

mercial loans to establish or extend a business were needed by a poor person or by others on interest make it clear that the well-to-do are to be treated as debtors. The Old Testament: "If you lend money to my people, to the poor, do not oppress them; you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not charge them interest. You shall give them the same law as you would expect your neighbor to give you. (Ex. 22:25 NRSV). The legislation on interest is designed to protect the poor and to prevent the exploitation of poor folk with no productive resources. The early Christian church attempted to apply these principles. The Council of Laodicea, a later church council, all interest on loans was prohibited. Medieval monarchs invited Jews, following Jesus's teaching, to be money lenders. This led to the rise of usury and in casuistic schemes developed to circumvent the prohibition.²⁵

With the letter of the law and the resulting legalistic application helped discredit, or at least weaken, the teaching that the God of the poor is Lord of the rich. It also contributed to the modern separation of economics from the Christian faith—indeed the whole field of economics. From the standpoint of revealed faith, modern economics stems from modern secularism, not from

the wooden application of God's living Word. The church has been silent. These biblical texts put the borrower's need more important than the lender's profit.

On the year of jubilee, the sabbatical year, the church must discover the underlying principles. The church has many strategies to give flesh to these basic

teachings. We know that God wills justice, not mere charity. We seek to eliminate poverty among believers. We are inspired by the biblical understanding of economic structures in the larger society that the church has the capital needed to earn a living. There

is an implication here that private property is so good that God wants everybody to have some!

Jesus' New Community

First-century Christians reaffirmed the Old Testament teaching. Jesus walked the roads of Galilee announcing the startling news that the kingdom of peace and righteousness was at hand. Economic relationships in the new community of his followers were a powerful sign confirming this awesome announcement.

The Hebrew prophets had not only predicted that Israel would be destroyed because of her idolatry and oppression of the poor; they had also proclaimed a message of hope—the hope of a future messianic kingdom. The days are coming, they promised, when God will raise up a righteous branch from the Davidic line. Peace, righteousness, and justice will then abound in a new, redeemed society. When the shoot comes from the stump of Jesse, Isaiah predicted, the poor and meek will finally receive their due: "With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth" (Isa. 11:4; see also Isaiah 9:6–7; 61:1; Jeremiah 23:5; Hosea 2:18–20).

The essence of the good news that Jesus proclaimed was that the expected messianic kingdom had come.²⁷ Certainly the kingdom Jesus announced disappointed popular Jewish expectations. He did not recruit an army to drive out the Romans. He did not establish a free Jewish state. But neither did he remain alone as an isolated, individualistic prophet. He called and trained disciples. He established a visible community of disciples joined together by their submission to him as Lord. His new community began to live the values of the promised kingdom. As a result, all relationships, even economic ones, were transformed in the community of Jesus' followers.

They shared a common purse (John 12:6).²⁸ Judas administered the common fund, buying provisions or giving to the poor at Jesus' direction (John 13:29). The new community of sharing extended beyond Jesus and the Twelve. It included a number of women whom Jesus had healed. The women traveled with Jesus and the disciples, sharing their financial resources with them (Luke 8:1–3; see also Mark 15:40–41).²⁹

Starting with this understanding, some of Jesus' words gain new meaning and power. Consider his advice to the rich young man.

When Jesus asked the rich young man to sell his goods and give to the

poor, he did not say, "Become destitute and friendless." Rather, he said, "Come, follow me" (Matt. 19:21). In other words, he invited him to join a community of sharing and love, where his security would not be based on individual property holdings, but on openness to the Spirit and on the loving care of new-found brothers and sisters.³⁰

Jesus invited the rich young man to share the joyful common life of his new kingdom.

Jesus' words in Mark 10:29-30 used to puzzle me: "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life." Why, I used to wonder, did he end his advice with a promise that seems too good to be true: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things [i.e., food, clothing, and so on] shall be yours as well." I didn't know how to make sense out of this seemingly naive statement.

But the words came alive with meaning when I read them in the context of what was happening among his followers. Jesus had begun a new community, a new social order, a new kingdom of faithful followers who were experiencing redeemed economic relationships.

The common purse of Jesus' disciples symbolized their amazing availability to each other. In that kind of community, there *would* be genuine economic security. Each person would indeed have many more loving brothers and sisters than before. The economic resources available in difficult times would in fact be compounded a hundredfold and more. The resources of the entire community of obedient disciples would be available to anyone in need. Such unprecedented unselfishness would certainly challenge surrounding society so pointedly that many would want to join while others, out of jealousy, would want to destroy through persecution. But even in the most desperate days, the promise would not be empty. Even if persecution led to death, children of martyred parents would receive new mothers and fathers in the community of believers.

In the community of the redeemed, all relationships are being transformed. Jesus and his first followers vividly demonstrated that the old covenant's pattern of economic relationships among God's people is not only to be continued but also deepened.

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The Jerusalem Model

The massive economic sharing of the earliest Christian church is indisputable. "Now the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common" (Acts 4:32).

The evidence in the early chapters of Acts is abundant and unambiguous (Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-37; 5:1-11; 6:1-7). The early church continued the pattern of economic sharing practiced by Jesus. Immediately after reporting the three thousand conversions at Pentecost, Acts notes that "all who believed were together and had all things in common" (2:44). Whenever anyone was in need, they shared. Giving surplus to needy brothers and sisters was not enough. They regularly dipped into capital reserves and sold property to aid the needy. Barnabas sold a field he owned (4:36-37). Ananias and Sapphira sold property, but then lied about the price (5:3-4).

Long ago, God promised Israel that obedience would eliminate poverty among his people (Deut. 15:4). That promise came true in the earliest church. "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them; . . . and distribution was made to each as any had need" (Acts 4:34-35).

Two millennia later the texts still throb with the joy and excitement of the first community. They ate meals together "with glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46). They experienced an exciting unity as all sensed they "were of one heart and soul" (4:32). They were not isolated individuals, struggling alone to follow Jesus. A new community, in which all areas of life (including economics) were being transformed, became a joyful reality.

The evangelistic impact of their demonstration of oneness is striking. The texts repeatedly relate the transformed economic relationships in the Jerusalem church to their phenomenal evangelistic outreach: "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day" (Acts 2:46-47). The joy and love expressed in their common life was contagious.

Acts 4 underlines the evangelistic impact of their transformed economic relationships. Verse 32 describes their sweeping economic sharing, and the very next verse adds, "And with great power the apostles gave their testimony

to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" (v. 33). Jesus' prayer that the loving unity of his followers would be so striking that it would convince the world that he had come from the Father has been answered—at least once! It happened in the Jerusalem church. The unusual quality of their economic life together gave power to the apostolic preaching.

Acts 6 gives a striking example of how the new system worked. Apparently the Jerusalem church included a significant minority of Hellenists (Greek-speaking Jews, perhaps even Greeks that had converted to Judaism). Somehow, the Jewish-speaking majority had overlooked the needs of the Hellenist widows. When the injustice was pointed out, the church's response was startling. The seven men chosen to look after the matter were all from the minority group! Every one of their names is Greek.³¹ The church turned over its funds for needy widows to the minority group that had been discriminated against. What was the result of this new kind of financial fellowship? "And the word of God increased; and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem" (Acts 6:7).

Redeemed economic relationships in the early church resulted in the spread of the Word of God. What a sobering thought! Could the same thing happen today? Would similar economic changes produce a dramatic increase of believers? Probably. Are those who talk about the importance of evangelism prepared to pay the price?

The earliest church did not insist on absolute economic equality. Nor did they abolish private property. Peter reminded Ananias that he had been under no obligation either to sell his property or to donate the proceeds to the church (Acts 5:4). Sharing was voluntary, not compulsory.³² But love for brothers and sisters was so overwhelming that many freely abandoned legitimate claims to private possessions. That does not mean that everyone donated everything. Later in Acts we read that John Mark's mother, Mary, still owned her own house (12:12). Additional passages indicate that others retained some private property.

The tense of the Greek words confirms this interpretation. In both Acts 2:45 and 4:34, the verbs denote continued, repeated action over an extended period of time. Thus the meaning is, "they often sold possessions," or, "they were in the habit of regularly bringing the proceeds of what was being sold."³³ The text does not suggest that the community abolished all private property or that everyone immediately sold everything. It suggests instead

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that over a period of time, whenever there was need, believers sold lands and houses to aid the needy.

What then was the essence of the transformed economic relationships in the Jerusalem church? The best way to describe their practice is to speak of sweeping liability for and availability to each other. Their sharing was not superficial or occasional. Regularly and repeatedly, "they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need" (2:45). If the need was greater than current cash reserves, they sold property. They simply gave until the needs were met. The needs of the sister and brother, not legal property rights or future financial security, were the deciding factors. For the earliest Christians, oneness in Christ meant sweeping liability for and availability to the other members of Christ's body.

Unfortunately most Christians ignore the example of the Jerusalem church. Perhaps it is because of the economic self-interest of affluent Christians. We have developed convenient rationales for relegating the pattern of the Jerusalem church to the archivists' attic of irrelevant historical trivia. Why did Paul have to take a collection for the Jerusalem church a few decades later? A modern book offers the familiar response:

The trouble in Jerusalem was that they turned their capital into income, and had no cushion for hard times, and the Gentile Christians had to come to their rescue. It is possible not to live for bread alone, not to be overcome by materialist values, and at the same time to act responsibly; and this is why the Church may be grateful for the protest of the commune movement, but still consider that it has no answer.³⁴

But were the Jerusalem Christians really irresponsible, naive communal-types whom we should respect but certainly not imitate? It is essential to insist that the Jerusalem principle of sweeping financial availability does not require communal living. It did not in Jerusalem. The Christian commune is only one of many faithful models. We dare not let the communal hobgoblin distort our discussion of the Jerusalem model.

But why did the Jerusalem church run into financial difficulty? It is unlikely that economic sharing was to blame. More likely the need was due to a unique set of historical circumstances. Jerusalem attracted an unusually large number of poor people. Since Jews considered alms given in Jerusalem

to be particularly meritorious, the many pilgrims to the city were especially generous. As a result, crowds of impoverished beggars flocked to the city. In addition, a disproportionately large number of the elderly gravitated to the Holy City to die or wait for the Messiah (see Luke 2:25, 36). Also, because Jerusalem was the center of Jewish faith, it attracted a large number of rabbis, who depended on charity because they were not paid for teaching. Their students likewise often were poor. Hence the large number of religious scholars in Jerusalem swelled the ranks of the destitute.³⁵

And that was not all. Natural disasters struck at midcentury. The Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus report recurring food shortages and famines during the reign of the Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54). Josephus dates such shortages in Palestine around A.D. 44 to 48.³⁶ At one point, famine was so severe that the Antioch church quickly sent assistance (Acts 11:27-30).

Special circumstances within the first church also caused unusual poverty. Jesus' particular concern for the poor and oppressed probably attracted a disproportionately large number of impoverished persons. Acts records considerable persecution (8:1-3; 9:29; 12:1-5; 23:12-15), so Christians probably experienced discrimination in employment, which wreaked havoc with their normal income.³⁷ Finally, the original Twelve seem to have given up their means of livelihood when they moved from Galilee to Jerusalem, so their need for support would have increased the demand on the church's resources.

These are some of the many reasons why the first community of Christians faced financial difficulty at midcentury. Misguided generosity was not likely a significant factor. In fact, the unusually large number of poor in their midst is probably what made dramatic sharing such an obvious necessity. That the rich among them gave with overflowing generosity to meet a desperate need indicates unconditional discipleship, not naive idealism.

The costly generosity of the first church stands as a challenge to Christians of all ages. They gave visible expression to the oneness of believers. In the new messianic community of Jesus' first followers, God was redeeming all relationships.

Was the beauty of this example a vision that quickly faded? Many believe it was. But the actual practice of the early church proves the contrary.

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