

Community Calling

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Acts

The Acts of the Apostles depicts the early church working hard to grow itself and serve others in the face of opposition, shortages of people and money, government bureaucracy, internal strife, and even the forces of nature. Their work shows similarities to what Christians face in non-church-related workplaces today. A small group of people put all their heart into work that brings Christ's love to people in every sphere of life, and they find the amazing power of the Holy Spirit at work in them as they do it. If this is not what we experience in our daily work, perhaps God wants to guide, gift, and empower our work as much as he did theirs.

The men and women in the book of Acts are ready to do whatever it might take to accomplish their mission. No work is too menial for the highest among them, and no work too daunting for the lowliest. Yet the depth of the Book of Acts stems not so much from what the people of the early church do, but why and how they engage in this amazing burst of activity. The why is service. Serving God, serving colleagues, serving society, serving strangers—service is the motivation behind the work Christians do throughout the book. Ultimately, then, Acts is not a model of the kinds of activities we should engage in as Christ's followers, but as a model of the

commitment to service that should form the foundation of our activities. Our activities are different from the apostles', but our commitment to service is the same.

Acts traces the life of the community of Jesus' followers as the Spirit forms them into a group of people who work and use work-related power and wealth differently from the world around them.

In Acts 1 and 2, God sends his spirit to empower their work. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). Jesus is giving his followers a vocation—witnessing, in the sense of bearing witness to the Spirit's power in every sphere of human activity—that is essential to the coming of the kingdom. God's gift of the Holy Spirit fills the gap between the essential role that God assigned to human work and our ability to fulfill that role. For the first time since the Fall, our work has the power to contribute to fulfilling God's kingdom at the return of Christ.

We must not fall into the mistake of thinking Jesus is talking only about the work of the individual sharing the gospel with an unbeliever through his or her words. Instead, bearing witness to the coming kingdom primarily means living now according to the principles and practices of God's

kingdom. The most effective form of Christian witness is often—even primarily—the shared life of the community as it goes about its work.

The community witnesses when the strong aid the weak. The community witnesses when its members use their resources to benefit the wider culture. The community witnesses when those around see that working in the ways of justice, goodness, and beauty leads to fuller life.

After Peter announces the Spirit's creation of a new kind of community, Acts traces the rapid growth of such communities in a variety of places. The community summaries in Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-38 are remarkable in describing the scope of commitment and shared life of the early believers. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as who owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds from what was sold.

While these texts do not describe work directly, they are keenly concerned with the deployment of power and possessions, two realities that are often an outcome of human labor. The first thing to note, in comparison to the surrounding society, is that Christian communities cultivate a very different set of practices with regard to the use of power and possessions. It is clear that the early Christians understood that the power and possessions of the individual were not to be saved for the comfort of the individual, but were to be expended or wisely invested for the good of the Christian community.

Stated succinctly, goods are for the good of another. More than anything else, life in the kingdom of God means working for the good of others.

This is a radical departure from the patronage economy that marked the Roman Empire. In a patronage system, gifts from the rich to the poor create a structure of systematic obligation. Every gift from a benefactor implies a social debt now owed by the beneficiary. This system created a sort of pseudo-generosity in which generous patrons often gave out of self-interest, seeking to accrue honor connected to patronage. In essence, the Roman economy viewed “generosity” as a means to social power and status. These notions of systematic reciprocal obligation are completely absent in the descriptions in Acts 2 and 4. In the Christian community, giving is to be motivated by a genuine concern for the flourishing of the beneficiary, not for the honor of the benefactor. Giving has little to do with the giver and everything to do with the receiver.

There is continuing debate about whether or not these community summaries advocate a certain economic system, with some commentators describing the practice of the community as “proto-communism” and others seeing a mandatory divestiture of goods. The text, however, does not suggest an attempt to change the structures beyond the Christian community. Indeed, it would be difficult to think of a small, marginalized, socially powerless group having designs on changing the imperial economic

system. It is clear that the community did not fully opt out of the systems of economics within the empire. Likely, fishermen remained members of fishing cartels and artisans continued to do business in the market. Paul, after all, continued making tents to support his missionary travels.

Rather, the text suggests something far more demanding. In the earliest church, people of means and power liquidated their goods for the sake of the less powerful “from time to time” as anyone “had need.” This describes a kind of radical availability as the normal status of each person’s possessions. That is, the resources—material, political, social, or practical—of any member of the community were put at the constant disposal of the Christian community, even while individual members continued to oversee their particular resources. Rather than systematically prescribing the distribution of wealth in such a way as to ensure flat equality, the earliest church accepted the reality of economic disequilibrium, but practiced a radical generosity whereby goods properly existed for the benefit of the whole, not the individual. This form of generosity is, in many ways, more challenging than a rigid system of rules. It calls for ongoing responsiveness, mutual involvement in the lives of community members, and a continual willingness to hold possessions loosely, valuing the relationships within the community more than the (false) security of possessions.

The practices of the early churches challenge contemporary Christians to think imaginatively about models for radical generosity today. How could radical availability stand as a witness to the kingdom of God and form a plausible alternative way of structuring human life in a culture marked by the tenacious pursuit of personal wealth and security?