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THE COMMUNISTIC EXPERIMENT OF ACTS II. AND IV.

I SHALL assume that in these two passages we have a genuine record of facts. St. Luke—whom I take to be the author of the Acts—was not indeed an eyewitness of this portion of the story. It belongs to a period and to a locality somewhat distantly removed from his ken. But he had sources which were authentic: the early chapters of the Acts are from an authority which is peculiarly Jewish, and bears the marks of personal and intimate knowledge. St. Luke, too, was a persistent inquirer, and a careful writer. I assume the statements to be true as they stand.

Further, in the course of these early chapters the author (whether the writer of the Hebrew original, or St. Luke his editor) has a way of pausing from time to time in the narrative, to review the position, and to sum up the growth and prospects of the nascent church. Every reader of Acts will have noticed this feature. Now the two passages before us are summaries of this kind. It is also clear that the second is an expansion of the former, telling us that this charitable zeal of the church increased yet more between chapters ii. and iv., and found its full tide at the stage described in the latter. So much for the statements which we have to discuss.

Before discussing them, I have a word or two to say respecting the whole question of riches and poverty, and of communism, as raised by the New Testament narrative. For in dealing with this problem we must begin before the Acts. We start from the life and teaching of our Master Himself. Our Lord quite literally "for our sakes became poor." He was born into a quiet household of the middle class. His family—on the human side—had a splendid lineage, reckoning King David as its founder; and in point

of worldly means, was removed from grinding poverty. St. Joseph, and doubtless the Blessed Virgin also, worked with their hands. The life of the Nazarene home was extremely simple; but it was as far from squalor as from opulence. It was an example of plain living and high thinking. But from the moment when the call came at the Baptism for the public mission to begin, our Saviour forsook all that He had. His initial fast in the wilderness was the keynote of His whole life afterwards. He ceased to possess anything, and was a mendicant. He lived on the charity of others. I will not stay to ask why. We may find one reason in the awful gulf which in that time and region (as many things in the gospel story assure us) divided rich and poor. We may find another reason in the fact that the struggle between the haves and the have-nots seems co-extensive with humanity, and lies at the root of all—or nearly all—the tragedies of history. How important our Saviour deemed the matter, we perceive, when He required of each member of the Twelve the same complete renunciation of all things. He and His Twelve lived a common life: they are a brotherhood (St. John xx. 17): they have a common purse: it is supplied by the gifts of holy women and others ("who ministered unto Him of their substance"). At times they ran short of food, as in the cornfield on that Sabbath morning, and when they were crossing the lake, or when they were glad to pick up the broken victuals and save them for their Master and themselves. Quite literally Christ "had not where to lay His head"; i.e. apart from the charity of others such as Lazarus, or the nameless owner of the Upper Room at Jerusalem. We who read the Gospels seldom bring home to our imaginations as we should the utter self-denial of the life of Christ. But the Twelve had been steeped in the spirit of that life. In their experimental mission-journey, they had already practised

its principles (St. Mark vi. 8): He "commanded them that they should take nothing for their journey save a staff only; no scrip, no bread, no money in their purse; but be shod with sandals; and not put on two coats." They are to be mendicants, like Himself, and each pair is to constitute (so to say) the germ of a brotherhood.

I stay not to dwell on the romantic story of St. Francis, and of the literal following of Christ which that beautiful soul practised in his own amazing life, and required of his first disciples. It wrought a revolution in Christianity, and revived the life of the church. I only refer to that wonderful episode of the thirteenth century to show that in all our thoughts about riches and poverty, and the self-denial of the wealthy for love of the poor, we must begin by contemplating our Lord. We may not feel convinced that the rule of St. Francis is the wisest to adopt to-day. But his method is sound: we should learn, like him, of Christ.

Our Lord, then, had taught His disciples to give up all they had, and to live a common life. The principle of His small brotherhood was mendicant and communistic.

Was it any wonder then, if so soon as the Holy Spirit had begun to work in the first Christians at Jerusalem, and they felt themselves faced by the problem of poverty at Jerusalem, their minds instinctively turned to their great Exemplar? We may be sure that none of the apostles at Jerusalem possessed anything of his own: they lived still—as they had when the Lord was with them—on the charity of the church. Unable themselves to relieve the poor—for they had nothing whatever to give—("silver and gold have I none")—they asked, and with powerful persuasion, the help of others' alms. The majority of the Christian converts in Jerusalem were probably poor. It is so in most towns and communities now. I shall presently have to point to some peculiar reasons why poverty was a chronic difficulty

at Jerusalem. Also many of the Christians had offended their families by joining the church, and (like St. Paul) had suffered the loss of all things to win Christ. Accordingly we read that the apostles had very early to establish a system of almsgiving. There was a daily provision of food for widows and others. Presently the Seven are ordained to meet the difficulties of distribution. Very early in the church "widows" became a kind of Order, charged with duties of sick visiting and other services of mercy, while receiving a pension from the church funds. The duties of the πρεσβύτεροι or ἐπίσκοποι at Ephesus, or Philippi, and all through the series of churches founded by St. Paul or St. Barnabas or St. Peter, would be far more duties of finance than of worship. They had first and foremost to take care of and expend the common fund of the church, and be the agents of its abundant charity. We know that the burial of the dead very early became one of the regular charges on the common fund of a local church; so that to the eye of the Cæsar and the Roman officials the church figured as a sort of burial society. Nor was such a system in the least foreign to the pagan world. Throughout the Roman empire, and still more in pre-Roman as in Roman Greece, brotherhoods and associations for charitable or public purposes—always dignified by religious worship—were perfectly common. Trades guilds, benefit societies, and burial clubs are no modern or mediæval creation; nor do they date from the Christian era.

I want you to perceive how natural it was, how obvious and inevitable, that the apostles should meet this problem of poverty in the church of Jerusalem by what strikes us as an extraordinary scheme of self-denial. "They had all things common," we read in Acts ii. 44; and this is immediately explained by the statement that "they kept selling their lands and possessions, and distributed them among

all, according as each had need." The process is made still clearer in chapter iv. 32, where we read :—

"And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul; neither said any (of them) that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common . . . and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked; for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things which were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and distribution was made to every man, according as he had need."

I understand by this, first, that the poor in the church, so far as they needed it, were fed and clothed from a common fund, and this as a matter of brotherly kindness, not as a condescension or "charity." That such brotherly bounty involved certain moral dangers, we infer from our own experience, and perceive from the warnings of St. Paul in 1 Timothy v., where he orders widows under sixty to be struck off the list of charity, and similarly all "widows" having children or grandchildren who ought to keep them; similarly at the end of 1 Timothy (ch. v.) he orders idlers and "busy-bodies" to be excluded from the charity of the church, recalling what he had taught "that if any could not work neither should he eat." We may find a significant reference to the same difficulty in the last verses of the Epistle to Titus, "And let ours also learn to maintain honest trades for necessary uses, that they be not unfruitful." The boundless charity of the primitive church, and its institution of a common charitable fund, was liable to be abused, and to become a moral danger.

But the words of Acts ii. and iv. may seem to imply something more than the institution of a common fund, however large. Is it meant that the owners of property realized everything, and divested themselves of all, and themselves

became pensioners of the common fund ? *I think decidedly not ;* and for several valid reasons.

(1) The object was the relief of the poor. It would not have helped the poor to add to their number.

(2) The help given was not the same to all. Some needed more, some less. Some needed one form of charity, others another kind. The phrase is emphatic " according as every-one had need." Some could earn a little, some more ; illness or age made others penniless. But every case was met, and discreetly dealt with, by the brotherly love of the church.

(3) It was not made a condition of church membership that every one should pool his possessions. The act was voluntary. Some sacrificed more, some less. That the sacrifice was optional is expressly stated. " Whiles it remained, was it not thine own ? and when it was sold, was it not still in thine own power ? " (Acts v. 4). Indeed the whole point of the story of Ananias and Sapphira hinges on their sacrifice being voluntary. Such voluntary acts of sacrifice at once brought the authors into high repute and favour. There grew up a moral obligation, something like a moral compulsion upon the rich to do the like. It could not be otherwise. And this brought about the temptation of Ananias and Sapphira. For reasons which may have been honourable, they were not prepared to impoverish themselves beyond a particular point. They sold their land—an olive-yard near Jerusalem, perhaps, or a piece of cornland farther down the hills, or a house and site in Jerusalem. Everybody knew what it was and where it was, but they wished to retain part of the price so realized. At the same time they were unwilling to lose the credit of having done a splendid act of self-denial. Their sin was therefore first and foremost hypocrisy, and the motive of the hypocrisy was vanity, and, conflicting with their vanity,

the love of money. Their hypocrisy was too closely identical with the hypocrisy of the Pharisees which had stirred the wrath of our Saviour, for His apostles to endure it. It is the besetting sin of all religion. It was exposed and avenged by an awful punishment.

I think therefore that we must not press too closely the words "they had all things common." It means certainly that every poor Christian could find help from a common fund; and that this common fund was maintained by the heroic self-sacrifice of the rich. But I do not think it means that every Christian at Jerusalem was divested of property and lived on the common fund. It means only that the rich became poor, and all realized their brotherhood and equality in the church.

(4) This view is confirmed by the way in which St. Luke introduces the story of Ananias and Sapphira. They were stimulated to their deed of generosity by the example of Joseph Bar-nabas, a Cypriote Jew, of the tribe of Levi, who, having land, sold it and added the money to the common fund. All that we read of Barnabas afterwards reveals him as a man of singular gifts of the spirit—tolerance, sweetness of temper, unselfishness, sympathy, charity.

In his subsequent missionary journey Barnabas shared from the first, and continued after his separation, the principle and practice of his great companion Paul, viz.: never to expect, or receive (if he could help it) any gift or support from the churches he founded or visited. This was an unusual stretch of independence and unselfishness: it was peculiar to Barnabas and Paul. St. Peter never practised it, nor other apostles. St. Paul explicitly tells us it was unusual, and the foregoing of a right—the rule which Christ Himself had laid down, viz., that the apostles should be supported by their converts. We have, then, in Joseph Barnabas a man of exceptional and heroic self-denial in

matters of money. I think it possible that in his case the sale of the land meant the denuding of himself of all that he had. His after life was the life of an apostle, and on his journeys he, like St. Paul, was supported by the bounty of the church which sent him out (viz. Antioch), or by his own handiwork; for every Jew had a trade between his fingers. The heroic generosity of Joseph Barnabas was hailed with loud praise by the church. It meant a mighty victory for the gospel: it was a glorious triumph of grace. Ananias and Sapphira desired to emulate this heroic deed; to win like admiration without the self-sacrifice. Does not the whole story imply that the act of Joseph Barnabas was exceptional in its degree?

I have no thesis to maintain. I only want to discover the truth. Of course the experiment in Acts has been frequently adduced by advocates of socialism as committing Christianity to some form of communism.

To my mind it leaves the question where it found it. If collective ownership of all things, if a socialistic commonwealth, such as many have dreamt of, be the goal of economic progress, the right aim of social reform, it is so because of its inherent expediency and wisdom, not because of this experiment. Christianity is not committed to any form of government, or any form of social organization. It "is like liquid, and fits any vessel," as St. Francis de Sales quaintly said. Christianity may find its fullest scope, its richest moral developments, in a democratic commonwealth and in a highly socialized form of community. That, I think, is certain. But Christianity is not committed to a revolutionary agitation for this or that form of polity or this or that type of social organization.

What seems to me far more clear—and indeed as clear as day—is that our Lord teaches by word and by example the awful dangers of wealth. It is so hard for a rich man

to be a good man; so unlikely for a rich society to be a healthy society; so unlikely for a wealthy class to be on the right side in national controversies. It is so difficult for a man, as he prospers in the acquisition of wealth and comfort, to remain a keen observer of social evils, and an active, courageous, and intelligent reformer. It is in this doctrine, upon which our Lord laid such tremendous emphasis, that we shall find the starting point of all proposals for the more social and collective use of the goods of this world. It seems to me that my Christian socialist friends do but weaken the force of their arguments by laying over-much stress upon this communistic experiment of the Acts.

For observe, the experiment, if it was really communistic (which I do not believe), soon came to an end. It left the poverty of Judaean Christianity what it was before. Ten years later the Gentile church of Antioch sends Barnabas and Paul to the Jewish church of Jerusalem with relief "to the brethren." Ten or fifteen years later still St. Paul encourages the Gentile churches all round the Mediterranean to do the same on a still larger scale—showing that poverty was a chronic malady of the Christian Jews of Jerusalem, as of the Judaean community in general.

Why was this helpless poverty so constant a feature of life in Jerusalem? I think the answer is not far to seek. And yet I have searched in vain for any treatment of the question in any ordinary works of reference. What I say, therefore, on this topic is my own and needs criticism.

Now Jerusalem was a much larger city, and had a far larger population than could be accounted for by the industries which existed there. These lay all about it, of course, lands wherein grew the olive, the fig and the vine, besides the cornlands and sheep fields of the lower country. But the land near Jerusalem was not so rich as to

be capable of supporting a large population. The greatness of Jerusalem of course depended on its Temple, and the vast system of sacrificial worship of which the Temple was the centre. A numerous hierarchy of priests and ministers found in that system their occupation and their living. These ministers had their families and dependents, all of whom lived upon the perquisites of the Temple worship. A whole world of peculiar trades lived indirectly upon the Temple system—cattle dealers, drovers, shepherds, dealers in hides and offal, tanners (e.g., Simon of Joppa); growers of all sorts of agricultural produce, and dealers therein; also workers in textiles, fullers, embroiderers; builders, too, and repairers of buildings: these, and numbers of others, were needed by the incessant round of Temple services. For pilgrims were constantly visiting the Temple, and every Jew throughout the world paid his poll tax yearly of half a shekel for the maintenance of the central sanctuary (St. Matt. xvii. 24). At certain times of year the tide of pilgrimage overflowed all bounds. The city was packed with tens of thousands of worshippers from every land. They had to be housed and fed. And though an oriental crowd of pilgrims made smaller demands upon space and comfort than the like multitude in the west, and though it may sound absurd to make comparison between those far-off days and our own, yet it may be suggested that much of the money that was earned by the rank and file of the resident population of Jerusalem must have come from the profitable visits of pilgrims. At the feasts the city was deluged with them; food was at a premium, every kind of accommodation was in demand; no resident was without employment and without reward. Then, between the festivals, all was slack, and poverty resumed her sway. It is, I believe, observed that in all cities where the chief industry is the attendance upon seasonal visitors—and like the university towns of

Oxford and Cambridge on the fashionable watering-places —there is a painful amount of helpless poverty. There is not only the evil of seasonal employment, but also the unwholesome contrast between the rich and the poor—the rich being represented by the spending holiday makers and the poor by the hungry resident. I incline to think that (*mutatis mutandis*) Jerusalem in the first century presented a similar social problem. Its poverty was chronic; it had a class of dependent poor, created and fostered by the very conditions of the life of the place.

I have one further word to add. To the ear of a pious Jew of our Lord's time, whether Christian Jew or unbelieving—the word "poor" conveyed a far more beautiful group of ideas than to our own. The epithet "poor" had become associated with sanctity and piety, in contrast with worldliness and irreligion. We remember how in the Psalms (e.g. Ps. x. and many others) "the poor" seem identified with the righteous and the faithful. They are objects of contempt and malevolence on the part of the great and powerful; but they are beloved of God. Whence this canonization of poverty? It is a characteristic of the post-exilic Psalms. It goes back to the time when the remnant of faithful Jews returned from captivity, poor in this world, but rich in faith. Their more worldly and prosperous brethren were content to stay in Chaldæa. But "the poor," after long struggle with hindrances of every kind, brought about the restoration of the church and of the nation. Then came the influence of the Syrian kings whose policy it was to Hellenize the Jewish people. The wealthier classes, the more worldly families, doubtless found that their interest coincided with the polity of their rulers. A process of disintegration set in, and the religion of the Jews was menaced by a powerful solvent. But the faithful, the patriotic, felt the danger, and were willing to sacrifice all

worldly advantage for the defence of their religion. When Antiochus Epiphanes decided to use coercion and to precipitate the process of Hellenization, the patriots, the poor saints, led by the Maccabaean house, rose in revolt, and their successful opposition to the Syrian kings is one of the most romantic episodes in all history. But a new glory attached to the party of faith, of unworldly attachment to the Law, to those who were willing to be poor, rather than prosper as recreants: the title "the poor" came almost to be equivalent to pious and faithful. When our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount said, "Blessed are the poor," the word teemed with associations half political, half religious, in the ear of the Jews. The central idea of the word was not mere absence of wealth, but the prevalence of an unworldly spirit. Hence St. Matthew in recording the saying adds his gloss: "Blessed are the poor [in spirit]," to avoid misinterpretation.

And when the Christian Church at Jerusalem found in its ranks many impoverished members—some of whom certainly had suffered the loss of all worldly prospects because they had embraced the new faith—we can understand with what a halo of religious heroism their poverty was clothed in the imagination of men who had been cradled in Hebrew traditions, and who had shared the voluntary poverty of their Divine Lord Himself.

EDWARD LEE HICKS.

THE CHRISTIAN INSCRIPTIONS OF LYCAONIA.

IN the EXPOSITOR for December I gave various examples of Christian inscriptions from Lycaonia[1] bearing on the

[1] We take this geographical term in the sense of the Byzantine Province from 371 onwards. I have added a few illustrative epitaphs from Laodiceia and Tyriaion, which were in Byzantine Pisidia, but geographically stand in much closer relation to Iconium than to Antioch. Laodiceia certainly, and Tyriaion probably, had been in Provincia Galatia along