

EVERYTHING IN COMMON?

THE THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE OF THE SHARING OF POSSESSIONS IN COMMUNITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES, THE EARLIEST CHRISTIANS, AND PAUL¹

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This study examines the practice and theology of sharing possessions in community in the NT by examining six diverse NT examples of sharing. The texts are chosen from across the Gospels, Acts and the Pauline Epistles in order to provide a range of examples of different kinds of sharing including variety in terms of: what is shared; the distance over which sharing happens; the geographical locations that sharing happens in; and practice. Each example is considered in its historical and cultural context before being compared with one or more non-Christian comparator examples to identify similarities and differences. These comparators are examples which show similar situations and practice, and which are likely to be known by or familiar to the community in the NT example (or which were used by others at the time as comparators). Having examined the NT examples and compared them with the non-Christian comparators, the thesis identifies common characteristics across the NT examples and consistent distinctives in how the early church shared possessions compared with the surrounding cultures.

Chapter one provides a brief overview of the literature that addresses questions around possessions in the NT. It observes that despite Panikulum's focus on communal identity and Saxby's historical

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study of community of goods, most studies focus on individual Christian practice or on policy at a state / economic level. Even Luke Timothy Johnson, who specifically focuses on sharing possessions, concentrates on the individual believer's relationship with God. In contrast this study focuses on sharing within community and between communities, rather than on: individual believers and their relationship with God; support for specific leaders; or economic policy. Chapter one also explains the rationale for the approach and methodology of this thesis.

Chapter two considers the practice of Jesus and his disciples, focusing mainly on the common purse in John 12:4-8 and John 13:28-29, but also using other Gospel texts that illuminate what may be happening with the common purse, for example Luke 8:1-3. This shows sharing where there are a number of different ways to share and where the common purse was used for buying food and other needs for Jesus and the disciples, and for providing for the poor. The example of Jesus and his disciples is then compared with the practice of rabbis and their disciples, the Essenes / Qumran community and the Cynics.

Chapter three examines two examples of sharing in Acts. The first is the example of selling, sharing and holding in common in the context of the earliest days of the church (Acts 2, 4, 5, 6). Here the sharing is linked to God's grace and the presence of the Holy Spirit. It is voluntary, yet with assumptions about how the giving takes place. While private property in name continues, possessions are seen as common and are sold and used as needs arise within the community. The sharing includes eating together. This example is compared with Jewish relief for the poor, the Essenes / Qumran community, and the Pythagorean community.

The second example considered in chapter three is that of the church in Antioch sharing with believers in Judaea with whom they had an ongoing relationship (11:19-30). It is an example where individuals contribute according to their ability, but where there is also corporate responsibility for sharing. Sharing is presented as key to being disciples of Jesus. The example evidences practical and careful stewardship. The example of Acts 11 is compared with the practice of appointing a *curator annonae* to subsidise the cost of grain in famine situations, and with the gifts of Helena and Izates to the people of Jerusalem during a period of hardship.

Chapter four looks at the sharing of food at the Lord's Supper in Corinth, where Paul instructs the Corinthians that their sharing of food should show equality and care for one another as members of one united body made up of people from diverse backgrounds, for whom Christ died. The 1 Corinthians 11 example is compared with Graeco-Roman meal practice.

Chapter five considers Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians to participate in the collection (2 Cor. 8 and 9), another example of sharing at a distance, but one with a less established relationship between those giving and those receiving. It is an example where sharing / giving: is core to being a Christian; is rooted in grace, in Jesus and his example; provides for need; is voluntary, generous and practical; involves all; is in relation to what one has; is relational; and has potential reciprocity. It is also an example where probity is important and God is central as the ultimate benefactor. The 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 example is compared with the practice of appointing a *curator annonae*, the gifts of Helena and Izates, the collection of Temple tax in the Diaspora, and expectations in patronage, benefaction and gift exchange.

Chapter six looks at how Paul responds to the ἀτάκτοι in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. It investigates the limits / boundaries to sharing in the context of regular shared meals in a community which shows familial love and provision, and deep sharing relationships. Paul instructs the Thessalonians to work as part of the way they love each other and he exhorts them to do good not only to those within the group, but also to those outside. The example from 1 and 2 Thessalonians is compared with the Epicureans, expectations in family life, voluntary associations and patronage practice.

Chapter seven draws together the evidence from the preceding five chapters. It identifies common characteristics across the New Testament examples which appear in at least four of the six examples and are not contradicted in any of the examples. The NT examples show sharing which: is practical and responsive; is based in a sense of communal identity, unity or relationships between individuals or communities; is in groups with a mix of backgrounds, either of different cultural backgrounds and / or of different social classes; does not have only one way of an individual contributing to the sharing, but multiple ways; has a tension between the individual and the community in terms of responsibility or ownership of the sharing; involves

responding to need; and includes eating together. It then compares across the comparisons to identify consistent distinctives, which appear in comparison with at least four of the NT examples, in how Christians shared possessions. In comparison with the surrounding cultures, the NT examples show groups with greater social diversity; sharing where everyone is involved in contributing; sharing which is voluntary and yet with expectations; more flexible approaches to sharing; and sharing which is based on relationship with God and other believers. The NT examples also often undermine patronage expectations—for example by seeing God as the ultimate benefactor and the one to whom all honour and thanks returns; or by encouraging all to benefaction, not simply those who are richer. In addition, the examples present sharing as a key part of the life of faith. The chapter also highlights three distinctively Christian motivations for the sharing: God's grace, action and provision; the relationship and unity between believers; and the example and actions of Jesus, particularly his death.

In summary, this thesis identifies seven common characteristics across the diverse NT examples of sharing possessions in community which it considers. It shows that Christians shared in ways that were consistently distinctive when compared with the surrounding culture and also tentatively identifies three distinctively Christian motivations seen within the NT examples compared with the non-Christian comparators. In addition it provides a possible methodology for considering areas where the NT presents a diversity of examples of practice.