

Acts 4:32–5:11

The Challenge of Possessions

We are not surprised to hear Luke claim that “the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul” (4:32) because we are accustomed to hearing such pious, often unrealistic claims made about Christian congregations, even within our own day. Preachers sometimes tend toward rosey exaggeration. But when Luke claims that “no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but that they had everything in common” (4:32), our ears perk up. How can this be? Karl Marx claimed that nearly every human attitude and action could be traced to economic sources. Luke was not a Marxist, but he was enough of a realist to know that there is a good chance that where our possessions are our hearts will be also. A surprisingly large amount of the Book of Acts deals with economic issues within the community. Much of Luke’s Gospel also deals with matters of money. Consider the parables of the Debtors (Luke 7:41–43), the Good Samaritan (10:29–37), the Rich Fool (12:16–21), the Unjust Steward (16:1–8), the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19–31), and the parable of the Pounds (19:11–27)—all but one of these parables are unique to Luke. Wealth is not, for Luke, a sign of divine approval. It is a danger. The rich young man could not part with his money (Luke 18:18–23), and another rich man was declared “thou fool” because of his silly reliance on well-filled barns (Luke 12:15–21).

“Why are we always talking about money in the church?” one of my church’s officers asked complainingly. “All we do is talk about money, giving, and the budget. I wish we could get beyond this and talk about the spiritual things that are really important for a church.”

His was an understandable but misguided wish for the church. In responding to him I noted that we had discussed all sorts of issues in church board meetings, but none of the issues under discussion were as volatile and potentially divisive as our congregational arguments about money. At least in this sense Marx was right: There is a kind of economic determinism at work in our lives. Money makes the world go around.

Ernest Becker noted that as belief in God and other traditional sources of immortality eroded in Western culture, money assumed a god-like quality in our lives, our ticket

to enduring significance in the face of death. We sometimes say, in the face of materialism, “You can’t take it with you.” But that observation does not defeat our materialism; it reveals its source. We cannot take things with us as we go into the oblivion of death; but we can pass financial power on to our offspring. We endow a chair at the university or have a pew named for us at church. Money is thus, in Becker’s words, our “immortality ideology,” our modern means of insuring that even if I must die my name, my family, my achievements, my power will continue after I am gone. Only Luke tells the story of the rich fool (12:13–21), the one who assumed that his possessions gave him god-like security against the invasions of mortality. The first banks were temples and the earliest coins were stamped with the images of gods.

“How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!” said Jesus (Luke 18:24). The disciples spoke for us all in asking “Then who can be saved?” (Luke 18:26).

But the same wonder-working power of the Spirit which made a lame man walk in the preceding section has enabled a man named Barnabas to sell his field and to give the proceeds to the apostles, who made distribution of such gifts to those in need (cf. Deut. 15:4–5). The church takes care of its own, thus creating in its life together a kind of vignette, a paradigm of the sort of world God intends for all. Justin Martyr marveled of his own church, not far removed in time from Luke’s church, “We who once coveted most greedily the wealth and fortune of others, now place in common the goods we possess, dividing them with all the needy” (I Apology 14:2–3). The power which broke the bonds of death on Easter, shattered the divisions of speech at Pentecost, and empowered one who was lame now releases the tight grip of private property.

Lest any should think that the material question is a small issue, Luke moves from the positive account of the generosity of Barnabas to the chilling tale of Ananias and Sapphira. There, possessions and what they do to us is a matter of life and death, the very first crisis to hit the young community. Unfaithfulness and deception are as close at hand as the community’s own life. In lying to the community and its leaders about the disposition of his property, Ananias has lied to God (5:3–4). In pitiless, dispassionate, and clinical detail, Luke describes the death of the two deceivers. Those who like the rich fool (Luke 12:16–21) attempt to secure life through material things receive not life but death. One of Jesus’ disciples was the first to abandon Jesus for money (Luke

22:1–5).

If money is somehow linked with our idolatrous attempts to secure immortality for ourselves, it is also the occasion for much self-deceit. There is something quite natural about the lies of Ananias and Sapphira, for we all know the way we rationalize and excuse our own covetousness, acquisitiveness, and greed . “I’m not really all that well off,” we say. “I have all I can do just to make ends meet.” “I worked hard for this and deserve it.” Our lies are a correlate of our materialism, for both our materialism and our self-deceit are our attempts to deal with our human insecurity, our human finitude, by taking matters into our own hands. Luther once called security the ultimate idol . And we have shown time and again that we are willing to exchange anything—our family, our health, our church, the truth—for a taste of security. We are vulnerable animals who seek to secure and establish our lives in improper ways, living by our wits rather than by faith. This “self-securing mentality” (E. Farley, p. 141) is at the heart of all failures to live by faith in God.

The church in the person of Peter confronts the lies of Ananias and Sapphira, because deceit of ones self or ones brothers and sisters in the church is a way that leads to death. The story is harsh, severe, uncompromising in the telling; but how is falsehood ever confronted except in a manner which always seems severe to the one tangled in deceit? The cost of not confronting our deceit over possessions is high—nothing less than the very death of our life together . The ancient *Didache* opens with, “Two ways there are, one of Life and one of Death, and there is a great difference between the two ways” (VI, 15). The ethical stance of these early Christians, their beliefs about matters like money, were concrete applications of their theological assertions. The church was called to be an alternative community, a sign, a signal to the world that Christ had made possible a way of life together unlike anything the world had seen. Not to confront lies and deceit, greed and self-service among people like Ananias and Sapphira would be the death of the church . The Epistle of James (1:9–11; 2:1–7) indicates that more than one early congregation was destroyed by the failure of Christians to keep riches in their place. Could that be why in ending the stark account of Ananias and Sapphira Luke uses the word “church” for the very first time in Acts (5:11)? Here in struggling with money the community first experienced itself as the disciplined community of truthfulness.

In his attempt to encourage Theophilus, Luke paints a positive picture of the early

community. But it is not a romanticized, idealized portrait. These are real people who are pulled in different directions by the same real tendencies which tug at us. These are real congregations where, on any Sunday, one is apt to meet both faithfulness and foolishness seated beside one another on the third pew from the left. It is important that we follow Luke's realism in our contemporary evaluations of the church. These are real people struggling to be faithful in a world which makes faithfulness problematic . There will be disappointments, unpleasantness, disputes, and some who put their hand to the plow will look back. Sometimes, those who are looking back, the Ananiases and Sapphiras of the church, are us.