

EXEGETICAL STUDY OF COMMUNITY OF GOODS IN ACTS 4:32-35 AND ITS APPLICATION TO CHURCH'S ROLE IN POVERTY ALLEVIATION IN NIGERIA

Emmanuel Olusegun LANA

Department of Christian Religious Studies,
School of Arts and Social Sciences,
Federal College of Education, Iwo, Osun State, Nigeria
E-Mail: lanaeo@fceiwo.edu.ng

&

Job Oluremi OKUNOYE
Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities,
Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo
E-Mail: jo.okunoye@acu.edu.ng, oluremiokunoye@gmail.com
08034253878

Abstract

This paper examines the idea of community of goods in Acts 4:32-35 in application to church role in poverty alleviation. The text is studied using the grammatico-historical approach of exegesis, featuring textual criticism, analyses of salient grammatical and syntactical features notable in the text as well as historico-cultural contextualization of the concept of community of goods. The study discovers that the idea of community of goods was not an original innovation of the early Church but a theological adaptation of a prevalent sociocultural and philosophical legacy of the society within which the church found itself. The paper concludes that the practice should not be literally appropriated as it only reflects that the Church has a timelessly binding obligation to care for the poor; thus, it must put in place contemporarily sensible principles by which its wealth is utilized for mutual aid and egalitarian welfare of its members. The study recommends that the Church should take poverty alleviation as a fundamental theological obligation essential for Christian fellowship and evangelism; put in place specific poverty alleviation programmes, not merely on occasional or circumstantial bases but as an integral part of its mission in society; while Church leaders should appropriate the wealth of the church as commonwealth, meant for mutual care and welfare of the entire membership, not personal aggrandizement.

Keywords: Church, Community of Goods, Poverty, Poverty Alleviation

Introduction

Poverty rate in Nigeria is on high-rise constituting a major existential challenge in the country and fueling several threats to national security. This problem of poverty is however paradoxical because it exists in the midst of enormous natural and human resources as well as unquantifiable potentials for wealth creation. Ironically, Nigeria is a rich country dominated by poor people. Poverty in the country is therefore more of distributive injustice. Consequently, the most relevant or effectual poverty alleviation strategy for the Nigerian society must address the gap between the rich and the poor and bridge this gap through

distributive justice. Meanwhile, distributive justice is as moral as it is a politico-economic phenomenon; hence, the Church, being a religious and moral agent, is a relevant role player towards modelling distributive justice in Nigeria.

Remarkably, the New Testament presents a model of distributive justice as a strategy employed towards poverty alleviation in the early Church. We find this model in the idea of community of goods narrated in Acts 4:32-35 where it is reported how the early Church showed practical concern for poverty alleviation. This paper attempts an exegetical interpretation of the concept of community of goods in the text with a view to identifying adaptable principles to guide the role of the church in poverty alleviation.

Acts 4:32-35 in the Overall Context of the Purpose of Acts

Inferably, the main purpose of Acts from the preface to the Gospel of Luke of which Acts is evidently a continuation. In the preface of Luke (1:3-4) the author proclaims his intention of writing to Theophilus that Theophilus may know the validity of things he was instructed in. After describing in the Gospel “all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which he was received up” (Acts 1:1) Luke proceeds in his second volume to trace for Theophilus the stages by which the Christian message had spread from Jerusalem into a time and place where Theophilus’ own knowledge could continue the story.¹

Sequel to the above general purpose, it is evident that Luke has a triangular interest: to defend the lawfulness or legal innocence of the Christian faith; to show the growth of the faith and to demonstrate the universality of the Christianity. Since Judaism was considered a *religio licita* or a legal and protected religion, Luke was very careful to show that the Christian faith was an outgrowth of Judaism. He does this by showing the historical roots in the Gospel, Jesus was a Jew and all early Christians were Jews. He shows the link between the Old Testament and the New Testament. He points out that the Roman government always viewed Christianity favorably. He seems to show that the primary opponents of the early Christians were pharisaical Jews and not the government.²

Luke uses Acts to show the growth of Christianity both in geographical and numerical senses. The outline for the geographical growth is given in Acts 1:8, which is arguably an adequate outline of the book. The faith grew in “Jerusalem” (Acts 1 – 7), “Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8 –11) and “uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 12 – 28). Luke’s interest in showing the numerical growth of the church is evident in his careful documentation of actual numbers, especially in the early parts of the book. There were 12 present when the new apostle was chosen; 120 were present at Pentecost; 3000 were converted on the day of Pentecost and 5000 were converted later.³

Finally, Luke has a far-reaching interest in showing that the Christian faith is universal. Tendency critics propose that Luke knew more than what he wrote but was unwilling to write more. If Luke thus failed to write much of what he knew, then he must have been selective in the way he used the materials at his disposal in the process of composing Acts of the Apostles. The question therefore arises, “what interest guided Luke in his selection of materials?” or, “what aim, what ‘tendency’ is he pursuing?”⁴ This led to a careful study of the content of the book. In the process it became very clear that Luke was only concerned about the ministry of Peter and that of Paul and that he carefully selected what he tells his readers in the book to make Peter and Paul run parallel as evident below:

Parallelism of the acts of Peter and Paul in Acts of the Apostles

| Peter | Paul |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Preached his first sermon (Acts 2) | Preached his first sermon (Acts 13) |
| Healed a lame man (Acts 3) | Healed a lame man (Acts 14) |
| Met Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8) | Met Elymas the sorcerer (Acts 13) |
| His shadow works (Acts 5) | His handkerchief works (Acts 19) |
| Laid hand (Acts 8) | Laid hand (Acts 19) |
| About to be worshipped (Acts 10) | About to be worshipped (Acts 14) |
| Raised Tabitha (Acts 9) | Raised Eutychus (Acts 20) |
| Imprisoned (Acts 12) | Imprisoned (Acts 28) |

From the foregoing striking parallelism, it is abundantly clear that Luke's purpose in Acts includes showing the universality of Christianity. The God using Peter among the Jews is the same God using Paul among the Gentiles in very similar ways.

The question now is, how does Acts 4:32-35 fit into the main purposes of the book of Acts? It is notable that Acts 4:32-35 has a similar character and reflects Luke's constant remark on the unity of the early Church in similar pericopes throughout the book of Acts (cf. 2:41-47; 5:12). Therefore, the story of community of goods is not an end in itself, neither does Luke present it as a sacrament of the church, but to illustrate the unity of the church.

Text-Critical and Grammatico-Syntactical Analyses of Acts 4:32-35

There is only one occurrence of textual problem or dispute in Acts 4:32-35 and it is found in verse 33. The textual problem of Acts 4:33 surrounds the clause, *τῆς ἀναστάσεως τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ* (of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus). There are seven textual variants or variant readings of the statement, some of them backed by strong and reputable manuscript evidences. In fact, the textual problem is so disputable that the adopted or default reading is rated "C" by the editors of the United Bible Society's *Greek New Testament* (4), an indication that "there is a considerable degree of doubt whether the text or the apparatus contains the superior reading."⁵

The variant readings and list of manuscript evidences, ancient versions and Patristic quotations behind each of them are presented as follows:

Table showing Variant Readings in Acts 4:33

| S/N | Variant Reading and Translation | Supporting Evidence |
|-----|---|---|
| 1. | <i>τῆς ἀναστάσεως τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ</i> of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus | Papyrus p⁸ ; Uncials P , 0049 , 056 , 0142 ; Minuscules 88 , 104 , 181 , 326 , 330 , 451 , 614 , 1241 , 1505 , 1877 , 2127 , 2412 , 2492 ; Ancient Versions it⁹¹⁹ , syr^h , cop^{sa} , eth^{pp} ; and Patristic Quotations of Irenaeus , Augustine and Theophylact . |
| 2. | <i>τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ τῆς ἀναστάσεως</i> of the Lord Jesus of the resurrection | Uncial B . |
| 3. | <i>τῆς ἀναστάσεως Ἰησοῦ</i> Χριστοῦ of the resurrection of Jesus Christ | Minuscules 808 , 1522 ; and Ancient Versions syr^p , cop^{bo} . |
| 4. | <i>τῆς ἀναστάσεως τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ</i> Χριστοῦ | Uncials D , E ; Minuscules 436 , 945 , 1739 , |

| | | |
|----|--|--|
| | of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ | 2495 ; Ancient Versions it^{d,e,r} , arm ; and Patristic Quotation of Chrysostom . |
| 5. | τῆς ἀναστάσεως Ἰησοῦ κυρίου τοῦ κυρίου of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Lord | Uncials ξ , A and Ancient Versions it^{ar} , vg^{ww} , cop^{bo} . |
| 6. | τῆς ἀναστάσεως Ἰησοῦ κυρίου ἡμετέρου of the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord | Ancient Versions vg^{cl} , cop^{bo} . |
| 7. | τῆς ἀναστάσεως τοῦ κυρίου ἡμετέρου Ἰησοῦ κυρίου of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ | Ancient Versions it^{ph} , eth^{ro} , geo . |

Apparently, the textual problem in this text does not pose any serious exegetical challenge nor constitute any threat to the interpretation of the passage. All the variant readings are essentially concurrent and unambiguously indicate that the apostles gave witness to “the resurrection” of Jesus or Jesus Christ or Jesus Christ our Lord, etc. The variance in the genitive object of “the resurrection” is not at all open to conjecture irrespective of the variant reading followed. Nevertheless, it is expedient for us to weigh the supporting evidences and make a verdict on the textual dispute at hand.

Based on the strength of supporting evidences, we can straightway eliminate the Variant Readings 3, 4, 6 and 7 from the contest. They are no match with the overwhelming characteristics of Readings 1, 2 and 5 in terms of manuscript type, date, and genealogy.

It is notable that Reading 1 enjoys the support of the largest number of supporting evidences. Its witnesses are also widely spread in terms of type as it is backed by a reputable papyrus, considerable number of primordial manuscripts, both Uncial and Minuscule, as well as notable Patristic quotations. However, superiority of a variant reading over another variant reading is not a function of mere population or typological variety of supporting evidences, but the strength of the evidences in terms of manuscript type, date, geographical origin or genealogy.⁶

Consequently, the puzzle of superiority among the three contending Variant Readings (1, 2 and 5) pertains to the question of superiority among the leading supporting evidences behind the three of them, namely, the Papyrus **p⁸** of reading 1, the Uncial Codex Vaticanus (**B**) of reading 2 and the duo of Codex Sinaiticus (**ξ**) and Codex Alexandrinus (**A**) of reading 5.

The strength of the Papyrus **p⁸**, the chief witness of Reading 1 is overwhelming, being a papyrus manuscript. In the words of Comfort and Barrett, “the papyrus manuscripts are among the most important witnesses for reconstructing the original text of the New Testament.”⁷ The reliability of papyrus manuscripts is not merely based on the precedence of the material on which they were written but their date of production. They mostly date from the middle of the second century and “provide the earliest direct witness to the New Testament autographs.”⁸ Thus Reading 1 is not a variant reading to be discarded in a jiffy or taken lightly in the textual dispute under reference here.

Likewise, Reading 2, though has just one manuscript evidence, is a force to reckon with because its witness, the Codex Vaticanus (**B**), is reputed to be, in the words of Metzger, “one of the most valuable of all the manuscripts.”⁹ Dated around the fourth century, the Codex Vaticanus is an Alexandrian text type in the Acts of the Apostles.

The combined forces of Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲛ) and Codex Alexandrinus (A) make Reading 5 somewhat equally strong and compelling. Codex Sinaiticus generally belongs to the Alexandrian groups of manuscripts and is dated fourth century. This manuscript is often accorded primacy of position in the list of New Testament manuscripts.¹⁰ In the same vein, Codex Alexandrinus (A), though dates slightly later from the fifth century, ranks along with the Codex Vaticanus (B) and Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲛ) as representative of the Alexandrian text type.¹¹

In the light of the foregoing assessment of the strength of the manuscripts evidence per variant reading, it is indeed difficult to determine which one is most reliable. Thus, the judgment of the editors of the *Greek New Testament, UBS 4*, who rate this textual dispute “C” is evidently justified. Acts 4:33 is a robust example of the text critical problem of the New Testament caused by corrupt scribal practices during the long transmission of the text by hand-copying before the invention of printing technology.¹² Nonetheless, given the date and integrity of papyrus manuscripts, our vote here goes to Reading 1. Therefore, we read Acts 4:33 as, **τῆς ἀναστάσεως τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ** (of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus).

Close study of the grammatical features and relationship of words (syntax) of the focal text avails deeper exegetical insight into the meaning of the text. The first notable grammatical feature is found in the subject of the entire passage, **οὗ πλήθους τῶν πιστευσάντων** (the multitude of those who believed). This noun clause is essentially in the participle mood as **πιστευσάντων** is the aorist active participle of the verb **πιστεῦω** (to believe). The Greek participle mood, which is at work here, mostly characterizes, rather than describes action.¹³ As Fuller describes it, a participle is a form of the verb that acts like an adjective.¹⁴ Nonetheless, we are not oblivious of the delicate nature of participles, as warned by Wallace who authoritatively states that “the participle is difficult to master because it is so versatile.”¹⁵ However, just as Wallace further informs, whenever the Greek participle is modified by the article, it must be adjectival.¹⁶ Interestingly, the participle **πιστευσάντων** under reference here is unambiguously modified by the article **τῶν**. Therefore, **τῶν πιστευσάντων** is incontrovertibly adjectival. Impliedly, the subject of the participle in this verse, which is, **οὗ πλήθους** (the multitude) are people characterized by “believing”. Their faith was characteristic of them, not just spontaneous action. Also, the aorist tense of the participle **πιστευσάντων** points to the permanence of that characteristic. The exegetical implication of these features is that the “multitude of believers” under reference in Acts 4:32 were established members of the early Church.

Another important grammatico-syntactical feature pertains to the phrase, **καρδία καὶ ψυχὴ μία** (one heart and soul), which describes **οὗ πλήθους τῶν πιστευσάντων** “the multitude of those who believe”. Hutson informs us that the phrase, “one heart and soul” has a striking linguistic affinity with Aristotle’s definition of a friend as “**μία ψυχὴ** (a single soul) dwelling in two bodies”.¹⁷ The phrase therefore reflects the Graeco-Roman ideals of friendship. In the same vein, the phrase, **πάντα κοινά** (all things in common) strikingly resembles a statement by Pythagoras the philosopher that **κοινά τα ἅπαντα** (friends have things in common). Likewise, the clause, **οὐδὲ εἷς τι τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αὐτῷ ἔλεγεν ἴδιον εἶναι** (no one said any of his possession was his own) resonates another statement of Pythagoras in his instruction to his disciples “to consider nothing their own”.¹⁸ Likewise still, as Draper aptly informs us, Plato describes community of goods both negatively: **οὐδὲν κοινά** (calling nothing their own) and positively: **πάντα κοινά** (having all things in common).¹⁹ Draper submits that the use of such language in the book of Acts shows that Luke is consciously drawing on Hellenistic Utopian ideas.²⁰

The exegetical implication of all the foregoing historico-linguistic evidences is that the prevalent philosophical understanding of friendship and justice within the Graeco-Roman society was evidently

behind Luke's expressions in his narratological efforts to portray the unity of the early Church. Another significant implication of these linguistic affinities is that they prove, beyond reasonable doubt, the historical literariness of the Lukan narration. Interestingly, Hutson buttresses this submission by stating that Luke's description is historically plausible because of its resemblance to the Aristotelian and Pythagorean ideals.²¹

Furthermore, we have double occurrence of the adjective **μεγάλη** (great) in verse 33. The first qualifies **δυνάμει** (power/influence) and introduces the apostles' act of **μαρτύριον τῆς ἀναστάσεως τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ** (testifying/preaching the resurrection of Jesus). On the other hand, the second **μεγάλη** qualifies **χάρις** (grace) which resultantly **ἦν ἐπὶ πάντας αὐτούς** (was upon them all). The import of this is that great grace is a function of great preaching of the resurrection. Another instructive element in this verse is the imperfect tense of the action of **οἱ ἀπόστολοι** (the apostles) namely, **ἀπεδίδουν τὸ μαρτύριον** (were giving testimony). The tense implies a linear or continuous action. Thus, they did not occasionally preach the resurrection but did so on a continuous and habitual basis.

One major distinctive grammatical element in the text under reference has to do with the word, **ἐνδεής** (that lacked) found in verse 34. The word occurs only here throughout the New Testament.²² Notably, the adjectival nature of this word implies a characteristic identity, which implies "a lacker" as in someone who is in poverty, not merely someone who is occasionally in need. Interestingly, Thayer defines the word to mean, "needy", "destitute".²³ This word is significant within the syntactical context of the clause, **οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐνδεής τις ἦν ἐν αὐτοῖς**, which should be understood as saying, "neither was there anyone that was in poverty among them". The clause indicates the object and goal of the activities of both the people and the apostles. We have a parallel grammatical feature in the manner these activities are expressed in the verse – the apostles "were preaching", the people "were bringing", all for the selfsame goal of ensuring that no member of the church was in poverty.

There are three verbs in Acts 4:35, namely: **ἔτιθουν** (were bringing), **διεδίδετο** (distribution was being made) and **εἶχεν** (were having). It is notable that all the three verbs share same tense as each of them is in the imperfect tense, implying continuous action. The exegetical implication of this is that the people were bringing the proceeds from the sale of their properties continuously while the apostles distributed to the needy at same rate – continuously. The substances of the people laid at the apostles' feet were not mere levies paid once-and-for-all. It was a culture of continuous giving. Beneficiaries of the distribution did not just enjoy the provision at once or on a once-and-for-all basis, but in a continuous manner as they had need. Also, what was laid at the apostles' feet was not appropriated by the apostles for personal use or self-gratification. Rather, it was deemed as commonwealth and the apostles saw themselves as stewards responsible for its redistribution towards meeting the needs of the people.

Historico-Cultural Contextualization of Community of Goods in Acts 4:32-35

The idea of community of goods presented as a practice of the early church by Luke in Acts 4:32-35 is evidently not without precedents in the Graeco-Roman and Jewish cultural backgrounds to the New Testament. Scholarly research on the subject have unearthed a gamut of evidence showing that what Luke presents in Acts 4:32-35 and pericopes relevant to that narrative (2:42-45; 5:1-11 and 6:1-7) cannot be adequately contextualized without exploring these vital historical and cultural antecedents.²⁴ Drapper offers a sequential chronicle of reminiscences on the idea of community of goods within the Hellenistic environment and the Palestinian Jewish milieu as antecedents to the practice of the early Church narrated by Luke in Acts 4:32-35.²⁵

Insights from the Hellenistic precursors are found in Plato and Pythagoras. For Plato, the ideal state is one that disparages private property, where sharing and common ownership of goods is the normal order characterizing the bond of “friendship” which must hold the members of the community together. Plato thus philosophized so influentially that the ideal state allows no private possessions or houses. That society, tagged, “the Utopian society” is retrospectively viewed by Plato into the remote past of a dimly remembered Golden Age.²⁶ Nostalgia for the Golden Age led to philosophical idealization of community of goods, although this rarely became the basis of a political or social programme.²⁷ Thus, we have in Plato, the idea of a community where all members have things in common without anyone claiming ownership of property but pulling their possessions together for the common good.

In the same, though slightly varied, vein, the Greek philosopher, Pythagoras taught community of goods and imposed it as a requirement on his followers on the basis of friendship. Draper aptly summarizes the Pythagorean requirement thus: “a prospective member of his community underwent a probation of three years of “contempt” and a further five years of “silence” before being accepted or rejected. During that period of probation, his money was provisionally surrendered to Pythagoras. If he was rejected, he received it back; if he was accepted, it was merged with the communal treasury.”²⁸

The foregoing evidences from the philosophies of Plato and Pythagoras respectively combine with the linguistic affinities found between the phraseology of Luke in Acts 4:32-35 and the formers’ Hellenistic assertions on the community of goods to unequivocally establish the fact that the practice narrated by Luke has Hellenistic antecedents, which cannot be discarded in our understanding of the Lukan account under reference in this study.

Now, we turn to antecedents on the community of goods from Palestinian Jewish environment. In the words of Draper,

Judaism in the first century A.D. was no unified phenomenon. On the contrary, its complexity is almost bewildering. It was a society in crisis, and various movements represented different responses to the crisis. The Maccabean revolt against the attempted Hellenization of Palestine (begun in 168 B.C.) had partially united the nation, although the process of Hellenization did not cease with their victory. Increasingly, the Hasmonian dynasty, which was founded by the Maccabean family, was itself touched by the pervasive influence, a process which culminated in the Roman conquest and domination of Palestine, beginning with Pompey’s capture of Jerusalem in 63 B.C. Various opposition movements emerged which challenged the Hasmonian monopoly of power, and the authority of the Sadducees, their spiritual heirs. The two most important were the Pharisees and the Essenes, both of which present material for comparison with the Jerusalem church’s community of goods.²⁹

Judaistic legacies precedent to the community of goods in Acts, as revealed above, are from Pharisaic “haburoth”³⁰ tradition on the one hand and practices of the Essene community on the other hand. It is noteworthy that apart from being a sect that followed a unique legalistic interpretation of the Jewish Scripture, the Pharisees also formed a closed community distinguished by peculiar customs and practices, which included the community of goods. The community of goods practiced by the Pharisaic Haburoth was however unique. It did not limit the possession of members neither did it forbid individual ownership of property. There was no criticism of riches as “riches were held in high esteem as evidence of God’s approval of righteousness.”³¹ We can therefore submit here that the Pharisaic models were not totally same

as the Hellenistic models earlier examined, particularly those of Platonic and Pythagorean philosophies, which forbade personal ownership of property.

The Essene communities present wide and diverse forms of the practice of community of goods.³² Hutson aptly captures the Essene legacy as follows:

...we know at least one first century Jewish sect that practiced community of possessions, the Essenes. Not only did this sect apparently have a commune at nearby Qumran, there is some evidence that they also had a compound in Jerusalem, so some Essenes could have been among the earliest Christian converts.... the Essenes lived in towns and villages, where they renounced warfare, slavery, and the accumulation of real property. They placed their daily wages into a common treasury from which they enjoyed a daily, shared meal. They also shared clothing in common, and out of their common fund they cared for any sick or aged members of the community.³³

The bottom line of the foregoing evidences is that the idea of aggregating commonwealth for redistribution towards an egalitarian community of mutual aid was widespread in both Hellenistic and Judaistic thought and society. It preceded the practice of the Jerusalem church of Acts as narrated by Luke in Acts 4:32-25. It is noteworthy, however, that certain modifications characterize the practice in comparison, especially in terms of the philosophical ideal of property ownership and disposition to wealth.

Application of Acts 4:32-34 to Church's Role in Poverty Alleviation in Nigeria

Exegesis is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. Its ultimate goal is the application of the original import of the biblical text to contemporary life situation. The text must be made to *treffen* (strike home) for the modern man! Thus, application of our exegetical findings in this study to Church's role in poverty alleviation in Nigeria.

As informed by Stuart, application of exegetical findings must be guided by certain clarifications.³⁴ These clarifications pertain to the nature, areas, audience, categories, time focus and limits of the application of the passage or text.³⁵ In the light of these, the overriding question towards the application of Acts 4:32-35 is, what legacy can we adopt for universal application from the story of Luke on community of goods in the Jerusalem church? In other words, what lessons are therein inferable for subsequent communities of the Christendom especially, the Nigerian Churches?

While some scholars extract normative principles of wealth redistribution towards poverty alleviation from the text, others, as reported by Hutson, "write off the community in Acts...as a utopian illusion or local experiment that proved impractical and was soon abandoned in Jerusalem and not replicated elsewhere."³⁶ Hutson goes further by citing Dupont to argue that, "the model of selling possessions to feed the poor among them was not a long-term tenable solution, as the Jerusalem church soon fell into poverty as a whole and needed assistance from gentile churches."³⁷ Here, we concur with Hutson that the eventual need for external support by the Jerusalem church should not be taken outrightly as symptomatic of failure of the community of goods, but the debilitating effects of acute persecution and gruesome famine (Acts 8:1; 9:1-2; 11:8), which imposed extreme economic hardships necessitating external aid.³⁸

Consequently, our answer here to the applicatory limits, or, better put, the timeless applicable principle, is that every community of Christian believers must put in place sustainable culturally and socioeconomically adaptable principles by which mutual aid is ensured in such manners that Christian unity and brotherhood is engendered and the gaps between the haves and the have-nots is practically bridged. It is left to each generation of believers to determine and adopt practical ways by which resources would be pulled together

and utilized for common good to provide leverage for the less privileged. In other words, poverty alleviation by way of bridging the gaps between the rich and the poor through the provision of leverage for the poor upon the wealth of the church is a fundamental theological obligation of the church in all ages. It is beyond voluntary social service. It is the essence of Christian fellowship and equal importance must be attached to it along with all other spiritual missions of the church.

While we cannot universalize the selling of personal possessions to build commonwealth for this purpose as it were in the Jerusalem church of Acts 4:32-35, it is abundantly clear that the goal of that practice, which is care for the poor, is timelessly binding on the church in Nigeria. Church wealth, howsoever generated, constitutes commonwealth. For the Jerusalem church of Acts 4:32-35, the commonwealth aggregated from the proceeds of sold possessions placed at the feet of the apostles by the members. The commonwealth of the church per generation of believers does not have to be from selling of possessions. Church commonwealth consists of all revenues of the church howbeit through tithes, offerings and all manners of donations made by church members. Church leaders are stewards of this commonwealth. They must hold it in trust for the well to do, and as channels of blessing for the less privileged within the Christian fold. Therefore, the wealth of the church is not for luxurious living by church leaders but a precious tool to be held in awe for the overall wellbeing of the church and faithfully utilized for mutual welfare. While we acknowledge and appreciate the fact that some Nigerian churches have been involved in poverty alleviation, this study encourages them to do more especially in this time of economic hardship. In the same vein, churches that had not been involved in poverty alleviation are being encouraged through this study to get involved considering the plight of the poor in current Nigeria state.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The focal text in this study is Acts 4:32-35. The text presents a model of distributive justice, termed “community of goods”, as a strategy for poverty alleviation in the New Testament as the early Church showed practical concern towards poverty alleviation through a distributive scheme. Acts 4:32-35 portrays the contributions of members as a “commonwealth” administered by the apostles towards bridging the gap between the rich and the poor through a practice of distribution which ensured socio-economic advantage for the less privileged and promoted fellowship within a community that increasingly strived to minimize inequality. It is against this backdrop that this study has examined the concept of community of goods in Acts 4:32-35 with a view to bringing out its original import. in application to Church role in poverty alleviation.

The strategic practice of community of goods through the selling of personal possessions by church members, submission of the proceeds to the apostles for redistribution towards poverty alleviation was not an innovation of the church, but a contextualized strategic practice drawn from existing cultures and philosophies prevalent within the sociocultural environment of the early Church. The import of this is that the early Church adopted an existing religio-cultural practice that portrayed ethical affinity to a Christian ideal and domesticated it. An eternal lesson we can draw from this scenario is that the contextualization of Christianity must embrace those cultural traditions of society that align with Christian ethics. Christian evangelization needs not condemn indigenous cultural legacies outrightly but sieve, therefrom, adaptable principles towards the projection of Christian ideals.

Essentially, this study has revealed that the church has an obligatory mandate to provide succor for the poor and the less privileged and this mandate is as important as any perceivable spiritual purpose of the church. The church must diligently pursue this mandate by bridging the gap between the rich and the poor through distributive justice by way of egalitarian utilization of the wealth accruing to it. Mutual aid is not

merely an extra-curricular activity of the church; it is the essence of Christian fellowship. The church is an alternative community of relief and egalitarian care. So, care for the less privileged is not supposed to be an occasional activity of the church but practically integrated into the institutional framework of church existence.

In the light of the findings of this study, we recommend that Churches should desist from mystifying or spiritualizing poverty because it is not a spiritual problem. The church must tackle the problem of poverty, not merely by prayer and fasting, but through practical, well-thought strategic actions. They should re-orientate their members that poverty is a challenge that requires human responsibility by emphasizing in their teachings, the dignity of labour and necessity for those virtues that are necessary for escape from poverty, such as diligence, taking initiative, creative imagination, and maximization of economic advantage within the socio-economic environment.

Also, Church leaders should appropriate the wealth of the church as commonwealth, meant for mutual care and welfare of the entire membership, not personal aggrandizement. They should be transparent and accountable about inflow and outflow of those resources. They should be faithful stewards of the church commonwealth by using it for mutual welfare of the members.

Finally, the Church should take poverty alleviation as a fundamental theological obligation essential for Christian fellowship and evangelism. She must put in place specific poverty alleviation programmes, not merely on occasional or circumstantial bases but as an integral part of its mission in society.

Notes and References

1. Richard Heard, "An Introduction to the New Testament", *Religion Online*, <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-13-the-acts-of-the-apostles/>
2. John Mark Hicks, "Numerical Growth in the Theology of Acts: The Role of Pragmatism, Reason and Rhetoric," A Paper presented at the 47th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, (Philadelphia, November, 1995): 24-25.
3. Hicks, "Numerical Growth in the Theology of Acts: The Role of Pragmatism, Reason and Rhetoric," 25.
4. "Luke-Acts", *Wikipedia*, <https://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luke%E2%80%93Acts> and "The Acts of the Apostles", *Bible Gateway*, <https://www.biblegateway.com>
5. Textual apparatus of *The Greek New Testament, 4th edition*, ed. by Kurt Aland, et al, Stuttgart, United Bible Societies, 1994, especially the introductory notes on evaluation of evidence for the text, pp. xii-xiii.
6. Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968): 207ff.
7. Philip W. Comfort and David P. Barrett, *The Text of the Earliest New Testament Manuscripts*, (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001):18.
8. Comfort and Barrett, *The Text of the Earliest New Testament Manuscripts*, 18.
9. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*, 47.
10. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*, 42.
11. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*, 47.
12. Metzger offers a brilliant exhaustive discussion of this challenge vis-à-vis the causes of error in the transmission of the text of the New Testament. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*, 186-246.

13. See Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 99ff. Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publ. House, 1996): 613ff.
14. Fuller, *You Can Learn New Testament Greek*, 234.
15. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, 613.
16. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*, 617.
17. Christopher Hutson, "All Things in Common: Mutual Aid in Acts 2:42-43 and Acts 4:32-37", *Leaven* Vol. 18 No. 4 (2010): 185.
18. Hutson, "All Things in Common: Mutual Aid in Acts 2:42-43 and Acts 4:32-37", 185.
19. Jonathan Draper, "The Social Milieu and Motivation of Community of Goods in the Jerusalem Church of Acts", *Church in Context: Early Christianity in Social Context*, ed. by C. Breytenbach, (Pretoria: NGK Boekhandelaar, 1988): 78.
20. Draper, "The Social Milieu and Motivation of Community of Goods in the Jerusalem Church of Acts", 78.
21. Hutson, "All Things in Common: Mutual Aid in Acts 2:42-43 and Acts 4:32-37", 185.
22. BlueLetter Bible App; Strong's Number G1729. Cf. Thayer, 213.
23. Thayer, *The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 213.
24. Brian J. Capper has done extensive groundbreaking and highly illuminating works on this. These include Brian J. Capper, "Jesus, Biblical Covenant, and the Essene New Covenant of Ancient Judea: On the Origins of the Early Christian Familial Economic Covenant", *The Qumran Chronicle*, Vol. 19 Nos. 1&2 (November, 2011): 1-30; "How Did Jesus Help the Poor? Virtuoso Religion as Stimulus to Economic Sharing in the Jesus Movement", *The Qumran Chronicle*, Vol. 19, Nos. 3&4 (December, 2011): 97-139; "Community of Goods in the Rule of the Community (1QS) and Comparative Analysis of the Advanced Probationer's Renunciation of Administration of His Property in Other Fully Property-Sharing Groups", *The Qumran Chronicle*, Vol. 20, Nos. 3&4 (December, 2012): 89-150 and "The Judean Cultural Context of Community of Goods in the Early Jerusalem Church", *The Qumran Chronicle*, Vol. 24, Nos. 1&2 (November, 2016): 29-49.
25. Draper, "The Social Milieu and Motivation of Community of Goods in the Jerusalem Church of Acts", 79-90.
26. Draper, "The Social Milieu and Motivation of Community of Goods in the Jerusalem Church of Acts", 77.
27. Draper, "The Social Milieu and Motivation of Community of Goods in the Jerusalem Church of Acts", 77.
28. Draper, "The Social Milieu and Motivation of Community of Goods in the Jerusalem Church of Acts", 78.
29. Draper, "The Social Milieu and Motivation of Community of Goods in the Jerusalem Church of Acts", 78.
30. The "*Haburoth*" can be described as "unions" translated in the LXX with the Greek *koinonia*, comprising members of religious associations who attempted to live out their interpretation of the Law in common. Draper, "The Social Milieu and Motivation of Community of Goods in the Jerusalem Church of Acts", 78.
31. Draper, "The Social Milieu and Motivation of Community of Goods in the Jerusalem Church of Acts", 79.
32. Capper gives a comprehensive account of the divergent Essene versions of the community of goods and their thorough expatiation within the context of the Qumran communities. Brian J. Capper, "Jesus, Biblical Covenant, and the Essene New Covenant of Ancient Judea: On the

Origins of the Early Christian Familial Economic Covenant”, *The Qumran Chronicle*, Vol. 19 Nos. 1&2 (November, 2011).

33. Hutson, “All Things in Common: Mutual Aid in Acts 2:42-43 and Acts 4:32-37”, 185.
34. Douglas Stuart, “Exegesis”, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2, ed. by D.N. Freedman, (New York: Doubleday, 1992): 685.
35. Douglas Stuart, “Exegesis”, in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 685-688.
36. Hutson, “All Things in Common: Mutual Aid in Acts 2:42-43 and Acts 4:32-37”, 188.
37. Hutson, “All Things in Common: Mutual Aid in Acts 2:42-43 and Acts 4:32-37”, 188. Cf. J. Dupont, “Community of Goods in the Early Church”, in *Salvation of the Gentiles*, trans. J. Keating, (New York: Paulist, 1979): 94.
38. Hutson, “All Things in Common: Mutual Aid in Acts 2:42-43 and Acts 4:32-37”, 188.