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THE SHARING OF GOODS WITH THE POOR IS A CHRISTIAN IMPERATIVE

Paul Mumo Kisau

Paul Kisau touches on two ever present realities among our churches: the prevalence of the poor and the need for generous contributions. The Christian church should not depend on generous foundations to help the poor for she has a mandate from Christ himself to share her goods with the poor. What a revolution would take place in our societies if the principles laid out in this article were applied to our churches! As we enter this new century let us pray that this biblical truth will motivate our churches to build a new society founded on obedience to Jesus Christ.

INTRODUCTION

The saying of the Lord found in Acts 20:35 has been widely used to motivate people to give money in churches in Africa. As far as I can remember, many a pastor would quote this saying to their congregations, 'it is more blessed to give than to receive'. Nevertheless, not many people have bothered to understand its context within the purpose of Luke-Acts, in particular as it relates to the sharing of the material goods with the needy (poor). The motivation to give to those in need has not found a particular interest in the Bible; rather it has been the parading of those who are deemed to be poor. The apostle Paul does not seem to use the means that are commonly used today to motivate the Ephesian elders to share their material wealth with those in need. The saying of the Lord becomes

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the focal point for those who would like to serve in giving to those less privileged. This saying comes at time that Paul is about to quit active missionary work since the focus of Lukan story will turn to his imprisonment. The saying thus completes the description of how the church ought to share the material goods with those in need (see the summaries of Ac 2:44ff.; 4:32ff.).¹

THE OVERRIDING MOTIVATION:

"It is more blessed to give than to receive." Acts 20:35

This principle sets the sharing of goods within the community of believers apart from all the other groups in the first century. The picture's focus becomes sharp when seen against a good background. This background is the other groups or ideologies before the primitive community of believers which seem to have held the same ideas. A fuller exegesis of 20:35 will now be done in order to bring out the impact the teaching of Jesus had upon the early community of believers. After the exegesis of 20:35 the feeding episode recorded in Luke's gospel will be discussed in order to provide one specific event that might have been of great influence to early community of believers.

Paul's speech at Miletus to the Ephesian elders ends with a solemn exhortation recorded in Acts 20:35. In this exhortation, Paul intertwines his role model with the saying of the Lord Jesus. The elders are urged to remember both Paul's lifestyle among them and the teaching of Jesus in the matters of working and sharing their material goods with the needy. There are several important words and phrases within this short passage, which are of help in its interpretation. These words will now be discussed in an attempt to shed light on the sharing impact of Luke's story in Acts.

¹ This is a small part of Paul Kisau's research work into the community in Acts of the Apostles in relation to the social sharing of goods. Paul argues that the sharing of goods in the Acts of the Apostles is not limited to the Jerusalem community, as it has been traditionally held, but transcends the whole description of the community. The 'saying of the Lord' proves this point beyond any reasonable doubt.

In Everything I Showed You Πας (Παντα) ὑποδεικνυμι²
(υπεδειξ)

This means 'in everything',³ in other words, all that has constituted Paul's life has been a form of modelling process, to show the way, teaching, to make known, to warn. Paul has been in the course of teaching the Ephesian Christians by his own example.⁴

To You - ὑμιν ὅτι ὁυτος

The purpose is further strengthened by the use of the phrase ὑμιν ὅτι ὁυτος which points to the audience so that there is no doubt in their mind as to whom Paul is addressing. It may be translated as follows: 'you that thus', 'in this way', 'thus', 'so', 'in the same manner'. The purpose of Paul's life has been for imparting the same kind of lifestyle to the Ephesian elders. He requires them to remember how he has lived among them and realise that they should live in the same way.

Hard Work - Κοπιαιο

What are they to imitate? Paul's κοπιαιο, that is, 'hard work'.⁵ They are to work hard with their own hands as Paul did in tent making. This formula of Paul encouraging others to imitate his life is found elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. I Co 11:1). In case they were not sure why they should work, Paul gives them the reason thus, δει, "it is necessary" to work in order to support (αντιλαμβαναι) those who are in need, the weak (των

² This term gives a sense of drawing a pattern for others to follow, that is, providing an example. So Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* 365.

³ Cf. every kind, all, full, absolute, greatest.

⁴ Marshall, *Acts*, 336. Marshall agrees with our point of view here thus, "in this way Paul sought to be an example of helping the poor (1 Th 5:14)..."

⁵ Harrison puts it succinctly thus, "He wanted the elders to be hard-working men of integrity and could think of no better way to impress his desire upon them than to cite his own disinterested labor in their midst." Harrison, *Acts: The Expanding Church*, 317.

ασθενουτων – ασθενειω).⁶ To reinforce this teaching Paul exhorts the Ephesian elders to remember (μνεμονευειω – “remember”, “keep in mind”, “think of”, “make mention of”, cf. Heb 11: 22) the saying of the Lord Jesus.⁷

The Saying of the Lord Jesus

Before we discuss this saying, it is worthy to note the usage of the title, 'Lord', in referring to Jesus. The term, 'Lord', appears 102 times in Acts and 92 times in Luke's gospel. The formula of the title is used to show reverence for Jesus as expressed in the Old Testament, 'Lord God'. Both God and Jesus are addressed in Acts as the 'Lord'. Perhaps it would be true to say that a lord demands obedience from those who recognise such a person as being worthy to be the lord. God in the Old Testament demanded no less than total allegiance to his Law. Jesus here, being spoken of as the Lord, gives the motif of one who deserves obedience from his subjects. The saying that is given here has strong bearing towards ethical teaching on sharing possessions to those in need of such help. Paul's life model is derived from the teaching of Jesus and the Ephesians will do well to listen to the why and how of sharing their goods with others. Paul elsewhere calls upon the Corinthian Christians to follow him because he is following Jesus.⁸

The Lord provides salvation to those who call upon his name (2:21) and Paul has had a personal encounter with the Lord on his

⁶ F.F. Bruce is of the opinion that the reference is on those who were sick and unable to work. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* 436. However, Paul elsewhere quotes the teaching of Jesus in an appeal for the support of God's servants (I Co 9:14), so that we should not see Paul limiting those to be supported as only the sick and weak. Paul talks of his hard work for his own needs and of those with him. These ones with Paul cannot only be the sick and the weak.

⁷ This saying has been used at the end of the speech in accordance with Pauline practice, where, the most important point is placed after a solemn exhortation. So Harrison, *Acts: the Expanding Church* 317. Harrison points to the first Corinthian letter, where the matter of sharing is placed immediately after the important discussion of death and resurrection (cf. I Co 15:58 and 16: 1 ff).

⁸ See I Co 4:16; 11:1; Php 2:5ff, 3:17; 4:9; cf. 1 Pe 5:3

way to Damascus (9:5f). This same Lord had added believers to the Church (3:19) and had given his Spirit to the Church (5:9). The disciples and all the believers belonged to the Lord (9:1,6,10). Therefore, the believers were under obligation to obey all the sayings of the Lord. For that reason, Paul, calls upon the Ephesians to remember one of the sayings of the Lord.

Now, concerning the words of the Lord Jesus expressed here. We do not find them elsewhere in the New Testament. Nevertheless, their spirit is evident in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Lk 6: 38).⁹ The implication of Paul's speech here is that the Ephesian elders were familiar with the saying already.¹⁰

The saying contains two contrasting elements, that of giving and receiving.¹¹ Marshall helpfully points out the possibility of this saying being misunderstood by implying that those who are helped are less blessed, when he writes that:

But clearly this is not what is meant, and the point is rather that it is better for a person who can do so to give to help others rather than to amass further wealth for himself (Marshall, *Acts*, 336).

It is perhaps better following Marshall's comment to translate λαμβανειν as 'take hold of', meaning 'it is better¹² to give¹³ than to

⁹ So Richard N. Longnecker, *The Expositor's 's Bible Commentary with the New International Version: Acts*, 310. So also F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 437. Cf. the same language in Sir. 4:31; Did, 1:5, 1 Clem. 2 1. Seneca, Ep. 81:17.

¹⁰ Bruce, *ibid*, comments here that "it is implied that they already knew this and presumably other sayings of the Lord, Collections of his sayings were probably in circulation by this time." See the discussion by D.L. Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul*, (Oxford: 1971), 3-40, 76-80. Cf. I Cor. 7:10,12,25; 9:14; 11:24f; I Tim. 5: 18, 6:3.

¹¹ μακαριον εστιν μαλλον διδοναι η λαμβανειν.

¹² See R. Roberts, "The Beatitude of Giving and Receiving," *ExpTim* im 48 (1936-37): 439, where he stresses the fact that wealth unshared brings sorrow. He puts it thus: "Generosity brings more happiness than acquisitiveness" because "wealth unshared becomes a soul-destroying obsession."

take¹⁴ hold of property.¹⁵ This echoes the Jerusalem spirit of sharing, where possessions and goods were sold freely to relieve the needs of others. We are to assume here that, for the Jerusalem church to continue sharing, someone must be ready to work to keep this flow. In the same manner, if the Ephesian church was to share with those who were in need, they must be ready to work. To give, means that there is something to be given, and this something has to come from somewhere. This *somewhere* is 'hard' labour.¹⁶

This saying does not give the mandate for God's servants to be self-supporting¹⁷ but rather urges them not to be takers only.¹⁸ The receiving which is described here is not that of the needy, since they

¹³ See R. Roberts, 438, who comments that "there cannot be givers without receivers. Giving and receiving are the obverse and reverse sides of one and the same transaction, and there is no reason why both should not be equally blessed-" Haenchen while not disagreeing with Roberts senses a discontinuity in Paul's train of thought. This is because few lines up he was advocating a giving to others, but now quotes a saying that seems to block receivers with shame- This tension is removed if we use 'holding' instead of 'receiving'.

¹⁴ R. Roberts, 439, agrees with this translation here that "probably the word take represents St. Paul's mind better than 'receive.' The word λαμβανειν can mean either."

¹⁵ Roberts is of the opinion that Paul is here comparing generosity and covetousness when he cleared himself of ever having coveted any man's silver, or gold, or cloths. See Roberts, 439.

¹⁶ Compare the quote by Harrison of B. F. Westcott's comments on Ephesians 4:28 thus; "Our faith constrains us to serve one another. Stealing is the typical form of using the labour of another to supply our wishes, while it is our duty to make our own labour minister to the needs of others. The inspiration of labour is not personal gain but fullness of service." Harrison, *Acts*, 318. See B. F. Westcott, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 73.

¹⁷ So Haenchen, *Acts*, 594. Haenchen comments on verse 33f, that "so Luke gives the reader to understand that Paul supported himself through his own labour, a trait for which the earlier description of the Pauline mission allowed only occasional space. It is thus made a duty for Christian church leaders not to live at the expense of the community."

¹⁸ John B. Polhill has captured the idea in his statement that "the minister is to be a servant, a giver and not a taker." Polhill, *Acts*, 430.

are to be supported anyway and it would seem contradictory to turn around and say that they were either cursed or less blessed.¹⁹

Our proposal here is that Luke has purposely allowed space to this saying of the Lord Jesus by Paul for its importance in reinforcing the sharing²⁰ spirit of both the Jerusalem church and the Antioch church. As Marshall rightly points out, Paul does not quote the words of Jesus often unless he has an ethical point to drive home (Marshall, *Acts*, 336). Polhill corresponds with what we are suggesting here when he writes that:

Paul had begun his address by listing the qualities of his own ministry as an example for the Ephesian leaders to follow. He concluded with a final quality he had sought to model. Perhaps he held it off to the end because he saw it as the most essential of all for a legitimate ministry (Polhill, *Acts*, 430).

Therefore, we can conclude that Luke has powerfully brought us to the position of not only admiring the sharing spirit of the Jerusalem church, but also to see the base of sharing liberally, namely, the saying of the Lord: "What they received they did not take hold of, but gave to such ones as had need. For this giving to continue, it was necessary for some to labour hard to provide. Wealth was not to be stored away (cf. the parable of the rich fool Lk 12:16ff) and neither was it to be shared among the rich (Lk 14:12). However, it was to be shared among all, including the poor of the community (Lk 14:13). Here is the danger of not sharing wealth with the poor of the community, since this amounts to not having an account in heaven (Lk 16:19ff). In the parable of the rich man and

¹⁹ To use Polhill again, here is a fitting word from him, "the saying should not be seen as a judgment against gracious receiving but rather against acquisitiveness, against actively 'taking' for oneself a common meaning for λαμβανω." (Polhill, *Acts*, 430 footnote). Haenchen does see contradiction of this saying with the example of Paul- See his discussion *Acts*, 594-5 footnote.

²⁰ Roberts rightly asserts that "whatever we have gathered, whether of wealth or of knowledge or of grace, we are required to share" (439). 21 Marshall, *Acts*, 336. 22 Polhill, *Acts*, 430.

the poor man, Lazarus, Abraham gives the reason for the rich man being in torment, because of his having received plenty while on earth (Lk 16:25). The rich find it very hard to share with those in need (Lk 18:23) and Jesus predicted that it is hard for them to enter the kingdom of heaven, perhaps due to the false security of wealth (Lk 18:25). Nevertheless, there are positive examples such as Zacchaeus (Lk 19:2ff) who was willing to share his riches with the poor.

THE TEACHING OF JESUS

Although we do not intend going into details of the teaching of Jesus on property and the poor, his teaching must have had of great influence on the primitive church.²¹ The birth of Jesus was introduced by a strong note of liberation for the poor and the chastising of the rich.²² In the same way, his ministry was also inaugurated by a declaration of the release of the oppressed and the blind. Jesus read a portion of Isaiah thus: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives... To proclaim the favourable year of the Lord" (Lk 4:18f). This interest in the poor is continued in the preaching of Jesus, where the poor are praised and the rich rebuked.²³ Yet as several scholars have noted, Jesus' attitude seems to have been ambivalent towards riches.²⁴

²¹ Everett F. Harrison, *Apostolic Church*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), 181. Harrison rightly sees the teaching of Jesus as having provided a 'powerful motivation' for the sharing of goods the Jerusalem Church.

²² The song of Mary introduces the liberation motif for the poor thus: "He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who are humble. He has filled the hungry with good things: and sent away the rich empty-handed" (Lk 1:52,53). The poor here are seen to be Israel, while the rich could be the foreign rulers.

²³ cf. The woes pronounced on the rich (Lk 6:24,25) and the blessings upon the poor (Lk. 6:20,21).

²⁴ Jesus accepted invitation to dinners hosted by the rich (Lk 11:37ff; 14:1ff. 19:1ff.). This does not mean that Jesus compromised his stand on the rich sharing the material goods with the needy. One example is fitting here,

We shall not examine the question of how Jesus viewed the whole question of property and poverty, but rather would ask if Jesus taught his disciples what to do with those in need. This line of thought could yield fruit to our enquiry of why the community of believers was open to sharing their goods freely.

Our beginning point then is that occasion when Jesus was confronted by the need of a large crowd of five thousand out in a desolate place.²⁵ This event must have been very significant to have appeared in all four Gospels. Although each Gospel has some slight difference of presentation of the event, they all agree on the main part of the story. We shall examine the story found in Luke's Gospel.²⁶

Seven things can be observed in the feeding of the more than five thousand people.

1. It was a large crowd, so overwhelming that the disciples were short of words when their Lord suggested they feed it.
2. The crowd was in a desolate place, meaning there were no shops to buy food.
3. Jesus commanded his disciples to give the crowd something to eat.
4. There were only five loaves and two fish, very little food for such a crowd.
5. When it came to feeding them, there was some organisation.
6. They all ate and were satisfied.

where Jesus used the opportunity to challenge the rich to invite people without expecting a recompense (Lk 14:12,13).

²⁵ Lk 9:10-17; Mt 14:13-21; Mk 6:32-44; 1 Jn 6:5-13.

²⁶ It is possible that this story provides a revelation to the disciples as Marshall (*The Gospel of Luke* 357-8) points out. Nevertheless, there should be something beyond a parallel of either the manna of Moses or the barley bread of Elisha, since the disciples are the ones being taught a lesson of caring for the crowd. This question of providing for those who followed them, must have continued to dwell in their minds. The effect on the crowd is shown in John's Gospel, where the next day the crowd is seen by Jesus as seeking him for another feeding (Jn 6:26).

7. There were twelve baskets full of what remained.

This observation leads us to draw several points: firstly, Jesus was the first to mandate community sharing. He could not listen to the suggestion of the disciples that the people be sent away to buy food in the nearby villages. Instead, the disciples are challenged to provide something for the crowd. If they were to provide something for the crowd then, why should they not do so at the day of Pentecost? Why should the crowd on the day of Pentecost be sent away?

We suggest that the lessons learnt at the feeding of the five thousand by Jesus must have had a tremendous influence on what the disciples did for the primitive community in Jerusalem. If they were to discover what was available during the feeding of the five thousand, why should they not be able to mobilise the crowd of the first believers to provide for the needs of the poor. Note that Luke has avoided the use of the word 'poor' or 'rich' in his description of the community of believers in Acts. There were no needy people among them. This may have its parallel in the fact that at the feeding of the five thousand, 'all ate and were satisfied' (Lk 9-17). The act of Jesus here had influenced greatly the action of the first believers in Jerusalem and other early communities described in Acts, perhaps more than what Jesus actually taught on the subject of the rich and the poor.²⁷

²⁷ Not that we are minimising its impact on the rich of Luke's community, but this does not determine what took place after the day of Pentecost. In other words, what happens in the early church does not depend on what Luke has written. Instead, Luke's community may benefit positively from it. However, it is likely that Jesus' attitude to the crowd of five thousand has affected the attitude of his followers. The story of feeding the five thousand shows Jesus feeding others instead of him charismatically begging from them.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE AFRICAN CHURCH

What implication does the foregoing discussion have for the African church? To this implication we now turn. It is worthy to mention here that only a brief implication will be provided below.

Therefore, all people are called upon to give, whether they are rich or poor. What is of first importance is the attitude of the giver as is portrayed by the rich and the poor widow (Lk 21:1ff). The model presented here raises some questions for the African church. Questions of whether the church in Africa has followed the saying of the Lord or the saying of the world. By the saying of the world here, we mean any motivation that is not Bible based. Such motivations as are depicted by the worldly fund raising agencies, whereby the poor are exploited in the name of raising funds for their cause. On the other hand, has the church failed any motivation, choosing rather not to give at all?

There are several, principles that can be gleaned from the foregoing discussion for application in the African church and any church of Christ.

- There is need for people to work hard, since without hard work there would be nothing to share. The implication for the African church is to set up an effective mechanism for production of wealth. We are thinking here of ventures that can be productive. The church members are to engage in ventures that will provide enough goods for their daily needs with meaningful surplus.

- The giving should be in accordance with the need (Ac 2:45). Moreover, the Lord does not ask us to give what we do not have (cf. 2 Co 8:12). The believers in Antioch gave according to what they could give for the relief of the believers in Jerusalem (Ac 11:29). This is a big challenge for the church in Africa, since the Antioch church was like a missionary church, yet it was able to help the sending church. When shall the church in Africa send relief to the church in the West? The church in Africa should learn that it is more blessed to give than to amass wealth. The amassment should not be supposed to be in millions. The churches in Macedonia serve as a good example here (2 Co 8:1-7).

- Like the Corinthian church, the church in Africa should abound in this 'gracious work' (2 Co 8:7).

•Those who are given are to receive graciously. There cannot be a giver without the given. The given should not just receive, otherwise the same cycle of amassing wealth will be repeated. Paul in the Corinthian letter has given a wonderful balance, where the given becomes the giver, so that none is misused (2 Co 8:13-14).

There is room to give our goods to relieve the need of others, for by so doing we gain eternal values. To grab goods for selfish gain does not give us eternal blessedness, but a temporary joy that fades away like grass. This point cannot be laboured when seeing the great needs of people as the new millennium has been ushered in. The conclusion of the matter is that the sharing of goods with the poor is a Christian imperative.