

# Life Together...



CALLED INTO  
THE COMMUNITY  
OF FAITH

## Sharing Possessions

Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37

As bearers of the image of the God who created them, the society of fallen, unredeemed men may manifest, to one degree or another, the “grace” of giving. The sight of suffering children at St. Jude’s Hospital in Memphis may move the most depraved man to write a check to support that institution. The sight of a young family displaced by Hurricane Isabel may move the most vile woman to make a contribution to the Red Cross for disaster relief. In Friday morning’s Star-Telegram I saw a list of the thirty-five richest Texans. Who knows how many millions the non-Christian people on that list have given to various institutions and philanthropic causes? This broad capacity for generosity is a tender expression of God’s common grace (see *EDoT*, Grace, p. 480).

Without doubt, one of the features that have marked historic Christianity is generosity. Indeed, the Bible teaches the voluntary and generous sharing of possessions as a distinguishing mark of the community of faith in every place and in every age. No motive is perfectly pure and no practice perfectly consistent, nevertheless there are two things that distinguish true Christian generosity from the giving of the unregenerate man. First, the motivation for Christian generosity is genuine gratitude to God for His saving mercies in Jesus

Christ. Second, Christian generosity is a state or condition of the heart made alive by the regenerating grace of God. More than an occasional response to dire circumstances and pressing needs; neither determined by nor dependent upon one's financial status, liberality, for the believer, is a lifestyle.

Indeed, its radical God-centeredness distinguishes Biblical giving from that common to unregenerate men. For example, the model for true generosity is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. **II Corinthians 8:9 (ESV)**, *for you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.* Second, one's capacity for true generosity flows from God Himself. **II Corinthians 8:1 (ESV)**, *We want you to know, brothers, about **the grace of God** that has been given among the churches of Macedonia.* **Acts 4:33 (ESV)**, *And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and **great grace** was upon them all.* Third, God produces the benefits of true generosity - submission to Christ (II Cor. 8:5), spiritual growth and mutual love (II Cor. 8:7-9), and relief of physical needs. Fourth, the end of true generosity is gratitude to God and the glory of God. **II Corinthians 9:11-13 (NIV)**, *your generosity will result in **thanksgiving to God**.* <sup>12</sup> *This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of **thanks to God**.* <sup>13</sup> *Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, **men will praise God** for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else.*

One of the features that marked the early Christians' life together was their extraordinary generosity. This is seen in two familiar passages from the Book of Acts. Here's the point I want you to keep in mind as we proceed: True

generosity (out of *gratitude to God* and for the *glory of God*) is an evidence of the grace of God at work within a congregation.

**Acts 2:41-45 (ESV)**, *So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. <sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common. <sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.*

**Acts 4:32-37 (ESV)**, *Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. <sup>33</sup> And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold <sup>35</sup> and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. <sup>36</sup> Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, <sup>37</sup> sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

As you may have noticed these passages are very similar in terms of both themes and language. I'm not convinced that the intensity of these early days can or was intended to be the norm for the church. The New Testament witnesses to the fact that over the years things settled down. Life together as Christians, like marriage, is not a perpetual honeymoon. Nevertheless, the basic contours of life together as believers were established in those early days.

There was this sense of wonder that the living God was at work in them and among them.

**Acts 2:41** and **43**, *so those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls* <sup>43</sup> *And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles ...* **Acts 4:33**, *and with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.*

Look again at 4:32-34a. *But they had everything in common ...* then there is verse 33 ... *There was not a needy person among them.* Verse 33 supplies the real explanation for what was going on within the fellowship of believers. The Gospel was being powerfully proclaimed and many were trusting Christ as He was offered in that Gospel (see Acts 2:22-24, 36). Consequently, *great grace was upon them all.*

**2 Corinthians 9:13 (ESV)**, speaking of the anticipated reaction of the saints in Jerusalem to the financial gift from the churches in Macedonia, says, *they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of **the gospel of Christ**, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others.* True liberality is inextricably linked to the ministry of the Gospel.

The energy fueling their fellowship did not arise from *within* the believers. There was neither knowledge of nor dependence upon programs or seminars to stimulate and sustain the atmosphere of wonder and worship. It was enough to know the good and merciful hand of God *upon* them. As warm air and warm water at the top of the ocean fuel a hurricane, the Gospel - faithfully preached, deliberately shared, and humbly lived out – is what fuels a sense of wonder and

joy in the church. Mark it down. The vitality of our fellowship is a function of the brightness with which the flame of the Gospel burns within and among us.

There was an intense sense of community. **Acts 2:42** and **44a**, *and they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers ... and all who believed were together ... Acts 4:32a*, *Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul. All who believed were together.* I don't think they all moved in together like a bunch of college students in a dormitory or hippies in a 1960's commune. They simply enjoyed being together. They fed off of the extraordinary sense of camaraderie fostered by their common conversion, their common confession, and their common commitments.

Not only did the Gospel break the bonds of their enslavement to sin but it also affected a radical change in their attachment to their "stuff." **Acts 2:44b**, *and had all things in common ... Acts 4:32b*, *and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.* Broadly did they now recognize God's ownership of their possessions. The possessions of one were at the disposal of all. With great abandonment they released their grip on those things they had clung to so tightly before their conversion.

The Gospel relieves the guilt and burden of sin. The Gospel eases the laboring conscience. But the Gospel of grace, through the gifts and ministry of the saints, tends to the relief of physical suffering and need as well. **Acts 2:45** (ESV), *And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need ... Acts 4:34-35* (ESV), *There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold <sup>35</sup> and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.* The

genuineness of an internal work of the Gospel is authenticated by a concern for the external circumstances of others who have been converted by that same Gospel. In this case, the assets of some were converted into cash, handed over to the apostles, and distributed to other believers on the basis of their need.

The Spirit of God supplies an example of one such contribution. **Acts 4:36-37**, *Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, <sup>37</sup> sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.* Barnabas owned a field. Whether this land was undeveloped or a working parcel, we are not told. We know nothing of the impact of this real estate transaction on his personal financial situation - whether it was sold out of his surplus or at great personal sacrifice. The point is that Barnabas, a man obviously possessed of the gift of encouragement, sold the field and brought the proceeds to the apostles to be used to relieve the poor among them. True generosity (out of *gratitude to God* and for the *glory of God*) is an evidence of the grace of God at work within a congregation.

Even with the equity legislated into the fabric of Judaism, such generosity and mutual concern as was exhibited among the early Christians must have appeared as a radical phenomenon and, not surprisingly, an inviting one to unscrupulous individuals with a spurious profession. But God has woven safeguards into the fabric of our fellowship to govern and protect the benevolence ministries of the community of faith; reducing the likelihood of the church being taken advantage of or being unduly burdened. I want to point out four of these safeguards.

First, slothfulness and laziness are not to be tolerated or subsidized by the community of faith. **II Thessalonians 3:7-15 (ESV)**, *For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, <sup>8</sup> nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. <sup>9</sup> It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. <sup>10</sup> For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. <sup>11</sup> For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. <sup>12</sup> Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. <sup>13</sup> As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. <sup>14</sup> If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. <sup>15</sup> Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.*

There were apparently those among them who were slackers – able but doing no work at all; men wasting their time – sleeping, pursuing frivolous get-rich-quick schemes, sitting in front of the TV or computer. From the habitual loafer the church may legitimately (without guilt) withdraw fellowship in order to get the brother's attention. Here's God's word to such men and women. Apply yourself to a job and make your own living. Paul sets himself up as an example of the principle. When he ministered among the Thessalonians he "earned his keep", so to speak. He labored night and day in order not to place an undue financial burden upon the members of the church. He did this to set before them an example of how things ought to be in their life together.

Second, the head of the family bears primary responsibility for the support of his dependents.

**I Timothy 5:8-16 (ESV)**, *But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.*

Even unbelievers assume responsibility for their families. How much more so should the man who professes Christ; whose family is bound together in covenant relationship to God? This is uncomfortably strong language. Here the support of one's family is linked to faith itself. A man may deny his faith by verbal recantation. He may also deny the reality of his profession by simple neglect in providing for his family.

The third safeguard is this: Church funds are not to be handed out indiscriminately. The resources are not to be distributed like Santa Claus throws candy to children in a Christmas parade. Certain conditions must be met before an individual may receive sustained financial support from the church. Indeed, as vulnerable as this condition might be, even widowhood, in and of itself, was not a qualification.

**2 Timothy 5:9-10 (ESV)**, *Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband,<sup>10</sup> and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.* Even for an older widow to receive sustained financial support from the church she had to meet certain criteria in terms of age, marriage, family, reputation, and ministry to the saints.

Finally, funds were ordinarily entrusted to the leadership of the church and distributed by that same leadership.



**Acts 4:34-35 (ESV)**, *There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold<sup>35</sup> and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.*

True generosity (out of *gratitude to God* and for the *glory of God*) is an evidence of the grace of God at work within a congregation. For us today this generosity is expressed in many concrete ways. For example, giving to meet unexpected and pressing needs within the congregation, tithing to the general church budget, privately sharing with one another as God points out specific needs to us, and cultivating an attitude toward our possessions that fosters good stewardship. I want to close with a final appeal before we approach the Lord's Table this morning. This appeal is to pursue a life of simplicity; to pray that God, over time, will help you position yourself for a life of joyful generosity.

**Ephesians 4:28 (ESV)**, *Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.*

We know what it is to work to have money to pay the bills. One of the Biblical motivations for working is to be able to meet the needs of others. God is pleased when one of His children makes a financial decision based, at least in part, on its impact upon his capacity to share with others. The freedom to share with one another is one of the most profound and practical reasons to pursue a life of simplicity.

During a recent study week I read a book by John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance: Invincible Perseverance in the lives of John Newton, Charles Simeon, and William*

*Wilberforce*. Simeon is a wonderful historical example of a believer for whom generosity was a way of life.

Charles Simeon was born on September 24, 1759. He died on November 13, 1836. His entire life was given to teaching at the University of Cambridge but this was not his main calling. Certainly one of the most extraordinary features of this man's life was the fact that he spent fifty-four years as the pastor of the same church - Trinity Church in Cambridge, England. This is even more remarkable when you consider the persecution and great prejudice he endured in this calling. His life was marked by a life of simplicity. Saved at nineteen years old (April 4, 1779), for the rest of his life "Simeon lived in simple rooms on the university campus, moving only once to larger quarters so that he could have more students for his conversation gatherings" (John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance*, p. 83). The following footnote appears in Piper's book.

In a memorandum Simeon wrote to explain why, with his resources, he did not abandon his role as and dependence on the modest living of a University Fellow: "My brother was extremely liberal ... At his death an exceeding great void would have been made if I had not determined to accept a part of his property and to appropriate it to the Lord's service and the service of the poor. The loss they would have sustained being about L700 or L800 a year, I suffered my brother to leave me L15,000, and have regularly consecrated the interest of it to the Lord; and shall (D.V.) continue to do so to my dying hour. Had I wished for money for my own use, I might have had half his fortune; but I wanted nothing for myself, being determined ... to live and die in the College, where the income which I previously enjoyed (though moderate in itself) sufficed not only for all my own wants, but for liberal supplies to the poor also ... The fact is, I have not

increased my own expenditure above L50 a year; nor do I consider myself as anything but a steward of my deceased brother for the poor." Quoted in Arthur J. Tait, *Charles Simeon and His Trust* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1936), pp. 51-52. True generosity (out of *gratitude* to God and for the *glory* of God) is an evidence of the grace of God at work within a congregation.

We now sing together and then resume the ministry of Word and Sacrament as we gather around the Lord's Table.

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Without doubt, one of the features that have marked historic Christianity is \_\_\_\_\_.

**Two things that distinguish true Christian generosity:**

The motivation for Christian generosity is genuine \_\_\_\_\_ to God for His saving mercies in Jesus Christ.

Generosity, for the believer, is a state or condition of the \_\_\_\_\_ made alive by the regenerating grace of God.

**Indeed, its radical God - \_\_\_\_\_ distinguishes Biblical giving from that common to unregenerate men.**

The \_\_\_\_\_ for true generosity is Jesus Christ, the Son of God (**II Cor. 8:9**).

Second, one's \_\_\_\_\_ for true generosity flows from God Himself. **II Cor. 8:1; Acts 4:33**).

Third, God produces the \_\_\_\_\_ of true generosity.

Fourth, the \_\_\_\_\_ of true generosity is gratitude to God and the glory of God (**II Cor. 9:11-13**).

**Point:** true generosity (out of *gratitude to God* and for the *glory of God*) is evidence of the grace of God at work within a congregation.

**Acts 2:41-45 (ESV)**, *So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. <sup>42</sup> And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common. <sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. **Acts 4:32-37 (ESV)**, *Now the full number of**

*those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.* <sup>33</sup> *And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.* <sup>34</sup> *There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold* <sup>35</sup> *and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.* <sup>36</sup> *Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus,* <sup>37</sup> *sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

**The basic contours of life together as believers ...**

There was this sense of \_\_\_\_\_ that the living God was at work in them and among them (**Acts 2:41 and 43; 4:33**).

The vitality of our \_\_\_\_\_ is a function of the brightness with which the flame of the \_\_\_\_\_ burns within and among us.

There was an intense sense of \_\_\_\_\_ (**Acts 2:42 and 44a; 4:32a**).

Not only did the Gospel break the bonds of their enslavement to sin but it also affected a radical change in their attachment to their " \_\_\_\_\_ " (**Acts 2:44b; 4:32b**).

The Gospel relieves the guilt and burden of sin. The Gospel eases the laboring conscience. But the Gospel of grace, through the gifts and ministry of the saints, tends to the \_\_\_\_\_ of physical suffering and need as well (**Acts 2:45; 4:34-35**).

**Four safeguards:**

First, slothfulness and laziness are not to be tolerated or \_\_\_\_\_ by the community of faith (**II Thess. 3:7-15**).

Second, the head of the family bears \_\_\_\_\_ responsibility for the support of his dependents (**I Tim. 5:8-16**).

Third, church funds are not to be handed out indiscriminately (**II Tim. 5:9-10, 16**).

Fourth, funds were ordinarily entrusted to the \_\_\_\_\_ of the church and distributed by that same leadership (**Acts 4:34-35**).

**Appeal to pursue a life of \_\_\_\_\_.**

**Ephesians 4:28 (ESV),** *Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need.*