

Loving Benevolence

Benevolence and care toward all other people were radically new in those converted to Jesus Christ. The Jews had been taught to care for each other within the Hebrew race, but their attitude toward Gentiles left much to be desired. Jesus' story of the Samaritan's benevolent actions toward the beaten Jewish man (Luke 10:25–37) reflects the thinking of Jews toward other races.

The Gentiles cared little for human life. The more pagan their idolatry was, the less they respected human life. Various Gentile cultures sacrificed their children to pagan idols, deified animals, worshiped celestial bodies, and glorified rivers and mountains. These forms of false worship lowered their regard for human beings made in the image of the one true God.

Jesus challenged the Jews to develop better attitudes by giving them a new commandment that would become the Christian trademark: "Love one another" (John 13:34, 35). He commanded them to have love for their neighbors, second only to their love for the Almighty (Matthew 22:37–39). Jesus even challenged them to love their enemies (Matthew 5:43–48).

As the spiritual body of Christ, the church was to follow the leadership of its Head (Colossians 1:18); therefore, the new spiritual economy which began in Acts was expected to follow the Lord's teachings about brotherly love. This brotherly love could not have exempted benevolent care.

THE FIRST CASE: A NEEDY CHURCH

According to Acts 2:41 and 4:4, several thousand new Christians visiting from the fifteen nations mentioned in 2:9–11 had been added to the apostles and the 120 disciples of 1:15. These visitors stayed in Jerusalem longer than they had planned, and they began to need food and care. Added to this longer-than-anticipated stay in Jerusalem, some of the new converts no doubt faced ostracism from their own families for becoming Christians. Many sold their possessions and brought the proceeds to the "apostles' feet" (Acts 4:35). The "apostles' feet" was Luke's way of describing the group's financial fund. Perhaps today we would speak of this as a church treasury or a bank account. Distribution was made to all who had need (Acts 2:44, 45).

Utmost care should be exercised in defining this situation. Some claim that the Christians in Jerusalem formed a common community in which all assets were to be owned by the group and no assets were to be retained by individuals or families. This claim describes a communistic society. In such an arrangement, all assets would be owned by the church, and all expenses would be incurred and paid as a group.

This does not fit the description that Luke gave, however. While these Christians "had all things in common" (Acts 2:44), "began selling their property and possessions," and were "sharing them with all" (Acts 2:45), their selling and sharing occurred "as anyone might have need"

(Acts 2:45). Many forget that when the needs were met, the selling and sharing ceased. These citizens of Jerusalem did not give up all of their personal properties and assets, but they did give sacrificially *until the needs were met*. The same principle is expressed in the distribution process: After the selling of possessions and the bringing of proceeds to the “apostles’ feet,” distribution was made “as any had need” (Acts 4:35). When the needs were met and the inequities satisfied, the Christians no longer sold and gave possessions. When the needs ceased, the selling ceased.

Many still had personal property in Jerusalem later in Acts. Ananias and Sapphira did not sell their property at this time, but waited until a later time (Acts 5:4). Also, Peter told them that they could have kept their property and still have been pleasing to God (Acts 5:4). Another man, Simon the tanner, had property in Joppa (Acts 9:43; 10:6), where he invited Peter to stay. Mary, the mother of John Mark, did not sell her house; it was used for a special women’s prayer meeting when Peter was imprisoned (Acts 12:12). Mnason still owned personal property in Jerusalem some years later, and he was host to the group who returned from the third missionary journey with Paul (Acts 21:16).

Therefore, it was not the case that Christians had all things in common in a communistic sense. They were not required to deliver all of their assets to the local congregation and then live out of a common treasury. The needs that arose in chapter 2 continued for some time, even months; and the same is true of the needs met in chapter 4. Until the needs were alleviated, the new Christians were willing to sell their possessions.

This benevolence was a voluntary and spontaneous outpouring of Christian love and concern for needy brethren. These gifts were given in the spirit of the new bond of brotherhood and fellowship, and it was a common interest in Christ that sparked such unusual generosity.

Such benevolence was so unusual and significant in a Jewish city that Luke said “abundant grace was upon them all” (Acts 4:33). People around them must have been astounded by these actions. When Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit about their gift and the sentence of death was carried out by the Lord (the Lord, not

Peter, imposed this sentence), great fear came not only upon all the church, but also “upon all who heard of these things” (Acts 5:11). These death sentences over the handling of benevolence had such an impact on those in Jerusalem that many did not dare to attend the apostles’ public teaching sessions (Acts 5:13); but Acts 5:14 says, “All the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number.” This was a new experience for old Jewish minds.

THE SECOND CASE: NEEDY WIDOWS

Widows continued to be in need, and some irregularities were straightened out by the appointment of seven men (not apostles) who could carry out these services (Acts 6:1–6). This case also singularly affected the citizens of Jerusalem. Luke said immediately following this account of the tender, careful provision for widows that further multiplying of disciples took place, even among many of the Jewish priests (Acts 6:7).

Most scholars place this occurrence two or three years after the Pentecost experiences mentioned in chapter 2. The apostles had not taken adequate foresight in this matter, but their use of other godly men gives rise to several important principles.

First, the teaching of the Word is highest in importance. Second, although it is important, serving the needy is of lesser importance than teaching the gospel. Third, many jobs within a congregation can be delegated to qualified, godly men and women. Fourth, men and women in every congregation are available and qualified to do these kinds of work. Fifth, an influence on the community will nearly always be prominent when a church takes care of the physical needs among themselves. Sixth, this example serves as a good pattern for every succeeding congregation that desires to serve the Lord well.

THE THIRD CASE: NEEDY CHURCHES

A prophet named Agabus predicted a famine over the world (Acts 11:28), and Luke recorded that this famine came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. Four famines occurred during the reign of Claudius Caesar; three of them

affected Rome and Greece, and one affected Palestine. The one in Judea occurred about A.D. 45, placing this third event more than a dozen years after the beginning of the church.

The Antioch brethren responded quickly and generously to the needs that arose in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30). Enough individuals in the congregation accepted the responsibility to help that Luke used the inclusive terminology “every man.” Each member helped proportionately, and the congregation’s respect for God’s organization was shown in the fact that the money was sent to the elders. One might say that this money was “laid at the elders’ feet.” Regardless of how it is expressed, the money was given from Antioch to the brethren in Jerusalem, but it is implied that the distribution was in the hands of the elders. Two great preachers, Barnabas and Saul, suspended their teaching activities to assist in delivering these gifts (Acts 11:30).

The Jewish Christians were still reluctant to preach the gospel to anyone but Jews (Acts 11:19), although some did begin going to the Gentiles in Antioch of Syria (Acts 11:20), with great success. The brethren in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to assist the new members, and Barnabas recruited Paul to help in this work (Acts 11:21–26). Paul and Barnabas worked in Antioch for more than a year, and this Jewish-Gentile mixture of the Lord’s church was the first congregation where the name “Christian” was used. Perhaps it is significant that the use of the term “Christian” was reserved until congregations recognized and practiced fully the universality of the gospel.

Paul later pleaded with brethren in Rome to assist in a benevolent need in Judea (Romans 15:26, 27). Since the Jewish brethren in Jerusalem had met the spiritual needs of the Gentile brethren in Rome by teaching them the gospel, Paul implied that it was only right for these Gentile brethren to meet the physical needs of the Jewish brethren in Judea. Benevolence can have a great spiritual impact also!

A FOURTH CASE: NEEDY CHURCHES AGAIN

Paul concluded the third missionary journey and returned to Jerusalem. The Jews supposed that he had taken Trophimus, an Ephesian Gentile, into the temple with him when he acqui-

esced to the elders’ charge to join (and cover the expenses of) four young men who were taking a vow (Acts 21:17–29). He was arrested and imprisoned, then sent to Caesarea. There he appeared before Felix, the governor (Acts 23:24), and Ananias, the high priest (Acts 24:1). Tertullus, an orator whom these raging Jews had brought from Jerusalem to help convict Paul, charged Paul with insurrection (Acts 24:2, 5).

Paul’s answer to the charge that he was leading a rebel insurrection against Rome was that it had been only twelve days since his return to Jerusalem, at which time he had brought alms and offerings to his nation (Acts 24:11, 17). He explained that he was helping his nation with gifts of money for the needy, not leading any rebellion—besides which, five days in Jerusalem would not have been enough time to stir an insurrection.¹

In speaking of the alms and offerings he had brought to Jerusalem, Paul alluded to a contribution that had remained a benevolent cause for several years. Paul had written to the Corinthians about this need and how they could be involved in meeting it, as he had already taught the churches in Galatia (1 Corinthians 16:1, 2). A year later, Paul had reminded the Corinthians of their pledges in this gift (2 Corinthians 9:1, 2), asking them to complete the effort (2 Corinthians 8:10–12; 9:3–5). Trying to avoid any criticism in handling the money, Paul had sent Titus and another brother to assist them in finishing their pledged gifts (2 Corinthians 8:16–24).

On the return from Asia, Achaia, and Macedonia during the third missionary journey, Paul had been accompanied by seven men (Acts 20:4, 5). These men had helped to carry the alms and offerings, which were most likely in gold and silver coins. Since these collections had been going on for at least two years, the bags of coins would have been far too heavy for Paul to handle by himself, or even with one or two companions. A plot against Paul had occurred during this journey, perhaps to steal the money he had already collected (Acts 20:3). Paul had done something rather unusual, going by land from Troas

¹Paul had spent two of the twelve days in travel (Acts 23:31, 32) and five days in prison, waiting for Ananias to come from Jerusalem (Acts 24:1). That left only five days—surely not enough time to lead an insurrection.

to Assos and leaving his companions on board the ship (Acts 20:13, 14). This ploy may have been used to confuse any robbers on his trail.

During this third journey, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, which included his admonitions to complete the pledged gifts. Paul also wrote Romans during this journey, and he mentioned this need for ministering to the saints in Jerusalem (Romans 15:25, 26). Therefore, we see another case of benevolence in the church, around A.D. 58–59.

CONCLUSION

Loving benevolence became one of the main characteristics of the early church. Every congregation took responsibility for its own local needs, and Christians were ready to respond to the needs in other places. That first century was

often cruel and drastic, but the Christians rose to every occasion to fill the needs of the brethren.

Christians have many individual opportunities to do good (Galatians 6:10), but there are still responsibilities for congregations. Christians today can give liberally and regularly to the group work of the church and still meet individual challenges. The Lord designed His church to be His benevolent society, and each congregation is adequately equipped to fulfill those responsibilities.

Early Christians fulfilled the Lord's intention that they should be known by their love for God and for their brethren (John 13:34, 35). J. W. McGarvey said, "There is no preaching so eloquent as that which sounds out from wholehearted benevolence."² ♦

²J. W. McGarvey, *New Commentary on Acts of the Apostles* (Delight, Ark.: Gospel Light Publishing Co., n.d.), 230.