

The Early Church Was Not Communist

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By Jay Richards

WASHINGTON, D.C.—You’ve heard this question. Since I write a lot about Christianity and economics, I’ve been asked it dozens of times—Was the early church communist?

It’s not a crazy query. In the book of Acts, just after Pentecost, members of the new church sold their belongings and shared their wealth. That sounds like communism to some folks. And, if Christians are to live up to their origins, the argument goes, then they should be communists too.

Makes perfect sense, as long as you misread the text, ignore the details and forget the meaning of words.

Still, lots of people have that impression. So let’s look at what the text says.

Acts 4:32-35—“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. And with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.”

Now, this was the very first church in Jerusalem. These believers were still buzzing from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The author (probably Luke) says “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31, RSV).

If they didn’t get it right, who did?

Fair question. As usual, though, the details and context are everything.

Define terms

First, let’s define communism. Communism is based on Marx’s theory of class warfare. Under capitalism, Marx predicted, the workers are exploited and at some point, revolt against the capitalists—the owners of the means of pro-

duction. The workers take control of private property by force, and then the state owns it on behalf of the people.

Then, after a while, Marx claimed, the socialist state would wither away and you'd get a communist utopia in which everyone lived in peace, harmony and preternatural freedom.

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There's none of this class-warfare stuff in the early church in Jerusalem. No talk of the "means of production." No denouncing of private property. No violent revolution.

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Second, the state was nowhere in sight. No Roman centurions were kicking down doors, confiscating property and collectivizing farms. No one was forced to do anything. The church in Jerusalem was just that—a church, not a state.

The church didn't act like a modern communist state. As left-leaning evangelical Ron Sider notes: "Sharing was voluntary, not compulsory."

Read carefully

It's easy to lose sight of this later in the text, though, when Peter condemns Ananias and Sapphira. They're the couple whose claim to fame is that they kept back some of the money they got from selling their land. They were struck dead as a result.

If you just glance at the text, you might think Peter condemns them for failing to give everything to the collective. But read it carefully.

He asks: "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God" (Acts 5:3–4).

So Peter condemns the couple, not for keeping part of the proceeds of the sale, but for lying about it. In fact, he takes for granted that the property was theirs, even after it was sold. Peter says nothing about private property per se.

Not the norm

Third, the communal life of the early church in Jerusalem was never made the norm for all Christians everywhere. In fact, Luke doesn't treat it as the norm even for the Jerusalem church.

In Acts, Luke is describing a unique moment in the life of the early church. Thousands of Jews had come from around the Roman world to worship at the temple in Jerusalem at Pentecost.

They were away from their homes, their jobs and their belongings. Then thousands of them became Christians—all at once.

What to do? They would have had to return home right away, alone and untaught, if not for the extreme measures taken by the local Christians. The locals chose to sell their possessions and share with their new brothers and sisters. Given the situation, that makes perfect sense.

For all we know, this selling-and-sharing stage lasted six months. It's unlikely that all these new Christians, many denizens of the far-flung Jewish Diaspora, stayed in Jerusalem for the rest of their lives. Many surely returned home at some point and brought their new faith with them.

We know from the New Testament that other churches in other cities had different arrangements.

For instance, Paul sternly warned the Thessalonian Christians: "If any one will not work, let him not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work" (2 Thessalonians 3:10-11).

Some new Christians had begun to take advantage of the generosity of their new brothers in the faith. That may be why the emergency communal life in Jerusalem was never held up as a model for how the entire church should order its life, let alone used to justify the state confiscating private property.

Communal living does have its place.

- Nuclear families sort of live communally. In functional families, however, the parents are in charge. So it's not really a commune.
- Many monasteries and religious orders live communally. These are highly disciplined, voluntary communities that are self-consciously separate from the ordinary life of family and commerce. Many of them survive for centuries—and, in fact, the productivity of some early monasteries helped give rise to capitalism in medieval Europe.
- There have been other Christian groups that have tried to live communally. There were lots of Christian communes in the 18th and 19th centuries.
- And the American Amish and the Jesus People USA live in semicommunal groups today. The ones that survive are small, voluntary and intensely disciplined.

Be generous

The take-home lesson is clear: The book of Acts doesn't describe an early communist experiment in Jerusalem, or set a precedent for how all Christians should live.

Still, there's a strong lesson in the example of these first Christians. In a pinch, we should all be willing to go to great lengths, even to sell all we have, to care for needy believers and to see the gospel spread to ends of the earth.