

Sharing Possessions and the High Priest's Council

Notes for 1 Apr

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Read: [Acts 4:32-5:11](#), [Acts 5:17-42](#)

There's no let up in the pace of the story...

This week we discuss three rather different short stories:

- Communal living ([Acts 4:32-36](#))
- Severe punishment for telling lies (or was it?)? ([Acts 5:1-11](#))
- An interesting technique for dealing with new ideas ([Acts 5:17-41](#))

The Believers Share Their Possessions

I've always been fascinated with alternative ways of living. I am a child of the sixties. I read Tom Wolfe's "[The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test](#)", the story of [Ken Kesey and The Merry Pranksters](#), at an early age. I was fascinated by the [Deadheads](#) (the fanatical followers of the Grateful Dead). In addition to all the chemical experimentation practiced by these groups, they had some very different ideas of what it meant to live well. "2.2 kids, a house, and a Ford Cortina" seemed to be the goal of the world in which I grew up. These 60's experimenters were doing something else entirely. In recent years I've become interested in more ancient community experiments. Monks and monasteries, abbeys and silent retreats, pilgrimages. Such experiments have been around, in one form or another, for over a thousand years. They must be doing something right.

One thing the hippies and the religious have in common is an understanding that capitalism is not the end goal. There are alternative ways to exist that don't depend on me making sure that "I am going to be OK, and, incidentally, good luck to you".

Do these few short verses in Acts hint at the early church experimenting with something along the same lines? Looking at the way the Book of Acts is written I reckon that when Luke makes a note of something it's because it's notable – ie it's not the norm. These people were trying something new, and that is worth noting. We don't hear much more about this way of living. There are stories, later in Acts, of the apostles setting up the deacons to look after the practical aspects of the community. And there are some commentators who think that Paul took up collections on his travels to assist this community. Perhaps, even back then such groups couldn't support themselves?

All the believers were united in heart and mind. And they felt that what they owned was not their own, so they shared everything they had... There were no needy people among them, because those who owned land or houses would sell them and bring the money to the apostles to give to those in need.¹

Questions

1. Is this an instruction to us to live in the same way? Or does Luke write about it because it was unusual?
2. How would you feel about living in such a way?

¹ Surely an appropriate riposte to right-wing pro-capitalist American evangelicals! This text is very close to Karl Marx's "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!". I do sometimes wonder if some evangelicals actually read the Bible...

3. Have you any experience of living in such a community? What was it like?²
4. The prognosis for those looking to live outside of conventional society isn't good. Most of the experiments from the sixties failed – and some failed very badly. The same can be said for many religious groups (eg Waco, an example close to Adventism). Why do you think such projects fail?
5. Equally some succeed. Why are many ancient religious communities still going strong? Is there something fundamentally different about a *religious* community that insulates it from failure?
6. Should we aspire to create such communities?
7. What do you think of this quote from Thoreau's "[Walden](#)"?

"If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavours to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal, and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded, and interpreted in his favour in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings."

Ananias and Sapphira

Again, is this story here because it is unusual? Surely, this must be the case! I can think of several – how shall we put it? – 'financial irregularities' within the Christian church that maybe resulted in nothing worse than someone losing their job. And often they got to keep their ill-gotten gains.

Questions

1. Why did God do this?
2. Was it actually God that did this?
3. If this was an exceptional incident what was its purpose? What was God doing?
4. Pretend you are a Church Board member and you found the treasurer fiddling the books. Would you go all Ananias-and-Sapphira on them? Explain your reasoning!

Gamaliel

I like this story! The high council were very angry with Peter and the apostles and didn't know what to do. They were afraid of the anger of the crowd if they killed the Apostles, but they were equally afraid of what would happen if Peter & Co didn't shut up.

Questions

1. What were the high council afraid of if the apostles kept on going?
2. Put yourself in their shoes and be kind in how you judge them! You are responsible for the spiritual wellbeing of your congregation and your congregation is being horribly stirred up. What would you do and why?

² The nearest I've seen to such a community was when walking the Camino de Santiago, the 500-mile trek across northern Spain. I went expecting a pleasant long distance walk but I found something life changing. The community of walkers, the *peregrinos*, and the kind people who run the hostels, the *hospitales*, have created something much more profound than a [stroll in the country](#) with a [nice place to stay](#). Rebekah Scott's memoir of running such a hostel, "[A Furnace Full of God](#)", is highly recommended.

Gamaliel, a Pharisee and member of the high council, tells the tale of Theudas, a rebel who, as Gamaliel puts it, 'pretended to be great'.

Some time ago there was that fellow Theudas, who pretended to be someone great. About 400 others joined him, but he was killed, and all his followers went their various ways. The whole movement came to nothing. After him, at the time of the census, there was Judas of Galilee. He got people to follow him, but he was killed, too, and all his followers were scattered.

So my advice is, leave these men alone. Let them go. If they are planning and doing these things merely on their own, it will soon be overthrown. But if it is from God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You may even find yourselves fighting against God!

Questions

1. What do you think of the advice to, essentially, leave it to God?
2. Why do we find that so hard?!
3. Have you ever sat on a Church Board, or similar, and had to make a decision when you'd no real idea of what to do? What strategy did you use to decide?
4. In most human endeavours or organisations I'd suggest that the default answer to the question "Shall we do X?" is "No, unless we can prove that X is better than what we're currently doing". An alternative answer would be "Yes, unless you can prove that what we're currently doing is better than X". Choose your answer. Discuss!

Resources

- From the New York Times: ["The New Generation of Self-Created Utopias"](#), a fascinating piece on 'intentional communities'.