Some things that are done in the name of the Lord cannot be hidden. Obviously, Barnabas was noted for what he did. But what he gave (the

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result of selling his property) was as second in importance to how he gave (he brought it to the Lord.) There was no sounding of the trumpet; no long prayers made; no grand procession and presentation; no seat was set at the head of the table; no charts and registry posted so that all might see his name and his affect upon the treasury. We find it simply recorded here as a matter of never mentioned again. Why was his giving noted at all? We cannot say anything but this, that this gives us some insight into the character of the man that shall accompany the apostle Paul on his first missionary expedition. But know this, that the text does not say that Barnabas sold **all** his property. But he having land sold it.

Two things we discussed tonight:

1. The necessary changes in the first church after our Lord's resurrection. And,
2. Do Scriptures suggest a communal lifestyle for N. T. churches?

I ask you to give these two things your serious consideration as you review these thought throughout the remaining days of the week.