

## **Ecclesiology Workshop:**

Title: 'Money, Church and Community. What Do They Have in Common?'

Blurb: This workshop Will Argue that Communal Ecclesiology Without Biblical Economy of Money and Possessions is Not Possible. Divine Communities both in the OT and NT times could not exist without sharing resources in social solidarity. It was this aspect which made them stand out from all other communities in their times and places. Communal generosity is thus one of the most visible hallmarks of biblical ecclesiology. What did church community looked like when it was practiced and how it could look like today when social solidarity is put in practice?

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## **Money, Church and Community. What Do They Have in Common?**

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In this presentation we will look into several defining moments of the birth of the community of God in the Bible. I will try to argue that the Biblical narratives provide us with aspects of ecclesiology that we have completely forgotten or moved to the side-lines of ecclesiastical discussion. However, as I will argue, if we want to discuss what ecclesial community looks like and how it operates in real life, it's impossible to do it without addressing the crucial issue of economics.

The first relevant context is in Deuteronomy 14 and 15. It depicts prescriptions for the newly established Israel community as it settles in their new homeland. The framework for their community is importantly given in the context of possessions and how they use it. Let's read the text.

# 1. Israel as Community - Deuteronomy 14:22 – 15:23

## Tithing Principles

<sup>22</sup> "You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year. <sup>23</sup> And you shall eat before the LORD your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always. <sup>24</sup> But if the journey is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, or if the place where the LORD your God chooses to put His name is too far from you, when the LORD your God has blessed you, <sup>25</sup> then you shall exchange it for money, take the money in your hand, and go to the place which the LORD your God chooses. <sup>26</sup> And you shall spend that money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household. <sup>27</sup> You shall not forsake the Levite who is within your gates, for he has no part nor inheritance with you.

<sup>28</sup> "At the end of every third year you shall bring out the tithe of your produce of that year and store it up within your gates. <sup>29</sup> And the Levite, because he has no portion nor inheritance with you, and the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who are within your gates, may come and eat and be satisfied, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do.

## Debts Canceled Every Seven Years

<sup>15</sup> <sup>1</sup> "At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release of debts. <sup>2</sup> And this is the form of the release: Every creditor who has lent anything to his neighbor shall release it; he shall not require it of his neighbor or his brother, because it is called the LORD's release. <sup>3</sup> Of a foreigner you may require it; but you shall give up your claim to what is owed by your brother, <sup>4</sup> except when there may be no poor among you; for the LORD will greatly bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance— <sup>5</sup> only if you carefully obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe with care all these commandments which I command you today. <sup>6</sup> For the LORD your God will bless you just as He promised you; you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow; you shall reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over you.

## Generosity to the Poor

<sup>7</sup> "If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, <sup>8</sup> but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs. <sup>9</sup> Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand,' and your eye be evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing, and he cry out to the LORD against you, and it become sin i among you. <sup>10</sup> You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand. <sup>11</sup> For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.'

## The Law Concerning Bondservants

<sup>12</sup> "If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and serves you six years, then in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. <sup>13</sup> And when you send him away free from you, you shall not let him go away empty-handed; <sup>14</sup> you shall supply him liberally from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your winepress. From what the LORD has blessed you with, you shall give to him. <sup>15</sup> You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this thing today. <sup>16</sup> And if it happens that he says to you, 'I will not go away from you,' because he loves you and your house, since he prospers with you, <sup>17</sup> then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his ear to the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also to your female servant you shall do likewise. <sup>18</sup> It shall not seem hard to you when you send him away free from you; for he has been worth a double hired servant in serving you six years. Then the LORD your God will bless you in all that you do.

## The Law Concerning Firstborn Animals

<sup>19</sup> "All the firstborn males that come from your herd and your flock you shall sanctify to the LORD your God; you shall do no work with the firstborn of your herd, nor shear the firstborn of your flock. <sup>20</sup> You and your household shall eat it before the LORD your God year by year in the place which the LORD chooses. <sup>21</sup> But if there is a defect in it, if it is lame or blind or has any serious defect, you shall not sacrifice it to the LORD your God. <sup>22</sup> You may eat it within your gates; the unclean and the clean person alike may eat it, as if it were a gazelle or a deer. <sup>23</sup> Only you shall not eat its blood; you shall pour it on the ground like water.

## Text Notes: What can we learn from the text?

**The context** is the social and economic structures of local and national communities of Israel. The community sense of the text is clear here and so is how or what creates it.

14:26 – Firstly, the communal aspect of the text is obvious from how they use the word 'you;' because in the text *you* - means '*you and your household,*' meaning it's in plural. It is not an individual 'you,' but it refers to the whole household.

14:29 - a special provision to keep the tithe every third year within the community - within your gates and use it to feed and support all who need it, even a visitor who comes to the community.

In fact, whole tithes setup is for the benefit of the community - it says '*within your gates*'. There is a provision from tithes - to support all within the community who need it.

Where do we even remotely think about this applying in our churches? We have an artificial system of percentage going to higher organisations but nothing from tithes stays in the community.

From 15:1. The rules about release of debt seem to apply again within community. One lends to a neighbour or a brother, who could be from another community, technically, but the emphasis appears to be on how a community should operate. However the lending is cross land which is clear from v. 7 onwards.

From 15:7 - the amazing social system of care which already was established for community 'within gates', is now extended to '*within any of the gates in your land*'. Whoever is poor 'in your land' - in any of the communities, could receive and should receive willing lending and support.

So firstly, we discover that there is available support for those needy within a community, and it is from the tithes. Now we discover, that there is support for all of Israel's communities in need and this applies across different communities. Individual communities are supposed to be naturally open to help and give out of their conviction.

The suggestion of the social structure which exists across communities continues in the rules about releasing a slave from verse 12. The whole motivation behind the releasing is to support the community and to provide with full-hands those who need - be they from local or a neighbouring Israelite community.

This must have created massive brotherly bonds between communities in Israel.

In such a setting no one was 'sucking up' the benefits for themselves. But all were sharing in what God gave them, and if some were struck by unfortunate circumstances - the others - locally or nationally provided a bountiful hand. This is all possible, because there was a system of social solidarity based on communal tithes in place. This way they could create community, a functional community which served the needs of needy and created communal sense of family. Such social solidarity was also a visible sign of God's blessing and they together in a selfish world formed indeed a different type of community which must have been obvious to all around them.

**Dt 15:20** is the last mention here that the text thinks in terms of community. They eat together the tithe. They create community by eating together the tithe. The tithe is not an end in itself. It has ecclesial purpose and that is to build up the church community in a most direct way.

The same point is already in chapter 14 and here it is too: The tithe was supposed to be communally eaten - shared together and not only consumed as a matter of religious rite - but they should have rejoiced and be satisfied by bringing the tithe.

We don't seem to have any system in place applying the sense of the text in our theology, ecclesiology or practice of tithe giving.

Instead we have created a system in which somebody, some organisational section sucks up the tithes and centrally distributes its value to lower organisations. The value is not defined specifically but it is to support directly the employees and the mission of the church. This model is however strange to the text. In the text what stands out is:

- (1) the local/national community nurture/support,
- (2) social sharing and
- (3) horizontal distribution.

These are the three main principles. The community together benefits and supports itself and by doing so they are becoming even more a community.

But a system where the money is simply moved up to a higher sphere inherently has no community sharing, mutual support or horizontal orientation. The orientation of tithes is rather vertical or hierarchical and thus the community does not benefit directly and consequently cannot directly be a community which can store reasonable means to provide support for those within the gates.

What would people think if a place existed where people would get social solidarity arising naturally from their community? Where one in need would get support because the community would be support-oriented and would have necessary means to support those in need. Instead we appear to be in a position where the local church community is unable to support adequately, or at all, those who need support, because often the local church itself needs support from higher organisation where they send their funds in the first place. At best maybe some individuals do reach out to support - but then that is not communal, that's individual - defeating the whole purpose of the section.

### **DT 15:2**

The idea is that the creditor is willing to lend. The text assumes the lending will happen in communities of brothers and neighbours. There is no command to lend hence it is not an enforced act. It assumes the communities will act like that.

That is the second point, the untold but clearly assumed context of lending is a local community of neighbours and brothers.

These are not rules for an artificial or top-down hierarchical or vertical process of lending and trying to gain something from it. It is about generic rules of lending to just anybody with whatever motivation. It is to support local community.

Clearly the lending is not for the purpose of gaining here because the creditor has to release the debt.

### **DT 15:11**

Brueggemann says that there is no contradiction between the promise of blessing and no poor in the land, as mentioned by the text earlier and this place.

Here is simply acknowledged that the poor will be there probably because they will never follow what is here and as the result they will never receive the full blessing and the poor will be there.

So it was the stubbornness of the people to follow willingly the command which led to the situation God wanted to prevent.

ISRAEL could have been the light of the world with unique economy and social system where all would have and where social and brotherly solidarity would rule. Such would make Israel 'rich' spiritually and also literally. They would become the magnet for the world. Their mission was embedded in them being a functioning community of social solidarity.

At the core of such missiological vision and promise is the basic economic motivation to give willingly to needy neighbours and to release debts every 7th year. This vision seems to imply that such attitudes and actions will over time lead to a society and community that together becomes rich with no poor.

The fact that the text here mentions poor means that people never followed up with this vision and the human selfish nature took over.

### **Dt15:15**

This is the basic motivation. Without God they would be nothing. On a deeper level it goes to the image of God. He commands this because God is like that. Knowing God is one who cares about slaves, is then the central motivation.

### **Dt 15:16**

The servant prospers, which implies not an exploitation context of forced work for the benefit of the owner but a social setting which enables even the servant to prosper and love what he or she is doing. That is quite a revolutionary system.

## (2) Economy of Extraction: The End of Community

On one hand the biblical vision for communities of Israel and church is based on the principles of social solidarity and communal generosity. Yet on the other hand there is also a different and competing model in the Bible which is not given by God to his people but devised on a large scale by Pharaoh.

### **Pharaoh's Economy Model - Gen 47: 13-21**

<sup>13</sup> Now *there was* no bread in all the land; for the famine *was* very severe, <sup>t</sup>so that the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. <sup>14</sup> <sup>u</sup>And Joseph gathered up all the money that was found in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, for the grain which they bought; and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house.

<sup>15</sup> So when the money failed in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan, all the Egyptians came to Joseph and said, "Give us bread, for <sup>v</sup>why should we die in your presence? For the money has failed."

<sup>16</sup> Then Joseph said, "Give your livestock, and I will give you bread for your livestock, if the money is gone." <sup>17</sup> So they brought their livestock to Joseph, and Joseph gave them bread *in exchange* for the horses, the flocks, the cattle of the herds, and for the donkeys. Thus he <sup>2</sup>fed them with bread *in exchange* for all their livestock that year.

<sup>18</sup> When that year had ended, they came to him the next year and said to him, "We will not hide from my lord that our money is gone; my lord also has our herds of livestock. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands. <sup>19</sup> Why should we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land for bread, and <sup>w</sup>we and our land will be servants of Pharaoh; give us seed, that we may <sup>w</sup>live and not die, that the land may not be desolate."

<sup>20</sup> Then Joseph <sup>x</sup>bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh; for every man of the Egyptians sold his field, because the famine was severe upon them. So the land became Pharaoh's. <sup>21</sup> And as for the people, he <sup>3</sup>moved them into the <sup>★</sup>cities, from one end of the borders of Egypt to the other end. <sup>22</sup> <sup>y</sup>Only the land of the <sup>z</sup>priests he did not buy; for the priests had rations *allotted to them* by Pharaoh, and they ate their rations which Pharaoh gave them; therefore they did not sell their lands.

<sup>23</sup> Then Joseph said to the people, "Indeed I have bought you and your land this day for Pharaoh. Look, *here is* seed for you, and you shall sow the land. <sup>24</sup> And it shall come to pass in the harvest that you shall give one-fifth to Pharaoh. Four-fifths shall be your own, as seed for the field and for your food, for those of your households and as food for your little ones."

<sup>25</sup> So they said, "You have saved <sup>a</sup>our lives; let us find favor in the sight of my lord, and we will be Pharaoh's servants." <sup>26</sup> And Joseph made it a law over the land of Egypt to this day, *that* Pharaoh should have one-fifth, <sup>b</sup>except for the land of the priests only, *which* did not become Pharaoh's.

The economy of extraction leads to complete demolition of original and natural communities which were settled around family fields, lands and flocks.

This is all gone by the cunning extraction strategy of Pharaoh executed through Joseph who was his right-hand man.

This is an opposite view from Dt 14 and 15.

Effectively, the Egypt as it used to be is gone, people became debtors to the king and his establishment. Egypt has gone **from community to city**. City is an unnatural and economically driven place. Because people don't own anything, there is no point they stay with their lands and animals. All they are needed for, is their work and muscles.

This is very cunning by Pharaoh, because he effectively detaches them emotionally from their lands and animals. If they stayed where they were, they would keep their natural attachment to their fields and crops and after some time maybe would want to keep them as their own. So pharaoh creates cities and the text says that he moved people from one end of Egypt to the other. In other words, as far as possible from their lands so that they could not go back easily. This way they would work on strange fields which were not their own and hence would not have natural attachment to those new fields. How devilishly clever.

The community is gone, because what keeps it alive and sustains it is gone. The city is born. But cities will only artificially keep up the appearance of community. Primarily they will sustain the needs of the king and his machinery.

You have to be sorry for the people of Egypt when you read the text. They now own nothing, they are only renting the land, pharaoh is using their bodies and benefits from their fruit.

What was supposed to remain in community is gone up to support the king. The king taxes his people by a 25% tax of all they make. It creates a vicious circle of depth and more depth. In the biblical vision families give 10% back to the local and national community. Every third year the fruits of their labour stay in their local community. What a different operation of economy and community.

Here is then **the key tenet of this presentation**: There is no way we build church community without right economy of possessions and money. There is no magic or esoteric blessing of God that spiritually descends on people or churches and makes them into functioning, supportive and lively community church which are attractive to outsiders. The two different scenarios of Dt 14; 15 and Egypt should motivate us to rethink ecclesiology.

I am sorry for the people of Egypt who were caught in the net of pharaoh's economy traps. The principles of depth cancellation of Dt 15 do not operate in the economy of extraction, hence people were never able to get back to owning large lands which could have supported family and local community and sustained them.

It's difficult to judge what kind of role Joseph played in helping to create this new economy of extraction and leaving the people of Egypt in depth and being slaves. But chapter 40 does not shed a nice light on him. Particularly, as he does the economy of social solidarity with his own people, his own family.

Bible develops an alternative economy, closely linked with the very existence, purpose and mission of Israel – **economy of restoration**. In this ecclesiology, *goods are shared* within community, *debt is released*, *people can be freed from their slavery* of work and be given land and place in the community.

In this economy, *money flows horizontally* and for the benefit and existence of the community. *Resources are shared in social solidarity*. Lending is willing and *no interest rates are used because that would benefit only individuals, not the community*. At the core of this vision is **the command of not coveting**. Maybe the last of the God's commands in the decalogue is the most ecclesiological in this sense. We always read it through individualistic concerns, but maybe the concerns behind it were communal.

Maybe as a side note or application, but it frames the Egypt narrative into the today's context - where do we see today the economy of extraction which we see in Gen 47? Maybe it's visible in tax policy of governments, in the credit-loan provisions, the interest rates and cheap labour – which all benefit few individuals, but not the community. People become vulnerable to debt and require debt relief. To have some sort of chance to compete in the economy of extraction young people leave schools with massive debt. Even before they make any money they are trapped (at least in UK and USA, EU is more socialist when it comes to education).

In **the rest of OT narrative**, we see how the Pharaoh's extraction economy has crept into Israel. Since the time of monarchy, kingly power has changed the constellation of the community of God's people. Only few kings perhaps were an exception, including David, but the system was put in place where the principles of sharing wealth for the benefit of

community have been replaced by a different model of extraction of wealth from community. Many OT prophets are sent by God with a message of warning and impending judgement for the sins of social injustice.

**The seventy years in captivity** is another echo of the fact that the key principles of Dt 14 and 15 – the release of debt and slaves were not upheld by the people of God and hence the land of Israel is having a jubilee year.

The restart of the OT church is however only partly successful. The temple is getting rebuilt, which is a good sign, but this is all in the background orchestrated by the Persian rules who cunningly appoint the descendants of the elites of the people who in the pre-captivity period were operating the extraction economy in Israel. So, the economy of extraction has infiltrated Israel after the exile too. The descendants of these elites are appointed by Persian king as imperial administrators making sure the king gets his dues. In other words, making sure the money is extracted from the local community. The impact of this is nicely described in Nehemiah 5. Opposing this practice Nehemiah offers in place economy of restoration – restoring to the people the lands and means to become community of God again (Neh 5:10-11).

± Nehemiah 5:10-11 (NRSV) *Moreover I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us **stop this taking of interest**. **11 Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you **have been exacting from them.*****

### (3) NT Church as Community: Gospels and Acts

Now, the third relevant context is the NT vision for church as community. I'd like to suggest that the OT picture is not an outdated nomadic view the Bible presents for God's church. If we open our eyes and are sensitive to these issues, we discover that the NT is actually well in line with the OT vision. The NT church was supposed to function on the same principles of social solidarity, communal sharing and restoration economy as the OT Israel.

#### ± Gospels – The Kingdom of God as Metaphor for Alternative Economy of Solidarity

In the gospels Jesus begins his ministry by announcing the good news which according to **Luke 4:18-19** is for the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed. Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 61:1 a messianic text which we in the West tend to read in a metaphoric way as speaking to spiritual hunger, captivity, blindness and oppression. Our reading may be partly true, but then in the Gospels, Jesus indeed feeds the hungry who follow him, releases people from all sorts of physical captivity and also literally heals blindness. So undeniably Jesus's ministry has touched the socio-economic conditions of the people of God at that time.

± Secondly, **Jesus himself was a man from Galilee – a country of peasants**. He stands against Jerusalem – an urban centre where the religious and economic elites lived for centuries. They organise the whole life of Israel from that city. They run an economy of

extraction on behalf of their imperial masters. The gospels are filled with allusions to the kind of economy they run.

The tax collectors are the most visible actors in many gospel stories. They are the front-line extractors of money and possession from the communities. They work for the urban elites in Jerusalem.

Jesus is taking a very different message to the people though. His code word for his communal and economic mission is kingdom of God. It's His term for 'alternative economy'.<sup>1</sup> In the gospel narratives, Jesus acts almost like a prophet like Moses or Elijah, working in village communities, bringing a very different message to them about the kingdom – economy by which they are run.

We have the social map and the main players in the extraction economy nicely introduced in ± Luke 19:47-48:

*Then He went into the temple and began to drive out **those who bought and sold** in it, 46 saying to them, "It is written, My house is a house of prayer," but you have made it a den of **thieves**."*

*47 And He was teaching daily in the temple. But the **chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders** of the people sought to destroy Him, 48 and were unable to do anything; for all **the people** were very attentive to hear Him.*

The reference to the principles of restorative economy of Dt 15 (particularly v. 11) is also built into the very heart of His prayer he taught his disciples. In the Lord's Prayer, the subject of debt and forgiveness stands out. Those who say the prayer state also their readiness to cancel debt. Particularly in the Matthean version the emphasis stands out: ± Matthew 6:12 'And forgive (Gr. ἄφεσις; also cancel) us our debts, as we have forgiven our debtors.'

Many other examples could be followed,<sup>2</sup> but perhaps it suffices to say that Jesus' ± 'you cannot serve both God and mammon' (Luke 16:13) is the summary of the stark choice between solidarity of covenantal community, in which people do not covet or defraud and the greedy, privatised and extractive imperial economy.<sup>3</sup>

## The Early Church in Acts

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<sup>1</sup> Oakmann suggests that 'Jesus advocated tax resistance as a concrete expression of the "kingdom of God"'. See Douglas E. Oakmann, *Jesus, Debt, and the Lord's Prayer: First-Century Debt and Jesus' Intentions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014), p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> Such as Mark 10:17-31 (Rich young ruler 'sell what you own, and give money to the poor...'); Mark 12:13-17 ('is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?'); Luke 12:13-34 (brotherly dispute about family estate); Mark 14:3-9 ('For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish, but you will not always have me'); Luke 16 (the unrighteous servant and the impossibility to serve both God and mammon).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Horsley, 'Foreword,' in W. Brueggemann, *Money and Possessions* (Louisville, Kentucky: WJK, 2016), p. xvi.

- Acts 2:41-47
- Acts 3:1-10
- Acts 4:32-37
- Acts 5:1-11

- Overview

### **The Main Framework for Acts**

Large tension in Acts involves interface between **Imperial authority** and **the work of the Holy Spirit**.

#### **Acts 2:42-47 - A summary programmatic statement**

A Community is established which challenges the modes of cultural and imperial practices including:

Social

Economic

Political/Power

Beliefs

The church shows a different way of being in the world. The settled order of the empire is threatened by the power of the Spirit.

- Introduction to Acts 2 - 5

#### 1. The early church is presented as **a community of solidarity**

There is a radical departure from imperial economics. The accumulation of wealth in the hands of privileged and powerful is challenged by 'having all things in common' in the church.

#### **Acts 3:1-10 – governing reference**

*"I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk."* (Acts 3:6 NRSV)

Apostles break with the economics of custodial generosity, because it maintains status quo. Alms have no transformative capacity.

The contrast is between *silver and gold* and *the transformative name of Jesus*.

- Introduction to Acts 2 - 5

#### 2. Marks of **the community of solidarity**

## **Acts 2:41-47**

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 NRSV)*

Apostles' teaching

They taught the narrative of Jesus

Fellowship

The network of friendship/neighborliness made alternative economics credible

Breaking of bread

This was a counter-imperial meal. People from all social strata eating together, the same amount and same quality food challenged the rigid Roman stratification of society. The meal had economic ramifications – challenged Rome's economic policy of abundance for elites and mere subsistence for the others (Alan Streett, *Subversive Meals* [2013], 203-4).

Prayer

The community appealed to an authority other than Emperor and Rome.

- Introduction to Acts 2 - 5

### 2. Marks of **the community of solidarity**

They were not simply about alternative economics, but about radically different understanding of the power for life that is operative and effective outside of conventional 'silver and gold' domain.

They reimagined the nature of worldly reality!

## **Acts 2:44**

*All who believed were together and had **all things in common***

**Hermeneutical excursus:** We read the text with negative connotation and try to explain it away. Why?

C. B. Macpherson (1962) suggests that it was people like Hobbes and John Locke who are the culprits behind our hermeneutics of this verse. They created the moral argument for 'possessive individualism'. An individual can possess all he/she could acquire without any social obligation. They changed the traditional view that property and labour were social functions. Ownership of property (which came with land and wood) involved social obligations. Locke erased moral justification for acquiring unlimited wealth.

- Introduction to Acts 2 - 5

### 2. Marks of **the community of solidarity**

## Acts 2:44

*All who believed were together and had **all things in common***

The ancient world did not practice 'possessive individualism'. Yet they legitimised social stratification, inequality of social access, power and goods.

The common good of the early church spoke deeply against such stratification of the imperial pyramid.

Acts shows that the property of believers was situated in a social-moral context of community. They provided an alternative kingdom from economy, power, social life to worldview conviction.

Unfortunately our pietistic – spirituality and confessional oriented – reading does not hear any of these...

- Introduction to Acts 2 - 5

3. **The community of solidarity** is based on original design of God for his people

### Acts 4:32-35

*32 Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common. 33 And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And great grace was upon them all. 34 Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, 35 and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need (Acts 4:32-35 NKJV).*

An echo of the old regulation of debt cancelation in Dt 15:1-18. 'There will be no one in need among you' (v. 4).

The early church is doing Deuteronomy 14 and 15. Their attitudes to property and money is not based on eschatology but on the original design of God for his people.

- Introduction to Acts 2 - 5

4. Money has radioactive potential

### Acts 5:1-11

*But Peter said, "Ananias, why has **Satan** filled your heart **to lie to the Holy Spirit** and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?... So **great fear** came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things (Acts 5:3, 11 NKJV).*

'Keep back' – *enosphisato* – is the same as used in Joshua 7:1 (LXX) concerning the affront of Achan – who also withheld money from the community. It ended in disaster for Israel.

Peter escalates the matter, suggesting that this simple economic transaction is actually a great cosmic struggle between Satan and the Spirit. The deception violated the Spirit's work.

Is the story of Ananias' and Sapphira's deception a replay of the initial act of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:6, where the 'desire' subverted divine expectation? If so, then it is remarkable that a simple transaction is a venue for the cosmic struggle in which the church is engaged.

Great fear – the church members are more likely to follow in the wake of Ananias than in the model of Barnabas

- Discussion of Acts 2 - 5

1. The early church is presented as **a community of solidarity**

*"I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk."* (Acts 3:6 NRSV)

Questions

**Is the absence (refusal) of silver and gold a necessary prerequisite to transformative power?** Is this what the narrative of 3:1-10 wants us to ponder about?

**Could it be that a refusal to use conventional custodial economics here attests the basis of transformative power that lies outside conventional status quo economics?**

That is, **conventional practices of money do not constitute the most likely venue for the Spirit's work of restoration.**

- Discussion of Acts 2 - 5

2. Marks of **the community of solidarity**

*They devoted themselves to the **apostles' teaching and fellowship**, to the **breaking of bread** and the **prayers**.*

*All who believed were together and had **all things in common*** (Acts 2:42, 44)

Questions

**Why do we not hear the multifaceted – political, economic, social message of Acts?**

**Is possessive individualism our church problem which tames all we do as church?**

**Have we reduced the marks of the church community to spiritual practices and truth declaration?**

That is, **we have transformed the breaking of bread into a mere symbolic act, explained away the social solidarity, and never discuss politics in the church.**

**What bite can such reduced church have on society?**

- Discussion of Acts 2 - 5

3. **The community of solidarity** is based on original design of God for his people

*And great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; (Acts 4:33-34)*

Questions

**Is this just a dream today? Why?**

**In a good pietistic fashion, have we perhaps spiritualized God's blessing to mean some sort of ethereal force landing on His people; instead of seeing it as outworking of God-given principles which the church has to put in practice if it wants to experience the blessing?**

- Discussion of Acts 2 - 5

4. Money has radioactive potential

*But Peter said, "Ananias, why has **Satan** filled your heart **to lie to the Holy Spirit** and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?... So **great fear** came upon all the church and upon all who heard these things (Acts 5:3, 11 NKJV).*

Questions

**How does the narrative help us to make sense of what the early church life was about?**

**To what extent is the current life of the church similar and to what extent dissimilar from the life of the early church in Acts?**

**If we were to 'replicate' the early church experience, what would need to happen in our church?**

## Conclusion

The classical western church thinking is

A. Religion is mostly personal, it's about mine or churches' spirituality.

B. Economics and politics are on the other side of the divide.

However, it is possible to see them going hand in hand, but that requires lots of rethinking.

The lesson from the key biblical places which speak to the issue of formation of God's human community is that money and possessions go hand in hand with church community.

We may even say that money and possessions belong to communities. Community is by default embedded in social relations and social relations are only sustained in mutually supportive environment of sharing and solidarity. This is why biblical ecclesiology or communal ecclesiology cannot be based on lofty theological reflection only, be that very

necessary for us today to have such reflection. At some point reflection needs to meet reality. Church is not a creation of God through invisible blessing. No, the church is a lived and practiced reality of people living together. However, if we live and practice the church on the principles of extraction economy, where does it leave the community and where does it leave our mission?

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