

Acts 4: 32-37 – Littlebourne chapel Sunday 14th August – Peter Hollander

³² All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. ³³ With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all ³⁴ that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales ³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

³⁶ Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

We've seen earlier in Acts how the Holy Spirit fell on the disciples, how it emboldened Peter and others to speak of the Jesus, the Messiah and how He was raised from the dead and is able to forgive and heal people. Last week the believers all prayed thanking God for who he is and what he has done, and that they would be given boldness and that signs and wonders would accompany the preaching of the Word. The number of believers had risen to 5,000 in a matter of weeks. The permanent population of Jerusalem was about 80,000, so about 6% of the population had already accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour. As we saw at the end of chapter 2, they met daily in the Temple, ate together and shared together. Here at the end of chapter 4, Luke reiterates what they are doing. A community had been created, based on love and sharing. Existing wealth that the believers had was realised and given to the apostles to share out to those in need, which would have included the apostles themselves as several of them were unemployed fishermen far from the sea. As a short term measure, this was fine. We can all off load money we don't need to share with others but when it's gone, for this system to continue, new people need to join with the ability to share what they have, or believers have to work to create the wealth for them to live on themselves and share with others their surplus.

These passages about the workings of the early church have troubled many Christians over the centuries believing it was a model for the church. Most people who wish this model were in existence today are those without houses and land to sell themselves, and would like others who do have wealth and good incomes to share it with them!

I have looked at what the early church fathers said about sharing. Some of these quotes sound like they come from some left wing politicians, rather than Christians because of the assumptions about ownership of wealth.

You are not making a gift of your possession to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. Ambrose of Milan, 340-397.

The property of the wealthy holds them in chains . . . which shackle their courage and choke their faith and hamper their judgment and throttle their souls. They think of themselves as owners, whereas it is they rather who are owned: enslaved as they are to their own property, they are not the masters of their money but its slaves. Cyprian, 300 A.D.

The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry man; the coat hanging in your closet belongs to the man who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the man who has no shoes; the money which you put into the bank belongs to the poor. You do wrong to everyone you could help but fail to help. Basil of Caesarea, 330-370 A.D.

Not to enable the poor to share in our goods is to steal from them and deprive them of life. The goods we possess are not ours but theirs. John Chrysostom, 347-407 AD

Instead of the tithes which the law commanded, the Lord said to divide everything we have with the poor. And he said to love not only our neighbours but also our enemies, and to be givers and sharers not only with the good but also to be liberal givers toward those who take away our possessions. Irenaeus, 130-200 AD

The rich are in possession of the goods of the poor, even if they have acquired them honestly or inherited them legally. John Chrysostom, 347-407 AD

Share everything with your brother. Do not say, "It is private property." If you share what is everlasting, you should be that much more willing to share things which do not last. The Didache

Let the strong take care of the weak; let the weak respect the strong. Let the rich man minister to the poor man; let the poor man give thanks to God that he gave him one through whom his need might be satisfied. Clement of Rome, 1st Century

Christians love one another. They do not overlook the widow, and they save the orphan. The one who has ministers ungrudgingly to the one who does not have. When they see a stranger, they take him under their own roof and rejoice over him as a true brother, for they do not call themselves brothers according to the flesh but according to the soul. Aristides – Apologia addressed to emperor Hadrian, early 2nd century

One of the reasons that much of what the early church fathers said never made it into mainstream theology is that wealth in the form of a house or land belongs to someone who either worked to get ownership or inherited it. The Roman world was a stable society under the rule of law, both in Israel and throughout the empire. The State had the capacity to award land and property as a reward for service to the State and the ability to confiscate land and property from those who were punished by the State. Legionnaires were rewarded for long service with land, usually seized from conquered lands or rebellious provinces. Political opponents of whoever was emperor often had their estates confiscated and given to others. This is nothing to do with Christianity, but this was the world in which the early church fathers made their pronouncements. Out of these ideas came monasticism, where men shared what they had and lived a communal life with rules – usually on property given to or purchased by the monastic community out of what was given by them and to them. The rules involved work as well as worship. Hermits depended on what they foraged and grew themselves as well as alms from others, in a much more informal way.

Paul in 2 Corinthians 8 explains what he thinks about support given to him and his team. *8 And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2 In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3 For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord's people. 5 And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. 6 So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. 7 But since you (that is the Corinthian church) excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. 8 I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. 9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. 10 And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter. Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. 11 Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it, according to your means. 12 For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have. 13 Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. 14 At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, 15 as it is written: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little" (Exodus 16:18 – speaking of the gathering of manna that miraculous was always just the right amount for everyone who harvested it as it appeared each morning).*

Here Paul writes about the generosity of those in Macedonia voluntarily giving to those in need. In Acts 11, we see the church preparing for famine in Judea. In 2 Thessalonians 3 Paul is clear about idle folk sponging off the church. *6 In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers and sisters, to keep away from every believer who is idle and disruptive and does not live according to the teaching you received from us. 7 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, 8 nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you. 9 We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. 10 For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat." 11 We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. 12 Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. 13 And as for you, brothers and sisters, never tire of doing what is good. 14 Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. 15 Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer.*

So what do we make of all this? It is quite simple: if you have more than you need, then help those in need. However discernment is needed to decide who is in need. The idle are undeserving, and if they make no effort to work or find work, Paul says “do not associate with them” especially if they are disruptive busybodies.

Over the centuries the church has accumulated vast wealth because people have given it land and houses and money. Some of this wealth has been used to build churches and buy houses for people employed by the church, some has been invested to provide money to pay employees and maintain property owned by the church. Some has been put aside for a rainy day or famine, and much has been apparently been wasted on art, sculptures, and good living. The church in its early days was a community small enough for people to know one another, but it grew very rapidly in two hundred years to a vast international organisation spread throughout the Roman Empire so that most people did not know fellow believers beyond their own community.

The principle of sharing has been taken over by humanists who have taken on board some of what Jesus taught, by claiming that if we all shared what we have, there would be enough for everyone. Humanist or secularist ideologies which seek to establish equality by sharing always make it compulsory for those who have more to share with those who have less. That involves the use of taxation to redistribute wealth or in extreme ideologies theft or seizure of property with transfer of ownership to the State. Everything Jesus asks us to do is voluntary. If we refuse to follow his commandments, our punishment is not in this world. Jesus says render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s. That meant pay your taxes to the secular government and pay your tithes and gifts as the Mosaic law required of Jews so that the Levites and poor were provided for. Given there are no Levites for us to provide for as a tribe whose job is to worship God and teach the Law of Moses, Old Testament tithing, the giving of first fruits and festival offerings have been superseded with New Testament sharing of our excess wealth to those in need not just among the believers but among the poor and needy who may even be our enemies as Iraeneus said. Iraeneus is one of the founding fathers of Catholic theology based on (1) Scriptures, (2) the tradition handed down by the apostles (some of which is of dubious historicity) and (3) the teaching of the successors of the apostles (who are mainly the bishops of Rome and teaching approved by bishops of Rome). A logical extension of “love your enemies” is to help them when they are poor and in need, so he is right in that respect.

When it comes to people today (whether Christians or non-Christians) who speak and teach about sharing and giving, the majority who do so have never given away pretty much all their personal wealth whether worked for or inherited, and embraced a very modest lifestyle while allowing others to spend what they have given away as they see fit without retaining any control over what they gave. Today we have the founder of Microsoft, Bill Gates, giving away billions but still controlling where it is spent and retaining a huge amount of personal wealth. In the past there was Karl Marx who sponged off Engels without really working for his living, wanting to seize from the rich and redistribute property and control of everything to the State. Last Sunday the son of the manse Gordon Brown was telling us that the government needs to help the poor now as there is a crisis. I was surprised to see his estimated personal fortune amounts to over £10million, so he is not just subsisting on his prime-ministerial and MP’s pension of a mere £100,000 p.a. So what we usually hear from all who say we need to help others more is that they expect others to give more in taxes or their wealth, rather than themselves. Christians called by God to spread the Gospel full time depend on what the body of Christ provides for them (on donations or modest stipends) or they have job which pays them, but they spend a lot of spare time on God’s work. None would be considered wealthy and very few will tell others what to do with their money. What they will do is teach what the Bible says and leave it to everyone to decide how to spend or give away their money.

In 2 Corinthians 9 Paul continues on the theme of giving. *9 There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the Lord’s people. 2 For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action. 3 But I am sending the brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be. 4 For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we – not to say anything about you – would be ashamed of having been so confident. 5 So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given. 6 Remember this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 7 Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 9 As it is written: ‘They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures for ever.’ [Psalm 112:9] 10 Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will*

enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. ¹² This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ¹⁴ And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

The conclusion is that we are all given the opportunity to be generous and meet needs of those we come across, like our neighbours, fellow believers, people we don't know personally and even our enemies.

So far I have spoken about giving and sharing. In this passage in Acts this key verse cannot be ignored: ³³ *With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.* The activity of the early church focussed on telling people about Jesus, but also how the community of believers lived.

The last verse sets the scene for the next chapter, but establishes the credentials of Barnabas who was with Luke travelling to spread the Gospel. ³⁶ *Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means "son of encouragement"), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.* Verse 35 also mentions gifts being laid at the apostles' feet. The 12 were leaders of the church, teaching, preaching, worshipping, handling money and distributing it to those in need. Again these facts are mentioned for us to understand what happens in following chapters.

When we read Scripture, we need to discern whether what is said is descriptive or prescriptive. Which category do these verses fall under? Are they just a description of what happened shortly after Pentecost? Do they contain commands or words that are prescriptive that we should follow? It can be both!

What is the Holy Spirit saying to us? To one it may be he is saying share more of what you have; to another it may be provide help for someone in need, whether in time or in some more tangible way; and to another it may be that we need to be closer to Jesus so that we can be of one mind and heart in our love of Jesus. We do acknowledge that all we have comes from God, the creator of the world, but how willing would we be to submit to him, if like the rich young man, Jesus asked us to give away what we have and follow him. Remember when we looked at Mark 10 and rich young man. ¹⁷ *As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. 'Good teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' ¹⁸ 'Why do you call me good?' Jesus answered. 'No one is good – except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honour your father and mother." ' ²⁰ 'Teacher,' he declared, 'all these I have kept since I was a boy.' ²¹ Jesus looked at him and loved him. 'One thing you lack,' he said. 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' ²² At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. ²³ Jesus looked round and said to his disciples, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!' ²⁴ The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, 'Children, how hard it is ^[b] to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' ²⁶ The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, 'Who then can be saved?' ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.' ²⁸ Then Peter spoke up, 'We have left everything to follow you!' ²⁹ 'Truly I tell you,' Jesus replied, 'no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel ³⁰ will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – along with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.'*

It's sometimes tough to be a Christian and we need wisdom and the willingness to hear the Spirit speaking to us as to how we face the challenges Jesus issues to us.