

The life of the Early Church Session 3



Devoted do anyone who has need (Acts 2:45; 4:32-37)

ENGAGE - activities to set the scene

- **Imagine** (*You will need a selection of personal items such as clothes, books etc*)

Set out the clothes, books and other items and ask a few people to look at them, choosing items that they would need, want or could use right now. Try to imagine together a way of arranging society, or maybe just a community, where everyone's needs were met regardless of their education, their ability to work, or how much money they had. Share some thoughts and ideas together of what this would practically look like.

- Is this way of living difficult for us to imagine? Why or why not?
- What are the obstacles to sharing with one another?
- Is there anything you would be hesitant to share? Anyone you would be hesitant to share with?
- Have you ever experienced a community that shared everything? (Many of us have done so; think of your experience of family - children are not usually 'productive', yet have their needs met in healthy families.)

- **Chain reaction** (*You will need strips of paper, pens, Sellotape or stapler*)

Ask people to write down on as many strips of paper as they want, what it looks like to help 'anyone who has need'. With the strips, create a long paper chain. Explain how our actions can impact others and set off a chain reaction.

- **Talk Time**

Ask people to get into groups and briefly discuss if there are any needs that they know about within their corps/church. If so, is there any way that the group can help to meet that need, in as quiet and dignifying a way as possible? Talk also about your neighbourhood or city. Are there any needs that they are familiar with? How can the group begin to address one of those needs in a very practical way?



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PRAY - prayer activities for different contexts

- **Praying the Psalms (*You will need paper and pens*)**
 - Read out Psalm 24:1-2.
Ask people to write down what the Lord has given them - material possessions, relationships, opportunities, where they live, their health, the natural world, etc. Once they are done, ask them to share their list with someone else, and thank the Lord together for his many gifts.
 - Read out Psalm 24:1-2 again.
Are they able to see all the things they wrote down as truly belonging to the Lord? What does that mean to them?
Read out this quote from Thomas Merton: 'If I remember that I have nothing called my own that will not be lost anyway, that only what is not mine but God's will ever live, then I would not fear so many false fears.' Ask people if they have any fears about their possessions, relationships, health, etc. Give them time to bring these to the Lord in prayer.
 - Read out Psalm 24:1-2 one more time.
Ask people to pray together, intentionally declaring that all the things they wrote down belong to him. Ask them to think especially about the things that are most precious to them, the hardest to yield control over. Make sure they speak out that these belong to the Lord as well.



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TEACH - content to help inform a sermon or small group outline

Context

- In Acts 2:45 we see the brand-new, Holy Spirit-filled fellowship of believers devoting themselves to a radical form of open-handed living. This is not mere charity. They believe that their possessions belong to the Lord and are therefore entirely available to be used by him to meet the needs of their brothers and sisters. This includes selling possessions, even property, and giving the proceeds to anyone in their fellowship that had need.

Exploration

- This is where we start to get uncomfortable. Devoting ourselves to prayer, teaching, worship and fellowship seem like appropriately 'religious' things to do. But sharing our stuff with one another? That sounds like economics, or maybe politics. It sounds like the preserve of aid agencies, the government, or The Salvation Army's social work.
- Is this really the work of the Church, the expected fruit of discipleship? Is my personal stuff, my space, my home, my money really meant to be entirely available for the Lord to use to bless others?
- The first discipleship community seemed to think so, and we get a reiteration of this principle in Acts 4:32-37. This passage explicitly states that they didn't view their possessions as their own, but that they held everything in common. Then we are shown the example of Barnabas selling a field and laying the proceeds at the apostles' feet. (He likely did not receive a tax receipt!)
- What are we to do with this? The stories in Acts are descriptive, which means they don't tell us what to do in the form of commands, but they do highlight what the very first believers thought was most important. We dismiss or water down these lessons at our peril.
- Many of us will find it hard even to imagine living in such a way in our modern society. The behaviour of the Church in Acts seems financially unwise at best, and flies in the face of our individualistic worldview.
- Yet the Early Church clearly believed that this devotion to open-handedness brought them into closer and truer union with Jesus. How? Their sharing was based upon love: love for God, and love for their brothers and sisters. It was not a compelled giving - that is important.
- When we are forced to share, it often leads to the fruit of bitterness, resentment, and the attempt to find loop-holes (consider most people's approach to paying taxes). The discipleship community in Acts received the revelation that everything they had belonged to God, surely in part because they realised what a gift they had been given in forgiveness of sins and the presence of the Holy Spirit. As a result, no one had to force them to share.



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Their voluntary sharing was the fruit of gratitude to God and love for any of the community who were struggling.

Conclusion

- This loving open-handedness brought them closer to the humility and generosity of Jesus. And it brought down the idols of selfishness, pride and greed.
- What if that could happen today? What if the gods and idols of our current society are leading us away from this fruit of discipleship? Could it be that our culture's near religious devotion to private property is not quite biblical? Could it be that we need to devote ourselves anew to the humility, generosity and love of Jesus, as displayed in the first Christian community?

REFLECT - questions for discussion/small groups

Read out **Acts 2:42-47**, and then read out verse **45** again.

- What are the believers devoted to in this verse?
- Why is this open-handed living essential to the early Christian disciples?
- How does this help Christians to become more like Jesus? What fruit does it bear?

Read out **Acts 4:32-37** for another example of the way the new believers shared their possessions.

- What was their motivation for sharing all that they had with one another?
- What would happen if someone suggested this way of living in your corps/church today? How about in your family?
- Is this the way Christians are expected to live today? Is open-handed living required of Christians? Why or why not?
- Would you want to live this way? What would be the purpose of it?
- What fruit do you think it would bear?
- How might it bring you and your community closer to Jesus? How would it communicate Jesus' message to the world?

