
| RESEARCH ARTICLE**Fellowship Lifestyle of the Infant Church of Jesus and Its Implication - Exegetical Analysis of Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-37****Joseph Adasi-Bekoe. PhD***School of Theology and Ministry, Ghana Baptist University College, Accra***Corresponding Author:** Joseph Adasi-Bekoe. PhD, **E-mail:** jadasibekoe@yahoo.com

| ABSTRACT

Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-37 record the fellowship lifestyle of the first church. Together, they give a broad account of the outcome of a spirit-filled life of the new believers. The narratives provide information about the centralized authority of the apostles and the nature of the power of the apostles over the infant church. In Luke's account, the first Christians came together as members of the spiritual family of Jesus after Pentecost. The experience united them into a community, whose bond of unity Luke described in the passage. Their fellowship lifestyle was expressed by their togetherness, a lifestyle motivated by love for one another. They lived as if they had one soul and mind, having all things in common, selling and sharing the proceeds as each had need. The result was that there was no needy person among them. Luke's account has prompted some scholars to suggest that the author presents the infant church as practicing a form of communism. To others, this account provides a model for Christian relationships. Some suggest that the example set forth is meant to be "prescriptive for Christian communities". However, others hold the view that this is only described rather than prescribed and that the author presents this as mistaken. This article shows that this lifestyle of the infant church was voluntary and not dictated by any legislation. It was a lifestyle that flowed out of love for Jesus and their new community, and the first Christians were able to do this through the help of the Holy Spirit.

| KEYWORDS

Fellowship, Friendship, Transition, Social Safety Net, Pentecost.

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1. Introduction

Acts 2:42-46 is an editorial comment marking the transition between the narrative of the events on the day of Pentecost and the healing at the Temple Gate. Acts 4:32-37 is part of an interlude that narrates the fellowship life of the early church as part of a broader account of the Spirit-filled life of the new believers. The two narratives found in Acts 2:41-47 and 4:32-35 accentuate and develop the expanding theme of believers' fellowship as the second summary repeats certain words, concepts, and phrases from the first (Hume 2013:86). There are certain common elements of repetition in both narratives. Both summaries call the members of the community believers (2:44, 4:32) who share all things in common (2:44, 4:32). In both summaries, there is an active re-distribution of material goods to the needy within the community (2:45, 4:34-35). The two narratives also provide information about the Apostles' power and witness (2:43, 4:33) and about the community's experience of favor and grace (2:47, 4:33). The second summary complements the first text to describe the new lifestyle of believers after the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11). The second text (Acts 4:32-37) has been classified as part of an interlude that narrates the fellowship life of the early church. It provides some

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details about the centralized authority of the Apostles and how the money raised from the sale of property was channeled through the centralized authorities to the poor and needy members of the church. The central import of the two passages is to give a vivid and detailed description of the nature of Christian fellowship in the first Christian community.

Even though there are shared elements of the two narratives, there are also distinctive elements. However, both the shared and distinctive elements combine to create an effect that there existed a strong bond of unity among the first Christians. In the first narrative, the believers are portrayed breaking bread and taking meals together (2:42, 46) in prayer, worship, and joy (2:42, 46, 47). The first summary repeats words that seem to suggest that new believers who join the group are described “as being added to” a community (2:41, 47). The second summary accents the Apostles’ bold witness (4:33) and their special role within the community to oversee the re-distribution of property (4:35; Hume 2013:86).

Luke’s description of the fellowship lifestyle of the first Christians has prompted some scholars to suggest that the author presents the first Christian community as practicing a form of communism (Phillips 2003:231-69; Lawrence 2005:152-71; Harrison 1975:67, Holtzmann 1884:27-60). This example, to some scholars, should be used as a model for Christian relationships. Some have even gone to the extent of suggesting that the example set forth is meant to be “prescriptive for Christian communities” (Chung-Kim, Hains, George and Manetsch 2014:131). Lightfoot suggests that “the picture of the infant church gives us an idea of what the church is really supposed to be like” (Lightfoot 2014:79).

However, there are groups of scholars who hold the view that this view of Acts is something that is only described rather than a prescribed for the church. The author of Acts presents this practice as mistaken, since sharing of possessions seems to disappear in the remainder of Acts (Hume 2013; Watson 2008:99-111). How then, are we to interpret the meaning and implications of the fellowship lifestyle of the first Christians? This author’s contribution to this discussion and its implications for the Christian church today is from the perspective of social welfare and to a larger extent theological.

1.1 The fellowship of the first Believers (Acts 2:42)

The first summary begins in verse 41, with an introduction of many believers being added to the church. The large numbers of souls constituted themselves into a community to which all new members of the Christian faith joined. The narrative begins with a description of the group’s first attempt at establishing a social safety net. Verse 42 highlights the unity and intimacy of the Christian community, which was marked by a commitment to apostolic teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer (Joel 2013:1). These four commitments became the main backbone or foundation, upon which the “superstructure” of this ideal Christian life was built.

It appears to me that Luke’s main burden, however, was not to focus on these four activities *per se*, but to stress the unity and intimacy this community shared through the Spirit, and the role these activities played in maintaining their new lifestyle. Green, accordingly, sees verse 42 as a kind of “summary of the summary” developed out of verses 43-47 (Green 2010:1289). The large number added to the church in one day showed that their conversion to the group was no fluke by their continuance in what the new community stood for (MacDonald 2001:1588). The re-introduction of the particle *proskartereō* here (v 42) (which first occurred in 1:14), was to highlight the united devotion of Jesus’ remaining disciples and those who have just been added to the faith (Joel 2013:2). Joel, again, observes that the four activities, named as the teaching of the apostles, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers can be understood as two main commitments; a commitment to apostolic teaching and a commitment to fellowship (2013:2). A commitment to the apostolic teachings and prayer helped define how fellowship was expressed. Fellowship was expressed by the early disciples coming together daily, having all things in common and the sharing together of economic and food resources together.

The first commitment of the new believers was to Apostle’s doctrine (*didachē*) frequently translated as “instructions or communication or teachings” (SHGD G1322). The early narrative in the book of Acts suggests, “this would have included scriptural (Old Testament) interpretation and gospel proclamation” (Chance 2007:59). The early parts of the book of Acts give to readers an impression that the first members of the Christian faith

devoted much of their time in prayer and study of the Old Testament while waiting for the promise of their departed leader (Act 1:14-17).

As to what formed the basis of the teaching of the Apostles, one can reasonably say that the doctrine of the Apostles will be based primarily on the reading of the Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus. There is evidence to suggest that Jesus had carefully passed on his values to his disciples while he was here with them. In John 17:8, while praying to the father, Jesus said that "For I have given to them the Words which you gave Me, and they have received them and have known surely that I came out from You. And they believed that You sent Me". In this priestly prayer (John 17), the main subject matter of His prayer focused on unity among the disciples. It would, therefore, not be surprising if the teaching of the Apostles focused on brotherly unity, whose impact was immediately recognized in Acts 4:32, where it is said that *the* "multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul". The teaching of the Apostles therefore, played a major role in preparing the heart of the believers for the oneness displayed by the members of the first church (Acts 4:32). By highlighting the teaching of the Apostles, Luke intended also, to communicate not only the priority of teaching and learning among the first believers, but also the authority of the Apostles. As Joen (2013:3) has noted, the "first mark of the first Christian community is a commitment to Jesus' revelation uniquely entrusted to the Apostles". The teachings of the Apostles, thus, became the ground rules for living in the new community of Christians.

The second commitment of the church is fellowship (verse 42). Fellowship as noted earlier can be said to include the breaking of bread. Chance asserts that at the "root of the word *koinōnia* is the idea of sharing" (2007:59). The Greek word *koinōnia* is a term found in Greco-Roman literature to express the mutuality and commitment as is expected in marriage (Achtemeier, Green and Thompson 2001:171-73). This mutual sharing took on many characteristics in the first church. Sharing included the desire to meet and be in each other's company, sharing one's economic resources and participating in the heart and concerns of one another. Fellowship was another evidence of the new lifestyle of the first Christians as it created a sense of being "separated to God from the world and a community of interests with other Christians" (Macdonald 1995:1588). In the context of this passage, the first church exhibited this mutual commitment "by both shared activity and shared possessions" (Joen 2013:3). The intimacy implied is made explicit by the phrase "the breaking of bread."

It is not clear whether breaking of bread here referred to the Lord's Supper or to a general meal shared by all members of church or to both. Before we return to explore fully the meaning and implication of the phrase *klah'-o ar'-tos translated as breaking of bread (Also in 2:46)*, it is important to briefly say that the idea at this stage is to point to a form of relationship, signaling friendship and intimacy (Joen 2013:3). The term, "breaking of the bread", occurred only once elsewhere, in Luke 24:35 where the disciples in Emmaus came to perceive the resurrected Jesus. It therefore assumed a special significance for the early believers as it pointed to the unique recognition and acceptance of the risen Lord Jesus: an event that bound the early Christians together in unity. It is clear from the social welfare perspective that fellowship through the breaking of bread became the practical means through which members' practical needs for food was met. By the institution of "breaking of bread", practical provision was made for all who may not be able to afford daily meals in their homes. Breaking of bread also enabled the Apostles fulfill a religious function shared at the eating of the Eucharist.

1.2. Relationship Between the believers and the Community (V 43)

In the first half of verse 43, Luke referred to fear coming on every soul. This fear (*phobos*) can also be rendered "awe" a reference to a kind of feeling described as to be (alarmed or flight) from God (SHGD G5401) which fell upon both members of the church and ordinary residents of Jerusalem. This fear restrained the enemies of the infant church from interfering with the progress of the church. This awe, beginning from the events on the day of Pentecost, by the signs and wonders which followed and by the wonderful unity and holiness that was necessary for the progress of the newborn church. Fear (*phobos*) occurs throughout Luke's Gospel to express awe in response to divine intervention (Luke 1:12; 2:9) and Jesus' miracles (Luke 5:26; 7:16).

Fear coming upon "every soul" (*pasē psuchē*) is a reference not only to the three thousand "souls" (*psuchai*) added by the Lord but to all living witnesses of the events in the church. Luke's point is that the entire Christian community, and even those outside it, continued to experience a deep and supernatural sense of awe and joy. This awe appears to be God's protective shield used to protect his infant church from attacks from enemies emanating

from outside the church, just as He had caused His awe to fall upon the Canaanites at the first settlement in Canaan (Deut. 11:25). God had also protected His infant church from enemies within the church from interfering from the progress of the church when Ananias and his wife Sapphira were both struck dead in Acts 5. The reference to the miracles performed by the Apostles was to affirm the continuity between Jesus and His disciples. It is to be understood as the work of the risen Lord who is continuing His work through His Anointed Apostles and confirming their authority through such wonders and signs (Joel 2013:4). The immediate impact of the miracles of the Apostles (2:43) and the preaching of the Apostles (4:33) was the phenomenal numerical growth of the church.

1.3 Fellowship and Poverty Alleviation (vv. 44-45)

The believers, made up of the “all (*pasē*) soul” in 2:43, and all who have experienced God’s power through the Apostles’ signs and wonders are pictured as dwelling together and having all possession in common. Chapter 4:32 almost repeats, content-wise, the main concepts of 2:44-45 when it says, “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”. Walton argues that the use of imperfect verbs throughout 2:44-45 and 4:32-35 is usually taken as indicating that these are summary statements indicating the habitual practices of the earliest believers (Walton 2008:102). There are several important exegetical decisions that are to follow the reading of certain key words and phrases in the passage. The first major decision is to answer the question of what form of togetherness the summaries imply. The second has to do with the question of whether the believers held property in common and the form it took if they did.

Now, I turn my attention to the question of what kind of togetherness was implied by *ēn epi* usually translated as “were together” by most modern translations. Should we take it to mean that the disciples adopted a common residence arising out of their conversion to Christianity or they moved into a common community as an expression of their fellowship one with another? Several scholars have attempted to provide answers to these questions, but most of them border on speculations (Walton 2008:103-107; Taylor 2001:147-61; Bruce 1990:132). For instance, Bruce suggests that the believers formed themselves into a synagogue of Messianic Believers (1990:132). Taylor also says that this expression “parallels the semi-technical use of the Hebrew equivalent *yhd* or *yhdw* as a label for the community in the Dead Sea Scrolls, notably 1QS 5.2, and thus might be rendered ‘all the believers *belonged to the community*’” (Taylor 2001:147-61). While one can discern some elements of shared living in the text, it appears as Walton says, both Bruce and Taylor went “beyond the evidence” with their suggestions (Walton 2008:103). In his opinion, this phrase serves to prepare readers for the fuller description of their meetings later, both in the temple and in smaller groups and in homes as indicated by verse 46 (2008:103). MacDonald (2001:1588), similarly, suggests that togetherness is an expression of fellowship implied by the “desire of the new community of believers to be with one another” (verse 44). Thus “together” may not imply a common residence or adopting a common community but closeness in terms of keeping company with one another. This idea is further buttressed by the fact that in verse 46, which says that the new believers, “continuing daily (*hēmera*) with one accord in the temple” (verse 46). Meeting (*hēmera*) rather gives an impression of time space, or consistency rather than a common residence as implied by both Taylor and Bruce. Similarly, Chung-Kim and others seem to agree that togetherness of the first disciples was expressed, first through meeting one with another when they suggested that fellowship refer to “mutual association ...and other duties of brotherly fellowship” (2014:132). There seems to be no available evidence to suggest that Luke envisaged the “Jerusalem community establishing a genuine coenobitic life”, and by contrast there is ample evidence that “any Jerusalem residents who joined the church continued to live in their own homes” (cf 2:46, 5:42; Alexander 2001:1034). It seems to me that this verse should be taken to mean that the first Christians cherished and spent a great amount of time in each other’s company. From the social welfare perspective, I consider such cherished moments of sharing time in the company of friends to be important for the formation of a group that would become an important social safety net for all members of the group.

The second part of 2:44 says that the believers *had all things in common*. This leads us to another important pair of issues – whether the believers actually held common property and if they did, what was the form it took. How are we to interpret the phrase ‘they used to hold all things (*hapanta*) in common (*koina*) (2:44)? Does the concept of “holding things in common” preclude the ownership of private property? Joel says 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” (2008:3). In the context of verse 44, togetherness was manifested in the early Christian community’s practice of having all things in common (*koina*) (Chung-Kim et al. 2014:132, Chance 2007:60).

On the other hand, it is also known that it was common for ancient societies to describe the origin of a “community in ideal terms, which include communal sharing” (Johnson 1992:62). It is also known that such a phrase, “holding things in common” and its parallel expression in 4:32, are also used in Graeco-Roman writings to describe ideal friendship. For instance, in the Cynic Epistles, there is a letter purported to Plato saying, “And if you need anything that is yours, write us, for my possessions, Plato, are by all rightly yours, even as they were Socrates” (*Socratic* 26.2). These phrases and proverbs are used to describe ideal social life in the Graeco-Roman world, without necessarily implying actual pooling of properties together. These proverbs and expressions were common language meant to show that friends held their properties loosely for one another’s use.

This knowledge has led some scholars to speculate that the language used by Luke in verse 44, “And all that believed were together and had all things common” and its parallel in 4:32, echo everyday expressions in the Graeco-Roman world. Moreover, it was possible that no actual holding of common properties occurred (Green 2010:1763; Chance 2007:60; Conzelmann 1987:24). Such description was idealistic, and Luke’s aim was to present the first church as putting into practice the highest ideals of friendship (2010:1763, Sterling 2000: 15-7). Walton, however, states that the Greek ideals in the writings of Plato and Seneca did not preclude the ownership of private property. In both scenarios, the idea was to show that “It was a matter of possessions being held loosely, so that friends might ask for them as they needed help” (Walton 2008:103). Luke seems to imply that the first Christians were able to achieve the highest ideal of friendship in the Graeco-Roman due to their experience of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-2)

The next phrase in verse 45, which says, “they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds” (v 45) has also fueled speculations that the disciples practiced some form of communism. Capper (1995:1730-74) appears to have taken such a stand that the first Christians adopted a form of communism. Capper cites Holtzmann in a dated article (1884: 27-60) to back his point that such selling of properties and subsequent pooling into a common good did occur among the first Christians and had its parallel among the Essenes at Qumran.

Even if it was true that such a parallel existed among the first Christians, were they compelled to sell their property to warrant such a claim? Since the basic idea of communism is a system that completely abolishes individual right to private property (Communist Manifesto 1872:464), it does not seem right to make such a claim. The example of Barnabas in Acts 4:36-37 confirms that some disciples actually sold their possessions and brought the proceeds to a centralized authority for distribution. Luke did not hint at any situation where people involved were compelled by the system to sell their possession. While, strictly speaking, selling off one’s possessions and giving the proceeds to the poor was not required in the Old Testament, it became a natural outgrowth of the sense of fellowship shared by the followers of Christ (4:2, 5:11; Green 2010:1289). Selling one’s possession and giving the proceeds to the poor for the purpose of following Christ was one of the difficult requirements of Christ of his followers that sent the rich young man away dejected (Mark 10:17-27). The members of the first church could fulfill this requirement of Jesus as a sign of the reality of the help of the coming Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1).

It may be admitted that the initial decision to take steps to address the social welfare challenges in the first church may have been forced on the members of the first church. This may be true because the church, at this time, had many people to support because a large number of pilgrims stayed on in Jerusalem after Pentecost (Knowles 2001:700). Besides, several of believers might have lost their jobs or had been rejected by their families because they had become Christians (2001:700). This communal living did not only rise out of social need. What Luke again seeks to portray is that this “community life flows from the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit, for 2:44-45 follows hot on the heels of the promise of the Spirit to those who believe” (2:38; Walton 2008:105). What is also clear is that this life of communal sharing among the Christians was inspired by the social welfare needs around them. As such, properties were sold and distributed to meet the social welfare needs of members.

1.4 The Nature of Fellowship in a Growing Church (VV 46-47)

Luke's intention to reiterate the expansion of the original gathering described in 1:14 to include the recent converts is evidenced by the repetition of the phrase, "*continuing with one accord*" in 2:46. The mention of daily devotion "to the temple" reflects the Jewish character of their faith in this early period. Here, Luke sought to describe one of the practices that promoted the unity of the church by his reference to the habit of breaking of bread (verse 46). We have said earlier that the meaning of *klah'-o ar'-tos*, has been the subject of disagreements among scholars and commentators. One school of thought believes the term refers to the taking of ordinary meals in the home of believers, while another school believes the term strictly applies to the Eucharist, or the communion. A third school of thought, however, suggests that the term applies to both the Eucharist and the eating of ordinary meals.

There is no doubt about the fact that the breaking of bread among the disciples could have served two purposes: as both a fellowship meal and the Lord's Supper. As the Lord's Supper, the meal fulfilled a religious function, but as a fellowship meal, it provided opportunity to meet the welfare needs of the poor. It could be discerned from the letter of Paul to the Corinthians that the fellowship meal was primarily to be used to fulfill social welfare needs. Paul's concern about the abuse in verse 21, "For when you take your food, everyone takes his meal before the other; and one has not enough food, and another is the worse for drink" is directed at the neglect of the needs of poor (1 Cor. 11:21).

In addition to the fellowship of sharing meals, Luke highlights the overwhelming joy the new community experienced: "they received their food with glad and grateful hearts" (vrs 46). Luke's concern was also to show that such a fellowship of sharing did not stem primarily from obligation or selfish motives but from genuine gladness and sincerity of heart because of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Food "shared in gladness" also connotes the idea that food is given out to meet the needs of those who are unable to provide for themselves. One can say that food was shared in such a way that people in need of food were provided with their needs. Just as properties were shared as people had needs, so was food shared so that all needs were met. Acts 6:1-2 confirms that people with difficulties in providing food for their families (widows and probably orphans) were assisted.

Luke closes his first summary of the state of the infant church by describing how her members rejoiced and the favour they had with the people in Acts 2:47 "praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved". Thus, Luke draws attention to the continuous joy shared among the first believers, specifying that their joy arose out of praises to God. The verb "praise" (*aineō*), occurring nine times in the KJV, is used by Luke to describe ecstatic response of angels (Luke. 2:19), shepherds (2:20), people (Luke 19:37) and the healed leper (Acts 3:8-9) to an important message. Its appearance in 2:47 suggests that the believers were rejoicing similarly because of the importance of the message of salvation that had come to them.

Alexander (2001:1033) notes that the phrase, "having favor with all the people" can be taken to be summing "up this first stage of the church's existence as an idyllic state in which the group is in harmony with its parent community, the people of Israel". In this state, the church became a paradise on earth where growth and praise became spontaneous (2001:1033). The church having favour (*charis*) with God may be a reference to the spontaneous miracles performed among them, echoing Acts 2:43. On the other hand, this initial favour was to last only for a short period of time, probably long enough to get the infant church established. Meanwhile, before persecution would arise in the church, the unity, and the social welfare provision mentality of "this new community seemed to elicit the admiration of even those who were not part of the community" (Jeon 2013:4). Luke concludes that, this group was not static, but the *Lord added* to their number day by day those who were being saved (ver. 47). Luke thus draws attention to the continuity between the church and the risen Lord by pointing out that He is ultimately responsible for the initiation (2:41) and the expansion of the community of faith.

1.5 The Pivotal Role of the Apostles (Acts 4:32- 33)

Luke begins this section by highlighting that the first Christians were so intimately united that none regarded his private possessions solely for personal gain but for the benefit of the whole group. This was to show that, the fellowship of the first church was one involving not only meeting together, but a fellowship of hearts, minds, and souls. The key phrase "The heart and soul of the multitude of those who believed was one, and not even one used to say that any of their possessions was their own" (4:32) echoes an earlier sentiment in (2:44), where the believers were said to be together and had all things in common. The expression sought to show that, togetherness of the believers was not imposed on the Christians by the Apostles, even though they had great authority among the believers. Instead, it sought to describe the disposition of the first Christians towards private property as voluntary. What underlies the phrase "heart and soul of those who believe was one" has its parallel, also, in Greek ideals about friendship. Aristotle cites two proverbs in expounding his understanding of friendship: "Friends are one soul" and "Everything belonging to friends is common" (Nicomachean Ethics 9.8.2). These may echo ideals of friendship in Acts 4:32, and even if it did, Luke's intention may be to assert the fact that the first Christian community realized all the highest ideals for human community of the Graeco-Roman world (Walton 2008:107).

Walton notes that the "language of the community being 'one heart and soul' (4:32) also has biblical parallels" (2008:105). He notes that the concept of unity of heart and soul in the knowledge of God is a theme running through Deuteronomy, as at least found in the Shema (6:5), where Israel is exhorted to love Yahweh with heart, soul, and strength. This theme is similarly found in the writings of the prophets, that point to a time when humans will have singleness of heart (Jer. 32:39-44; Ezek. 11:19). The prophets also suggested that such times will become times of peaceful coexistence among humans and the need of the poor would be provided. Thus, Luke presents the first Christians in Jerusalem as "fulfilling the highest hopes and ideals embodied in the Torah for a community life" (2008:106).

Again, Luke notes the new attitude of the first Christian community towards private property as "And not one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own" (4:32). Taylor (2001:52) says the phrase "the things which he possessed" creates a picture of a continuing "private ownership" of property among a group. Luke, therefore, sought to draw attention to two important facts; that the group did not abandon ownership of private property, and that the group members were willing to share their properties one with another. Luke pointed out that even though the new Christians held private property, their attitude towards their properties was that they were not their own property by virtue of the fact that they were willing to give it up (*hapanta koina*) for the use of others (fellowship). This attitude is certainly different from that of a communist community where people are compelled to give up their properties. This attitude of the first Christians suggests that a "broader biblical theology of stewardship may underlie the text here" (Walton 2008:105).

Once again, it must be pointed out that the group members' willingness to hold their private possession (all things in common) refers to their attitude, and not the physical location of the properties. Again, it is noted that, this passage follows immediately on the heels of the church's first experience of persecution (4:1-22). Peter's arrest might have strengthened the resolve of the Christians towards more 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*; Jeon 2013:6). It is evident that sharing to meet socio economic needs of the members of church was inspired by "being filled by the Holy Spirit" (4:31), coming on the heels of prayer.

4:33 "And the Apostles gave witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus with great power. And great grace was on them all". Once again, Luke reminds readers of the pivotal role of the Apostles in the formation and development of the new Christian community. The focus of their testimony (*marturion*) was on the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ (2:31; 4:2), and the message was delivered in the power of the Holy Spirit: an echo of Acts 2. Two important reminders seem to be obvious here: 1) that the church was born out of the reality of the resurrection of Christ, and, 2) that the witness of the first church was not like a contemporary intellectual argument but given with great power (*dunamei megalē*; Joen 2013:7).

Luke continues, "Great grace was upon them all." Grace (*charis*) is often understood as "favor," and this sense is likely included here. However, in this context, this "grace" also refers to the generosity in giving towards the need of

others. Paul seems to be saying the same things of the Macedonian churches when he writes that the "grace of God" given to the churches has resulted in an "overflowing of their joy, and the depth of their poverty, abounded to the riches of their generosity" (2 Cor. 8:1-2). In this example of Paul, grace resulted in great giving even among the poor. The emphasis that this grace was upon all of them appears to be emphasizing the theme of unity among the believers.

1.6. Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation among the Believers (V. 34-35)

The immediate versus preceding verse 34 says that great grace was upon all the believers. The practical demonstration of the grace, which all the believers had experienced, was that each person shared his possessions until "there was no needy person among them". The proclamation of Jesus' resurrection, coupled with the outpouring of the grace of giving upon all members, resulted in a phenomenal increase in philanthropy (verse 34).

One can also find that the sentence used for the description of the outcome of this sharing among the first Christians (verse 34) has its parallel in the Old Testament. The words used were borrowed from Deuteronomy 15:4. Once again finds in the Old Testament, an expectation, particularly among the prophets, of future times of bliss when humans will have singleness of heart (e.g. Jeremiah 32:29; Ezekiel 11:19). This will also come with complete devotion to Yahweh and his concerns and ideals. Luke, thus, showed that just as in the future society of bliss, to be created after the blessings of Yahweh is poured on his people, "there will be no poor among you", so there was no poor person among the first Christians (Green 2010:1293; Walton 2008:105).

Earlier in Acts 2:45, I observed that the imperfect forms of all the verbs used, "were selling and were distributing", are iterative in force. That is to say that the first Christian community members gave in response to the nature of social welfare needs. As the welfare needs are perceived by the members, each sold their "possessions and belongings", and distributed them accordingly (Jeon 2013:5). Such selling and sharing were progressive.

Verse 35 says the proceeds from the sale of properties were laid at the Apostles feet for distribution as they deemed fit. The specification "feet of the Apostles" reiterates the authority and influence of the Apostles in the new church community. It also suggests that the Apostles were trustworthy and faithful men. Their right to decide who gets what (Joel 2013:6) further highlights the level of their influence.

1.7. Sharing Possession among believers (V.36-37)

36 "Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the Apostles called Barnabas (which means 'son of encouragement'), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the Apostles' feet". Here, Luke mentions Joseph, one of the disciples the Apostles referred to as Barnabas, (meaning the son of encouragement) who became a good example, by his generous donation of the price money of a field he sold. Even though it is difficult to understand how a Levite could own a piece of land (cf Numbers. 18:21, Deuteronomy. 10:9), the narrative admits he did not only own a piece of land, but he also sold one and brought the money to the common treasure to be given to the needy.

Barnabas' (36-7) example is mentioned here to provide a positive illustration to members of the infant church as an ideal use of wealth (Alexander 2001:1034). As Ryrle has suggested, the action of the believers (verse 34) and Barnabas (verse 35) in selling their possession was a voluntary one and does not in any way suggest the abolition of the ownership of private property (1961:36). The name given by the Apostles to Barnabas, the son of encouragement, supports the idea that the Apostles did not force members to give their possessions, but people gave as a voluntary and joyful response to the gospel.

Capper's explanation of the events involving Ananias and his wife in Acts 5:1-11 suggests that Peter referred to Ananias as being a novitiate member of the community. Initiation into the Qumran community membership is a two-stage process. The first stage required the novitiate to hand over possession to the bursar while the prospective member becomes a postulant. However, at this stage, of being a postulant, one's possessions were not merged with the common fund of the society. After a further year, the postulant becomes a full member, following which the property is merged and becomes of common good of the group (1QS 6.19-20). The community of goods is what marks out the community from outsiders (1QS 9.8-9). Severe punishments were

meted out to those who lied about their property, such as being excluded from the common meal of the community for a year and rations given to a member reduced by a quarter (1QS 6. 24-25).

Even though the proposal is attractive and interesting and appears to have the merit of locating the events of the early chapters of Acts within a Jewish matrix, Walton (2008:107) says it is doubtful that the parallels he proposes are exact. Even if this parallel existed, it is doubtful if the first Christians practiced a 'common fund' analogous with that at Qumran.

The impression given by the reading of Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32-37 leaves one with little or no doubt about the intensity of Christian fellowship among the first Christians. Some scholars have argued that Luke presented the social welfare practice of the first church as "mistaken, since sharing of possessions seems to disappear from view in the remainder of Acts" (Philips 2003:231-69; Lawrence 2005:152-71). Nevertheless, Walton (2008:109), in a direct response to these suggestions argues that the social welfare practice of the first church was undergirded by "the theological keynote of God's ownership of all things", and a strong teaching of stewardship in the first church.

This lifestyle inspired by the Holy Spirit enabled the first Christians to hold and share their possessions lightly in trust for God and others. I have also pointed out that the social welfare concerns and sharing became a central feature of the first church. This practice did not end, even when it was evident that the Jerusalem Church could not sustain from their funding sources. They called for support from other churches and encouraged others to do the same (9:36, 10:2 -31, 11:27-30).

1.8 Theological Reflection on Social Welfare

Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-35 set out an account of a social safety net involving members of the first Church in Jerusalem. In the passage, generally perceived as a summary of fellowship lifestyle of the infant church, Luke carefully but briefly described several important characteristics of the infant church. In this summary, Luke showed that membership of the safety net was made up of all who accepted the message of Peter at Pentecost and beyond. They came together as a community whose purpose centered on understanding the teachings of Jesus through his Apostles. The leaders of this group were the Apostles who became the managers of the social safety net of the first church. Luke described the attitudes and motivation of the group in such words as "being together in a common place", "having one soul and mind" "having all things in common". They were, voluntarily, selling their possession and handing the proceeds of such sales to a fund managed by the Apostles.

The description creates the impression that the first Christians prioritized the provision of social welfare needs of their members as one of the major responsibilities of all followers of Jesus. The funding source of this expensive experimentation came from the private economic means of all members, as members were selling their properties and handing the proceeds over to the common fund for distribution as others had need. The leaders of the church encouraged the practice of the principles involved by appealing to others for assistance. The description of the intensity of Christian fellowship lifestyle had led some scholars to speculate that the first Christians experimented in communism. But Luke's description did not suggest that the believers were compelled to do any of the things they did.

The social teaching of the leadership of the first church was consistent with that of Jesus and other actors of the Gospel scene. In the Gospels, Jesus taught his followers that one of God's major expectations from his followers is giving to the disadvantaged or the poor (Luke 10:25-37). Jesus showed in his teachings that, underlying God's strong desire for justice in the society is his concern that no one is disadvantaged in life. In His inaugural sermon, Jesus sought to make the provision of justice for the disadvantaged one of His and His followers' main duties (Luke 4:18-19).

Paul, consistent with the teachings of Christ and the agenda of the first church showed a lot of sensitivity to the poor. He was personally involved in soliciting for support from the gentile church to the poor members of the church in Jerusalem (Galatians 2:10). He stressed the unity of the church as a body (Corinthians 12:27) and taught that members of this body should aim at complementing one another. His insistence on the complementarity of the membership of the Church led him to champion the collection from the gentile world to the poor members of the Jerusalem church (Romans 15:25-6, 1 Corinthians 16:1-3, 2 Corinthians 8-9).

Before I conclude this section, I will turn my attention on what principles the church today can deduct from the social welfare practices of the infant church. Is the church today obliged to follow the example of the first church? While I concede that a literal application of the principles espoused in Acts 2-4 may not be required today, there are important principles that are still applicable to the church. While there may not be a straightforward answer to this question, an insight into the attitudes behind successful implementation of the first social safety net among the first Christians will give us a cue if this is necessary today. As Walton (2008:105) has pointed out, the Apostles' teachings, like most biblical authors, may have hinged on the broad Old Testament principles of stewardship, that see "the earth is the LORD's and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1).

Such understanding means that man holds material possession in trust for God, in whose image he is made (Genesis 1:26-28). Stewardship of God's resources suggests that man is held accountable for its use. The best way to use God's resources is to give it back to Him. God is seen in man, represented by the poor (Proverbs 19:17; 28:27). Therefore, any action on behalf of the poor is an action done to and for the Lord. Thus, as the narrative suggested in Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35, the teachings of the Apostles stimulated by the Holy Spirit became an important factor that contributed to the success of the experiment of the first Christians.

Similarly, Christians of today should naturally be encouraged to respond to the contemporary needs of their members and use what the first Christians did as a guide. What the leaders of the first church did was to teach the general principles of stewardship, thus preparing the heart of all their members to respond to the needs of others. The leaders also through the regular meetings in homes exposed the reality of poverty among the church members to all members of the church. This led to rich members, whose heart had been prepared to give to relieve poverty, as a service to God, freely giving of their economic goods to the Apostles to be distributed among their poor neighbours.

The first method or means of getting all church members involved in social welfare provision for all church members was identified in the quote above as "rousing the individual conscience, in such a way as to awaken strong". This rousing of conscience was done in the first church by the teaching of the Apostles (Acts 2:42). Similarly, Jesus' social teaching was aimed at rousing the individual conscience to change them into "self-sacrificing personalities", who would share their economic resources with the poor. In the contemporary church, this should be the function of leadership through her teaching ministry.

The second means of "of helping the brethren and relieving misery and want" is identified as converting the members of the congregation into a community bound together by brotherly love. In the first church, this conversion of individuals into a community occurred through the fellowship shared among the members of the church. The idea of the phrase in Acts 2:46 expressing that the new Christians "continuing daily (*hēmera*) with one accord in the temple" (verse 46), gives the impression that the new Christians spend a great amount of time in one another's company. Their regular meeting (*hēmera*) was to create bonding between the individual members, who have been united by a common believe in the Gospel. The members of the first church, consisting of people from diverse background, were converted into a community bound together by brotherly love. This enabled all to be interested and concerned for one another, so resources were shared to meet the needs of others.

The third means identified by Harnack and Herrmann (2007:8-9) is a call to the church to enter some relation with both Government and Non-government agencies, identified as "the arrangements of the world" to support the efforts of the church. This clearly aligns with the steps taken by the Apostles when the church in Jerusalem was not able to support the growing number of poor people who joined the group. We have noted elsewhere in this dissertation that, in such circumstances, the Apostles called for support from outside the church. This refers to the advocacy function of the church. Through advocacy, the believers at Antioch gathered financial help for believers in Judea during the Claudian famine (Acts 11:28-30). Paul was requested by the leadership of the church at Jerusalem to gather support for the poor believers at Jerusalem from among the gentile believers (Gal. 2:10). Such opportunities to lobby and or collaborate with both Government and Non-government agencies for support for poor members of the church is still available to the church today.

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