



TGP: Acts 4:32-37; 5:1-11

THE
generosity
OF THE
NEW COMMUNITY

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BY ROBERT A. WEATHERS

WHEN JESUS PRAYED THAT HIS followers would “all be one,” just as He and the Father are “one” (John 17:21-22), He was anticipating the lofty ideal that believers would be united in faith and practice. He prayed that God’s people would be a community, a unified and powerful force for change in the world (vv. 20-24). Further, Jesus said this community demonstrates its unity when God’s people “love one another” (13:35).¹ Throughout the Book of Acts, we see this unity in action and the characteristics that make the new community spiritually strong.

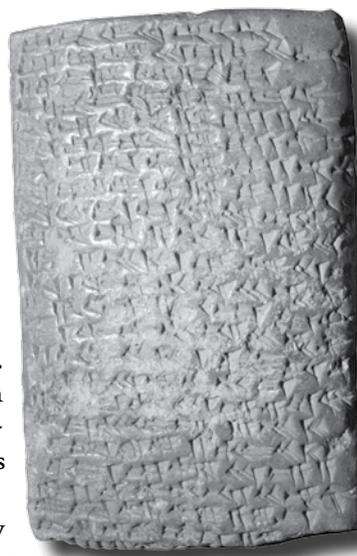
Two passages in Acts describe the new, young community of believers as it was maturing to be a unified church. The first is Acts 2:40-42 and the second is Acts 4:32-37. They are similar in their portrayal of the fledgling community of faith, but the second passage has a slightly different focus. Here Luke wanted not only to emphasize the unity of the new community, but also to underscore a key characteristic of that unity: generosity among the believers.

When believers practice this extravagant generosity with one another, it is evidence that they are one, just as Jesus and the Father are “one.”

Traits of the New Community

In Acts 4:31, Luke summarized God’s work in the midst of the Christians, describing how God came upon them with power, which enabled them to serve and shaped them into His ideal community, unified by the Holy Spirit. Then Luke portrayed them as a Spirit-filled new community in which God was working in power.

As Luke saw it, the new Christian community was characterized by four significant traits that were demonstrated in specific actions. First, they were of “one heart and mind” (4:32). The phrase could be translated more literally as “one heart and soul.” “Mind,” though, is also a good translation because it indicates that the new believers operated out of the same shared commitments,



Below: After the third Jewish revolt against the Romans, known as the Bar Kokhba Revolt (AD 132-136), the Jews were no longer allowed to live in Jerusalem. Many of them thus settled in the region north of the Sea of Galilee. One such community was at Yehudiya, which

dates to about AD 200–400. During the Ottoman period, many Arabs, using stones and materials they found on the site, resettled here and built these structures on top of the centuries-old foundations and footprints of the earlier structures. These remains give

a good impression of what an early Jewish village would have looked like.

Above: From the 15th cent. BC, deed from near Kirkuk recording the pledge of a field by Sartea to Wantesenni in return for two measures of barley and a mule.

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passions, and doctrine. Because they thought the same way, they cared about the same things. Their unity was woven into the community's personality, and it showed in the people's priorities and perspectives.

Second, the power and witness of the apostles was an integral part of the community's identity (v. 33). Witnessing of the risen Christ and preaching Him were the main purposes of the new community, and the apostles did this with "great power." Most likely this referred to the miracles that continued to accompany the apostles' preaching. Previously the apostles had been warned not to preach Christ and His resurrection (v. 18), but preaching the resurrection was the core of their message and they continued with enthusiasm.

Then third, "great grace was on all of them" (4:33). The world could see God at work among the believers, and the blessings and favor of God was evident by the numbers being added to the fledgling community of faith. God's grace was working powerfully through the new community, and it was obvious by the people whose lives Christ had changed.²

Generosity of the New Community

Those new followers also reflected God's grace toward them by being gracious toward one another. So, the fourth significant trait was they shared their possessions. Spirit-filled generosity characterized the new community. As Luke described it, "no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but instead they held everything in common" (v. 32). In Greek, this phrase literally

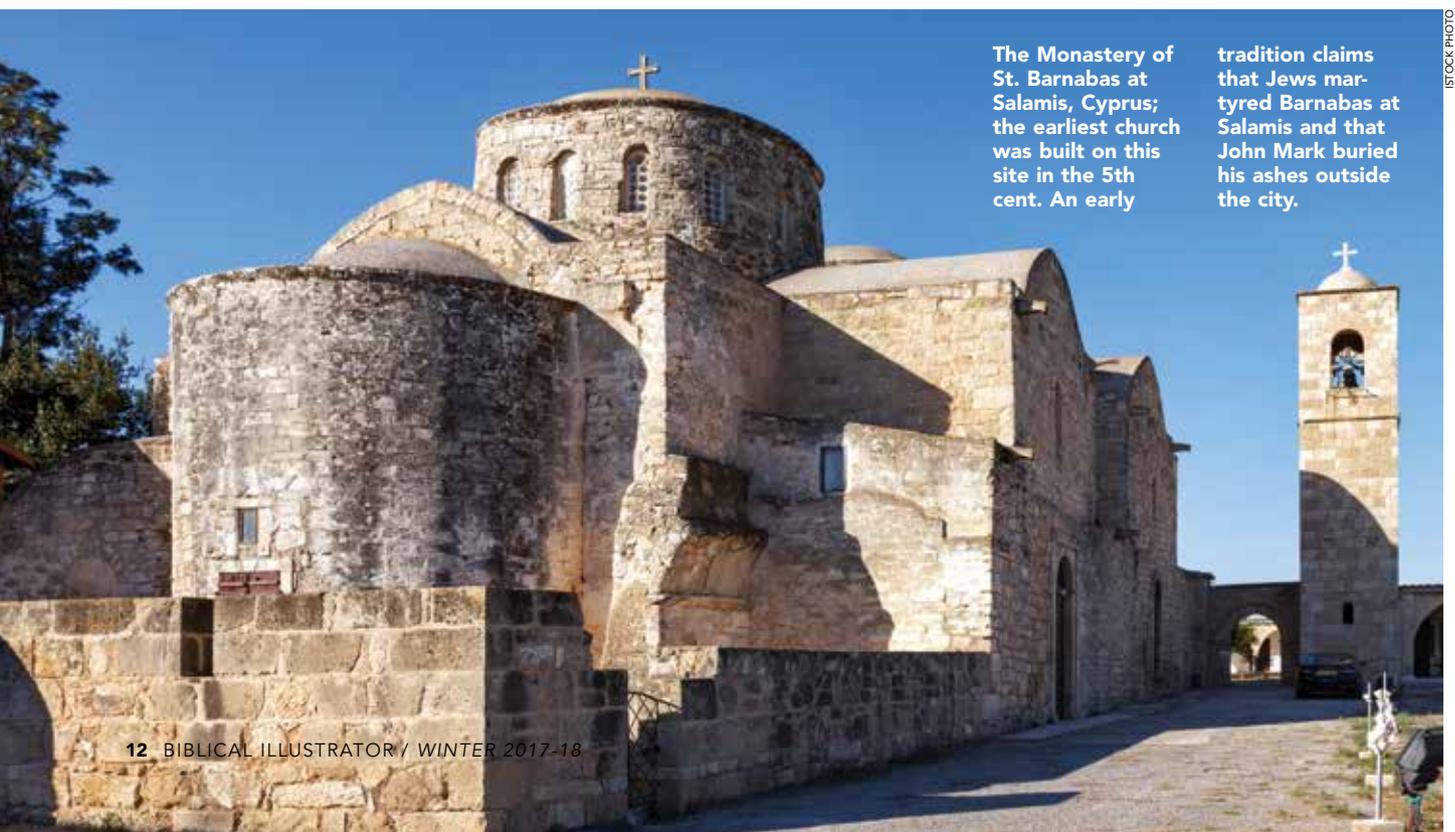
reads, "everything was in common with them." This was more than a decision about material possessions; it was the result of a spiritual commitment. This would have struck a chord with Luke's Gentile readers who idealized shared living but were never able to bring it to fruition. Christians, however, fulfilled this ideal.³

The practice of Spirit-filled generosity began by believers thinking differently about property and its use. One evidence that the believers were of one mind was their new perspective on their property. It was no longer private property, but it was community property and "they held everything in common" (v. 32). Unlike some ancient communities that sought to share material possessions, the practice of generosity was not obligatory. It was voluntary.⁴

With that perspective, when someone was in need, the new community rallied to help their spiritual siblings. They sold houses and land and then brought the proceeds to the apostles. The apostles, in turn, distributed the proceeds to the needy among the believers. This simple process of generosity echoed the extravagant grace of God that the new community was experiencing.⁵

Generosity or Economics?

Some scholars infer that the early Christians were practicing a form of economics resembling Communism, in which, for the sake of economic equality, people renounce ownership in favor of all property being in common. This, they argue, was the Greek ideal; Hellenism taught that communal ownership would



The Monastery of St. Barnabas at Salamis, Cyprus; the earliest church was built on this site in the 5th cent. An early

tradition claims that Jews martyred Barnabas at Salamis and that John Mark buried his ashes outside the city.

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to the apostles (Acts 4:37).

Above: Roman coins in a bowl dated to the Roman Era; found at Caesarea Maritima.

Left: Arab farmer plowing his rocky field in the evening sun along the Jerusalem-Jericho road in Israel. His two donkeys, pull-

ing the plow, are in a simple wooden handmade double-yoke. Barnabas sold his field and brought the proceeds

usher in a utopian society and would be far better than owning personal property.⁶

Three characteristics of the generosity Luke described indicate, though, that people cannot use this passage to support Communism or Socialism. First, when Luke said believers “held everything in common,” he did not mean they owned everything equally. Instead, he was describing their mindset and illustrating what it meant to have “one mind” in the new community of faith. On the one hand, believers continued to own personal possessions. On the other, “in heart and mind they cultivated an attitude so radical that they thought of their possessions as being available to help their needy sisters and brothers.”⁷

So, second, the property was still private property. Luke did not hint that the new community saw ownership as unethical or immoral. Instead, the reason their generosity mimicked the gracious love of God was, in fact, because they were sacrificing their personal possessions.⁸

Third, they gave voluntarily and not under compulsion. They gave freely and sacrificially, thereby illustrating God’s gracious and extravagant love, which each in the new community had experienced. Christian generosity happens when we give freely, not under compulsion (2 Cor. 9:7).

An Example of Generosity

Spirit-filled generosity was the primary characteristic Luke wanted to illuminate, so he elaborated on

this in Acts 4:34-37 as he depicted the outworking of this unique generosity. To illustrate his point, Luke offered an example of a disciple who exemplified the generosity of the new community. Joseph, also called “Barnabas,” demonstrated the new normal of sacrificial generosity by selling a field and bringing the proceeds to the apostles for support of believers who were in need (Acts 4:36-37).

By example, then, Barnabas showed that practicing Christian generosity means we hold nothing back, that the church assumes responsibility for all of its members and especially for the needy, and that we imitate God’s extravagant and gracious love toward us when we do so. This generosity is an expression of the Christian community demonstrating its unity and its love for one another as Jesus had described (John 13:35). Further, when believers practice this extravagant generosity with one another, it is evidence that they are one, just as Jesus and the Father are “one” (17:21-22). 🍷

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

2. John B. Polhill, Acts, vol. 26 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 151-52; I. Howard Marshall, Acts: *An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5 in *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 115.

3. Polhill, Acts, 152.

4. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 100-101.

5. James Montgomery Boice, Acts: *An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 92.

6. Polhill, Acts, 151; Jay W. Richards, *Money, Greed, and God: Why Capitalism is the Solution and Not the Problem* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 22-23.

7. John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 107.

8. Richards, *Money, Greed, and God*, 22.

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