
A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE IV.

THE CHURCH FATHERS ON THE NATURE OF PROPERTY.

BY HENRY HUNTINGTON SWAIN, PH. D.

THE fathers of the early church were not economists. They could not even be said to be, in the modern sense of the term, social philosophers. They sought to reform society, but it was rather through the leavening influence of moral principles than by means either of elaborate "programs" or scientific study of the elements of social organization. Thus few of them have declared themselves unequivocally on the nature of property, and their views can be inferred only from their acts or pieced together from fragmentary allusions sparsely scattered through their writings.

With reference, first, to their acts, we have no evidence that any of them set about establishing any movement toward a change in the institution of private property. It may, perhaps, be alleged that certain heretical sects included community of property among their tenets. Such sects were freely denounced by the fathers, however. Indeed, we are dependent mainly on the testimony of their enemies for our knowledge of communistic tendencies among the heretics, and in some instances where independent evidence is available, the charge is found to be false. We must not therefore give too much weight to these reports, and the very fact that charges of communism are so freely hurled at heretical sects, is good evidence that those who made the charges were themselves opponents of communism.

Augustine, it is true, at one time formed, with some of his associates, a plan for a select communistic family of ten men; but, before the plan had very far matured, it was abandoned, on account of the wives which some had and others (including Augustine himself) "hoped to have"[1] It would be utterly unwarranted to assume that this fanciful dream of an hour, devised apparently to enable a coterie of well-to-do friends to enjoy each other's society and escape the irksomeness of industrial exertion by living on the aggregate accumulations of former years, had its origin in any scruples about the institution of private property.

Nor is there evidence that the fathers themselves were disposed to disregard the "sacredness" of property rights. Augustine, after his conversion, reproaches himself bitterly for having, as a boy, committed a wanton but very petty act of thievery.[2] In fact, this trifling lapse which, from the vividness with which it impressed itself upon his memory, must have been a rare if not a solitary instance, seems to have caused the saint much keener remorse than some of his early practices which, judged by modern standards of morality, seem flagrant.

In laying down a rule for convents, Augustine says: "Call not anything the property of one, but let all things be common property."[3] And the establishment of monasteries is often taken as the chief indication of communism in the early church. It must be observed, however, that the monastic life is never urged as a general plan of life for mankind at large. It was never expected that any but a small fraction of society should belong to these communities. The monastic life was not more a renunciation of private property than of all wealth beyond what was essential to the barest subsistence. The monastery was not so much a community of wealth as a community of poverty. Further, even for the bare pittance deemed necessary, the

[1] Confessions, vi. 14. [2] *Ibid.*, ii. 4. [3] Letter ccxi. 5.

monastery was dependent on the outside world and the institution of private property. While aiming to withdraw so far as possible from contact with the world, the monastery was not primarily an industrial organization, but, by reason of the vows of poverty and celibacy, depended, both for economic support and for recruiting its numbers, on the successful maintenance of a wholly different system in the world at large.

But even in the earliest times complete community of property was not the inflexible rule of the convent. Jerome relates an instance of a monk leaving at his death a hundred pieces of money which he had earned by weaving linen.[1] And though Jerome tells with approval of the burying of the money with its owner, there is no indication that the monk's error was in treating the money as private property, but in having regard for wealth at all. If the case had been otherwise, the money would have been turned over to the monastery instead of being destroyed. "Thy money perish with thee," he quotes, and tells how, in Egypt, it is a crime to *leave after one* a single shilling.

The frequent warnings of the fathers against riches, and their appeals to renunciation of wealth, cannot be taken as evidence of any peculiar views on the nature of property. Nowhere is it intimated in these quotations that the institution of private property is an injustice. It is always the notion that wealth is demoralizing to the owner, never that by holding it one wrongs his fellow-beings. "Let us therefore, brethren," says Augustine, "abstain from the possession of private property; or from the love of it, if we may not from its possession."[2]

Many precepts of the fathers distinctly look to the holding of private property, and are meaningless without it. The following quotation from Rogers' "Catholic Doctrine of the Church of England," in reference to the biblical

[1] Letter xxii., To Eustochium. [2] On Psalm cxxxii.

writers, is no less applicable to the fathers: "Against community of goods and riches be all those places (which are infinite) of Holy Scripture, that either condemn the unlawful getting, keeping, or desiring of riches, which, by covetousness, thievery, extortion, and the like wicked means, many do attain; or do commend liberality, frugality, free and friendly lending, honest labor, and lawful vocations to live and thrive. All which do show that Christians are to have goods of their own, and that riches ought not to be common."

Augustine himself so understands the Scriptures: "Why," he says, "do you reproach us by saying that men renewed in baptism ought no longer to beget children, or to possess fields and houses and money? Paul allows it."[1]

One of the most striking passages in the writings of the early fathers which seem to oppose the institution of private property, is the following from Chrysostom: "Is not this an evil that you alone should have the Lord's property, that you alone should enjoy what is common? Is not the 'earth God's and the fullness thereof'? If then our possessions belong to one common Lord, they belong also to our fellow-servants. The possessions of one Lord are all common. . . . Mark the wise dispensation of God. That he might put mankind to shame, he hath made certain things common, as the sun, air, earth, and water, the heaven, the sea, the light, the stars; whose benefits are dispensed equally to all as brethren. . . . Other things then he hath made common, as baths, cities, market-places, walks. And observe, concerning things that are common there is no contention, but all is peaceable. But when one attempts to possess himself of anything to make it his own, then contention is introduced, as if nature herself were indignant that when God brings us together in every way, we are eager to divide and separate ourselves by appropri-

[1] De Moribus Ecclesiæ Catholiciæ, xxxv.

ating things, and by using those cold words 'mine and thine.' Then there is contention and uneasiness. But where this is not, no strife or contention is bred. This state therefore is rather our inheritance, and more agreeable to nature. Why is it that there is never a dispute about a market-place? Is it not because it is common to all? But about a house and about property men are always disputing. Things necessary are set before us in common; but even in the least things we do not observe a community. Yet those greater things he hath opened freely to all, that we might thence be instructed to have these inferior things in common. Yet for all this we are not instructed."[1]

The only other quotations in the writings of the fathers that seem distinctly to sanction community of property as a general practice are those which comment upon the conduct of the earliest converts at Jerusalem at the day of Pentecost as narrated in the Acts. Chrysostom, for example, says of this: "If the same were done now, we should convert the whole world even without miracles."[2] And John Cassian attributes the abandonment of the pentecostal practice to the weakness of the newly-born faith of the Gentiles and cooling of the early fervor.[3]

Now preliminary to any consideration of this matter, it is to be noted that the fathers very commonly held the notion of two distinct standards of the Christian life,—one practicable standard for all, and a higher ideal for which only a very few could be expected to strive. So, for instance, Jerome, constantly quoting "One thing thou lackest," urges the renunciation of property (though more mildly in his later letters), but emphasizes "*If* thou wilt be *perfect*." That these men seriously concerned themselves about any general change in the institution of private prop-

[1] Homily xii., On Timothy. [2] Homily vi., On First Corinthians.
[3] Conferences, xviii. 5.

erty, we have already seen to be an untenable position. Yet even ideals which are not considered practicable, may be a good indication of the real verdict of the reason and conscience on existing institutions. Consequently it is worth while to determine just what this pentecostal practice was which Chrysostom calls "an angelic life."[1]

It is quite common to assume that the church at Jerusalem was communistic, but careful reading of the very scant information which we have on the subject shows that the evidence to be adduced in favor of this hypothesis is very meager indeed.

Now what were the circumstances under which it is said that the disciples had all things common? Here was a great multitude assembled from all parts of the Roman world. They had come up to Jerusalem to attend the feast of the Passover, and had made some provision for that occasion, but they had already remained far beyond the time expected. Their resources were temporarily exhausted. Many of them, being at a great distance from their homes, were of course unable to earn the means of replenishing their stock of supplies. A great emergency was at hand. Heroic measures were necessary to meet it. And so we read, that "all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all, as every man had need."[2] That is, those who lived at Jerusalem and had property, sacrificed it to feed their unexpected guests, and if any among the strangers present had come provided with anything more than sufficed for their immediate needs, they likewise contributed. We have no need to assume that these contributions were used otherwise than to provide for the strangers and perhaps for some of the very poor who lived at Jerusalem. That the persons who contributed so liberally became thereby dependent on a common store for their own

[1] Homily vi., On First Corinthians. [2] Acts ii. 44, 45.

sustenance is not even implied. Indeed the very next verse precludes us from supposing that these generous souls sacrificed the whole of their property, for we find them "breaking bread from *house to house*"[1] of the believers.

Now what expressions are used that are not equally applicable to the common practice in our own day in connection with great religious conventions where those in attendance are entertained by the residents? Is it any straining of language to say of such gatherings that they have all things common? Is not the delegate brought into the home and made to feel that, so long as he stays, everything the house affords is to be held in common? Are there not gatherings day by day where all meet together to enjoy the bounty of the local church, and no one says aught of the things which he possesses is his own, but they have all things common? Indeed are not all the conveniences and accommodations which the city affords placed at the free disposal of the guests?

The circumstances at Jerusalem were peculiar in two respects: (1) the multitude was overwhelming, in view of the limited numbers and resources of the resident Christians; (2) the occasion had not been anticipated, and therefore no systematic plans had been possible; consequently extreme measures were necessary. So, "as many as were possessors of lands or houses[2] sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made to every man, according as he had need."[3] But this benevolence is seen to have been purely voluntary,[4] and apparently brought in-

[1] Acts ii. 46.

[2] See Acts xii. 13 for evidence that this refers only to possessions in excess of personal needs, and that private homes were still retained by the disciples.

[3] Acts iv. 34, 35.

[4] Acts v. 4.

to prominent notice the comparatively few who made considerable contributions.[1] Now it is noticeable that all these contributions were of "consumption goods" to relieve immediate wants. Not a single reference can possibly be twisted into an intimation that an industrial organization was established whereby all the members continued to obtain their living. There is no reason to doubt that those who had made these contributions continued to gain their livelihood as they had done before, namely, by individual exertions in connection with the general industrial system of the times. Nor is there the least evidence that their later acquisitions were ever turned into a common store. The occasion of Pentecost seems to have been a solitary experience, never repeated, so far as we have reason to believe, in the history of the Jerusalem church.

If the Jerusalem church were so radically different from the other churches (for the other apostolic churches are not alleged to have been communistic), it seems almost incredible that such a fact should receive no further notice in the Acts, and not the slightest allusion in any of the Epistles, although frequent mention is made of this church.

In commending the Jerusalem Christians at Pentecost, therefore, the early fathers do but stamp with their approval the same view of property implied in the teachings of Christ, the social theory of property, private property a social trust. As Latimer says: "They [goods] be ours upon the condition that we shall spend them to the honor of God and the relieving of our neighbors."[2] "Things are not so common that another man may take my goods from me, for this is theft; but they are so common that we ought to distribute them unto the poor, to help them and to comfort them with it."[3] "The rich man cannot say, 'This is mine alone, God hath given it unto me for mine own use.'

[1] Acts iv. 36; v. 1. [2] Sixth Sermon on the Lord's Prayer.
[3] Fifth Sermon on the Lord's Prayer.

. . . For the rich man is but God's officer, God's treasurer. . . . And remember that thy riches be not thine own, but thou art but a steward over them."

Nor is there lack of passages in the writings of the earlier fathers expressly sanctioning this view. The Ante-Nicene Archelaus: "The centurion, a man exceedingly wealthy and well-dowered in worldly influence, possessed a faith surpassing that of all Israel; so that, even if there was any one who had forsaken all, that man was surpassed in faith by this centurion. But some one may now reason with us thus: It is not a good thing, consequently, to give up riches. Well, I reply that it is a good thing for those who are capable of it; but, at the same time, to employ riches for the work of righteousness and mercy is a thing as acceptable as though one were to give up the whole at once."[1]

And Jerome, writing to Paulinus, says: "Your possessions are no longer your own, but a stewardship is entrusted to you."[2] And Chrysostom says: "This wealth is not a possession, it is not property, it is a loan for use."[3]

Chrysostom has left on record some notions in regard to special forms of property which may be worth a little notice. One of these illustrates the common prejudice of early times against wealth acquired through trade, and particularly gold and silver, the special instruments of the trader. "What then," he says, "did Abraham hold unrighteous wealth; and Job, that blameless, righteous, and faithful man, who 'feared God and eschewed evil'? Theirs was a wealth that consisted not in gold and silver, nor in houses, but in cattle. . . . The riches of Abraham, too, were his domestics. What then? Did he not buy them? No, for to this very point the Scripture says, that the three hundred and eighteen were born in his house. He had al-

[1] Disputation with Manes, 42. [2] Letter lviii.
[3] Homily xi., On Timothy.

so sheep and oxen. Whence then did he send gold to Rebekah? From the gifts which he received from Egypt without violence or wrong."[1] And yet the same Chrysostom says: "Is gold good? Yes, it is good for almsgiving, for the relief of the poor; it is good, not for unprofitable use, to be hoarded up or buried in the earth. . . . It was discovered for this end that it should loose captives."[2]

Private property in land seems to the worthy Chrysostom to involve some injustice, though he does not propose any radical change: "Tell me, then, whence art thou rich? From whom didst thou receive it? and from whom he who transmitted it to thee? From his father and his grandfather. But canst thou, ascending through many generations, show the acquisition just? It cannot be. The root and origin of it must have been injustice. Why? Because God in the beginning made not one man rich, and another poor. Nor did he afterwards take and show to one treasures of gold, and deny to the other the right of searching for it; but he left the earth free to all alike. Why, then, if it is common, have you so many acres of land, while your neighbor has not a portion of it? It was transmitted to me by my father. And by whom to him? By his forefathers. But you must go back and find the original owner."[3]

Notwithstanding this past injustice, Chrysostom realizes that an attempt to upset existing tenures might aggravate the evil, and he hints pretty clearly at the doctrine of prescription, for he immediately adds: "But I will not urge this argument too closely. Let your riches be justly gained, and without rapine. For you are not responsible for the covetous acts of your father. Your wealth may be derived from rapine, but you were not the plunderer."[4]

[1] Homily xii., On Timothy. [2] Homily viii., On Timothy.
[3] Homily xii., On Timothy. [4] *Ibid.*

The grounds upon which the right of private property rests, do not seem to have claimed much attention from the fathers. But it is interesting to find that Augustine, in dealing with this matter, does not have recourse either to a "social contract" or to "natural and inalienable rights," but sees in property a creation of society, maintained for the good of society by its organized forces in government, and subject therefore to such modifications as the interests of society may demand. He says: "By what right does every man possess what he possesseth? Is it not by human right? For by divine right 'the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.' . . . By human right, however, one says, This estate is mine, this house is mine, this servant is mine. By human right, therefore, is by right of emperors. . . . It is by right from him that thou possessest the land. Or take away rights created by emperors, and then who will dare say, That estate is mine, or that slave is mine, or this house is mine?"[1]

[1] Tractate vi., On the Gospel of St. John, 25.