



COLLECTIVISM AND/OR CHRISTIANITY: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF ACTS 2:42-47 AND 4:32—5:11

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INTRODUCTION

Some believe that Christianity is non-capitalistic at its core and that such a position is based on Scripture. Advocates of this position commonly cite Acts 2—5 as a primary example of the collective commitment of the initial church. This view is misguided. It is based principally on a misinterpretation of several key texts which we will consider below.¹ Our analysis of each passage will reveal the consistent theme that all giving was a voluntary and joyful response to the gospel and its powerful attestations through the apostles and its social implications. We will also observe that the first believers did not feel compelled by the apostles to surrender their right to personal property and its discretionary use.

EXEGESIS

*Acts 2:42-47*²

Summary of Passage

This passage highlights the unity and intimacy of the first Christian community, which was marked by a commitment to apostolic teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. Commitment to Christ was demonstrated especially by the voluntary outpouring of resources and free distribution to all in need.³ The end of the passage relates how the internal vibrancy resulted in numerical growth.

Translation⁴

Acts 2:42-47: ⁴² And they were devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the fellowship and to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. ⁴³ And fear was coming upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were coming through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who had faith were together and having all things in common, ⁴⁵ and were selling their possessions and the belongings and were distributing these to all as any were having need; ⁴⁶ and daily, attending together the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they were receiving their food with glad and grateful hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having gratitude towards the entire people. And the Lord added to those who were being saved daily.

2:42. This is a description of the first Christian community. The four activities capture what the first Christians did following their conversion in response to the gospel message. Luke's main burden, however, is not to focus on these four activities *per se* but to stress the profound unity and intimacy this community shared through the Spirit.⁵ The participle *proskarterountes* first occurs in 1:14, highlighting the united devotion of Jesus' remaining disciples, the women who had followed Jesus, Mary, and the rest of Jesus' earthly family. Its occurrence here is certainly intentional, communicating how the initial band of followers has expanded to include the new believers who have accepted the gospel and have been baptized (2:41).

The four activities named are the teaching of the apostles, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers. These four activities should be understood as two main commitments—a commitment to apostolic teaching and a commitment to fellowship.⁶ The specification of “the teaching of the *apostles*” highlights the unique authority and status they had among the first believers.⁷ After all, it is the apostles who uniquely received Jesus' commandments through the Spirit (1:2). The importance of the twelve is reiterated by the need to replace Judas with Matthias (1:26). The first recipients of the gospel turn to these apostles for guidance on how they ought to respond to the gospel (2:37). The phrase “the teaching of the apostles,” then, communicates not only the priority of teaching and learning among the first believers but also the authority of the apostles. In short, the first mark of the first Christian community is a commitment to Jesus' revelation uniquely entrusted to the apostles.⁸

“Fellowship” (*koinonia*) is a term found in Greco-Roman literature to express the mutuality and commitment characteristic of marriage.⁹ In the given passage it is clear that such mutuality is expressed by both shared activity and shared possessions. The intimacy implied is made explicit by the following phrase “the breaking of bread.” It is unclear whether Luke is referring to the Lord's Table¹⁰ or perhaps to a larger meal shared by church members¹¹—if not both¹²—although the latter is more likely.¹³ Either way, as is the case today, this specific form of fellowship signaled friendship and intimacy, which was extraordinary given that such meals broke the pattern of eating only with those of a similar socio-economic-ethnic background. Moreover, the use of the phrase “breaking of the bread” occurs only once elsewhere, in Luke 24:35: it is through the “breaking of the bread” that the disciples in Emmaus come to perceive Jesus. There may be a subtle reference here to the unique recognition and acceptance of the risen Lord Jesus that bound the new converts. Finally, the devotion to prayers echoes the description of the first believers found in 1:14-15,¹⁴ reiterating how the new community represents an expansion of the original praying 120.

2:43. In the first half of verse 43 Luke notes “fear was coming upon every soul.” “Fear” (*phobos*) occurs throughout Luke's Gospel to express awe in response to divine intervention (e.g., Luke 1:12; 2:9) and Jesus' miracles (e.g., Luke 5:26; 7:16). Undoubtedly it has a similar sense here and provides much insight into the devotion described in 2:42 and the overwhelming

generosity soon to be detailed: the impetus for this group was “a joyful, trembling sense of awe.”¹⁵ “Every soul” (*pasē psuchē*) is a reference to the three thousand “souls” (*psuchai*) added by the Lord. Luke’s point is that the entire Christian community continued to experience a deep and supernatural sense of awe and joy.

In the second half of verse 43, Luke specifies that such fear was in response to the manifestation of the many signs and wonders coming through the apostles. The phrase “wonders and signs” (*terata kai sēmeia*) is intentional, harkening back to “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs (*terasi kai sēmeiois*) that God did through him in your midst” (Acts 2:22). Thus Luke’s emphasis is as much on the continuity between Jesus and his disciples as on the miracles themselves; it is the risen and exalted Lord who is continuing his work through his anointed apostles and confirming their authority through such wonders and signs.¹⁶ Moreover, the repeated reference to “apostles” reiterates the unique power and authority of these men within this community.

2:44. The wording of verse 24 merits careful attention. A literal translation reads: “But all who have faith were together and had all [things] fellowshipped.” The first use of “all” (*pantes*) in this verse refers back to “all (*pasē*) soul” in 2:43. The “all” who have experienced God’s power through the apostles’ signs and wonders are further described as “those who have faith” (presumably) in the gospel taught by the apostles. All these gospel-believers were together (or in a single place)¹⁷ and had “all” (*hapanta*) in “common” (*koina*) or—to be consistent with the translation “fellowship” (*koinōnia*) in 2:42—“all” had “all fellowshipped.” This is Luke’s way of expressing that all had adopted an attitude of mutuality, sharing their individual material possessions with one another as fellow members of the household of faith.¹⁸ Such pooling of possessions was not imposed on them by the apostles but was a voluntary response born out of a sense of spiritual unity and mutual care.¹⁹

2:45. Both imperfect verbs “were selling and were distributing” (*epipraskon kai diemerizon*) are iterative in force; that is, as the first community members perceived need, they sold their “possessions and belongings” and distributed them accordingly.²⁰ Such transactions did not happen overnight, nor were they forced by the apostles. They were progressive and voluntary as the community became more cognizant of one another’s needs and more convicted of their common bond in Jesus Christ. The use of the pronoun “all” (*pasin*) reiterates the absence of discrimination and the profound unity of the first community. All who had need received from those with plenty, since they were all of one faith.

2:46. That Luke seeks to reiterate the expansion of the original gathering described in 1:14 to include the recent converts is evidenced by the exact repetition of the phrase “devoting together” (*proskarterountes homothumadon*) in 2:46. The mention of daily devotion “to the temple” reflects “the Jewish character of their faith in this early period.”²¹ This should not surprise us, as

Jesus and his disciples regularly attended the temple. Luke notes, however, that their fellowship went beyond the formal boundaries of the temple. The phrase “breaking bread from house to house” is not a reference to the Lord’s Supper but to meals shared together. Luke’s concern is to reiterate how the new community began to connect in profoundly intimate and familial ways. In addition, Luke highlights the overwhelming joy the new community experienced: “they received their food with glad and grateful hearts.” The sense is that such fellowship did not stem primarily from obligation or selfish motives but from genuine gladness and sincerity of heart as a result of the Spirit.

2:47. Verse 47 continues the note of joy shared among the first believers, specifying that they were praising God. The verb “praise” (*aineō*) occurs only a few times in Acts (2:47; 3:8, 9). It appears early in Luke to describe both the angels’ and shepherds’ reaction to God’s manifestation of salvation in Jesus Christ. Its appearance in 2:47 suggests that the believers are rejoicing similarly because of the good news of salvation that has come to them. Luke also notes that this new community enjoyed “favor towards the entire people.” The term “people” (*laon*) is probably to be understood in contrast to the three thousand souls who were saved through Peter’s message (2:41) and are referenced in this passage as “all” (2:43, 44, 45). Although persecution would soon come to the church, for the time being the radical unity and philanthropy of this new community seemed to elicit the admiration of even those who were not part of the community.

Such a vibrant community did not remain static. Luke concludes this passage with the note—echoing 2:41—that “the Lord added to those who were being saved.” What is clear is that the Lord is the subject. It is the Lord who is ultimately doing the work of expanding the initial community of faith.²² This is consistent with Luke’s overall theology that salvation belongs to the Lord.

Acts 4:32-37

Summary of Passage

Acts 4:32-37 clearly echoes what we have already seen in 2:42-47, reiterating the unity, generosity, and spiritual vibrancy of the recent converts and the authority of the apostles. Luke, however, notes a specific individual among the community (Barnabas) in order to set up a contrast with Ananias and Sapphira, who will appear in the very next passage.

Translation²³

Acts 4:32-37: ³² *And the multitude of those who had faith was one heart and soul, and not one was saying that any of the things he possessed was his own; rather for them all things were in fellowship.* ³³ *And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.* ³⁴ *For there was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses, selling [them] they brought the proceeds of what was sold* ³⁵ *and laid it at the apostles' feet, and distributed to each according*

to someone who had need.³⁶ And Joseph, who was called Barnabas from the apostles (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus,³⁷ a field that belonged to him selling [he] brought the money and laid it at the feet of the apostles.

4:32. Luke initiates this section by highlighting that “the multitude of those who had faith” were so intimately united that none regarded his possessions solely for personal gain but for the benefit of all believers. Luke says nothing at all about any sort of imposition made by the apostles, even though they had great authority among the believers; nor does Luke suggest that all gave up either their personal property or their right to personal property. Rather, he simply expresses their disposition, which he then substantiates in the verses that follow.

What is extraordinary is that the “multitude” (*phēthous*) of believers had this generous disposition.²⁴ Without blunting the force of this reality, we should note that this passage follows on the heels of the church’s first experience of persecution (4:1-22). It appears that Peter’s arrest resulted only in more earnest prayer and boldness (4:23-31). Under such persecution it is natural for those who share in a common faith to band together and share “everything in fellowship” (*hapanta koina*),²⁵ an obvious echo of 2:44. Whether our focus is on the supernatural or circumstantial reasons for such unity, Luke’s point is clear and emphatic: those with faith were extraordinarily united in heart and soul, as expressed in a liberality that freed each person from materialism to compassion.

4:33. Again we are reminded of the apostles’ pivotal role in the growing Christian community. The focus of their “testimony” (*marturion*) was “the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ” (see 2:31; 4:2). This is a reminder that the church was born out of conviction in the historicity of Christ’s resurrection. But Luke also specifies the nature of the apostles’ witness. Their testimony was not like a contemporary intellectual argument for the reality of the resurrection. Rather, we are told that “with great power” (*dunamei megalē*) the apostles were giving testimony. “Great power” is not only suggestive of miracles like the healing of the cripple described in 3:1-10. It is also a reference to the great power exerted by God in raising Jesus from the dead. The “great power” is resurrection power which bore witness to the reality of the resurrection itself.

Continuing with the theme of unity, Luke writes that “great grace was upon them all.” The repetition of “great” (*megalē*) certainly is intentional, indicating that such grace was akin to “great power.” “Grace” (*charis*) is often understood as “favor,” and this sense is likely included here; but the epistles make clear that “grace” also refers to power for perseverance.²⁶ This sense seems fitting in this context, given the first believers had just experienced persecution. Finally, the emphasis is that none in the community was excluded from experiencing this extraordinary outpouring of power and favor. Luke again is careful to note that “all” (*pantas*) received such grace. Luke’s point is that everyone in the congregation received not only every necessary material good as each needed but also every good spiritual gift. Although analyses of the first

Christian community often point out the extraordinary generosity of the wealthier members, Luke emphasizes the extraordinary grace and power experienced by all members of the community. Any attempt to understand the philosophical underpinnings and practices of this community must begin with a proper appreciation for its supernatural character, which Luke is intentional to highlight again and again. Apparently Luke wants to leave no room for misunderstanding: these first believers were freed from unduly materialistic concerns because they had come to witness, experience, and believe in a person and reality that transcended the here and now.

4:34-35. These verses show a practical demonstration of the grace which all the believers had experienced. The proclamation of Jesus' resurrection resulted in a notable increase in philanthropy. None among them had any need, because those who had lands and homes sold them and brought the proceeds to the apostles who, in turn, gave to those in need.²⁷ As we observed in 2:45, the imperfect form of all the verbs indicates that such selling and sharing was progressive as the community became more aware of one another's needs. Their possessions were not entirely forfeited in a matter of a day and then redistributed by the powers that be. In addition, we should observe that the proceeds from the sales were entrusted to the apostles to use however they deemed most fitting, analogous to how church members entrust elders and pastors with the appropriate use of offerings. There is no suggestion that wealthy believers were forced or pressured to give up or sell their possessions. Rather, it appears that each gave of his own accord in response to the gospel message and its confirmations through the work of the apostles.

The specification "feet of the apostles" reiterates the authority of the apostles in this community, which is further highlighted by their right to decide who gets what.²⁸ What is truly extraordinary was the freedom and gladness with which the wealthy believers gave of their possessions. Although their motivation is not detailed for us, the context up to now makes clear that it was both the proclamation of salvation and the outpouring of the Spirit that resulted in both a conviction and a desire to give what they had to build up God's own household. A myriad of factors help us to understand the impetus behind such liberality, including an overwhelming experience of generosity from God resulting in generosity toward others; the belief that this life is temporary; and the conviction that one's ultimate security is found not in one's possessions but in God. In summary, it was nothing less than a radically new gospel-worldview that resulted in such free giving. The "greatness" of God's power and grace upon them highlighted in 4:33 was more than a private internal quality; it revealed itself in the incredible generosity of those with great possessions.²⁹ It is important to recognize their free generosity in order to avoid misunderstanding the phrase "feet of the apostles." While the apostles clearly filled an authoritative role within the community, their authority did not remove or impinge on the believers' right to own property and to use it according to each person's discretion.

4:36-37. Among the believers was a man by the name of Joseph, referred to by the apostles as Barnabas, who embodied—even exemplified—the process of selling personal possessions and laying the proceeds at the feet of the apostles. While details about him are scarce, something extraordinary about this individual earned him the apostles’ praise as a “son of encouragement.”³⁰ Implicit is the idea that Barnabas generously and joyfully gave the apostles all the proceeds from selling his field, setting the stage for the narrative concerning Ananias and Sapphira.

The name Barnabas, which means *son of encouragement*, supports our thesis that giving was a voluntary and joyful response to one’s personal conviction of the gospel. If the apostles had imposed the sale and distribution of personal property, it would be difficult to understand why the apostles and the community of faith were encouraged by Barnabas. No citizen or person in authority is encouraged by the fact that an individual has paid his taxes; doing so simply fulfills what is required by the state. Inspiration and appreciation arise when a person gives generously and nobly of his own accord without any external instigation or coercion.

Acts 5:1-11

Summary of Passage

F. F. Bruce aptly notes: “The story of Ananias is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua. In both narratives an act of deceit interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God.”³¹

At this point in Luke’s narrative, Ananias and Sapphira are introduced as a stark contrast to Barnabas. Luke makes clear that the sin of the couple is not greed but deceit. They were condemned for attempting to lie to the Holy Spirit by presenting themselves as more generous than they were. Luke makes equally clear that Peter was able to discern their scheme. Finally, Luke emphasizes the condemnation that fell upon this husband and wife and the ensuing fear that fell upon the entire community.³²

Translation³³

Acts 5:1-11: ¹ But a certain man named Ananias with Sapphira, his wife, sold property, ² and he kept back for himself some of the proceeds—indeed, his wife knowing—and bringing only a part laid it at the feet of the apostles. ³ But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie against the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain yours? And after it was sold, was it not in your authority? Why did you contrive this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.” ⁵ Hearing these words, Ananias fell down and died, and great fear came upon all who heard. ⁶ And rising the young men wrapped him up and, carrying him out, buried him. ⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came not knowing of what had happened. ⁸ And Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.” And she said, “Yes, for so much.” ⁹ And Peter said to

her, "How is it that you conspired to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who buried your husband are at the door and they will also carry you out." ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. Entering the young men found her dead and, carrying her out, buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.

5:1-2. From the outset Ananias is introduced with a degree of suspicion by the use of the term "certain" (*tis*) versus the plain introduction of Barnabas.³⁴ Like Barnabas, this man and his wife Sapphira sold property; unlike Barnabas, who brought all the proceeds from selling his land, this couple kept a portion of the proceeds and gave the apostles the remaining amount. Luke notes that Ananias did this with the full knowledge of his wife, although it is not yet clear whether it was with her full consent. The implicit malefaction was not that the couple decided to keep a portion of the sale (see 5:4) but that they sought to appear more generous than they were, by laying before the apostles the supposed full amount.³⁵ The verb "kept back" (*enosphisato*) is used of Achan's deceitful act of stealing some spoils of Jericho despite God's command to devote all of Jericho to destruction (Joshua 7:1). In general it is a verb associated with fraud, pilfering, and embezzling; its occurrence here therefore highlights Ananias' deceptive motivation.

5:3-4. Peter's response points to not only his authority but also his unique spiritual endowment. He knows what Ananias has done, and he recognizes its spiritual root. Peter observes that Satan had filled Ananias' heart to lie against the Holy Spirit by keeping a portion of the proceeds. That Satan "filled" (*eplērōsen*) the heart of Ananias stands in contrast to the Spirit who "filled" (*eplērōsen*) the first believers (2:2). Here is the fundamental contrast between Barnabas and Ananias. The contrast is key to understanding Luke's different assessments of their offerings. The former is not commended for obeying some external imposition but for giving joyfully as an overflow of being filled with the Spirit. The latter is not condemned for violating some external imposition but for giving deceptively as an overflow of being filled with Satan. In short, the two are neither commended nor condemned on the basis of submission to any requirement set by the apostles.

All the same, it is clear that Ananias is not free from blame. Ananias' fault is accented in verse 4, where Peter appears to reason with him. Peter observes that the property and the proceeds were always "yours" (*soi*) and "in your authority" (*en tē sē exousia*). Here we have the clearest announcement concerning Christian charity in the early church. Giving was not compulsory; rather, each believer maintained the right to determine how to use his possessions and gains to help those in need. The use of the interrogative particle *ouki* at the beginning of 5:4 furthers the point. The obvious answer is that Ananias was free to do whatever he pleased with his property and the proceeds. The sin in view was the desire to deceive the apostles into thinking that

Ananias too merited the title “son of encouragement.”³⁶ There is absolutely no suggestion that Ananias was guilty of failing to give or to surrender his right to personal property.

Verse 4 concludes with the words, “You have not lied to men but to God.” Peter’s declaration reiterates that God was to be the focus of the Christian community. Giving among the members was to be motivated by the experience of God’s Spirit and for the purpose of pleasing him. Ananias is condemned not for keeping a portion of the sale but for failing to make God the motivation and goal of his giving.

5:5-6. Verse 5 begins with a present participle, vividly conveying how divine judgment was drawing closer as Peter’s words fell upon Ananias. The verb “died” (*exepsuxen*) occurs only a few times in the NT, twice in this passage and once in Acts 12:23 describing Herod’s death. The verb seems reserved for the death of a wicked person. The instantaneous and otherwise mysterious nature of Ananias’ death is intended to connect his death with his sin. Luke leaves no room to interpret his death as something inexplicable or coincidental. The sudden judgment conveys God’s zeal to maintain the sanctity of the community and his sovereign judgment over all. Nothing is hidden from his sight, and no deed will go unnoticed.³⁷

Luke also notes that “great fear came upon all who heard.” The judgment on Ananias was intended to have not only an individual impact but a corporate one as well. Similar to the grace that fell upon all (4:33), the judgment was meant to underscore both apostolic authority and God’s holy presence. The hastiness and the absence of any family make the burial somewhat unusual. The burial suggests the community’s intent to cast out evil from their presence as quickly as possible (see Deut 13:5). That is, the desire to keep the community pure outweighed the need to observe proper burial rites. Such a communal motivation to please God rather than man displays the opposite of Ananias’ heart and reiterates the fundamental ethos prevalent among the first believers. Whether the matter at hand involved voluntary giving or disregarding proper burial protocol, the basic quality we see in this community is its awe of and reverence toward God.

5:7-8. Sapphira arrives on the scene after about three hours “not knowing” (*mē eiduia*) of her husband’s death.³⁸ Thus the opportunity is given to her to respond to Peter without bias. Peter’s inquiry is intentionally plain and simple. It allows for only yes or no. Peter asks whether the amount Ananias brought equals the amount which he received for the land sold. With life-or-death judgment in the balance, Peter does not want to allow for any misunderstanding. He gives Sapphira the opportunity to come clean. Sapphira, however, fails abysmally. She responds with equal directness, “Yes, for so much.” The exchange shows that Ananias and Sapphira’s sin was not failure to abide by an apostolic code that required the forfeiture of private property and the sale of personal assets. Rather, their sin was the attempt to appear more generous than they were.

5:9-10. Peter responds by drawing attention to the Spirit of the Lord. Revealing his knowledge of their scheme through the use of the verb “conspired” (*sunephōnēthē*), he asks why she chose to “test” (*peirasai*) the Spirit. The latter verb occurs regularly in Acts (5:9; 9:26; 15:10; 16:6-8; 24:5-8) and is reminiscent of how Israel tested the Lord in the wilderness (Exod 17:2). The force of the verb includes ingratitude and pride. Why did the couple reject God’s grace and call to righteousness by acting deceitfully? Did they really suppose they could deceive the Spirit? Peter’s question is clearly rhetorical, showing up the folly of their plot to appear more generous than they were.

Peter not only discloses his knowledge of their fraud but also declares that the judgment that fell on Ananias is about to fall on Sapphira. The reference to “the feet (*hoi podēs*) of those who buried your husband” echoes Isaiah 59:7, which conveys a sense of readiness to act. The fact that God’s judgment is not isolated to Ananias emphasizes the universality of God’s judgment on all who attempt to lie to the Spirit. What is evident in verse 9 is that the sin in question was lying to the Spirit, rather than lack of conformity to any apostolic requirement to surrender personal property.

Verse 10 is an obvious echo of verses 5-6. Like Ananias, Sapphira immediately falls to the ground and dies. The young men enter, find her dead, carry her out, and bury her next to her husband. The only difference is that there is no mention of wrapping Sapphira’s body, which was common in Jewish custom. Sapphira’s death and burial bring to closure God’s judgment on the entire household for seeking to deceive God.

5:11. The passage concludes with Luke noting that fear came upon not only the “whole church” but upon “all who heard of these things,” presumably those outside the church.³⁹ “Great fear” (*phobos megas*) is an obvious echo of 5:5. It also recalls 2:43a, where “fear came upon every soul” as the apostles performed many signs and wonders. In both cases there was a sense of awe in response to apostolic authority and the tangible manifestations of God’s power.⁴⁰ This is also the first of many occurrences of the term “church” (*ekklēsia*) in Acts. While the uses of the word are not identical, here the word communicates that a distinct community has emerged. Such a community has heard the gospel through the apostles, has responded in faith, and is united by a common fear and awe of the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. The imperative aspect of the Christian life, which clearly includes the generous giving of one’s possessions for the sake of those who have less, is to be understood as a joyful response to God’s good news of salvation through Jesus Christ, a life lived before and empowered by the Spirit of Christ.

CONCLUSION

In each of the above passages in Acts, it is clear that all “sharing was voluntary, not compulsory.”⁴¹ Bock observes: “Acts 5:4 makes clear that such a donation was not required, in contrast to the requirement at Qumran among the Essenes.”⁴² The term “voluntary” should not be taken to mean that giving is not expected of Christians. Generosity is a concrete mark of one’s

allegiance to Christ's Kingdom. Nevertheless, nowhere in the passages above is there the slightest suggestion that the apostles required believers to give up personal property and sell all their possessions for the good of the greater community. Peter's questions to Ananias and Sapphira make this especially clear. Derek Thomas comments:

The Jerusalem community of brothers in Christ engaged in something different. Theirs was a voluntary, not an enforced, compliance. Nor did the Jerusalem community suggest anything unworthy about private ownership. When Barnabas, for example, sold a field, it is described as one "that belonged to him" (Acts 4:37). What these Christians practiced was not a primitive form of communism but a generosity of heart toward the needs of those whom they regarded as brothers and sisters in Christ. They were putting into practice what Paul would eventually summarize as the need to do good to all, "especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10).⁴³

The above passages certainly suggest that believers will be extraordinarily generous with their possessions, but the power behind such acts of kindness is nothing other than the gospel as it is confirmed by the Spirit.

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NOTES

1. Two additional problems with such a position are: (1) It fails to take seriously the inherent problems of moving from a descriptive text to a prescriptive principle. Thus, even if Acts 2—5 describes a primitive form of collectivism, it does not mean that such collectivism should be prescribed for all churches for all generations. If this were the case, we should find blatant examples of such prescriptions in at least some of the NT epistles. (2) It commits the error of anachronism by confusing the philosophical underpinnings and historical circumstances of collectivism with the motivations and practices of the first Christians.

2. The immediate context of Acts 2:41-47 is:

- 2:1-47 The Day of Pentecost
- 2:1-4 The Descent of the Spirit
- 2:5-13 The Crowd's Amazement
- 2:14-36 Peter's Address
- 2:37-40 The Call to Repentance
- 2:41-47 The First Christian Community

The outline shows that the Christian community is the product of the Spirit and the embodiment of true repentance in response to the proclamation of the gospel. That is, the new community is not ultimately or primarily the effort of

people but is the supernatural work of the Spirit. Similarly, its underlying ideology is nothing other than the gospel. The first Christian church reflects a community filled with the Spirit of Christ and convicted by the gospel.

3. John B. Polhill, *Acts* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 122.

4. All translations are original and seek to be as literal as possible in order to reflect the rhetoric and unique literary features of the text. Any significant textual and linguistic points are reflected in the translation. For textual comments, see F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 72.

5. Derek W. H. Thomas, *Acts* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2011) 54: “It is a church characterized by several things in particular, but it was their sense of common purpose and identity that is especially notable.” Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts* (2008) 48: “These four elements characterize the life of the Spirit.”

6. Howard I. Marshall, *Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 88: “These are generally regarded as four separate things, but a case can be made out that they are in fact the four elements which characterized a Christian gathering in the early church.” Cf. Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Paternoster, 1998) who asserts that “only two things are really mentioned here, teaching and *koinōnia*, with the latter further defined as involving the breaking of bread and prayer” (160).

7. I do not think it is necessary to speculate on the precise content of this “teaching,” for it does not appear to be Luke’s concern. Nevertheless, Thomas is right to take Peter’s sermon (Acts 2:17-36) as the likely content, which focused both on Jesus as “the Christ” and Jesus as “the Lord” (*Acts*, 56). Thomas also offers an interesting application from the phrase “the teachings of the apostles”: “‘Apostolic’ teaching consists in more than just citing what the Bible says, and we must assume that Luke’s summary statement that the church continued in the ‘teaching’ means that they began to formulate into statements of orthodoxy ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’ and ‘Christ died for me’” (*ibid.*, 57).

8. See Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, 73.

9. BDAG. This comports with Luke’s presentation of Jesus’ teaching on wealth, which uprooted one of the most prevalent models of friendship in antiquity. A patron-client relationship was common, where the patron provided an asset to a client, and the client reciprocated with loyalty and expressions of honor; in short, the client became a debtor to the patron. In such a relationship it is easy to see many opportunities for abuse and exploitation. Instead of conforming to such a system, Jesus’ followers were to give freely without any expectation of return. Hence the famous refrain in the Lord’s Prayer: “And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us” (Luke 11:4). “Debt” is not to be understood in an unduly spiritual sense. Jesus exhorts his disciples to forgive debts much in the way family members would do for one another versus lending for the purpose of control and recognition. See Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 171-73.

10. See Marshall, *Acts*, 89; Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, 73; Parsons, *Acts*, 49.

11. See David Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 161.

12. See Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 160-61.

13. See Thomas, *Acts*, 61: “When in Acts 20:7, the Christians in Troas met ‘on the first day of the week’ in order to ‘break bread,’ it is tempting to think that this is an allusion specifically to the Lord’s Supper. But when Paul had spoken until after midnight and Eutychus had fallen to his death, Paul, after bringing Eutychus back to life, paused to break bread. This was surely a reference to more than just the Lord’s Supper, since he then recommenced speaking until daylight came!”

14. See also Thomas, *ibid.*, 62, who suggests set prayers were used but notes that Luke may simply be noting that the new believers were regularly engaged in prayer.

15. *ibid.*, 64.

16. Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, 74: “And just as the miracles of Jesus when he was on earth were ‘signs’ of the kingdom of God, those performed through his apostles partook of the same character (cf. 3:6).” Parsons, *Acts*, 48: “In 2:43, the teaching of the apostles is linked with the signs and wonders that they performed, recalling the opening verse of this narrative, which itself recalled the ‘first book’ which recorded all that Jesus began ‘to do and to teach’ (1:1). The authority of the apostles . . . stands in the prophetic tradition of Moses and the prophet like Moses, Jesus, and fills the believers with reverent awe.”

17. Witherington, *Acts*, 161: “The intent of using the phrase is to say something about the unity or togetherness of the early Christians, even if its precise translation may be debated.”

18. D. L. Mealand, “Community of Goods and Utopian Allusions in Acts II-IV,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 28 (1977): 96-99.

19. Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, 74. The motivation here did not stem from a misguided view of Christ’s imminent return but from a concern for the communal needs: the motivation was not eschatological but communal.

20. Bock, *Acts*, 152.

21. *ibid.*, 153.

22. Thomas, *Acts of the Apostles*, 64: “All the success the church enjoyed was due to the Lord’s blessing. No part of it, in the end, can be attributed to human involvement. There was no synergism or cooperation, either individually or collectively. It was the Lord who added to their number, because ‘salvation belongs to the Lord’ (Jonah 2:9).” Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, 75: “It is the Lord’s prerogative to add new members to his own community; it is the joyful prerogative to existing members to welcome to their fellowship those whom he has accepted.”

23. See n. 4.

24. Marshall, *Acts*, 115: “The choice of word (*company*) reflects the growth in size of the Christian group.”

25. On the translation “fellowship” for *koina*, see my comments on 2:44.

26. James R. Harrison, *Paul’s Language of Grace in its Graeco-Roman Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 243; John Nolland, “Grace as Power,” *Novum Testamentum* 28 (1986): 26-31.

27. In passing it is worth noting that one mark of this new community was a profound concern to make sure none in the community suffered from want. This resonates with one of Luke’s main concerns in Luke-Acts to tie discipleship with a concern for the poor and marginalized. In the Gospel of Luke the sharing of material possessions

was closely tied to social relations. To share freely without any expectation was to treat them as family, whereas to do otherwise was to treat them as outside one's inner circle. Thus, when the rich ruler refused to see what he had and give to the poor, he was making both an economic and a social statement. By choosing his wealth over welfare, he made clear that his desire was not to partake in the work of God in Christ Jesus whose salvific purpose included exalting the lowly and satisfying the hungry with every good thing (1:52-53). For this reason the Pharisees and scribes are condemned for their acts of greed (11:39-41; 20:46-47) and the rich man who disregarded the beggar Lazarus finds himself in Hades (16:19-31). The free and generous sharing of one's possessions was a clear marker of true allegiance to the cause of Christ's Kingdom.

28. Parsons, *Acts*, 73: "To assume the posture of being at another's feet is a gesture of submission in the OT. . . . Luke also employs this language of being at another's feet as a symbol of submission. . . . So here in 4:35, laying the proceeds at the apostles' feet is more than just a way of taking care of an administrative detail; it is a symbolic gesture of submission to apostolic authority."

29. Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, 101, n. 55: "The grace which rested on them all (v. 33) may include divine and human favor, together with a responsive spirit of gratitude (Gk. *ca, rij* covers all these nuances)."

30. For further discussion on Barnabas, see Parsons, *Acts*, 73-75; S. Brock, "Barnabse: *huios paraklēseōs*," *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1974): 93-98; Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 209-10.

31. Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, 102.

32. There have been various attempts to debunk the historicity of this account; see, e.g., A. W. F. Blunt, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1922), 153; Joseph Klausner, *From Jesus to Paul*, trans. William F. Stinespring (New York: Macmillan, 1943) 289. Such attempts reflect more of the bias of the interpreter than the improbable veracity of the narrative. Any focus on the historicity or even the morality of this narrative is tangential, given the emphasis here is on "the reality of the Holy Spirit's indwelling presence in the church, together with the solemn practical implications of that fact" (Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, 104).

33. See n. 4.

34. The inclusion of this contrasting example with Barnabas also reflects Luke's desire to provide a comprehensive picture of the early church versus the utopia suggested in the previous passages (see Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 157). While the majority were exceedingly generous, there remained a few who—despite their small number—still posed a serious threat to the community's holiness. The contrast is especially ironic given the meaning of the names of Ananias and Sapphira. The first means "the Lord is gracious," the second "beautiful." The passage makes clear that they acted in a manner inconsistent with their names.

35. See my comments below on 5:3-4. Again, the sin in view was not that Ananias chose to keep a portion of the proceeds: verbs 2b ("bringing only a part laid it at the feet of the apostles") should not be misinterpreted as an indictment against Ananias. As our analysis will highlight, Christian giving was not imposed by the apostles. Rather, the sin was that Ananias sought to deceive the apostles by pretending to bring the entire proceeds to the apostles.

36. Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, 105-06: “In a situation where those who followed Barnabas’ example received high commendation within the group, the social pressure on others to do the same, or rather to appear to do the same, must have been considerable.”

37. Bruce views this form of judgment as a possible expression of grace upon Ananias (ibid., 106): “But it may have been an act of mercy as well, if the incident be considered in light of Paul’s words about another offender against the believing community: ‘deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus’ (1 Cor. 5:5).”

38. There has been some debate whether this portion of the narrative is fabricated, given that Sapphira arrives three hours later. The assumption is that she would have been informed immediately and would have arrived much sooner. Such an unproven assumption is not reason enough to dismiss this portion of the narrative. As the narrator, Luke has included only details that are important to communicate his overall point of divine judgment and the resulting fear that fell upon the community.

39. If the conjunction *kai* is exegetical, the sense is, “And great fear came upon the whole church, that is, upon all who heard of these things.” Because Luke’s focus here is on the church, the interpretation is plausible. Either way, the point is that the fear of God began to spread, particularly among those who now considered themselves followers of Jesus Christ.

40. See Thomas, *Acts of the Apostles*, 64-65, who views the phrase “great fear” as key to understanding the ethos of the first Christian community.

41. Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Nashville: W. Publishing Group, 1997), 78.

42. Bock, *Acts*, 152; Bruce, *Acts of the Apostles*, 100-01.

43. Thomas (2011) 60.