

- A. A couple of weeks ago, we had a reading from the biblical book of Acts that has caused people to ask whether community life in the early church promotes communism. What passage is that?
- Acts 2:44-45: "And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need." Here the Jerusalem church extended help to fellow Christians, probably new church members.
 - Think of the situation in Jerusalem at the time: Remember, there were Jewish pilgrims in Jerusalem from all over for the festival. Three thousand of them were converted to Christ and baptized all in one day. It seems a lot of them did not go home. It's easy to understand why. How could their faith in Christ be nurtured back at home? Who could tell them about the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies in Jesus of Nazareth the way Peter or James or John could? Suppose we today would go on vacation, then decide to stay there – no home, no job, etc. There were a lot of mouths to feed, and people pitched in.
This was an impressive demonstration of Christian love, without grand economic theory.
- B. How does that differ from communism?
- Communism as we know it today is an economic and even political theory born in the modern world. Christians in Jerusalem just after Pentecost had never read the writings of Karl Marx.
 - Even if they had, they certainly would not have agreed with Marx that what is material is primary and that there is no spiritual reality. They certainly did not envision a class struggle in which religion is sop that owners toss to workers to keep them contented and in line.
- C. Does the book of Acts tell us anything more about the sharing within the Jerusalem church?
- Yes, at the end of Acts 4 and the start of Acts 5. Acts 4 indicates that they held all things in common. Then Acts 5 opens with the story of Ananias and Sapphira, which shows that Acts 4 had been made a general statement to which there could be exceptions. This story is sometimes taken to show what could happen if someone did not throw everything into the common treasury. But it actually shows that no one was forced to contribute to that common treasury.
 - Here's what happened: Ananias and Sapphira sold property, and kept back some of the proceeds. At length, both were struck dead. But Peter told Ananias that even after the property was sold, they could have done what they wanted with the money. The problem was that they had pretended they were giving the full amount. They lied to the Holy Spirit. That is, they had lied to God. (The Holy Spirit is God, and a Person!) That was their sin. Failure to contribute was not the problem, as it would be in a modern communist system.
- D. Is there anything we should keep in mind here about how to read and apply the Bible?
- It is always important to distinguish between the examples the Bible gives and the commands it enjoins. Martin Luther wrote that "we will admit no example, not even from Christ himself, much less from other saints, for it must also be accompanied by God's Word, which explains to us in what sense we are to follow or not follow it" (AE 40, 132). The Bible nowhere commands Christians to develop a common treasury.
 - What IS commanded repeatedly in the Bible is love of one's neighbor -- even sacrificial love! -- informed by the example of Christ and empowered by His love for us.