



The Community of the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:32-37)

Commentary: Week Ten

***Scripture divisions used in our series and various commentaries differ from each other.
This is the reason for the occasional discrepancy between
the verse range listed in our series and the commentary notes provided in our Scripture Studies.*

New American Commentary¹

5. The Common Life of the Community [4:32-37](#)

The previous episode exemplified the prayer life of the community with an actual incident. Luke returned to his summary style to further picture the life together, much as he did in [2:42-47](#). Many of the themes are the same, but there is considerable development of one theme in particular, the sharing of goods within the fellowship.

[4:32-33](#) The opening two verses are almost identical with [2:43-44](#), only in reverse order. Together they characterize the community life as marked by four things: their unity in mind and heart (v. [32a](#)), their sharing of their possessions (v. [32b](#)), the power and witness of the apostles (v. [33a](#)), and the grace of God, which rested upon them (v. [33b](#)). The overarching concept was their unity, their being “one in heart and mind,” their fellowship in the Spirit (cf. *koinōnia* in [2:42](#)). This served as the basis of their sharing of their possessions. The latter is described in two ways. First, “no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own.” The picture is one of unqualified sharing, of not claiming owner’s rights, of saying “what’s mine is yours.” The second expression is “they shared everything they had.” The Greek literally reads “everything was in common with them.” Taken by itself, this could refer to shared ownership; but in conjunction with the first expression, it also refers to a practice of freely sharing one’s goods with another.

Many interpreters have seen Luke’s description of the Christian practice here as reflecting Greek ideals, particularly in such phrases as “one mind” (*psychē mia*) and “all in common” (*hapanta koina*). The Greeks shared a common myth that in primitive times people lived in an ideal state in which there was no ownership but everything was held in common. Some attributed such a practice to the Pythagoreans, and Plato envisioned his ideal republic as one devoid of all private ownership. It is doubtful such a utopian ideal was ever realized among the Greeks, but for some Greeks communal ownership was a major part of their dream of a “Golden Age.”

More common than this myth was the Greek ideal of friendship according to which true friends held everything in common (*panta koina*) and were of “one mind” (*mia psychē*). Aristotle is reputed to have defined a friend as “one soul dwelling in two bodies.” Such expressions became commonplace and are found in Roman writers such as Cicero as well as the Hellenistic Jew Philo. Luke’s description would have evoked an immediate response in his Gentile readers. What they esteemed as an ideal had become a reality in the young Christian community. They were of one mind, for they shared freely with one another, truly common both in soul and in means. The main business of the community was, of course,

1. John B. Polhill, *New American Commentary – Volume 26: Acts*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 150-154.

the witness for Jesus; and this the apostles continued to do “with great power” (*dynamis*, v. [33](#)). This power likely refers to their continuing performance of miracles, a further testimony to God’s answering their prayer (v. [30](#); cf. [5:12–16](#)). “Much grace was upon them all,” primarily in God’s blessing on their lives and witness. On this note Luke’s general summary of the Christian life together ends (cf. [2:47](#)). He then turned to a more thorough discussion of one particular aspect of their common life—their sharing of goods.

[4:34–35](#) If v. [32](#) depicted the Christian sharing in terms of Greek ideals, verse [34a](#) sets forth the Old Testament ideal: “There were no needy persons among them.” This is the ideal God established for Israel. According to [Deut 15:4f.](#), Israel was to keep God’s commands; and God would bless them; there would be no poor among them. There is evidence that in New Testament times the text of [Deut 15:4](#) was seen as a reference to the ideal final times when Israel would be fully faithful to the law and there would be no poverty in the land. The Christians saw themselves as the people of God of the final times (cf. [2:17](#)), they were experiencing God’s blessing ([4:33](#)), and they were striving to realize the ideal of a people of God with no poor among them.

Verses [34b–35](#) depict the means by which they sought to realize this ideal. Those who had lands or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds, and lay them at the apostles’ feet. The proceeds were then distributed to the needy among them. Repeated attempts have been made to see this as an early Christian experiment in community ownership. Sometimes a specific pattern has been suggested, such as the common ownership practiced by the Qumran covenanters. There are many reasons to reject such suggestions. Every evidence is that the early Christian practice was wholly voluntary.

First, there was no transfer of ownership, no control of production or income, no requirement to surrender one’s property to the community. The voluntary nature of the Christian practice is evidenced by the consistent use of the iterative imperfect tense throughout vv. [34b–35](#). This is how they “used to” do it. They “would sell” their property and bring it to the apostles as needs arose.

Second is the example of Barnabas in vv. [36–37](#). His sale of property would hardly be a sterling example if surrender of property were obligatory.

Third, in the example of Ananias and Sapphira, Peter clarified for Ananias that his sin was in lying about his charity. The land remained his to do with as he pleased; he was under no obligation to give the proceeds to the church ([5:4](#)).

Fourth, the picture of the central fund for the widows in [6:1–6](#) is clearly not an apportioning of each one’s lot from a common fund but a charity fund for the needy.

Finally, there is the example of Mary in [12:12f](#). She still owned a home and had a maid. The Christians enjoyed the hospitality of her home. This was clearly no experiment in common ownership.

But what of the practice of laying the proceeds at the apostles’ feet? The gesture was one of submission to another. At this point the Twelve were the representatives appointed by Christ as the foundation of the true people of God. The submission was not to them but to the one they represented. To lay one’s gift at their feet was to offer it to Christ. The apostles certainly did not consider this an enviable role. They were all too glad to turn the responsibility over to others (cf. [6:2](#)).

[4:36–37](#) Luke concluded his treatment of the early Christian sharing with two specific examples—one to be followed (Barnabas) and one to be avoided (Ananias and Sapphira). Barnabas sold a field and placed all the receipts at the apostles’ feet. Of more interest to us are the little details told about Barnabas here.

Luke had a way of taking characters who played a major role later in the book and introducing them early, but only briefly and in passing, as is the case with Barnabas here. His name was Joseph, and he was given the nickname Barnabas by the apostles. This was not insignificant in itself because the granting of a nickname was often seen as a sign of respect. (Compare Jesus giving Simon the nickname of Peter/Rock.) The problem is that Luke said the name meant *Son of Encouragement*. Now *bar* does mean *son* in Aramaic, but no scholar has ever been able to give a convincing derivation of “encouragement” (*paraklēsis*) from *nabas*.

Etymologies aside, the important thing is how well the by-name fits the picture of Barnabas in Acts. He was the encourager, the advocate, the paraklete par excellence of all the characters in Acts. When the Christians in Jerusalem shied away from Paul after his conversion, Barnabas interceded and introduced him to them ([9:26f.](#)). When Paul refused to take Mark on his second missionary journey, Barnabas took up for Mark ([15:36–39](#)). When the Christians of Jerusalem became concerned over the orthodoxy of the Antiochene Christians in their witness to Greeks, Barnabas again served as intercessor, saw the gracious work of the Antiochene Christians, and encouraged them ([11:20–23](#)). Indeed, [11:24](#) well sums up the portrait of this “Son of Encouragement”: “He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.”

We also learn that Barnabas was a Levite from Cyprus. Levites were officials in the temple cultus, subordinate in rank to the priests. Prohibited from offering sacrifices and barred entrance to the holy place, they served in such capacities as policing the temple grounds, keeping the gates, and providing the music at sacrifices and on ceremonial occasions. According to ancient provisions ([Deut 10:9](#); [Num 18:20, 24](#)), Levites were not supposed to own land, but that no longer seemed to apply in Barnabas’s day. (Indeed, Jeremiah, a priest, owned land [[Jer 32:6–15](#)].)

We are not told where the field was located, whether in Judea or his native Cyprus. Nothing was made of Barnabas’s Levitical status in Acts. He may never have served as a Levite. Such service was in no way compulsory for one of Levitical lineage. Just how strong were Barnabas’s Cypriot roots we also are not told. Luke simply said here that he was a Cypriot by birth. His family may have moved to Jerusalem when he was quite young, and it is in and around Jerusalem where we find Barnabas active in the early chapters of Acts. On the other hand, it is probably not by chance that Paul and Barnabas’s mission work together began on the island of Cyprus.