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All Things in Common: Mutual Aid in Acts 2.42-47 and 4.32-37

CHRISTOPHER R. HUTSON

In 1832 a reader who called himself “Integer Vitae” wrote to the *Millennial Harbinger* to discuss Acts 2.¹ Among other things, he asked, “Why is it that the subjects of the present ‘restoration of the ancient order’ still live in separate dwellings, and feel as other men on the subject of *private* property?”² The question alludes to Alexander Campbell’s series of essays published in the *Christian Baptist* between 1824 and 1829 under the title “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things,” thus identifying Integer Vitae as a long-time follower of Campbell and a restorationist. The thrust of the question is simple: as a restoration movement, why are we not following the NT example of a community of possessions? In this essay, I question whether the Jerusalem church was a commune, but I suggest that Acts 2 and 4 offer a model of mutual aid that might serve as a Christian alternative to commercial insurance.

⁴² And they were continuing in the teaching and fellowship (*koinonia*) of the apostles, in the breaking of bread and prayers. ⁴³ And fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs came through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all the believers were in the same place and held all things in common, ⁴⁵ and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to everyone, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And from day to day continuing unanimous in the Temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they received their food with gladness and singleness of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And from day to day the Lord added to the same place those who were being saved. (Acts 2.42-47)

³² And the multitude of the believers was one in heart and soul, and not a single one used to say that any of his possessions was his own, but for them all things were common (*hapanta koina*). ³³ And with great power the apostles used to give testimony about the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was upon all of them. ³⁴ For there was not any needy person among them; for whoever were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of the sales ³⁵ and laid them at the apostles’ feet, and they gave out to each as any had need. ³⁶ And Joseph, who was called by the apostles Barnabas (which means “son of consolation”), a Levite, a Cypriot by birth, ³⁷ sold a field that he had and brought the money and laid it before the apostles’ feet. (Acts 4.32-37, author’s translation)

1. Integer Vitae, “Pages 225 and 226 of the New Translation,” *MH* (1832): 185-186, was followed by Alexander Campbell’s response, “A Solution of the Difficulties presented by Integer Vitae,” *MH* (1832): 187-188. The identity of Integer Vitae (“one upright in life,” from Horace, *Odes* 1.22) is unknown.

2. Integer Vitae, *MH* (1832): 186.

These two passages are summary statements that Luke³ inserts in his narrative from time to time in order to depict the church as a thriving community (cf. also Acts 5.12–16; 9.31–32). Both passages reflect Greco-Roman ideals of friendship.⁴ The phrase “one in heart and soul (*kardia kai psychē mia*)” (Acts 4.32) resembles Aristotle’s definition of a friend as “a single soul (*mia psychē*) dwelling in two bodies.”⁵ And his phrase “all things common (*hapanta koina*)” (Acts 2.44; 4.32) resembles a saying of the philosopher Pythagoras that “friends have all things common (*koina ta philōn*).”⁶ And again, the statement, “no one used to say that any of his possessions was his own (*idion*),” (Acts 4.32) resembles Pythagoras’ instruction to his disciples “to consider nothing their own (*idion*).”⁷

The Pythagoreans associated their ideal of community of possessions with justice (*dikaioσynē*), according to Iamblichus in the third century of the Christian Era:

The first principle of justice, then, is the concept of the common and the equal (*koinon kai ison*), and the idea that all should approximate as nearly as possible in their attitudes to having one body and one soul (*mias psychēs*) in which all have the same experience, and should call that which is mine and that which belongs to another by the same name, just as Plato, who learned from the Pythagoreans, also maintains [*Rep.* 462b]. This, then, he of mortals best established, by having banished everything private (*to idion pan*), and by having increased what is common (*koinon*) as far as the lowliest possessions, which are causes of discord and tumult. For all things were common (*koina panta*) and the same for all, and no one possessed anything privately. And if someone were satisfied with the community (*koinōnia*) he used the things in common most justly; but if not, he got back his own property, and indeed more than he had contributed to the common stock (*to koinon*), and so left. Thus from its first source Pythagoras established justice in the best manner.⁸

So Luke portrays the Jerusalem church in categories that appealed to Gentile-Christian readers’ ideals of friendship and justice.

Furthermore, Luke’s description is historically plausible, because, in addition to the Pythagoreans, we know at least one first-century Jewish sect that practiced community of possessions, the Essenes. Not only did this sect apparently have a commune at nearby Qumran, there is some evidence that they also had a compound in Jerusalem, so some Essenes could have been among the earliest Christian converts.⁹ According to Philo, the Essenes lived in towns and villages, where they renounced warfare, slavery and the accumulation of real property.¹⁰ They placed their daily wages into a common treasury from which they enjoyed a daily, shared meal. They also shared clothing in common, and out of their common fund they cared for any sick or aged members of the community.¹¹

3. The books of Luke-Acts are anonymous. In referring to the author as “Luke,” I follow tradition and make no claim as to the actual historical identity of the author.

4. J. Dupont, “Community of Goods in the Early Church,” in *Salvation of the Gentiles*, trans. J. Keating (New York: Paulist, 1979), 96–97. Alternatively, Rubén R. Dupertuis, “The Summaries of Acts 2, 4, and 5 and Plato’s *Republic*,” in *Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative*, ed. J. A. Brant, C. W. Hedrick and C. Shea (Atlanta: SBL, 2005), 275–285, points out correlations but overdraws the analogy between Plato’s “guardians” and the Jerusalem apostles.

5. As quoted in Diogenes Laertius 5.20; cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1168b; Cicero, *On Friendship* 25.92.

6. Diogenes Laertius 8.10; cf. 6.72; 10.11; Plato, *Republic* 4.424a; *Critias* 110d; Philo, *On Abraham* 235; Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* 65a.

7. Diogenes Laertius 8.23.

8. Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Way of Life* 167–168, trans. John Dillon and Jackson Hershbell (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 183.

9. Brian J. Capper, “Community of Goods in the Early Jerusalem Church,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.26.2 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), 1730–74. Philo, *That Every Good Man is Free* 76, says they avoided cities, but Jerusalem may have been an exception.

10. Philo, *Every Good Man* 77, trans. Colson (LCL). Philo, *The Contemplative Life*, describes a similar Jewish sect called “Therapeutae.”

11. Philo, *Hypothetica* 11.10–13.

Josephus offers a similar account of the Essenes, who, he explains to his Roman readers, were similar to Pythagoreans.¹² He describes their community of possessions this way:

Riches they despise, and their community of goods is truly admirable; you will not find one among them distinguished by greater opulence than another. They have a law that new members on admission to the sect shall confiscate their property to the order, with the result that you will nowhere see either abject poverty or inordinate wealth; the individual's possessions join in the common stock and all, like brothers, enjoy a single patrimony.¹³

Josephus goes on to describe various Essene rituals, including daily meals. And he notes that there were two subgroups of Essenes, some celibate and others married.

Many have noticed similarities between Philo's and Josephus' descriptions of the Essenes and the sectarian documents among the Dead Sea Scrolls, leading to a conclusion that the scrolls reflect Essene belief and practice.¹⁴ In any case, they certainly reflect a Jewish sectarian group that practiced community of possessions. According to the *Community Rule* (1QS), a candidate for admission was placed on probation for one year of study, during which he could not "touch the pure Meal of the Congregation," or "have any share in the property of the Congregation."¹⁵ But if he completed his probation and was accepted, then "his property and earnings shall be handed over to the Bursar (*mebaqqer*) of the Congregation who shall register it to his account and shall not spend it for the Congregation," and then only after a second year of probation, "his property shall be merged."¹⁶ According to Iamblichus, Pythagoras required a similarly rigorous probationary period (three years of instruction followed by five years of silence) before full admission into the group, but he says that those who were rejected after all that received back double all their property.¹⁷

But the Dead Sea sect was not monolithic, for in the *Damascus Document* (CD) we find variations on the rules regarding, among other things, marriage, just as Josephus indicates. Also, there were variations regarding community of possessions:

No man shall sell clean beasts or birds to the Gentiles lest they offer them in sacrifice. He shall refuse, with all his power, to sell them anything from his granary or wine-press, and he shall not sell them his manservant or maidservant inasmuch as they have been brought by him into the Covenant of Abraham.¹⁸

No man shall form any association for buying and selling without informing the Guardian of the camp and shall act on (his) advice and they shall not go [astray. Likewise he who marries] a woman . . .¹⁹

This is the Rule for the Congregation by which it shall provide for all its needs. They shall place the earnings of at least two days out of every month into the hands of the Guardian (*mebaqqer*) and the Judges, and from it they shall give to the fatherless, and from it they shall succour the poor and the needy, the aged sick and the man who is stricken (with disease), the captive taken by a foreign people, the virgin with no near kin, and the ma[id for] whom no man cares . . .²⁰

12. On the two groups, see Justin Taylor, *Pythagoreans and Essenes: Structural Parallels* (Paris and Louvain: Peeters, 2004).

13. Josephus, *War* 2.3 [122], trans. Thackeray (LCL). Cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.11–22.

14. For a dissenting view, Steve Mason, "Did the Essenes Write the Dead Sea Scrolls? Don't Rely on Josephus," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 34.6 (2008): 61–65, 81.

15. 1QS VI.16–17, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, trans. Geza Vermes (New York: Penguin, 1997), 106.

16. 1QS VI.19–20, 22, trans. Vermes, 106–107.

17. Iamblichus, *Pythagorean Way* 72–73.

18. CD XII.8–11, trans. Vermes, 141.

19. CD XIII.15–17, trans. Vermes, 142.

20. CD XIV.12–16, trans. Vermes, 143.

Here we have not a commune but something more like a mutual aid society. Now this should give us pause, because the communities reflected in the *Damascus Document* are clearly related to the group reflected in the *Community Rule*, and yet they have different ways of practicing community of possessions and of providing for the needy. Those who lived at Qumran and followed the *Community Rule* may have organized themselves into a full commune, but those who lived in various small towns apparently married and retained private property, including slaves under certain conditions. These honored the same principles of frugality and contentment, and they contributed to a common fund from which they provided for needy persons.

Justin Taylor has pointed out that, in a similar way, Pythagoras distinguished two categories of his followers:

. . . he called some “Pythagoreans,” and others “Pythagorists” . . . he identified the former as his true followers, and decreed that the latter show themselves emulators of these. Then he ordered that the property of the Pythagoreans be held in common, and that their common life should be permanent. The others he ordered to retain their own possessions, but to meet together to study with one another.²¹

Thus, according to Iamblichus, Pythagoras had different categories of followers who applied his principles in different ways. So also, Pythagoras’ dictum that “friends have all things common” (*koina ta philōn*) was interpreted and applied in different ways by non-Pythagorean philosophers. Epicurus, for example, who had a reputation for frugality and hospitality, “did not think it right that their property should be held in common, as required by the maxim of Pythagoras about the goods of friends; such a practice in his opinion implied mistrust, and without confidence there is no friendship.”²² And Cicero applied the ideal parsimoniously to mean that friends hold in common all those things that are not private property, such as a river or fire or advice, and that if one gives indiscriminately to the needy, who are too numerous, one will not have resources to help one’s friends, i.e., one’s social peers.²³ Alan Mitchell has concluded that authors like Cicero, “appealed to the maxim *koina ta philōn* to uphold conventional status divisions within society. They did not invoke it to advocate reform and social leveling.”²⁴

But perhaps not even Pythagoras organized his followers into a true commune. In the first century B.C.E., Diodorus Siculus remarked that, “whenever any of the companions of Pythagoras lost their fortune, the rest would divide their own possessions with them as with brothers.”²⁵ And Iamblichus indicates that, after spending all day in community, Pythagoras’ followers used to return to their own homes at night.²⁶ So it may have been that the communion among Pythagoreans entailed mutual sharing of private property and not a true commune in the modern sense. At least later Pythagoreans interpreted their founder’s program this way.

Taylor suggests that, in order to understand what is going on in Pythagorean and especially in Essene texts, we need to move beyond a simple dichotomy of either private property or pure communism.²⁷ For one thing, as we have seen, not all groups within the same school of thought organized themselves exactly the same way. For another thing, Taylor follows Catherine Murphy’s helpful distinction between right of *ownership* and right of *use*.²⁸ It may be, for example, that when Philo describes the Essenes as sharing a

21. Iamblichus, *Pythagorean Way* 80–81, trans. Dillon and Hershbell, 105.

22. Diogenes Laertius 10.11, trans. Hicks (LCL).

23. Cicero, *On Duties* 1.51–52.

24. Alan C. Mitchell, “‘Greet the Friends by Name’: New Testament Evidence for the Greco-Roman *Topos* on Friendship,” in *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship*, ed. John C. Fitzgerald (Atlanta: SBL, 1997), 245–246.

25. Diodorus Siculus 10.3.5 (quoted in Taylor, *Pythagoreans and Essenes*, 42).

26. Iamblichus, *Pythagorean Way* 100; cf. Diodorus Siculus 10.3.5.

27. Taylor, *Pythagoreans and Essenes*, 44–46; idem. “The Community of Goods among the First Christians and among the Essenes,” in *Historical Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 155.

28. Catherine M. Murphy, *Wealth in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Qumran Community* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

house, he does not mean they held the deed jointly. On the contrary, “For all the wages which they earn in the day’s work they do not keep as their private property (*ouk idia*), but throw them into the common stock (*koinēn*) and allow the benefit (*ōpheleia*) thus accruing to be shared by those who wish to use it.”²⁹ It may be, then, that some Essenes retained the ownership of their property while dedicating any “benefit” in the form of income or practical use to the community.³⁰

Taylor’s suggestions for interpreting ambiguities in the texts regarding Pythagoreans and Essenes may be useful for understanding similar ambiguities in Acts. On the way to dismissing the relevance of the Jerusalem model for modern Christians, interpreters commonly point out that Luke’s idealistic portrait of the Jerusalem church begins to fade as soon as he paints it. Even as we admire faithful Barnabas selling his property in Crete (Acts 4.36–37), Ananias and Sapphira slap us in the face (Acts 5), and we are shocked, shocked to read Peter’s claim that they had the right to own property and to retain some or all of the sales price (Acts 5.4). Conzelmann says, “Luke’s portrayal should not be taken as historical,” and he continues, “Luke does not present this way of life as a norm for the organization of the church in his own time. It is meant as an illustration of the uniqueness of the ideal earliest days of the movement.”³¹ But as restorationists, don’t we look precisely to the “ideal earliest days of the movement” as normative for our practice?

Others write off the community in Acts 2 and 4 as a utopian illusion or local experiment that proved impractical and was soon abandoned in Jerusalem and not replicated elsewhere.³² For example, Dupont argues that, “the model of selling possessions to feed the poor among them was not a long-term tenable solution, as the Jerusalem church soon fell into poverty as a whole and needed assistance from gentile churches.”³³ But we might consider the degree to which persecution (Acts 8.1; 9.1–2) and especially famine (Acts 11.28) created extra economic hardships for the Jerusalem Christians (Acts 11.29–30; Gal 2.10; Rom 15.25–27; cf. 1 Cor 16.1–4; 2 Cor 8–9). Perhaps their need for outside assistance had nothing to do with inherent weaknesses in their economic model.

Luke’s reports of wealthy land owners in the Jerusalem church would fit with his larger apologetic interests in portraying Christianity as a movement that appealed to people of high social status and in correcting critics who characterized Christians as poor, uneducated, women and slaves.³⁴ Indeed, archaeological evidence from the Cenacle (“Upper Room”) suggests that at least one member of the earliest Christian community owned a spacious house in a fashionable part of the city.³⁵ Far from a failure, it could be that the Jerusalem ideal of *koinōnia* did live on, though not necessarily in the form of a commune, if indeed it ever took that form. The second-century satirist Lucian of Samosata pokes fun at Christians for their gullibility in lavishing aid upon a scam artist whom they took to be a genuine evangelist. When Peregrinus was thrown into a Palestinian prison for preaching Christianity, Lucian says that:

people came even from the cities of Asia, sent by the Christians at their common expense (*apo tou koinou*) to succour and defend the hero . . . they despise all things indiscriminately and consider

29. Philo, *Every Good Man* 86, trans. Colson (LCL); cf. *Hypothetica* 11.4.

30. Taylor, “Community of Goods,” 156–159, overdraws the analogy between Ananias and Sapphira and Essene probationers.

31. Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, trans. J. Limburg, A. T. Kraabel and D. H. Juel (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 24.

32. David L. Mealand, “Community of Goods and Utopian Allusions in Acts 2–4,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 28.1 (1977): 96–99. Campbell, *MH* (1832): 187, responded to Integer Vitae along this line.

33. Dupont, “Community of Goods,” 94.

34. E.g., Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.50; 6.13; cf. Abraham J. Malherbe, “‘Not in a Corner’: Early Christian Apologetic in Acts 26:26,” *Second Century* 5 (1985–86), 193–210; reprinted in idem, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 147–163.

35. Bargil Pixner, “Church of the Apostles Found on Mt. Zion,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 16.3 (1990): 16–35, 60, traces the Church of the apostles to an early Judeo-Christian synagogue on the site of the Cenacle; Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, “The Cenacle and Community: The Background of Acts 2:44–45,” in *Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Honor of Philip J. King*, ed. M. D. Coogan, J. C. Exum and L. E. Stager (Louisville: WJKP, 1994), 296–310, suggests that the Cenacle was originally a private residence owned by a Jesus follower.

them common property (*koina*) . . . if any such charlatan and trickster, able to profit by occasions, comes among them, he quickly acquires sudden wealth by imposing upon simple faith.³⁶

Now if a pagan author like Lucian, writing for a pagan audience, could assume his target readers would get the joke, then there must have been Christian groups scattered around the Greek-speaking world with reputations for community (*koinōnia*). The ideals of the Jerusalem church did not die. But what Lucian knew sounds more like mutual aid funds than communes.

Over the centuries, few groups have attempted to replicate the communal life of Acts 2 and 4.³⁷ When we think about groups who have tried, what usually come to mind are Anabaptist groups such as Hutterites and Mennonites. But Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia is a notable example founded by Southern Baptists. And more recent “Intentional Communities” and “New Monastics” demonstrate interesting possibilities. All of these are laudable efforts to bring Acts to life in a new era. Perhaps these are what *Integer Vitae* had in mind in 1832.

Yet what if the church in Acts 2 and 4 was not a true commune? Even so, it seems that the Jerusalem Christians were doing something more intentional than merely sharing. So as another way of thinking about Acts, it might be useful to explore the concept of the mutual aid fund. Could Christians help one another by sharing their possessions and their risks? Could they pool their resources into a fund that would take care of basic needs in times of crisis as a Christian alternative to an insurance program purchased from a multinational conglomerate? What would that look like? Would *Integer Vitae* recognize it as a restoration?

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36. Lucian, *Peregrinus* 11–13, trans. Harmon (LCL).

37. On the history of such attempts, Rita Halteman Finger, “Cultural Attitudes in Western Christianity Toward the Community of Goods in Acts 2 and 4,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 78 (2004): 235–270. And on directions for the future, Franklyn Pimentel Torres, “The Practice of Christian Communities at the Beginning of a New Millennium: A Current Community Reading of Acts 2,” in *God’s Economy* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005), 202–219.