

April 25, 2021  
Sunday Morning Service  
Series: Acts  
Community Baptist Church  
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Greer, SC 29650  
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## COMMUNISM, COMMUNALISM, OR COMPASSION? Acts 4:32-37

We are all too familiar with communism. The idea, the seed form of communism was present among some ancient Greek philosophers. Some historians proposed that this form of social interaction was practiced by the early church (specifically according to our text) and by other religious groups (including Puritans and Pilgrims) in years that followed. The ideology seemed to grow more obvious as a reaction to the industrial revolution when socialists blamed capitalism for the woes and suffering of the proletariat, a new class of people made up of average wage earners.

Communism became the ideology that has been practiced widely in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries due to the work and influence of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. According to Marxist theory, class conflict arises in capitalist societies due to contradictions between the material interests of the oppressed and exploited proletariat—a class of wage laborers employed to produce goods and services, and the bourgeoisie—the ruling class that owns the means of production. Because they own the means of production, the people in charge get their wealth on the backs of the laborers. It is inequality. The solution was to force the wealthy class, the bourgeoisie, to give part of their excess to the proletariat, the lowly wage earners. They called it equality accomplished by redistribution of the wealth.

If all that sounds familiar and very close to you, it is probably because you have been watching the daily news. Is that what the new Church in Jerusalem practiced? No.

Or did the first Christians decide to practice communalism? Communalism is a more modern ideology than communism. While it is similar, it is different in that communalism is mostly voluntary.

The idea is simply that the members of the commune will have all things in common. We, the mature generation, saw this idea practiced firsthand in the hippy communes where young libertarian idealists agreed to pool all their resources so that everyone was equal. Sadly, the sharing of all things meant sharing of spouses and children also, and that never works out for good.

Multiple scholars are convinced that the early Church in Jerusalem practiced communalism. Is that what the Christians were doing according to our text? In a way, as far as material possessions are concerned, it is generally fair to describe their practice as communalism.

However, the major distinction between the Church's practice and communism or communalism is the motivation. Political/economic ideologies are built on attempted solutions to financial, material, or social needs. Christianity is built on love, a genuine compassion for our Christian brothers and sisters. How can we say we love a brother or a sister and yet not be moved to help them when they find themselves in a legitimate need?

That is the question Apostle John asked. *But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him (1 John 3:17)?* James, half brother of Jesus, posed the same question: *If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that (James 2:16)?*

Those questions were foundational in the attitude and activity Luke described in the early Church. That the people had all things in common is undebatable. That is what the text clearly says. Why they decided to do what they did is the question. And that question must be answered by appealing to the early Christians' love for Christ which worked out in expressions of love for each other.

### Unique Attitudes (vv.32-33).

It is probably a bit surprising for the modern Christian to read the opening words of our text and discover that, in the first Church, they had everything in common. To say that unity was the underlying trait might be an understatement. *Now the full number of those who*

*believed were of one heart and soul (v.32a)*. The *full number of those who believed*, as it is mentioned here, was now well over 5,000 (4:4). The Church had grown to this number in a matter of days. There was no organization, no structure, no buildings, no denominations with bishops or superintendents. How were the leaders supposed to meet the needs of the people?

There were only a handful of leaders. But there was plenty of “heart and soul.” These were the people who believed. It really was not that everyone just kind of joined up because they had the same preferences or believed in the same kind of religious teaching. Christ was building His Church which is unlike any other kind of movement, ideology, or religious experience. God moved in a supernatural way on the hearts of over 5,000 people – most of them being in Jerusalem. God drew these people irresistibly to Jesus to confess their sins and express faith in His finished work of atonement for salvation. God the Holy Spirit did the miraculous work of regeneration in their heart and soul.

Therefore, the result that we read about in this text was not that the people tried very hard to be nice to each other because that is what religious folks do. Rather, as a result of becoming a true believer in Jesus Christ, they loved each other and that love came out in expressions of compassion. Jesus promised that this would be the case when He told the apostles, “*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*” (John 13:35).

Unity with believers is not really a goal as much as a result of right fellowship. Right fellowship with Jesus will result in right fellowship with other Jesus believers. Who demonstrated that better than the apostles themselves? When they walked with Jesus they sometimes quarreled with each other, but now, being filled with the Holy Spirit, they led the unity of the Church.

And being drawn by God the Father into relationship with God the Son, and being filled with God the Holy Spirit, sharing was the result. To that end we read, *And no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common (v.32b)*. Luke had already hinted at the deep unity of the first Christians when he wrote, *And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need*

*(Acts 2:44-45)*. Now, in the text before us, we find more detail in that everyone disowned everything. We will see more about that in verses 34-35.

There is a somewhat odd progression of the text at this point. Luke has been describing the extreme unity of the people, the result of changed hearts because of trusting Christ. The result was a demonstration of Christ’s love. But all of that pointed to another result of faith. The people were enjoying great power and grace. God granted great power to testify. *And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus (v.33a)*. This means that the witnesses were witnessing.

Jesus picked out exactly twelve men to train them for this task. Of course one of the twelve was a traitor because he wanted to be and because, in God’s plan, it was necessary. Jesus had instructed the other eleven and Matthias regarding their responsibility. It was a three-year training session by Jesus. In that training, Jesus had taught the men about what to expect from rulers. “*They will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name’s sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness*” (Luke 21:12-13). Jesus also made it very clear that the divine plan was that “*the gospel must first be proclaimed to all nations*” (Mark 13:10). He taught them, “*Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things*” (Luke 24:47-48).

That brings us to the two commands from Jesus that clearly articulated the apostles’ responsibility to witness for Him. He said, “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*” (Matthew 28:19-20a). Jesus also said, “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*” (Acts 1:8).

The apostles, the witnesses, carried out Jesus’ instruction giving testimony with great power. The Greek word for testimony is *marturion* which gives us the English word martyr. The root of the

word means to bear in mind or remember that which demands much deliberation and consideration. That idea fits well with “eye witness.” That is what Jesus told the apostles they were to do. They would bear careful, deliberate testimony about what they heard, saw, learned from Him.

Specifically, the apostles witness was about the Lord Jesus’ resurrection. That is so interesting in light of everything else they learned and experienced in three years of training. Their witness did not focus on all the miracles that Jesus did. Their witness did not tell amazing stories about the parables and teaching Jesus gave. Their focus was on the resurrection and everything else fell in line under it. That is important because without the resurrection there is nothing else to say about faith in Christ. Paul explained that truth like this: *And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins (1 Corinthians 15:17).*

And yet the miracle of Christ’s resurrection is still a stumbling block to faith even as it was to our ancient peers. Paul experienced that same reaction when he testified about the resurrection to the philosophers in Athens. *Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, “We will hear you again about this” (Acts 17:32).*

God granted special, unusual power to the witnessing apostles. It was the dynamo of God. Without special power from God our witness will be so many stories, so much information, mere religious chit chat. We would be wise to ask God to grant us great power when we tell about the resurrection of Christ or any other great truth about our Lord Jesus. How much more effective we would be even in our attempts at edifying each other if we spoke with divine power.

Not only did God grant great power to the witnesses, but God also granted great grace to all. Luke recorded that *great grace was upon them all (v.33b)*. All believers receive God’s great grace (unmerited favor of God) at the moment of salvation. In fact, every person is the recipient of God’s common grace throughout life even if we don’t believe He exists. But when God kindly draws us out of the dungeon of sin to our Savior Jesus Christ for salvation, that is sometimes called irresistible grace.

Because God pours out His grace on us sinners to bring us into His family through Christ, He continues to give us grace to witness

for Him. Throughout the Christian’s life God continues to pour out His favor and kindness to help us serve Him, to witness for Him, to be conformed to our Savior. So what happens when the Lord’s witnesses receive His great power and His great grace?

### **Unusual Actions (vv.34-37).**

The results for those early Christians are almost shocking. The people actively shared possessions so that there was no material need in the Church. Luke wrote that *there was not a needy person among them (v.34a)*. This statement alone should be a bit shocking to us especially in light of Jesus’ statement, *“For you always have the poor with you” (Matthew 26:11a)*. In other words, Jesus taught that there will always be poverty on some level. Poverty is the result of sin. It is not always a consequence of an individual’s sin, such as sloth or foolishness. Poorness is just the result of the principle of sin in the world.

That is why the Mosaic Law is full of instructions telling God’s people to watch out for the poor. But even in Jesus’ day there were plenty of poor people. And there are plenty of needy people in our day. How many of them are our Christian brothers and sisters? In an amazing display of God’s grace, that common need disappeared in the early Church. There was plenty of provision, *For as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need (vv.34b-35).*

Some people suggest that part of the problem was that Jewish people from Galilee and even more remote areas had moved into Jerusalem to be part of the Church. It is possible that people might have come to know Christ at Pentecost and chose to stay in Jerusalem or move to Jerusalem. However it was that the need came about, owners liquidated their real estate. It is possible in our culture and setting to question the wisdom of this matter. But maybe these people were so serious about following the Lord’s command that they fully planned to leave their houses and lands behind as they went into Judea, Samaria, and all over the world to be His witnesses.

Also, God knew that within a very short time, Saul of Tarsus was going to wreak havoc on the Church in Jerusalem. As a result of

persecution, it appears that everyone except the apostles, fled the city. Later in this study we will read, *And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles (Acts 8:1)*. The full plan of God's will is not always discernable, but His timing is always impeccable.

They brought the proceeds to the apostles for distribution. Laying the money at the apostles' feet was a pretty good demonstration of complete commitment to Christ. There is no indication that the apostles solicited this money or put pressure on anyone to give. They would simply be in charge of distributing according to the need. With a church possibly numbering over 10,000 this was going to be a daunting task. Also, with the apostles distributing the money, it would prevent a recipient from feeling indebted to a donor.

This unusual activity had to be motivated by the Lord who was building His church. If or when such activity becomes driven by emotion, it will result in foolish and very costly choices. We each are responsible to manage any material possessions we have for the glory of God. By pouring out great grace on particular servants, the Lord may well reveal the need for highly unusual choices or activity.

Our text ends with an illustration of the activity. There was this one particular fellow called Barnabas. Actually his name was Joseph. *Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus (v.36)*. Joseph was a good Jewish name maybe named after the patriarch with the same name. The apostles gave him the nickname Barnabas. That name means "son of parakleisis" which commonly means to encourage. But more accurately the word *parakaleo* means to exhort or call alongside. In light of subsequent information about Barnabas, we can conclude that Joseph was an effective preacher and teacher also.

This man was a Levite from Cyprus. At some point he moved to Jerusalem where a Levite would feel quite at home in the city of God's temple. But we must wonder if Barnabas was a practicing Levite? Maybe not in light of the fact that the man liquidated his assets to benefit the church. We read that he *sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet (v.37)*.

According to Mosaic law, Levites did not own any property because they were set aside for God's service. Apparently, Levite Joseph the Son of Encouragement was somewhat wealthy. The text does not say that he liquidated all of his possessions or real estate but "a" field.

In subsequent information in Acts, we might conclude that Barnabas was from a wealthy family. We know that his aunt, the mother of his cousin John Mark, owned a house large enough for a part of the church to meet in (Acts 12:12). By the way, it was in Jerusalem and apparently she did not sell it which was good so the church had a place to meet.

As we close let's make some practical applications about the story. We should consider the possibility that there would be possible negative results regarding future needs. Some argue that it was necessary for Gentile churches in Asia to collect offerings to meet the needs for saints in Jerusalem because they liquidated their sources of income. But that conclusion does not take into account that most of the Christians left Jerusalem almost twenty-five years earlier at the outset of Saul's persecution. Also, we know that a large reason for the poverty among Christians in Jerusalem around the year 55 was a famine (Acts 11:28).

Conversely, liquidating assets might have had a positive result when it became necessary to move away. We already mentioned God's timing in the matter. Within a couple of years of this amazing sacrificial activity, the Christians had to move out of Jerusalem. A practical application of that truth is that it is a bit easier to go to the mission field if you are not encumbered with possessions.

Finally, there is a relevant application to make. Again, the beginning days of the Church were full of miracles and unusual events that we should not expect to be repeated throughout history. Nevertheless, the need for demonstration of compassion in the local assembly is always right and often necessary. Giving to meet a material need can be a response to human pressure. It should be a response to God pouring great grace into our hearts.

The beginning stages of Christ building His church were full of miracles and unique activity. Our text does not recommend in any way that Communism is good for the Church. It obviously is not. Nor does our text recommend Communalism, though it does appear that, to some extent, such was the practice in the early Church. However,

our text strongly recommends a heart of compassion to meet legitimate needs in the Body of Christ. That compassion is not so much a response to pressure from the church leadership or even the needy person as it is a natural expression of God pouring out great grace for His people. Pray for great grace.