

Sharing Love: The Early Church Community

November 22, 2020

Acts 4:32-5:11

This week's scripture lesson is at the same time both uplifting and troubling. The reading is from Acts, written by Luke, as the second part of his writings for "Theophilus", which means "lover of God." We don't know whether the name is a particular person, or meant to be addressed to all who love God. Luke, of course, was Paul's companion and helper, starting with Paul's second recorded missionary journey. The narrative in Acts at that point, Acts 16:10, begins to use the pronoun "we," indicating that Luke was accompanying Paul. Luke was not himself a witness to events of the early church in Jerusalem, just as he was not himself a witness to Jesus's earthly ministry. Rather, he collected materials from others in order to construct his narratives. For the gospel, he obviously drew on Mark's writing, and also other material that was also used in Matthew, referred to as the "Q" source by scholars. In addition, there is what is called "special Lukan material," that is not reported in other gospels.

Much the same seems to have happened for the Acts of the Apostles. Clearly Luke had some sort of "Jerusalem source." Indeed, there's reasons to think he had multiple sources, especially since some material in Acts occurs in "doublets." The same information being presented twice with some degree of variation. In fact, that is true in particular for this scripture material. Acts 2:42-47 seems to present the same picture, but in less detail, and omitting the particulars of 5:1-11. It seems likely that John Mark was a source, and Luke would likely have talked with others. We just can't do much more than speculate. By the time Acts was committed to writing by Luke, many of the witnesses to these things would have passed on, just as had most witnesses to Jesus's ministry. The primary materials we have that give a perspective independent of Acts are the letters of Paul. Indeed, as Reverend Zanicky has discussed, the letters of Paul are our earliest New Testament writings.

The lesson material is descriptive of the early church, originally the only church. It was made up of Jesus's apostles and other followers in the days after Jesus's crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. This description, in both 2:44-47 and 4: 32-37, are often taken as the ideal that Church should strive to emulate. That's clearly the lesson writer's view. He calls this a "Sharing Church," and later seems to hold it up as a model for our day. Let's take a look. This early church was characterized in the following ways:

1. Attentive to the apostles' teaching: The apostles and others who were witnesses to Jesus and his ministry would have repeated His parables and other teachings. They would have recalled and told new members of His miracles. After Pentacost, there were many new followers who were not present for those things. It seemed likely that some of these things might have been written down. But, that would not have seemed important. At this point, Jesus's followers are all Jews. They think of Jesus as Messiah, a Jewish Messiah. They expect Him, as Messiah, to reappear very soon to fulfill the prophecies of God's reign on earth. So, why write things down? It is more important to tell people, and spread the word of Jesus, and His life and ministry, and how He would fulfill what was expected as described in the Jewish scriptures, what we call the Old Testament.

2. Shared fellowship: Jesus's followers shared a communal life together, just as Jesus had with apostles and other disciples, who followed him as he traveled. The term "communism" has been used, for example by the *Interpreter's Bible*. But I would prefer the term "communalism," to avoid confusion with the horrors of the 20th century that we associate with the word "communism." Their shared life together included shared meals and care for the poor among them. The welfare or resource claims of the fellowship were considered superior to those of the individual. In Jesus's day, the money of the whole party seems to have been held in common in a single purse, maintained by Judas, as the treasurer of the group.

There's some indication that this was also done by members of the fellowship not maintaining any private property. As we read in verse 34, "**... as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. 35 They laid it at the apostles' feet and it was distributed to each as any had need.**" This seems to suggest a universal behavior. But that may have just described the ideal. Immediately afterwards, we read that Barnabus sold a field, and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. This is the first mention of Barnabus. His name means, "son of encouragement." There's no statement that says this was the total of his possessions. If it had been, where did he subsequently get the funds needed to support his later travels and ministry? That ministry was somewhat at variance with the Jerusalem church's doctrines, specifically when it came to Gentile Christians. There is no reason to believe that the Jerusalem church ever supported "missions" in any financial sense. There's no reference to them ever providing any money, except to poor members of their community in Jerusalem.

3. The church “broke bread” together. This was symbolic of Jesus at the last Supper. At this time it was still a substantive communal meal, perhaps even the primary source of sustenance for poorer members. The term “breaking of bread” refers to the Jewish custom of saying this blessing at a meal, “Blessed be thou, O Lord our God, that thou didst make bread to be on earth.” After so saying, the bread would be broken ceremonially, and distributed. The term “breaking of bread” came to mean sharing a meal, with the connotation that doing so was an act of reverence. We continue to follow this custom in our Lord’s Supper.

4. The community was devoted to prayer and worship. The members attended at both the Temple and Synagogue. The Temple was, of course, there in Jerusalem. We read that they were there daily (Acts 2:46). They would have been practicing the rituals and worship of Judaism. Yet, in their homes, they were still in a worshipful community. They would have shared their fellowship in The Way in that context.

What is distinctly absent from this description of this early church is labor. There is no mention of members of the fellowship continuing to hold jobs, perform work, or earn money to provide for the sustenance of themselves or others. From the text, we see only one source of income for these early followers of Jesus, the sale of their assets. Now, it may be that some members continued to be engaged in productive labor. If so, the fact that it was unremarked may be indicative of it not being important. In contrast, much later, Paul makes a point of telling his church in Thessalonica that those who would not work should not eat (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

It is easy to understand why work would be seen as unimportant. The Messiah was expected to return any day. Spreading the gospel, and prayers, and worship were of utmost importance, so that the fellowship would be prepared. It was not important that the church fellowship be sustainable. The end of time was coming soon. They had faith. Faith that God would provide for them, as long as they were this loving, giving community dedicated to Jesus and His Way.

We do know that by the time Paul is writing letters to his churches, the Jerusalem church was impoverished. See Galatians 2:10, and 2 Corinthians 8: 1-7 and Chapter 9, where Paul talks of gifts being collected for the brothers in Jerusalem. It would seem that, in fact, that the communal model, as practiced in Jerusalem, was not sustainable. The question is really never answered. The

Jerusalem church, except perhaps some individuals who escaped, was destroyed in A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem.

There are hints that things were not all living up to the ideal, even at first. In Chapter 6, we read that there were complaints by the Hellenists, that is, Greek speaking Jews, that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food (6:1). That kind of thing is not surprising when there is a communal system – some people see others getting more than they do. It is almost bound to happen. The problem was solved by appointing “deacons” to manage the distribution. Luke describes that the apostles characterized it as, “to wait on tables” (verse 2). The apostles held that they had more important things to do. Yet, one of these appointed to “wait on tables,” Stephen, was a leader in efforts to preach the gospel.

The other indication that everything was not well is the disturbing story of Ananias and Sapphira, 5:1-11. The name Ananias means “Yaweh is gracious.” Sapphira means “beautiful.” They sold a piece of property, and then kept some of the proceeds, donating the remainder as if it was the whole sum. It would seem that the proceeds of the sale were designated as “gifts to God,” and as such, laid at the apostles feet. The expression of laying something at someone’s feet seems to be the expression for a legal process of that time for transferring property. Peter makes clear that the sale was not a sin, nor would withholding some of the proceeds. The sin was the falsehood of representing the gift as being the entire proceeds. When Peter condemned Ananias for this, he fell dead. As Peter says, the sin is not that he lied to the apostles; he lied to God. A few hours later Sapphira was confronted, and she responded with denial, just as Ananias had. She immediately died as well.

We read in verse 11 “**And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard these things.**” Well, yes! In the parallel passage in Chapter 2, this story seems to be subsumed into verse 43, “**Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.**”

So, why was this such a big sin? It is characterized as a sin against God, or in particular, a sin against the Holy Spirit (verse 5:9). It is hypocrisy. Ananias and Sapphira wanted to appear as more generous than they actually were. They wanted public credit for having sold the property and donated all of the money, when they actually, secretly withheld part for themselves. Many of Jesus’s strongest words are condemnations of hypocrisy. In the Sermon on the Mount, Chapter 6 of Matthew specifically warns against hypocrisy in almsgiving, prayer, and in fasting. His words of condemnation of the Pharisees are primarily for being hypocrites. The

basic principle of hypocrisy is distortion of truth. When what is good is condemned as evil, and what is evil is promoted as good, the danger is being cut off from truth, God's truth.

So much of the world of our day seems to be aligned in this way. Products that are harmful or unneeded are glorified in advertising for the sake of profits for those who make, manage and promote them. Things that are good, or should be good, are mocked, ridiculed, and demeaned. Self-indulgence is promoted in the interest of selling products. We live in a sea of self-promoting media.

Well, this isn't entirely new. It was true in Jesus's day, and it was true in the early church as well. Peter identifies the sin as a lack of forthrightness. As followers of the Way, Ananias and Sapphira were to be forthright about what they were doing, and in the example they were setting. The punishment seems extreme. But, as Christians, we believe that God is gracious. Indeed, Ananias's very name proclaims that! Where is grace here? We can only suppose that God was gracious here as well. Ananias and Sapphira were believers. As such, their destiny did not end with these untimely deaths. I believe that they found their way into God's Kingdom. For as believers, they could appeal to Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins, and be found clean in the presence of God. We, too, depend on that forgiveness and grace.

Meanwhile, let us try our best to live the lives that God seems to have called us to, and do so with honesty and forthrightness. We need not walk in fear if we are but believers in Jesus.

So, the early church as portrayed in Acts may not have been quite as idyllic as a casual reading would suppose. They had their problems, just as we do. The church needs to be sustainable, and has been, across many generations. It had to grow up. I have come to believe that Paul, in helping his churches deal with many practical problems, was a key developer of the practical church, particularly that of the "Western" church. There were many other offshoots of Christianity, many of which spread eastward. Just as the Jerusalem Church disappeared in 70 A.D., those other churches have disappeared, or at least are greatly diminished. Paul's wisdom and writings seem to have been important in sustaining the Church as we know it.

Prayer: Gracious God, you have shared your love for us in Jesus. You ask that we share that love with others. Help us to consider carefully the many ways we can share your love. Amen.