

“Christian Communism”

In the Book of Acts

J. HAROLD GREENLEE

There are two passages in the Acts of the Apostles which are especially used by some people as proof-texts for the argument that real communism was practiced in the Christian Church after Pentecost. These passages as they appear in the King James Version are as follows: “And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need” (Acts 2:44-45). “Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles’ feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need” (Acts 4:34-35). These passages supposedly describe a genuine “Christian communism” — a society in which private property was abolished and where the ruling principle could be stated in the words, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need” — or at least in which there was a redistribution of wealth, in which all shared equally.

It is evident that this communism, if it was practiced, did not survive for long. Why did it not survive? Two answers fairly well include those which have been offered. The first answer is that the communistic practices were God’s will for the Christian community, but that selfishness and other non-Christian attitudes made God’s ideal impossible and forced a return to “capitalism,” where each person had his own personal property. This answer assumes that if we could establish a truly Christian city or country today, it would then be God’s will to have such communism again. Indeed, this assumption helped lead to the establishment of the Shaker settlements, the experiment at Zion, Illinois, and other such ill-fated attempts during the past century.

The second answer, which is probably the more common one in our day, is that these early Christians were generous to a fault, becoming starry-eyed idealists who were either so overcome by the joy of their Christian fellowship that they gave their money away unwisely, or else were convinced that Jesus would return to set up his Kingdom so soon that money and possessions were worthless. At least one Sunday School lesson commentator, who seems quite sound in many respects, implies that the collections for the Christians in Jerusalem which Paul mentions in his epistles (I Cor. 16:1-4; II Cor: 8-9; etc.) were necessary because this mistaken experiment in communism had so impoverished the Jerusalem Christians that they were thrown on the mercies of other Christians who had not been involved.

Neither of these two answers is satisfactory. In reply to the first, there seems to be abundant evidence that God has ordained the principle of private ownership. The right of private ownership, which is capitalism, and of the legitimate rewards of one’s own initiative and work, are far more consistent than is communism with the high evaluation which God has placed upon us as individuals, made in his own image. The commandments “Thou shalt not steal” and “Thou shalt not covet” are based upon the right of private property. Sharing with others, based upon love and issuing in love, would be impossible if nothing were our own to share.

The second answer suggested is equally unacceptable. The New Testament nowhere warns us that what these early Christians did in these matters was mistaken. If they were mistaken, then the New Testament is not a completely safe guide for our lives. This conclusion we do not accept.

It seems that the whole assumption of communism in Acts, even a so-called "Christian communism," is due to a misunderstanding of the author of Acts. This misunderstanding is of two kinds. One is a misunderstanding of the author's point of view. He is trying to emphasize very strongly the attitude of generosity which prevailed among the Christians. He was describing an attitude of heart which should be found in any truly Christian home. He meant that the Christian love was so sincere that, if someone was in need, others would share with him as though their possessions were his. A pagan writer about 100 A. D. described the Christians as Acts intends to describe them, with these words: "He who has gives to him who has not without grudging. And if there is a man among them who is poor and needy and they have not an abundance of necessaries, they fast for three days that they may help the needy with the necessary food." Here is not communism, but Christian love. Moreover, the author of Acts shows that he is not describing complete communism by the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:2, 4); for he writes that Peter rebuked Ananias with the words, "Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? And after it was sold, was it not in thine own power?" How could Peter have said this if all the Christians were expected to surrender their possessions?

The second misunderstanding of Acts in these passages is a misunderstanding of what the author actually said. The description given in Acts 2:45 and 4:34-35 is a picture of progressive selling of possessions and distribution of the money. Every verb—five of them—in these descriptions pictures, in the original language, not a single or simple act, as the King James Version seems to say, but a continuing, repeated, or customary action. We might read them in this way: ". . . they were selling . . . and were distributing . . ."; and ". . . they were bringing the prices . . . and they were placing them . . . and it was being distributed . . .". In other words, as commentators on the original tongue point out, the disciples were prompted by Christian

love to aid those of their company who were in need, *whenever anyone was in need*, even if it meant selling possessions to provide the assistance. This assistance was evidently carried out by the apostles for the church, rather than being a purely individual matter, as Acts 4:35 points out. It may, therefore, have involved some sort of systematic contributions by those who were able. But it is clearly not a case of everyone's selling all his possessions and giving it all to the church.

The misunderstanding is not lessened, moreover, by the translations, ". . . and parted them to all men, as every man had need" (2:45), and ". . . unto every man according as he had need" (4:35). The meaning of each of these passages is more nearly, ". . . and distributed them so often as anyone had need." Indeed, in both passages in the original words "had need" are preceded by a little word making the idea more indefinite—that is, the distribution was made to people *when and* if they were in need.

The translation in 2:44, "*had* all things common," can also easily be misunderstood to mean that the disciples owned everything in common. The verb translated "had" often does mean "to have" in the sense of "to possess". However, it is this same verb which is used in the following passages:

Referring to the people's opinion of John the Baptist, "they counted him as a prophet" (Matt. 14:5); "for all *hold* John as a prophet" (Matt. 21:26); and "for all men *counted* John, that he was a prophet indeed" (Mark 11:32).

Referring to the people's opinion of Jesus, "they *took* him for a prophet" (Matt. 21:46).

Paul, referring to Epaphroditus, "*Hold* such in reputation"—that is, "Consider such people precious"—(Phil. 2:29). The meaning of the verb in these passages, in other words, is to have or to hold an opinion about someone or something, or to consider someone or something in a certain light. It is this meaning which should be used in Acts 2:45, which gives the meaning that "they considered all things common"—that is, they had the truly Christian spirit of the

motto, "What is mine is yours if you need it."

Perhaps a paraphrase or free translation may summarize what we believe to be the proper meaning of these two passages we have been discussing:

"And all who believed were accustomed to consider their possessions as common property; and they would sell their properties and possessions and distribute them to anyone who was in need" (Acts 2:44-45).

"For neither was anyone in need among them; for as many as were owners of fields or houses would sell them and bring the

price of the things which were sold and would place it at the feet of the apostles and it would be distributed to anyone who was in need" (Acts 4:34-35).

The idea that the Christians were attempting to set up a "communistic utopia" rests upon a view which reads the author's glowing description of vital Christian stewardship and love among what was doubtless a large percentage of poor people, and mistakenly forces into his words a description of a legalistic system which was forced upon the entire Christian community. A fair interpretation of relevant passages does not seem to bear out such a utopian thesis.